Inquiry into engaging parents in the education of their children

MANAAKITIA A TĀTOU TAMARIKI

Children's
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Parental engagement has a major effect on children's education, both now and in their futures

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry on improving children's educational outcomes though better parental engagement.

As Children's Commissioner, I have a statutory responsibility to advocate for children's interests, rights and welfare, and to report on any matter that relates to the welfare of children.

Education is a key area of interest for me because of its major effect on children's welfare, both now and in their futures

INTRODUCTION

It is well-evidenced that not all children and young people in New Zealand are achieving their educational potential, and that this situation is both persistent and deeply damaging to the individuals affected and our prospects as a nation.

While what happens in formal education settings such as schools and early childhood education (ECE) services is important, parents, families, whānau and communities are major influences on children and young people's educational outcomes. A summary of relevant research on this topic is included in my July 2013 **Working Paper: *Parents', Families' and Whānau Contributions to Educational Success***, attached as part of this submission.

Being involved in their child's learning and education is a key part of being a parent. The environment in which parents live, including community expectations and structural policy settings, and their own skills and experiences, can make it either easier or harder for parents to get involved effectively. A key role for Government is to make it easier.

To be effective, education and learning strategies need to take full account of children and families' wellbeing and experiences, and be developed and implemented not only across the full range of Government agencies, but also in conjunction with children, families and communities themselves. An effective strategy to engage parents and whānau in their children's learning would recognise that;

> learning happens from birth onwards and in both formal and informal settings
> there is a wide range of influences on children's learning, including parents, families, whānau, communities, the formal education sector (ECEs, schools, principals, teachers, and Boards of Trustees), non-government organisations, and government policies and services
> environmental factors (including policy settings such as those around family incomes and housing) and social norms as embodied by parents themselves influence how easy or hard it is for parents, families and whānau to do the best for their children.

STRUCTURE OF THIS SUBMISSION

The first section of this submission provides a description of the different roles and forms of engagement parents have in contributing to the educational success of their children.
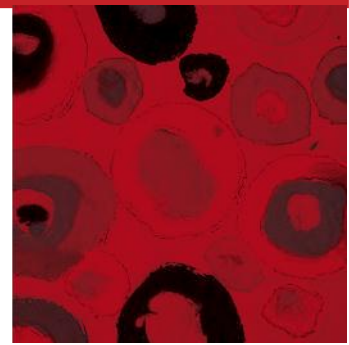
The next three sections respond to the main questions posed by the Committee for this inquiry.

Parent, family and whānau role in children's learning

Parents have different roles in different settings and at different stages of their children's lives, but they are always important.

PARENTS' ROLES

Research shows that most parents[1] are very interested in their child's educational success, and are prepared to, and want to, do as much as they can to help. I believe that how much they succeed at this depends on how well they are supported to perform their parenting role overall (for example, having adequate income and housing), and how much information they have about education and learning.

Parental engagement in education takes different forms for different families and at different ages and stages. Education (and learning itself) happens all the time, in both formal and informal settings. Parents have different roles at different times, but they are always important.

In the early years

In the early years, the parental role in education is usually as the primary provider of educational experiences, for example, by talking, reading and singing with their child. These activities have multiple positive effects, including on educational outcomes by supporting healthy bonding and brain development.

Parental engagement tends to be through health and social service providers (e.g. Well Child/Tamariki Ora providers, targeted programmes such as Family Start, community-based parenting support). Important bases for parental engagement in education are formed in these early years with organisations and services outside the education sector.

In ECE

The first formal experience of the education system most families have is with ECE services. ECE can involve parents in many different ways, from participating alongside the child, to being a partner to the establishment and delivery of the learning programme but not being physically present, to having involvement in non-educational elements such as fundraising.

In the school years

Once a child is at school, the parental role in has at least two elements: continuing informal learning (e.g. participation in cultural activities, conversations around the dinner table); and, being engaged in the learning their children are doing at school (e.g. having a strong relationship and communicating well with the teacher, setting expectations, productive engagements around homework).

There is evidence that whether or not parents engage in their child's school-based learning is related to their views on two key questions:

> *Is it my role to get involved in my child's education? (parental role-construction) and*
> *Can I make a useful contribution? (self-efficacy)[2.]*

How parents feel on these two points is affected by the attitudes of the community. Schools and teachers can also impact on how parents respond to these questions, by either inviting parents into the learning process or not.

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[1] When I refer to parents I mean adults who have ongoing caring roles for children. By 'family and whānau' I mean an extended family: in some cases, this group can be very extended and included members who are not biologically related but have caring responsibilities towards each other.

