

# Engaging with families to support student learning in secondary school



**There is a great deal of evidence that families play a critical role in their child's learning. So how can secondary school teachers and leaders best work with families to support student learning?**

This guide makes recommendations based on the best available research evidence about how secondary school teachers and leaders can engage with families to bring about improvements in students' learning outcomes.<sup>1</sup> It sets out 'promising' and 'not promising' approaches drawn from multiple studies which have measured the effects of different strategies. While there is room for improvements in the quality of available research evidence,<sup>2</sup> these approaches provide 'best bets' for guiding practice. This guide also sets out next steps for considering how the findings relate to your individual practice or whole school strategy.

Note that some of the examples offered may not apply in all contexts. Reasonable adjustments should be made where necessary to ensure full access and participation for all families.

## **Australian Professional Standards for Teachers**

Focus Area 3.7 (Engage parents/carers in the educative process)

Focus Area 7.3 (Engage with the parents/carers)

## **Australian Professional Standard for Principals**

Professional Practice 5 (Engaging and working with the community)

The Teacher and Principal Standards outline professional expectations for engaging effectively with families. They recognise the importance of working in partnership with families to improve learning outcomes for students.



## Promising

Research evidence shows these approaches for engaging with families can have a **measurable positive effect** on student learning outcomes. While some promising approaches may seem obvious, the key is that they have been shown to improve student learning outcomes when they are implemented well.



### Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Recognising and supporting learning that takes place in the home has been shown to improve students' academic achievement, academic behaviour, and social-behavioural competency.<sup>3</sup> Families who feel they are working in partnership with their child's school can be more likely to engage in practices to support learning at home.<sup>4</sup>

For there to be genuine recognition and support of families' role in learning at home, families and school staff need to be seen as equal, trusted partners who both influence a student's learning. This could be achieved in the first instance by having a conversation with families about:

- talking with their child about school and what they have learned
- conveying family expectations around learning and/or
- helping to create an environment that allows for study.

However, it is not recommended that schools simply *tell* families techniques or tools they should use at home, or ask families to assist with homework.



### Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning

Two-way communication (that is, communication that flows both ways from school staff to families, and from families to school staff) has been shown to improve students' social-behavioural competency.<sup>5</sup> To be most effective, two-way communication should draw on the knowledge and expertise of both families and teachers about students' learning needs and achievements.

Additionally, low-cost, light touch updates from schools to families about student learning have been shown to improve students' academic achievement.<sup>6</sup> These updates are particularly beneficial for students at risk of falling behind.<sup>7</sup> Text messages, emails or phone calls could:

- inform families about upcoming tests or assignments
- provide assignment results
- inform families about missing assignments or homework and/or
- provide short summaries of a lesson to prompt conversation at home.

Light touch updates should be personalised, positive, concise and focused on learning, and should enable families to respond if required. These updates are more effective when schools consult with families about how often and at what time of day they would like to receive messages.<sup>8</sup> School leaders should also consider how light touch updates can be maintained without increasing teacher workload.<sup>9</sup>



### Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem-solving between families, students and school staff has been shown to improve students' academic outcomes and social-behavioural competency.<sup>10</sup> It helps to share responsibility for decision-making and learning. It can also ensure that families, teachers and leaders are using a consistent approach for addressing a student's unique learning needs.

Collaborative planning could involve working together with families and students to identify students' individual goals for learning, as well as strategies for achieving them. Goals could relate to specific subjects (for example, improving fluency in Mathematics) or apply more generally (for example, successfully transitioning into secondary school or defining career aspirations).

Examples of collaborative problem-solving could include asking students and their families about questions you have when reviewing a student's progress, and actively discussing learning opportunities for students.



## Promising

### Reflection questions



#### Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

##### Teachers

- How do families you work with already support their children's learning?
- Have you had explicit discussions with students and families about high expectations for learning?

##### Leaders

- There is no 'one-size-fits-all' way of recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home. What does or could it look like in your school?
- What strategies did your school use for remote learning during COVID-19? Is it possible to leverage some of these strategies in future to support family engagement in learning?



#### Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning

##### Teachers

- How do you or your colleagues invite families to share their knowledge and expertise about students' learning needs and achievements, and how do you share your knowledge and expertise in return?
- How could light touch updates remain positive when they are about missing assignments or disappointing results?

##### Leaders

- What supports (for example, translation services) are in place to help all families and staff communicate with each other?
- Do school communications cater to differing levels of adult literacy?
- Does your school have a systematic process in place for providing families with personalised, light touch updates about student progress? Could some of these updates be automated (but still personalised)?
- Has your school consulted with families about their preferred frequency and time of day for communications?



#### Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

##### Teachers

- What types of goals are your students working towards? Do you invite or encourage families to help shape some of these goals?
- How do you collaborate with families to help ensure students can achieve their goals?

##### Leaders

- How easy is it for families to raise issues or challenges about learning with school staff?
- Are there systems in place to allow for collaborative problem-solving with families?
- How are student goals and successful problem-solving strategies communicated between teachers of the same student, or as students transition from one year to the next?

## Not promising

Research evidence shows these approaches are **risky**. They may have no effect or, in some cases, even have a negative effect on secondary school students' learning outcomes.

### Relying on inviting families to activities on the school grounds

Families are often encouraged to be involved at school — for example, by volunteering in the classroom, attending back-to-school nights or fundraisers, and being involved in parent committees. While these may have many other benefits, encouraging families to be involved in these ways has generally *not* been found to improve student learning outcomes.<sup>11</sup> In other words, these activities *by themselves* cannot be expected to lead to improvements in student learning.

#### Reflection questions

##### Teachers

- How many of your efforts to engage with families directly link to student learning?
- Do you or your colleagues feel that families who rarely come to school are less engaged in their child's learning?

##### Leaders

- How many of your school's family engagement efforts have direct links to student learning?
- Is there a culture in your school of thinking that families who rarely come to school are less engaged in their child's learning?
- How do you build the capacity of staff to engage families in their child's learning? How could this capacity be further developed among your staff?

### Relying on one-way communication from families

The benefits seen from building two-way communication between families and schools are generally *not* seen when communication stops at the school. One-way information sharing from families to their child's teachers or school (that is, when communication is initiated by families and not reciprocated, harnessed or acted on by school staff) has *not* been shown to improve student learning outcomes.<sup>12</sup>

#### Reflection questions

##### Teachers

- What factors make it difficult for you or your colleagues to act on information that could be useful in the classroom?
- Do you find that some information shared by families about students' learning needs or achievements is being lost within the school?
- Could proactive collaboration and problem-solving with families help them feel that any issues or challenges for their child's learning are being heard?

##### Leaders

- Does your school have a culture of listening and responding to families?
- Do school structures and policies allow for two-way communication between a student's teachers and the student's family wherever possible?
- Are there systems that help teachers of the same student to share information from families where appropriate?

### Encouraging families to monitor, assist with, or check homework

Although using light touch communications about upcoming assignments or missing homework is a promising approach, encouraging families to supervise, check or directly help their children with homework is not. Generally, this has *not* improved student learning outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

One possible reason that assisting, monitoring or checking homework does *not* improve learning outcomes is because adolescents need to work more independently as they develop greater autonomy. There can also be differences in how families and teachers explain content or interpret tasks, and greater specialisation of the curriculum in secondary school can make it increasingly difficult for families to effectively assist with homework.<sup>14</sup>

#### Reflection questions

##### Teachers

- If you've noticed that families are helping with homework, what alternative actions could you suggest they take to support students to complete homework independently (for example, work spaces or homework routines)?
- Are there homework tasks you could set that encourage students to talk with their families about what they are learning, but also to complete the tasks independently?

##### Leaders

- Do staff expect families to monitor their child's homework?
- Do families see helping with homework as part of their role?
- Does your school have systems that help to efficiently track homework completion?



## Where to next?

Consider which of the scenarios in the table below most closely resembles your current practices.

