

PARENTS & TEACHERS

Building bridges for the future?

STEPHEN CRUMP University of Sydney



SHONA MCLEAN

The slogan of the New South Wales Department of Education for 1995 (and 1996) is "Schools, Parents and Community: Teaching and Learning Together". This article is an account of a recent study conducted into the nature of school, parent and community links in an urban community about ten kilometres from the centre of Sydney. The study was particularly interested in whether such links provided an improved context for "teaching and learning together", though this is a tough question to answer.

The Department of School Education in New South Wales (NSWDSE) is one of the largest education systems in the world and as big as Australia's largest private companies. As such, it is responsible for providing government-

controlled education to 750,000 students in 2,200 schools (70 percent of school-aged students in New South Wales), employing 60,000 people. As recent research has shown, it is one thing to assert policy. It is another to ask an organisation this large to respond in a meaningful and faithful manner to a set of priorities developed at head office level. We thus set out to explore in real school settings the implementation of policy intentions for community participation with particular reference to what teachers and parents expect of schools and each other over this issue.

Recent policy initiatives in New South Wales and Australia, as well as internationally, have been designed to reform the relationship between schools and community into partnership. Yet there is little research on the extent of parent involvement policy-in-use and, thus, about whether a genuine partnership really is emerging locally or in overseas contexts. As teachers know, there is an immediacy of these issues and it is a hot topic in public debate. Who should own the schools? and how might such ownership operate?

The history of the position of teacher unions

on this matter is ambiguous. While the tack chosen differs from state to state, teacher unions generally block parent representation in areas the unions claim belong to teachers' professional privilege. In a 1995 unsigned article in *The Australian Educator*, the Australian Education Union (AEU) appears to condone a view that focuses on fears about unrepresentative groups who try to cross this line and exercise control. The AEU position appears to be one of parents/community acting in an advisory capacity only, even though the article illustrates over 20 years of experience in Victoria where, according to Anne Davies of the Federated Teachers Union, "The notion of partnership doesn't give any one group total control."

Newly elected president of the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF), Denis Fitzgerald, wrote officially (in an article entitled *Loco parentis*) that he thought parents had "gone loco" and were to blame for a litany of problems the NSWTF used to blame on the Liberal/National Party government. Fitzgerald may yet regret this attempt at schoolyard wit, though not unless he is able to see beyond the limited stereotype that "sensible" parents are there to "support

teachers". The irony is that Fitzgerald claims to be arguing against "the empowerment of one group against another" when the NSWTF and New South Wales Department of School Education have held a hugely disproportionate power over parents about what is done to children in schools for over 100 years. Fitzgerald fears that involving parents will generate an adversarial climate yet goes on in the same article to adversarially lock parents out of enterprise bargaining, staffing and curriculum matters!

Teachers, many of whom are themselves parents, know the value of education for a family. There are "irrational" parents but there are poor teachers, bricklayers, trade union officials, taxi drivers, pilots etcetera. Schools must be accountable for what they do to and for children who are compelled by the state to attend. Poor teaching, just like poor parenting, is likely to stem from a failure of the system, of the structures within which we live and work. The Victorian example (of over 20 years of partnership) indicates how a real partnership enhances the trust between home and the school as well as advancing genuine examples of democratic action at the school level. Is it too much to ask that other states learn from this?

NEW SOUTH WALES PRIORITIES FOR 1995

New South Wales government priorities for 1995, outlined below, concentrate on parent participation/involvement assisting them in the implementation of broad policy goals. In many cases, these are specific to literacy, school governance or assessment issues so do not raise basic principles about parent and teacher rights and responsibilities. They are teacher-focused, teacher-generated and held to account by teachers, even though they manage to extend the stereotype beyond canteen help and fund-raising.

The NSWDE states, in the priorities documents, that parents have a right to information about their children's learning and the community has a right to information about the achievements of its schools. The actual goals are stated as:

In 1995 we will:

- explain outcomes-based education to parents,
- set clear expectations about student homework,
- improve school reporting on student achievement and progress,
- explain basic skills testing results better, and
- report the findings of quality assurance school reviews.

We will measure our success through:

- increased parent awareness of new curriculum approaches,

- positive parent response to new reporting procedures,
- the extent of parent involvement in homework, and
- follow-up of school review findings.

The priority "community participation" begins with the statement "Parents and teachers are partners in the education of children... Schools are most effective when their teaching and learning programs reflect the needs and aspirations of students and their communities." The Department of School Education views these needs and aspirations as expressed through "school councils and parent organisations [which] provide a focus for local decision-making and an opportunity for parents, staff and other community members to set collaboratively the goals and policies of schools." For the purposes of our research, this was an untested assertion. The stated goals of the NSWDE for 1995 are:

In 1995 we will:

- support the effective operation of school councils,
- increase parent and community participation in school planning and decision making,
- expand parenting programs,
- improve procedures for monitoring and responding to parent/community concerns, and
- promote community awareness of the goals and achievements of public education.

