



Promising Practice Profiles

Project title	Connected Families—Strong Communities
Project practice	Connected Families—Strong Communities aims to increase community awareness that the children of families who work well with the school have better outcomes, and stay at school longer. It is based on partnerships between the school, families and community organisations to improve opportunities and outcomes for young people and their families.
Project undertaken by	Anglicare Victoria
Start date	January 2005
Focal areas	Family and children’s services working effectively as a team Supporting families and parents Child friendly communities
Program	Local Answers
Issue	<p>Connected Families—Strong Communities developed in response to a request from Cranbourne Secondary College (in the outer south-eastern area of metropolitan Melbourne), to assist in building stronger relationships with families and the broader community. It was envisioned that greater employment opportunities and better socio-economic outcomes for students followed increased school attendance and retention. On the other hand, stronger links forged with parents would also assist in reducing isolation and stress, increasing confidence to address parenting issues.</p> <p>Evidence suggests it is vital to work towards increasing adolescent connection with family and community in enhancing their educational and occupational spectrum and building their self-esteem, self-efficacy and social connection. This will lead to improved life opportunities and options for young people, as well as stronger, more sustainable family units.</p>
Program context	<p>Anglicare Victoria is a not-for-profit organisation that works with children, young people, families and parents.</p> <p>Connected Families—Strong Communities is a project that has been developed to create stronger networks between Cranbourne Secondary College, school families and community organisations in Cranbourne with the aim of building a stronger, sustainable and connected community. The aim is to improve opportunities and outcomes for young people and their families. It involves a partnership between Anglicare, Cranbourne Secondary College and South East Local Learning and Employment Network (SELLEN).</p> <p>Initially the program was aimed at parents of Year 7 students, but now the program includes a wide range of parents and students throughout the school.</p> <p>This program offers parents the opportunity to engage in a meaningful way with Cranbourne Secondary College through several pathways that have been established.</p>

Parent Participation Pathways include volunteering for various activities at Cranbourne Secondary College, such as in-class support, administration support and coordinating social activities and events. The program also offers parents the opportunity to engage in activities and training that develops and increases their skills towards obtaining further education and employment.

Parent groups are offered to the parents, which focus on child and adolescent development to promote the building of positive, strengths-based relationships. Social activities are organised by the parent volunteer Fund Raising Group to raise money for the school for provision of goods and services that benefit targeted groups of students. These activities also provide the opportunity for parents, teachers and other community members to interact at a social level as a means of breaking down barriers that may exist.

Initial contact with parents of Year 7 students for the upcoming year is done by telephone or by person at the Year 7 Information Night, and then followed by the Welcome Breakfast for the Year 7 parents and students at the beginning of the year.

A newsletter, *Staying Connected*, is produced each term by the project worker and volunteers. This newsletter keeps the parents and volunteers informed about activities at the school, further developments, opportunities and other volunteer groups. It keeps the school informed about the activities of the volunteers. It is also used as a means of connecting the volunteers with each other and a sense of purpose.

Connecting parents with each other and the community strengthens family systems, social networks and social capital in local communities thereby strengthening families and communities more broadly. The idea is that when parents, school and community work together they can provide stronger support for children and young people and children will become more connected to school, more motivated to achieve their full potential and more confident in themselves and their community.

Practice description

This section details the ingredients that are critical to the effective operation of the program:

- establishment of key contacts and networks;
- pathways to participation;
- involving parents in the process;
- data collection for community asset audit;
- welcoming environment;
- targeted engagement strategies with parents;
- involving the broader community as stakeholders; and
- parent and child relationship development.

Establishment of key contacts and networks

Key contacts and networks were identified and established in the planning stages of the project. Key contacts include: the City of Casey, the School Focussed Youth Network, Cranbourne police, Salvation Army, Rotary, Lions Club, William Angliss, and Cranbourne Library. They were identified as playing key roles and providing necessary facilities that were needed to support various activities. These key contacts and networks were invited to participate in collaborative planning and active relationships in the provision of training, community building and employment opportunities.