We're already using some or all of the <b>promising</b> approaches	We're currently using some or all of the <b>not promising</b> approaches	We're just <b>starting</b> to engage with families	We're using <b>other</b> approaches not covered in this practice guide
<p>That's great – the evidence suggests these are good approaches to try. You could focus on embedding, sustaining and monitoring quality practice. For example, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>explicitly consider implementation barriers and enablers — that is, the factors that are helping and hindering family engagement among the school community</li> <li>focus more on tailoring approaches to meet the diverse and unique needs of families</li> <li>share your approaches, challenges and successes with other colleagues or school leaders</li> <li>monitor and review how these promising approaches are going (for example, by collecting student learning data, and consulting with families, colleagues and students about what is and is not working, and what adjustments could be made to improve outcomes).</li> </ul>	<p>There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to family engagement, and findings in the research evidence may change as further studies are carried out or approaches are tested in more settings. However, based on the best available research evidence, these 'risky' approaches are less likely to be successful and may even have negative impacts on student learning. In this context, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>closely monitor how the approach is going in general and for specific groups of students and their families (for example, by collecting student learning data, and consulting with families, colleagues and students)</li> <li>review the evidence you have collected to see if the approach is giving you a good chance of success</li> <li>consider trialling some of the promising approaches.</li> </ul>	<p>Family engagement in children's learning has been linked with positive outcomes for student learning, so it's great that you're looking for strategies to try. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work with colleagues to identify the main needs of families across your classes</li> <li>select which one/s of the promising approaches you could first focus on to meet these needs</li> <li>monitor how this approach is going (for example, by collecting student learning data, and consulting with families, colleagues and students)</li> <li>ask colleagues or school leaders for feedback or to discuss challenges that arise</li> <li>browse AERO's <a href="#">resources</a>.</li> </ul>	<p>Family engagement can involve many different activities. Your approach may not yet have been tested by researchers, or may have been tested in studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria for this guide. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>continue to monitor how your approach is going (for example, by collecting student learning data, and consulting with families, colleagues and students)</li> <li>try some of the promising approaches you haven't tried already</li> <li>review the evidence for your approach using AERO's <a href="#">Research reflection guide</a>.</li> </ul>



## For more information

This is a very short summary of recommendations drawn from the research evidence. To check how we synthesised the most rigorous and relevant approaches from meta-analyses, systematic reviews and primary studies, see our [brief description](#) or [detailed description](#). For further guidance, see the practical resources, [annotated reference list](#), and detailed implementation guides on the [AERO website](#).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In this practice guide, “learning outcomes” usually refers to academic achievement (measured through grades or test scores) and/or academic behaviours (such as engagement/persistence, school completion or time spent on homework). Some studies also reported on “social-behavioural competence” (including social-emotional learning outcomes like social skills and behaviour regulation). While this practice guide includes social-behavioural competency outcomes where they were reported in the included studies, it is not intended to be a comprehensive guide for how schools can work with families to support students’ social-emotional learning outcomes. In other words, there may be other promising approaches (not included here) that schools can use to engage with families to bring about improvements in students’ social-emotional learning outcomes.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, there is a need for more replication studies to test approaches in different contexts, and to better understand how family engagement approaches work when they involve multiple strategies operating at the same time. There is also less research evidence on family engagement at secondary school compared with early childhood and primary school.
- <sup>3</sup> Smith et al. (2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Smith et al. (2020).
- <sup>5</sup> Smith et al. (2020); Sheridan et al. (2019).
- <sup>6</sup> See et al. (2021); Kraft & Dougherty (2013); Kraft & Rogers (2015); Bergman (2015); Miller et al. (2017).
- <sup>7</sup> See et al. (2021). Text messages, emails and phone calls from schools to families have been shown to have small positive effects on student achievement. These communications have generally been more successful in Mathematics compared with English or Science. They have been found to benefit students with lower academic attainment, but not students who have English as an Additional Language/Dialect. Communications sometimes also took place via school communication systems.
- <sup>8</sup> For example, Bergman (2015) trialled updates several times per month and Miller et al. (2017) tested messages during and after school.
- <sup>9</sup> See et al. (2021).
- <sup>10</sup> Smith et al. (2020); Sheridan et al. (2019).
- <sup>11</sup> Smith et al. (2020).
- <sup>12</sup> Smith et al. (2020).
- <sup>13</sup> Higgins & Katsipataki (2015); Smith et al. (2020).
- <sup>14</sup> Hill & Tyson (2009).