

Student-Parent-Teacher Goal Setting Conferences: One way to encourage parental engagement in secondary schools

A search for information on 'parental involvement and engagement in secondary schools in Australia' reveals there are many academic studies, journal articles, government funded projects and educational frameworks that advocate the benefits of involvement and engagement by parents in schools. This research highlights the positive effects such involvement can have on academic performance, student well-being, attendance and relationships. However, engaging parents in learning seems to have the greatest positive impact (Emerson, Fear, Fox, and Sanders, 2011). In secondary schools, there appears to be a decline in parental involvement, such as helping out at the school or meeting with teachers. There appear to be unwritten rules in which parents perceive that the school does not want them to be involved.

Hill and Tyson (2009, cited in Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2001) report that *"the transition from primary school into high school presents particular challenges for students and families as the knowledge and skills required to address and achieve school curriculum requirements become more complex and students are faced with important academic and career decisions"*. Teachers understand that parental engagement in education is an important ingredient to achieving positive student outcomes and that students need both parental and school based support to make these academic and career decisions.

Literature on the issue of parental involvement (in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995) outlines three key mechanisms of parental engagement that have a positive impact on student outcomes:

- 1 **Modelling** – by modelling school-related behaviours and attitudes, parents demonstrate that school based activities are worthy of adult interest and time.
- 2 **Reinforcement** – by involving themselves in aspects of schooling, parents reinforce their interest and attention, and



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send out a message of positive affirmation to their children.

- 3 Instruction** – when parents engage in direct instruction, they can promote learning and knowledge at home, as well as help children develop higher levels of cognitive complexity and ability.

Parent engagement is mentioned as a key element in the National School Improvement Tool, *Domain 3 – A culture that promotes learning*. This domain highlights the following areas for consideration and investigation for schools across the country:

- *The staff of the school demonstrate an understanding of the importance of positive and caring relationships to successful learning, and work to build mutually respectful relationships across the school community.*
- *Interactions between staff, students, parents and families are caring, polite and inclusive.*
- *The school views parents and families as integral members of the school community and partners in student learning.*

The TCEC School Improvement Framework requires schools to provide opportunities for parent/school partnerships, including two-way conversation, actively engaging parents in their child's learning and consulting parents as first educators.

A quick scan of a variety of schools' vision and mission statements reveals that schools, in general, are committed to educating students for life beyond school and are thus seeking to produce 'well-rounded' students. An emerging strategy that some schools are employing to encourage and challenge parental engagement in their child's learning, and to promote better learning outcomes for a student, is through a goal setting conference process involving the student, parent and teacher. Goal setting has increasingly become an important strategy to help people work towards their own objectives. By providing opportunities to work with both students and parents, teachers are able to build positive relationships in which to work to identify relevant academic, social and organisational goals with each student. The goal setting conference is a strategy to promote and work toward these aims and objectives identified by the school and its students.

Work on goal-setting theory suggests that an effective tool for making progress is to ensure that participants in a group are clearly aware of what is expected from them. The goal setting conference is a proactive measure to set firm educational foundations and positive ongoing relationships between all key stakeholders. While the goals established are informed by parent and teacher input, they are very much developed and owned by the student. These conferences provide students opportunities to develop and practise some of the Personal and Social Capability skills addressed in the Australian Curriculum. ACARA documentation suggests that when students develop skills within this capability, they are also enhancing skills in other areas. They learn about their own emotions, values, strengths and capacities. These can all be shared with the parent.

Conducting goal setting conferences

There are a variety of ways in which schools can implement and conduct goal-setting conferences. However, the following aspects should be considered and planned for:

- 1 Communication with parents:** Early and regular communication about the introduction of such an initiative is important to its success. Schools need to be clear about its purpose, benefits and expectations for the conference.
- 2 Pre-conference information:** Students, working with their

parents, should be asked to identify a few key areas or goals that they would like to achieve during the year. This information should be submitted prior to the conference so that the teacher has a chance to review the information.

- 3 Professional Learning needs:** It is imperative that some professional learning is conducted for staff prior to the conferences taking place. This, in general, would focus on how to help students set good goals.
- 4 Conducting the conference:** Appointments should be made and they should be attended by all three parties – parent/s, student and teacher at the school. The pre-conference information, questions and concerns about the process are discussed at the interview. It is important that the interview does not turn into a reporting session.
- 5 Documenting the goals:** Following the conference, the student should document their goals and submit them to the teacher. Documentation would need to be easily accessed by all parties and often referred to as a point of reference in ongoing conversations throughout the year.
- 6 Student learning needs:** Students' needs in regard to goal setting, planning, reflecting on goals and future decision-making should be addressed throughout the process, in line with the Personal and Social Capability (ACARA).
- 7 End-of-year feedback:** It is important that the goals are referred to regularly throughout the year rather than being seen as a one off activity at the start of the year. Ways in which this can be achieved are through self-reflection opportunities, student and teacher conversations, as well as teachers referring to student goals in mid- and end-of-year reports.
- 8 Review:** Feedback on the process and value of the conference should also be sought from parents, teachers and students and the process reviewed regularly.

By attending the student-parent-teacher conference, parents can involve themselves in their child's learning and so influence their educational outcomes. The parent is modelling and reinforcing the value they place on their child's education and aspirations. The parent is able to help the child to achieve the goals by encouraging and continuing conversations about the conference and goal setting processes.

Well-considered and well-planned goal setting conferences are one strategy to engage parents in their child's education. Parental engagement in learning is known to affect student outcomes. The conferences provide a springboard for further conversation and partnership and invite the parent to be actively engaged in their child's learning. However, this process is not a one-off activity and it should be a commitment to an ongoing relationship between students, parents and teachers.

References

- 1 Emerson L, Fear J, Fox S, Sanders, E. Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau: Canberra; 2012.
- 2 Haynes WJ. The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement. A meta-analysis. *Urban Education* 2007; 42: 82–110.
- 3 Hoover-Dempsey KV, Sandler HM. Parental involvement in children's education: Why does it make a difference? *Teachers College Record* 1995; 97: 310–31.