Pathways to participation

Clear pathways to participation were identified and established through key contacts and networks. Processes and procedures were developed to enable parents to access these pathways. These pathways were interconnected and included the opportunity to:

- volunteer (in the classroom, on fund raising group, as a group or course facilitator, in administration tasks);
- engage in parent-child relationship courses and support groups (for example, Talking About Adolescents; Parenting Hangout);

- develop training and employment skills through outside agencies, such as SELLEN;
- meet other parents through social activities (Year 7 Welcome Breakfast, Volunteers Awards Night); and
- develop leadership and mentoring skills that enable parents to join community groups and organisations.

The reasons these pathways work is because they are all interconnected and enable parents to engage and expand in further pathways as they develop confidence and skills. For example, a parent may progress from participating in a course to becoming the group facilitator of another course. Another reason these pathways work is because they enable parents to determine which direction they wish to follow and to what extent they wish to be involved and in what timeframe.

Parents are offered the opportunity to participate in various projects when they first come in contact with the program usually at the Year 7 Information Night or the Year 7 Welcome Breakfast. Projects include Lunchbox Activity, Brunch Club, Learning for Life, Parent Hangout, Fundraising. These projects put them in direct contact with the school. They can become involved in a range of cultural and social activities and events. Pathways are provided for parents who wish to develop skills, confidence and self esteem through courses and group sessions. Further pathways are provided if parents wish to participate in training and employment opportunities in courses held by outside training organisations. Through these courses parents find it easier to proceed to further education. They are also offered courses in leadership skills and mentoring and are assisted in joining community groups and organisations through pathways that were established with these agencies.

Involving parents in the process

It was recognised that parents are an important asset and are empowered if they can identify and enact their own outcomes and solutions. In order to do this they need to be provided with opportunities to obtain skills and to develop and use their own resources and strengths. This way parents design and implement their own solutions/outcomes whether it is within the school environment or at home.

A range of opportunities for involvement

Schools have traditionally only offered opportunities for involvement during working hours. This has unintentionally excluded many working parents. The Connected Families—Strong Communities project has developed a wide range of opportunities for participation including one-off, evening, and weekend events to provide the broadest access possible.

Projects were developed to provide a range of options in which parents can choose to be involved. They can become more involved with the school through volunteering either casually or on a regular basis. They can participate in activities and events organised both within and outside working hours and are provided with opportunities to share and learn skills.

Parents are trained to facilitate groups, to become mentors to both students and other parents and to take leadership roles in the community. They are also involved in the initial engagement of new parents as it is recognised that new parents are more likely to relate to another parent rather than a staff member. Parent volunteers are encouraged to use a strengths-based, solution-focused model for developing a conversation and exploring ideas during these interviews.

Building-in feedback and ideas from parents

Parents are given opportunities to share their ideas and provide feedback, which is used for further project development. The fact that parents have direct involvement in the programs through participation, facilitation and decision making about issues that affect them has been a crucial factor in their continual support and the successful working of the program. Parent facilitators now feel confident to communicate directly with the school about activities, financial matters and guidance. A major component of the program is to improve parent self-esteem and confidence and decrease social isolation.

Recognising parent contribution

A volunteer awards night is held annually to recognise the contribution that parents, students, community members, community organisations and other agencies make to the school and to the wider community.

Data collection for community asset audit

A database was established to collect information that would map and identify current and potential skills of families and audit the assets of the community to realise articulated goals. This information was gained by the development of questionnaires and by telephone script. This original engagement with the parents was done by the project worker. A spreadsheet was developed from the questionnaires which listed existing, desired or potential skills. Focus groups were formed from this information. This database has been updated as the program has expanded and further information has been required.

Welcoming environment

A family oriented welcoming environment was developed through providing a venue at Anglicare Victoria for parent groups and activities. Also, Cranbourne Secondary College provides facilities and opportunities at the school for parent groups to participate in volunteering activities. At the beginning of the project, much effort was put into breaking down barriers between school staff and parents, while increasing opportunities for parents to be physically present at the school. As well, parents are trained as facilitators and are instrumental in the operation of the program which often makes it easier and more comfortable for other parents to become involved.

Facilitation group training encourages a strengths-based approach using respectful communication, inclusion and collaboration within all groups.

Targeted engagement strategies with parents

The program is primarily aimed at the parents of Year 7 students. Initial strategies include telephone interviews conducted with parents of incoming Year 7 students regarding their experiences of the school and local community and to explore their ideas for how the school and community could be improved to benefit children, young people and families.