[2] See Hoover-Dempsey, K.V., Walker, J.M.T., Sandler, H.M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A.S., and Closson, K. (2005) Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elemntary School Journal 106:2 (105-130)* for a full discussion of this model

Elements of an effective strategy for engaging parents, families, whānau, aiga, and communities in education
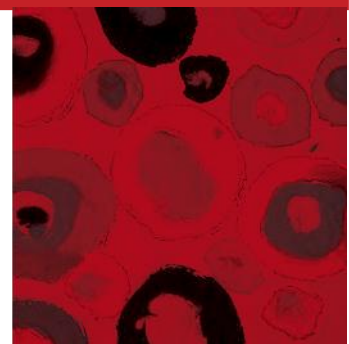
Any strategy that seeks to improve educational outcomes needs to :

- take account of early childhood as well as the school years
- look beyond the education system or sector
- attend to the environments in which families and children live, and what is needed to make these environments conducive to positive engagement

AN APPROACH FOR SUPPORTING POSITIVE PARENTAL BEHAVIOURS, ATTITUDES AND VALUES

The Terms of Reference of the inquiry make it clear that the Committee is interested in taking a strategic approach to parent and whānau engagement. My attached Working Paper outlines an approach to generate better outcomes for children and young people by supporting positive parental behaviors, attitudes and values. Building on that approach, I propose that elements of an effective strategy include:

> Start early and maintain focus
> Work with families and whānau as experts
> Build on what is already known
> Take population-wide approaches to support education
> Provide targeted and intensive support to disadvantaged communities.

Start early in the life of children and families and maintain focus over the life course

Including early childhood (including pre-birth experiences) and the services that are delivered in this period, is important for an effective strategy for the following two reasons.

First, parents are the main providers and facilitators of education for their children. It is a time when most parents are very interested in their children's learning and have high hopes for them, and when parental behaviours and attitudes to their role are parents and to their child's development and education are being established. This is the best time to influence parental behaviours.

Second, early childhood experiences have long-lasting effects. Brain and physical development also happens at a rapid pace during these years, setting the foundation for future abilities. A poor start to life can have high costs to both the individual and society. For example, there is evidence that not only educational outcomes, but also some conduct disorders and criminal offending, can be affected by childhood experiences.

The majority of parents want the best for their children and know how to do it. I believe that some parents do not require any intervention from government to provide a positive learning experience, but others require information (about the fact that what they do is important, or about ways they can interact with their children), and a small number will require intensive support to be able to provide positive learning environments for their young children.

While establishing strong foundations in the early years is critical, the importance of sustaining support for parental

engagement does not end there.[3.] The support that parents need to engage in the education of their senior secondary student will be different to the support they need when their child is a baby. Any successful strategy to engage parents and whānau in their children's learning would need to promote practices that are developmentally appropriate, with care taken around transition points and interfaces with other policies, practices and approaches.

Work with parents, families and whānau as experts:

All the available research and anecdotal evidence is clear that programmes and projects that are 'done to' families, that treat them disrespectfully, and that diminish their practices and systems, are ineffective. Any strategy to engage parents and whānau in their children's learning would need to treat them as partners, and should be designed and delivered in collaboration with them.

Once children are engaged in formal education settings, there is an important role for schools and educators in initiating positive engagements with parents and whānau that recognise the strengths in parents and families (and avoid deficit assumptions). Both the general climate of the school set by the school's leadership, and the specific actions of the child's teachers, are important.

Engaging with parents, whānau and community should be considered as part of the school's core business. This means that schools should be resourced and funded to discharge this obligation well, and teacher education should address parent and whānau engagement specifically, both in initial teacher education and ongoing professional development.

Build on what is already known:

There is a large amount of international and New Zealand research and evidence on all the points raised by the Terms of Reference. Much of this is summarised in my Working Paper. You may also find the Education Review Office's (ERO) 2008 reports of its *Partners in Learning project*[4] and the Best Evidence Synthesis commissioned by the Ministry of Education, *The complexity of community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand*[5] helpful.

I believe that policies and programmes that aim to change New Zealand society must be evidence-based. Being evidence-based means measuring and assessing the things that are important to understand, not just the things that are easily measurable. An important corollary is that policies and programmes that are found to be ineffective must be stopped.

Population-wide approaches supporting education:

Policies focussing on increasing educational attainment in the population generally are important components of any strategy for supporting parents' and whānau involvement in learning (e.g. initiatives such as the Better Public Services goal that 85% of 18 year olds should have attained NCEA level 2 in 2017).

Parental education levels are a key predictor of a child's outcomes, as education policies and experiences often have lifespan and inter-generational effects. Parents' attitudes to their children's learning and education are affected by their own experiences, e.g. low levels of educational attainment or bad experiences in school may make it less likely that parents will believe that they can and should get involved in their children's learning and education.

[3] I note that the current National Education Goal 4 is that "A sound foundation in the early years for future learning and achievement through programmes which include support for parents in their vital role as their children's first teachers". A useful recommendation of the inquiry would be that Government remove the phrase 'early years' from this goal.

