

Partnering with Families in an Inclusive Education System

Developing partnerships with families and having effective methods of consultation and collaboration are expectations of the Australian school system. These expectations are identified in documents such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, the Disability Standards for Education, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, and Queensland's Parent and Community Engagement Framework.

With a focus on change and leadership development, Community Resource Unit has been working with people with disabilities, their families and supporters for over 30 years. Through our Families for Inclusive Education Project, funded by the Queensland Department of Education in 2019-2020, CRU supports families to be clear, informed, confident, and connected, so that they can work as respected and valued partners in their children's education. CRU is working to equip families of students in state schools across Queensland with the knowledge and skills needed to work effectively with their child's school. The ideas presented here for developing more productive partnerships come from the families we have worked alongside.

Research suggests that relationships between schools and families of students with disability are often fraught and source of considerable frustration and disappointment. Families frequently report feeling their input is unwelcome or their views or priorities were overlooked (Mann et al 2020). They describe feeling powerless at times in influencing school decision making and even feeling marginalised within school communities, including feeling their child's enrolment is frequently under question. While some families do experience strong collaboration, many find advocating for their son or daughter with disability feels constant, and at times costly to their own well-being.

*“School is a big part of my kid's life.
I would like to be involved, and help them
by working with their teachers.
I would feel more confident about school if
teachers had more confidence in me”*

CRU believes that the basis of partnerships with families must be a presumption of inclusion and welcome, and a commitment to **respectful listening** to the student and the family.

Families will not always get it right but they have a natural authority which deserves respect.

Families have a natural authority because they:

- *Know the child most fully and over the long-term*
- *Love and care about the child the most*
- *Have a stake in the outcomes – they will wear the consequences of school decisions*
- *Are expected to advocate*
- *Usually have less vested interests*

(Michael Kendrick 1996)



Photo credit: Craig Berkman ABC News.

To achieve positive partnerships, schools must prioritise relationships.

Families say that positive relationships are more likely when their child with disability is **unconditionally welcomed**, and seen as a **valued, contributing member of the school community**.

Families say they also want to feel welcomed and valued.

To do better requires knowledge of what families value, a critical analysis of the factors which erode trust and mutual respect, and proactive commitments from schools.

Families tell us they want educators and schools to:

- See the child as an individual who is valued and has strengths and gifts
- Value student and family hopes and dreams
- Make the least dangerous assumptions – keep high expectations
- Not be a naysayer but rather work for maximum participation and inclusion
- Be non-judgmental and make efforts to hear and understand families
- Demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to figure things out for each individual child
- Promote a culture of professional learning and self-reflection based on openness to families' knowledge and perspectives
- Develop understanding of the family experience, including the additional demands and complexities families of students with disability face

Challenges schools face in partnering with families may include:

- Finding time to build relationships within the busyness of school schedules and competing demands
- That families and educators bring prior histories to the relationship – when those histories have been problematic, it can take more time to develop trust and rapport
- That educators can feel confused or make the wrong assumption due to wide divergence of family views and preferences
- An accumulation of hurts or conflicts can erode trust and lead to reactive responses (on both sides)
- That both parties face dilemmas in finding the most sensitive way to address issues of concern without causing offence
- Working with limited resources or other restrictions contrary to student needs or family requests

CRU acknowledges that schools face challenges in meeting all the expectations or hopes that families might have. It is easier, however, to build effective relationships when we remain alert to these challenges, even if they cannot be readily overcome.

Schools also have valuable perspectives on barriers to establishing collaboration with families, however, our purpose here is to identify those factors which families report.



Families identify the following practices as undermining effective partnerships:

- Calling meetings or asking for written agreement at short notice, leaving the family feeling ambushed
- Stacking meetings with staff, leaving the family overwhelmed and unable to participate effectively
- Being closed to input; withdrawing stonewalling when conflict is high
- Relying only on formal top down engagement strategies
- Appearing to judge the family
- Failing to accept responsibility for mistakes or shortfalls in inclusive practice
- Having a child/family is the problem mindset
- Only offering a standard, inflexible way of doing things
- Being a powerful expert and not acknowledging family expertise
- Being pessimistic about the child's potential and future (having low expectations)
- Lacking sensitivity – speaking or writing negatively about the child or only reporting on deficits and “incidents” rather than progress or achievements

Families identify the following practices as contributors to effective partnerships:

- Willingness to address the unequal power between the family and school
- Staying curious about the student and family perspective
- Sharing information in a timely and accessible manner
- Listening in order to understand even if there isn't agreement with the family view
- Demonstrating a willingness to problem solve and be flexible
- Speaking positively and enthusiastically about the child and always demonstrating a commitment to their rights and best interests
- Knowledge of the research evidence and legal and moral imperatives for inclusive education
- Ensuring all communication is respectful, positive and compassionate
- Understanding common family experiences – the additional complexities they manage, and a social context where the student and their family are very likely to have experienced negative and discriminatory treatment

“Please, please, please, please remember we are a resource. So many things could be resolved quickly if we had the opportunity to give input. Our children are at the centre of our lives, and their learning and their well-being is always important to us.”



As recognised in the PACE framework, communication and school culture are key elements of establishing effective collaborative practice.

Suggested improvements in these areas are based on family input.

What can educators and schools do to improve communication?

- Jointly agree on means and frequency of communication as early as possible and review as needed
- Recognise roadblocks – e.g. check if there are indicators that the family feels their child is not valued or that their views are not welcomed
- Avoid defensiveness. When tensions are high, work to listen more and say less
- Develop empathy for the family viewpoint; consider what parents are likely to hear in common interactions and aim to be thoughtful about common experiences of families
- Speak positively and sensitively
- Invite input – provide waiting time and be enthusiastic about encouraging and valuing family contributions
- Provide appropriately clear and accessible information i.e. explain unfamiliar processes and don't overload with technical or expert language
- Take up opportunities for professional development to improve communication skills

What can educators and schools do to improve school culture?

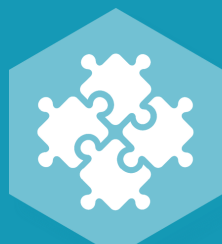
- Instil a mindset of high expectations
- Model flexibility
- Value diversity and set a vision for inclusion
- Uphold student voice
- Expect challenges and adopt critical self-reflection
- Believe in every child and their value as a contributing member of the school community
- Do “what it takes”
- Prioritise relationships – make time for these to be built
- Reward and invest in staff who are leading inclusive practice
- Join with others who are trying to do better
- Provide active roles for families to be involved i.e. more than receiving school messages
- Actively working to share power in decision making e.g. joint responsibility for developing goals



Communication



Partnerships



Collaboration



Decision-making



School culture

*“Some stories enhance life;
others degrade it.
So we must be careful about
the stories we tell,
about the ways we define
ourselves and other people.”*

Burton Blatt

Ref: Mann, G et al (2020). “Developing productive partnerships with parents and carers” in Graham, L. (Ed.) *Inclusive education for the 21st century: Theory, policy and practice*. Allen & Unwin, Australia.

For more information on the
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See: cru.org.au/families-for-inclusive-education/
To read more on collaboration:
[cru.org.au/families-for-inclusive-education/
resources/working-collaboratively/](http://cru.org.au/families-for-inclusive-education/resources/working-collaboratively/)