Engagement strategies also include contact with the parents by letter and information provided at the Year 7 Information Night prior to the student commencing school. A Welcome Breakfast is organised for parents and students on the first day at school where parents are offered information about the program. They are also invited to add their suggestions and comments. Follow up phone calls from the Connected Families—Strong Communities support worker are also done throughout the year. At all times, a strengths-based, solution-focussed model is used for developing conversation and exploring ideas.

Involving the broader community as stakeholders

Key contacts and ongoing networks in the broader community were identified and established at the commencement of the program. Partnerships were developed with groups such as the Lions Club and Rotary. Parents are assisted in becoming involved in these community groups through training offered by the Salvation Army in developing leadership skills, confidence and initiative. Long-term community assets are built up through this involvement and become integral in the overall structure of the community. Parents are able, through their community connections, to strengthen the support that is offered to families through community service groups and encourage better services and provisions to meet unmet needs.

Parent–child relationship development

The program offers parents the opportunity to explore and expand on the relationships they have with their children through social support, parent education courses, and group sessions facilitated by other parents.

The program offers parents the opportunity to participate in learning parenting skills, and focus on the development of and build relationships with their adolescent children. Talking About Adolescents is a group that was designed for the program and is run each term by parent facilitators. Participating parents decide on the issues they want to explore. The number of weeks that the program runs is flexible depending upon the needs of the parents and the progress of the group.

Research base

The project design for Connected Families—Strong Communities was based on Community Asset Building principles, using a Participatory Action Research model in its approach. A number of underlying premises, theories and approaches have also influenced project development that included:

Community Asset Building

Community Asset Building involves identification of current and potential assets within a specific community with the aim of mobilising the community to identify and enact their own solutions/outcomes. Howard (2002) explained:

The asset model comes from the Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a non-profit agency that conducts research on children and youth. At the institute, much reading, thinking and discussion took place about what young people need to succeed. Developmental assets identify the key resources, advantages and qualities young people need to mature into caring, responsible and happy adults ... Just as asset building fosters a sense of connection between young people and caring adults, it also encourages parents to strengthen their own connections within their communities. The more “plugged-in” parents are to sources of support—friends, family, neighbours, schools, places of worship—the better prepared they will be to meet the ongoing and new challenges of parenting. (Howard, 2003, p. 2)

Strengths-based approach

The strengths-based approach assumes that all people have strengths and resources they can draw upon and all people are doing the best they can with their current strengths and resources. The strengths-based approach relies upon inherent respect for all people, empowerment, social justice, inclusion and collaboration, transparency and self-determination (Jewell & Blackmore, 2004).

Self-determination is a particularly strong feature of the Connected Families—Strong Communities project. Following the research findings from McCashen (2004) that: “Self-determination is about ‘ownership’. It involves genuine choice and the right to participate or not and to be included and consulted”, the project has utilised a variety of methods to inform, consult and invite participation of all parents involved with the Cranbourne Secondary College. Projects that are developed provide a range of ways parents can choose to become involved by providing activities and events both within and outside of work hours, opportunities for casual or regular involvement, and opportunities to share or learn skills.

Solution focused

This approach aims to shift a problem oriented view of life to one that emphasises solutions and new possibilities. This approach maximises the client/families'/communities' sense of management of local circumstances and fosters a belief that no matter how complex the circumstances are, small changes can have significant impact on the behaviour of all involved. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) have developed a model for mapping and utilising community assets in order to rebuild local neighbourhoods. The Connected Families—Strong Communities project begins by mapping the skills, resources and assets available through parents, students, community members and local services and matching these to ideas for project developments based on feedback from parents, college staff and community members. The parent telephone interview uses a strengths-based, solution-focussed model for developing a conversation and exploring ideas.

Systems and ecological theories and approach

Social supports are essential to family wellbeing (Whittaker, 1986; Whittaker & Gabarino, 1983) and the adequate development of the child and young person. All behaviour needs to be understood in its social and economic context.