We will measure our success through:

- the effectiveness of school councils,
- parent and community response to training and support materials,
- positive media coverage of the achievements of schools and their communities, and
- parent/community satisfaction with the quality of service provided by schools.

This is an ambitious agenda and it is not surprising that the Department of School Education decided to maintain these over two years. There is every likelihood that much more time will be needed for something measurable to occur, given the lack of fidelity in policy implementation noted over many years. Let me stress, these are worthy objectives. However, before looking at the research data, I remind readers of my opening comments about the possibilities of achieving change and response in an organisation as large and bureaucratic as the NSWDE. The process of forming official School Councils has been slow despite vigorous encouragement in some clusters and regions. Organisational histories and individual fears combine with a poor model to restrict work on the sorts of bridges teachers and parents need if schools are to be effective in the future.

TABLE 1: Survey Data (percentages)
Baysview 1994

- 65% of parents/families in the Baysview data felt very strongly (YES) that teachers cared at their child's school and 33% felt this strongly (yes). Only 2% responded negatively (NO, no).
- On addition, 66% of those responding felt very welcome at the classroom.
- Families felt that schools send out clear messages [73% =YES], and reach most homes with invitations to school events [76% =YES].
- Most families thought that schools have an active Parents and Citizens Association [57% =YES; 37% = yes]. However, only 25% reported attending meetings and, even then, documentary and anecdotal evidence indicates self-report for P&C attendance was exaggerated.
- Community support [52% =YES] and partnerships [60% =YES] were acknowledged.
- 60% of families reported having the same level of involvement as for the previous year (1993) [7% =more; 16% =less].
- Most responses stated that they helped their child with writing, reading and mathematics though 82% [46% =YES; 36% = yes] responded they could help more if shown how.
- A very high percentage [98%] of parents stated they talk to their child about school.
- However, 27% reported they had not visited their child's class [though 47% did regularly] and 26% had not talked to their child's teacher.
- A "significant" group [29%] reported having different goals for their child than the school.
- Just as many families [27%] replied they had not been told the skills their child needed to learn.
- 35% of homes responded YES to being contacted about problems the teacher reported about their child. Only 14% responded YES for being contacted about improvement in their child's work or behaviour.
- For other forms of contact between the school and home, 64% reported contact about fund-raising, 49% about committee membership, 33% about community services and 27% about school maintenance.

N = 281/7 urban primary schools

THE RESEARCH

In 1994 the researchers and some parents and teachers adapted the Johns Hopkins University survey of home/school connections, tested in hundreds of sites in the United States. We then applied it to eight primary schools in what we called the "Baysview" cluster of schools which provided a discrete and coherent administrative and geographical location and variation in socio-

economic status and ethnicity (as established through 1992 Census statistics). Surveys and interview questions were approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney. The study sought both depth and breadth of data sources to construct, through triangulation of research strategies and techniques, as full a picture as possible within research limits of what was occurring. In August 1994, 467 surveys were distributed randomly to families across all classes in the

seven core schools (one trial school) with a return rate of 61 percent. Ninety surveys went out to teachers in those schools with a return rate of 63 percent.

Examples of the types of questions asked are:

Question 1: We would like to know how you feel right now.

Q1.1 Teachers at this school care about my child.

Q1.2 I feel welcome at this school.

Where "NO" means DISAGREE A LOT;

"no" means DISAGREE A LITTLE;

"yes" means AGREE A LITTLE; and

"YES" means AGREE STRONGLY.

Question 4: Circle one choice for each statement if the school has done these things in the last 12 months.

Q4.3 Send home clear messages that I can read easily.

Q4.5 Invite me to events at the school.

Where "NO" means NEVER;

"no" means HARDLY EVER;

"yes" means ONE OR TWO TIMES; and

"YES" means SEVERAL TIMES (the school has done in the last 12 months).

Responses were evenly split between families with female and male pupils (49.8 percent): 80 percent were filled in by the mother, 16 percent by the father and the rest by other relatives/guardians at >1 percent each. Of the responses: 56 percent had one child at the school, 36 percent had two children, seven percent had three children and one percent four or more. The full data for individual sites is held by each school. In the short summary below we provide a series of key positive and negative findings of the 281 responses completed sufficiently for analysis. The responses, expressed in percentages, are listed in Table 1.

