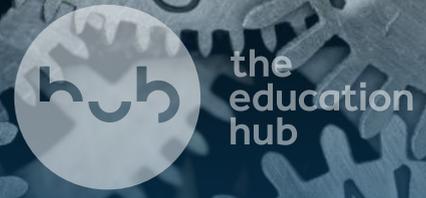


What school leadership can do to support home-school partnerships



School resources

Research in Aotearoa New Zealand agrees with international research on the impact of home-school partnerships. However, schools often face barriers to implementing long-term strategies, and schools in New Zealand tend to be characterised by:

- a lack of policies for home-school partnership
- a lack of time and resources
- ingrained beliefs about the roles of teachers (as the sole authorities) and parents (as the recipient of instruction at best or interfering at worst)
- a limited range of participation activities
- minimal focus on parent education and support
- limited training for teachers on working with families
- ad hoc organisation of parental involvement
- infrequent use of home visits.

Key strategies for supporting partnerships

School leadership can help dismantle barriers by providing four key ingredients: a strong culture of partnership, emphasis on collaborative practices, practical resources, and plenty of time. Here are three essential terms to get you started:

Family involvement refers to a range of activities that engage families in their children's schooling, such as attending parent-teacher conferences and educational workshops, volunteering for field trips, or guiding home-learning activities. Be aware that many involvement activities are primarily focused on whānau support for the school, or they may put families in a passive role as recipients of knowledge.

Home-school partnerships, on the other hand, are mutually determined, balancing the traditional power dynamic between teachers and whānau. They have benefits for all partners – students, whānau, and teachers. While increased family involvement is a consequence of effective partnerships, effective partnerships do not automatically arise from involvement activities.

Collaboration means that schools and whānau develop individualised ways to interact with each other, drawing on each partner's experiences and resources. They create common goals and exchange information. They negotiate beliefs about the best way to support children's learning, rather than teachers imposing their beliefs upon families. Whānau self-define how they participate in their children's educational experiences.

1. Build a strong, cohesive vision and culture. To achieve this, school leaders can:

- Cultivate a shared belief in the importance of partnerships and show commitment to making family engagement a central priority rather than a bolt-on extra.

- Curb deficit-theorising and encourage a strengths-based views of families' values, beliefs, and home context.
- Create an environment that is respectful, open, and inclusive of family diversity. This might mean overcoming negative stereotypes of certain cultural groups.
- Focus on students' learning and wellbeing, rather than just seeking involvement with school activities such as fundraising or governance.
- Create a staff-room culture where parents are seen as genuine partners in the students' education.
- Show sensitivity to the circumstances of families and students, and potential barriers to involvement.

2. Develop collaborative processes and practices. To do this, school leaders can:

- Create a written policy setting out a wide range of ways in which families can be involved in their children's education, and the ways in which schools and teachers will support families to do this. A policy is important to clarify parents' rights and responsibilities to partnership. The policy should be distributed to parents and teachers, and implementation should be monitored.
- Involve parents in developing the policy. Find out their real needs rather than making assumptions. Discover whether parents want to become partners with the school, what their vision of partnership is, and what goals they would like partnership to address.
- Offer an online portal that gives parents immediate access to their children's attendance and grades, and which allows them to email teachers. Put effort into maximising the number of parents using the portal.
- Be prepared to offer a number of invitations and opportunities for participation and involvement, as families are more likely to be involved in their children's education when schools make a greater effort to engage them.
- Create structures and processes for solving problems and resolving differences.

3. Provide partnership resources and reviews. To lead this work, school leaders can:

- Appoint one person in the school who has responsibility for promoting and organising partnership, and a multicultural team to coordinate development and progress of home-school partnership work.
- Offer ongoing professional development on implementing a range of aspects of parental involvement.
- Conduct regular evaluations of the effectiveness of partnership practices, including record-keeping on parent attendance at activities. Find out parents' impressions of current partnership activities, and look to extend and consolidate successful practices.

4. Make time: It takes on average at least three years to implement good quality, comprehensive, multi-dimensional home school partnerships. Plan both long and short time scales for implementation that include indicators of success.

Common pitfalls to avoid

The literature on home-school partnerships highlights several common pitfalls in the work of increasing family involvement and building partnerships. They are:

Confusing engagement with the school with engagement with learning. You may catch yourself privileging forms of engagement that are directly helpful to the school (such as attending parent-teacher interviews or volunteering in school). This can negate the 'invisible' ways that families are engaged in their

children's learning. To avoid this, recognise that parents might be very involved with the learning of their children at home, even if they do not turn up for activities at the school. Find ways to uncover, document and validate the effectiveness of diverse ways that families support their children's education. Research has shown home involvement with learning to be more effective than school-based involvement.

Being too focused on teacher-set goals. This may mean that partnership becomes skewed in favour of families following advice and directions from teachers. It may also lead to existing, helpful family practices being overlooked or undermined. To avoid this, find out about the parents' goals for their children, and culturally valued practices that might support learning. Discuss how families and teachers can come together to create learning opportunities for students that one partner could not provide on their own. The aim is not to make homes more like school, but to draw on families' areas of expertise to optimise learning for students.

Deficit thinking in regard to parents. Any kind of attempt at home-school partnership will be undermined by deficit thinking and stereotypical assumptions about parents. To avoid this, look for the best in everyone. Parents report that teachers' and principals' positive attitudes encourage them to get involved in their child's education. A positive attitude means seeing all families as a resource for their children's learning, having respect and high personal regard for them, and believing in their ability and desire to fulfil their responsibilities and put children's interests first.

Reducing support for families who are already involved in their children's learning. It is tempting to focus your energy on families who are not engaged in their children's learning. However, families who are more engaged may then feel that they can't ask for support if problems do occur. To avoid this, maintain open lines of communication with everyone, soliciting their input even if you think things are going well.

Offering one-way communication only. Traditionally, school policies have focused on the teacher communicating their thoughts to the parent; for example, by identifying ways parents can help at home. The one-sided nature of such communications can make parents feel powerless in the exchange, frustrated, or even distressed. They are then less likely to attend further parent-teacher interviews. To avoid this, make it clear that families are respected as partners, and that they have something valuable to contribute. Ask them how they feel about their child's progress and difficulties, methods of teaching in school, and how the school can adjust.

Having a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Sometimes, teachers may assume that there is one 'best' way to parent and educate all children. They may attempt to follow externally created programmes without adapting them to suit individual families. This approach fails to acknowledge cultural diversity and neurodiversity, and it leads to one-way communication. To avoid this, be curious about families' backgrounds and experiences. Listen to their ideas and attempt to find personalised solutions. Learn about the neurodiversity paradigm and offer staff regular professional development opportunities to help them tailor their approach to the [neurodivergent learners](#) in their classes.

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Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.