[4] Education Review Office (2008). *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities; Partners in Learning: Good Practice, and Partners in Learning: Parents Voices,* Wellington. Education Review Office

[5] Biddulph, F., Biddulph, J., & Biddulph, C. (2003). *Best Evidence Synthesis - The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children's Achievement in New Zealand,* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Making access to literacy and numeracy and parenting training easy for parents and caregivers who want and need it could also help them to engage more effectively in their children's learning.

Provide targeted and intensive support to disadvantaged communities:

Not all New Zealand children are achieving their education potential. This is particularly so for children living in poverty, including a high proportion of Maori and Pasifika children.

Improving parental engagement is a good way to support improved educational outcomes for these children. However, moving parents into a space where it is easier for them to be engaged will mean addressing a range complex, interrelated factors. These factors include ensuring children and their families have:

> Stable, nurturing family
> Supportive community
> Adequate income to meet needs
> Supportive education sector
> Accessible health services
> Affordable, safe, healthy homes
> Safe homes and communities

Achieving the social and cultural shifts the inquiry seeks for disadvantaged communities requires targeted and intensive support across all these factors.

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Identifying best practice examples of approaches, locally and internationally, that support parents and communities to encourage their children's learning
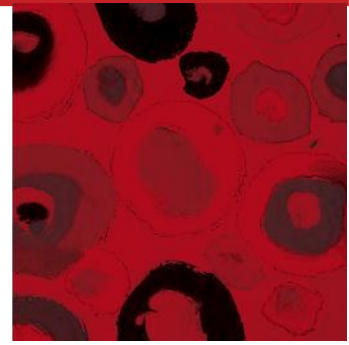
What will 'best practice' look like? Some advice to the Committee on how to assess 'best practice' is offered here.

ASSESSING 'BEST PRACTICE'

I am sure the Committee will be provided with many examples of practice in engaging families and whānau in learning. When assessing whether or not they should be identified as 'best practice' I recommend you consider whether the approach, programme or project:

> puts children's interests and wellbeing first
> has a well-thought through intervention logic that is consistent with research and evidence or has any monitoring or evaluation evidence
> demonstrates a clear understanding of the parents, whānau and community it is intended to benefit (including cultural and socio-economic circumstances)
> takes a strengths-based approach and respects parents, families and whānau
> aligns with principles of healthy child development.

Assessing initiatives in this way provides a clear, rational lens to weigh up where the best investments would be to make the most impact.

Identifying ways to leverage the strength of communities to lift the educational achievement of children and young people in their community
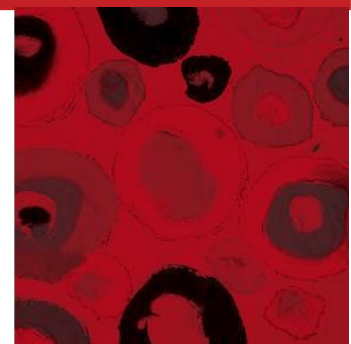
A key role for the Government is to provide the right settings for a productive society, and provide community support through policy settings and funding.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE

It is increasingly recognised that if government and communities work together they can achieve better outcomes for society. Members of communities are more aware of the issues that are relevant to themselves. Therefore their involvement in the design and implementation of policy initiatives means the solutions can be more appropriate for the local context.

Strengthening families and communities is an integral part of community development; Non-governmental organisations and local and central government can play an important role in helping social networks to grow and lead to real progress in communities.[6]

There are many different types of communities, including geographic areas and local neighbourhoods as well as social and cultural communities. Because of the importance of cultural competence in successful learning and the special place of Māori in New Zealand society, iwi and other Māori organisations can play a valuable role in any education and learning strategy.

A key role that government can play is to provide much needed financial support to sustain these initiatives, alongside private philanthropic trusts.

Some communities need much more active support from the government. We know that children living in poverty experience multiple disadvantages, in particular environmental and social factors that can impede them from fully participating in their education. In these cases, the government's role should not just be supporting community-led development initiatives, but with more direct policies that address the causes and effects of poverty.

I am particularly interested in how the 'collective impact'[7] approach could be used to bring together and align all the community, business, philanthropic and government resources to achieve the shifts the inquiry seeks for disadvantaged children. I urge the Committee to review the evidence of collective impact on addressing educational outcomes.[8]

CLOSING

Thank you for your consideration of this submission. I would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee to speak to this submission.

Dr Russell Wills
Children's Commissioner

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[6] For some examples of how community organisations are working to strengthen families, see EAG Working Paper 19 *Role of local strategies in reducing child poverty,* (www.occ.org)

[7] See for example, Stanford Social Innovation Review, *Channeling Change: making Collective Impact Work* (www.FSG.org)

[8] See examples at www.fsg.org.