In a nutshell, what these numbers indicate is that parents/families/caregivers have a respect and faith in the education provided for their children. In tandem with that, and not at all contradictory or undermining the former, the responses indicate a desire to know more about what happens in classrooms so that the home can play a more constructive role in their child's learning and in the teaching/learning activities of the school as a whole. The defences constructed by the NSWTE, as outlined above, thus appear unnecessary unless one is unable to contemplate any other role for parents than subservient uncritical "support". Any perusal of the literature on the changing nature of what it means to be a "professional" tells us that doctors, lawyers, architects and so on are becoming much less authoritarian in making decisions *with* (not *for*) their clients. Teachers have long been good at this but they need to shy away from anyone claiming that education is a special case and that things are too complex for outsiders to understand and contribute to. Arrogance does not become us.

TABLE 2: School-Home Links in Baysview Community

CURRENT STRATEGIES

- "Welcome" pamphlet and public display posters;
- weekly newsletter (which includes in varied degrees and frequency):
 - School Counsellor notes to parents regarding child raising and support,
 - class newsletter,
 - community news items: sports clubs, community notices and the like,
 - notices from local community centres and long day child care centres,
 - minutes from the Parents and Citizens Association meetings,
 - publicity about public meetings (for example, regarding a School Council),
 - a section in Italian, Chinese and other community languages, and
 - excursion information and permission notes attached to encourage reading;
- Grandparents Day;
- visits by ex-students;
- television broadcasts (for example, on Australian National Television and Channel 10) for:
 - achievement of healthy basis for food in canteen (1992),
 - Aussie Sports Fun 1993 (high school students tutoring sports' skills), and
 - Basic Skills Test 1993 (Year 3 students);
- visits by children at long day child care centres to Infant classes (junior or Year 0 classes);
- systems for parent helpers for classroom, sports/swimming carnivals, excursions, library and maintenance;
- invitations parents/caregivers to attend, free of charge, professional performances (music, story-telling);
- combined Scripture services for Easter and Christmas with invitation to parents;
- parent-teacher talks organised on a formal basis by the school;
- "Thank You" end-of-year lunch for parent/community supporters, and for teachers;
- regular local newspaper items;
- parent/family surveys;
- read-with-me club (parents reading with children at home);

- intensive reading tutor program (parents reading with children in classrooms);
- League of Schools Reaching Out Committee (at Northford PS);
- school drama night or music/dance concerts;
- links to Safety House Program;
- parent organised fair/fetes;
- more regular feedback slips on weekly newsletter; and
- 1994 Year of the Family activities.

POSSIBLE FUTURE STRATEGIES

- coffee/doughnut "Let's Talk" sessions (one per term or at distribution of Reports);
- increase the number of phone lines into school/improve school reception space and practices;
- distribute school weekly bulletin to local radio in addition to local newspapers;
- parent-teacher homework liaison;
- develop links to Inner West Learning Difficulties Parent Support Group;
- parent workshops on learning and child-raising issues and on how to talk to teachers;
- Parent-Teacher Action Team (problem-solving group for a particular issue);
- teacher workshops on improving parent-teacher interviews; working with volunteer parents; school evaluation; development of school policy on community involvement; getting publicity; talking to parents...;
- parent liaison person for each class with telephone tree to assist and mediate;
- inter-school visits for parent-teacher groups (within Baysview Cluster);
- parents to publish one school bulletin per term;
- school birthday and appropriate activities;
- pupils address Parents and Citizens Committee and the School Council;
- develop a register of parent-community resource people/willing helpers; and
- organise free child care for school-home related meetings.

DISCUSSION

I will address a few items that, in interviews and subsequent meetings with the schools, caused most interest and comment. One example is the extremely high percentage of homes that recognised teachers cared and felt the school was welcoming. When we presented this data at an American conference, the discussant did not believe our data! Our defence is too involved to go into here but one can readily bring to mind the type of negative stereotypes that abound about teachers and parents, and the destructive myths built on notions of blame. Yet we believe the core figure is a true reflection of what happens in most school communities. That is, about two-thirds of families are reasonably confident in what the school is doing and feel welcome and valued. Similar numbers of homes are happy about communication levels and willingness to encourage a partnership between home and the school.

However, there is a converse reality. About one third feel the home has goals for their children which are different from those promoted by the school. Similarly, about one-third had not visited their child's classroom more than half way through the school year and nearly as many had not talked to their child's teacher. Of course, the reasons for this are varied and legitimate. But these numbers suggest a pattern of breakdown between the home and school that can not be ignored if the school wants to provide the best possible education for each child under its care. As a group, homes and school need to ensure that what they do together generates a dynamic, healthy and forward-looking culture.