It is apparent utilising a systems and ecological approach, that outcomes for children and young people cannot be determined at school or at home alone:

The Epstein model of six types of Involvement provides a framework to review research that ties family and community involvement in schools to positive student outcomes. (National Centre for School Engagement, 2005)

Outcomes

There have been a range of outcomes related to our practice approach. These are:

- parent active support to the school has been established;
- parents are linked to the community (i.e., there is established support between the community, the school and parents);
- school staff are now appropriately responsive to parent participation within the school;
- credible relationships with community groups lead to increased responsiveness to community needs;
- improved communication and relationships between parents, students and teachers;
- parent participation in parent education;
- student satisfaction;
- parent satisfaction; and
- teacher satisfaction.

Evidence of outcomes

The Connected Families—Strong Communities project has undertaken a range of data collection activities to generate evidence about the impact of its approach and participant satisfaction. This has included a range of data collection methods:

- *External evaluation*—A community development student at Frankston TAFE undertook an action research project reviewing the program over the 5 months in 2006. She worked with a Critical Reference Group including members of the College's principal team, parent volunteers, a Youth Services worker, a Rotary member and the local police Youth Resource Officer. The review process consisted of holding focus groups and distributing questionnaires and collating the responses. In total the evaluation collected data from 297 participants including parents, students, staff and community members.
- *Service user surveys*—measuring pre- and post-activities.
- *Evaluation/participant feedback*—following attendance at activities. For example: written feedback from participants including students, parents, college staff, local business people and local service providers who attended the Celebration Dinner in July 2006.
- *Case studies*—case studies of parent and community volunteers and testimonials are recorded.
- *A Participatory Action Research model*—this involves constantly collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to assist with critical reflection on the project's models. This process focuses on trialling initiatives and constantly seeking feedback from all stakeholders. As a result, the project has been able to determine which models are most effective at engaging participation, achieving desired outcomes and are also sustainable.

Data collected from these various methods have been summarised below in relation to each of the identified outcomes:

Parent active support to the school has been established

There has been a significant level of parent volunteering at the school. From January 2005 to the end of 2006, 347 parents have been involved in at least one activity such as Parent Education, Skills development, Social Inclusion Activities, Parent Feedback Interviews or the range of volunteer activities.

Fifty-two parents have completed volunteer induction and remain involved. Twenty percent (20%) of those trained have since returned to the workforce. Fifty percent (50%) of trained volunteers are involved in more than one activity. Prior to the project, the school had some six volunteers; therefore the increase attests to the value of offering opportunities for involvement, skills development and resource sharing. A number of volunteers have provided testimonials regarding their experiences with the program and what that involvement has meant for them and their families.

Of parents contacted as part of the external evaluation (TAFE student), 42% reported an increased involvement in the school for parents, teachers and students. Twenty-five percent (25%) identified that communication within families and the school has improved.

Parents are linked to the community

Community engagement is established through the number of parents who are involved in community group activities through volunteering. The Blue Light Disco was initiated by this program and is now a well publicised monthly event and is supported and maintained by volunteers. A number of parents from the college have joined the local Lions Club, students and family members have volunteered to assist with Lions Club BBQs, and 22 students and parents participated in community consultations with the Casey City Council in 2006.

In addition, community groups also provide members the opportunity to undertake voluntary activities associated with the school one-off events or ongoing projects. Volunteers have come from Rotary, local businesses, local churches, parents, staff and students of the college and local police and politicians. Of these, 52 volunteers have engaged in one or more ongoing projects/programs within the college. The external evaluation (conducted by TAFE student) found that organisations had been involved in a range of activities including: celebration dinner, community building initiatives, parent-teacher interview BBQs, homework help group and other school activities, welcome breakfast, and in referrals as appropriate.

Parents are reporting increased connection with their children and with other parents. They are reporting increased confidence in parenting and numerous parents have moved from volunteering into paid employment—some within the college and others within the community.

School staff are now appropriately responsive to parent participation within the school

College staff members are expressing their appreciation of the level of support from both parents and community members. This is resulting in improved morale of staff. Several staff members have stated that they would not have had the confidence to organise projects such as the Careers Expo and the Literacy Support program without the support they receive from volunteers through the Connected Families—Strong Communities project. Several staff members now have parent helpers regularly working in their classrooms.

College staff have developed a better understanding of, and connection with, local community services and organisations resulting in better connection of families to services available to support their needs. Increasing numbers of parents are noticing that college staff are interested in and supportive of their children's and family's needs.