Thus, having a school community feeling confident in what the school is doing may not be enough to ensure that the best teaching and learning is going on. Parental satisfaction does not mean that families can not, should not also desire further, more effective connections. Table 2 lists an extensive range of school-home links. Most of these are school-initiated, much to the credit of the teachers who work hard at reaching out to homes. Increasingly, homes are reaching in to the school seeking a place for their knowledge and skills in the forms of knowledge and knowledge in the forms of knowledge validated in the school setting. Those schools responding to this are able to fashion in a rich and new way the things they do to educate young people about subject knowledge and life skills.

Some individual parents or local communities are seeking to reach in with their values and beliefs. This is a real challenge for a democratic society and there needs to be a more sophisticated response to finding ways to attune public opinion to the needs of the public. An overriding responsibility

and social justice needs to take account not only of what the teaching profession believes, but also of what those who are its targets believe; those whose actions will express the desires and fears of a pluralistic society expressing ideals of tolerance and free will.

REFLECTIONS

What the Baysview story tells us is that parents and teachers are building bridges to the future in finding ways for parents to be more involved in their child's education. Schools are willing to encourage the involvement of parents and break away from the traditional processes of parent/school connections. Whether this is enough to make penetrating change is questionable but the development of open communication between family, school and community is a good start to providing a springboard for better practice.

Education policy, in current initiatives, concentrates on schools trying to achieve things as a community. Attempts by parents

to participate, rather than be involved, in schools have a long history and should not be construed as mainly a threatening creation of New Right politics. Chitty (1994) illustrates this (for the United Kingdom) by reference to the "vigorous expansion of parent interest in education" that took place in the 1960s as part of a radical and progressive spirit. Brown and Reeve (1993) illustrate this (for Australia) in their study of parent participation, equality and democracy as expressed in the 1980s. What is changing in the 1990s is the nature and extent of the links between school and home and this article has given some insights into what these are and the extent to which they are effective and constructive, or not.

There is little doubt that the answers to these questions are vital to policy-makers, administrators and practitioners at all levels as they seek solutions today for the twenty-first century school. They also have profound implications for teacher education for, without adequate initial experiences in their pre-service program, beginning teachers will be overwhelmed by the idea of consulting and working closely with the local community.

NOTES

STEPHEN CRUMP worked in New South Wales government secondary schools for 12 years as a teacher and administrator. He now lectures in educational administration, research and policy analysis at the University of Sydney, New South Wales Australia 2006. E-mail: crumps@edfac.usyd.edu.au

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Details of the study can be found in:

Crump, S.J. & Eltis, K.J. (1995, April). *School-home relations: Political relations in policy implementation*. Presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Difficulties involved in translating policy to action is reported by:

Ball, S.J. (1994). *Education reform – A critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

The quote "Who should own the schools?" is from:

Glenn, C. (1992). Who should own the schools? *Equity and Choice*, 9(1), 59-63.

That the Australian Education Union appears to condone a view focusing on fears of unrepresentative groups is referenced to:

The Australian Educator, 45(1), 9-12. Unsigned letter.

Doris Fitzgerald's "gone loco" quote is from:

Fitzgerald, D. (1995). Loco Parentis. *Education*, 76(11), 8.

The priority given to community participation is expressed in:

Boston, K. (1995). *1995 – New South Wales Department of School Education priorities*. Sydney: New South Wales Department of School Education.

The lack of fidelity in policy implementation is noted in:

Crump, S.J. (1993). *School-centred leadership: Putting policy into practice*. Melbourne: Thomas Nelson.

Details of the data regarding family views of schools presented to an American audience can be found in:

Crump, S.J. & Eltis, K.J. (1995), see above.

The long history of parent involvement in the United Kingdom is recorded on page 10 of:

Chitty, C. (1994). Consensus to conflict: The structure of educational decision-making transformed. In D. Scott (Ed.), *Accountability and control in educational settings*. London: Cassell.

and for Australia, in:

Brown, J. & Reeve, P. (1993). Parent participation, equality and democracy. In D. Smith (Ed.), *Australian curriculum reform: action and reaction*. Canberra: ACSA.

For further reading on home/school links see:

Ames, C. (1993). How school-to-home communications influence parent beliefs and perceptions. *Equity and Choice*, 9(3), 44-49.

Epstein, J. (1989). Five types of parent involvement: Linking practice and outcomes. In J. Epstein (Ed.), *School and family connections: Preparing educators to involve families* (pp. 1-10). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.

Shipley, D.G. What is a community? *Equity and Choice*, 8(3), 19-23.

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