The role of volunteers has increased parent contact with the school to the extent that parent involvement around the school and in the classroom is now factored into the school curriculum. The school now allocates a staff member each year to act as volunteer coordinator at the school. The school has also employed one of the volunteers to teach Samoan language as a subject.

Parents who volunteer their time with administration tasks now provide a service that the school could not otherwise afford and their input increases the contact that the school can have with parents via notices and newsletters.

A leader and group facilitator from the program has been invited to join the School Council next year as parent representative.

Credible relationships with groups and community organisations

The project has continued to be approached by other organisations, schools and community groups about information on the program.

The ability for the program to expand and respond to community need was evident when a youth training officer from William Angliss College (a local TAFE) recently contacted the project about his concerns on the number of Indigenous students who appear to be leaving school at an early age and with undeveloped skills. A support group including a local Aboriginal elder is being formed to examine this issue.

Improved communication and relationships between parents, students and teachers

The external evaluation (conducted by the TAFE student) identified that 45% of students surveyed ($n=58$) had noticed changes with teachers and parents being more supportive and there being better communication.

Parent's participation in parent education

Parents continue to participate in Talking About Adolescents which is run every term. Post activity surveys show that in 2006, Talking About Adolescent programs were run with 13 participants. Of these, 69% of parents felt that communication in the family had changed as a result of program.

Student satisfaction

Student testimonials identify their satisfaction with the program. Student feedback after events run by volunteers, such as the Careers Expo and the International Day Celebration, have reported high levels of satisfaction and an increased connection to the college. Sixty (60) students completed feedback questionnaires with 82% of students indicating they are in favour of parental involvement in their school and many students reporting that they hope the project can strengthen families and assist with family problems. This evidence challenges long-held beliefs concerning parental involvement at the secondary level of education.

Parent satisfaction

Parents are reporting increased connection with their children and with other parents. They are reporting increased understanding of adolescent development and confidence in parenting. The resulting stronger relationships between parents and adolescents have also assisted in keeping young people engaged in their education

A number of parents have formed strong friendships through their involvement with Connected Families—Strong Communities and have gone on to assist one another with transport and child care enabling greater levels of participation both within the project and in the wider community.

Post-activity feedback surveys of various parent workshops identified the following results:

- 54% of parents felt that relationships had positively changed in the family as a result of program;
- 57% of parents felt that interactions had positively changed in the family as a result of program;
- 77% indicated their own parenting behaviours had changed as a result; and
- 100% requested a continuation of the program to build on skills.

Similarly, feedback after the Maths Homework Workshop (2006, total

participation of 13) identified that:

- 92% of parents felt the course had increased their connection with others; and
- 92% of parents felt the course had increased their connection with the school.

Parent testimonials also support their satisfaction with the program

Policy analysis	The Connected Families—Strong Communities project is a positive example of project that builds social capital outcomes both within a secondary college setting as well as within the wider community.
Evaluation	The Connected Families—Strong Communities project has been evaluated both internally and externally by a community development student at Frankston TAFE in 2006.
References	Howard, R. (2003). <i>When parents ask for help: Everyday issues through an asset-building lens</i> . Minneapolis: Search Institute. Jewell, P., & Blackmore, P. (2004). <i>From strength to strength. A manual for professionals who facilitate diverse parent groups</i> . Melbourne: ACER. Kretzmann, J., & McKnight, J. (1993). <i>Building communities from the inside out : A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets</i> . Chicago: ACTA Publications. McCashen, W. (2004). <i>Communities of hope: A strengths-based resource for building community</i> . Bendigo: St Luke's Innovative Resources. National Centre for School Engagement. (2005). <i>What research says about family-school-community partnerships</i> . Retrieved 11 March 2009, from www.cde.state.co.us/cdeprevention/download/pdf/Epstein_NCSE.pdf Whittaker, J. (1986). Integrating formal and informal social care: A conceptual framework. <i>British Journal of Social Work</i> , 16(Supplement), 39–62. Whittaker, J., & Gabarino, J. (1983). <i>Social support networks: Informal helping in the human services</i> . New York: Aldine.
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More information	More information on the Connected Families—Strong Communities and Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website.



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