Building authentic and effective partnership between parish schools, families and community
Acknowledgements

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Purpose of the Family-School Partnership Statement:

To support the Catholic faith formation, learning and care of all students through authentic and effective partnership between parish schools, families and community.

Rationale

The Family-School Partnership Statement (FSPS) provides clarity, unity and strategic direction around authentic partnership between families and parish schools within the Diocese of Lismore. Authentic partnership is grounded in relationships in which all stakeholders feel cared for, respected and valued. Our Catholic Diocesan mission, substantial research evidence, and current educational policy all point to the critical importance of renewed partnership efforts between families and schools. The FSPS has been built on such evidence, alongside existing shared wisdom and practice, to support parish school communities amidst the pressures and complex realities of both school and family life. The FSPS acknowledges and respects contemporary family life in all its richness and diversity.

What do Catholic Church and key Catholic Schools Office Lismore documents say about family-school partnership?

Throughout the history of Catholic education, parents have been affirmed by the Catholic Church as the primary educators of their children. Partnership, collaboration and reciprocal respect between parents and parish schools are emphasised in Catholic Church documents.

There must be the closest co-operation between parents and the teachers to whom they entrust their children to be educated. In fulfilling their task, teachers are to collaborate closely with the parents and willingly listen to them; associations and meetings of parents are to be set up and held in high esteem.

[Canon 796, paragraph 2, Code of Canon Law]
Parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children’s education belongs … The constant aim of the school therefore, should be contact and dialogue with the pupils’ families, which should also be encouraged through the promotion of parents’ associations, in order to clarify with their indispensable collaboration that personalised approach which is needed for an educational project to be efficacious.


In schools, understood as educational communities, families have a most important place and role. Catholic schools appreciate their value, and promote their participation in the school, where they can assume various forms of co-responsibility … “Partnership between a Catholic school and the families of the students must continue and be strengthened: not simply to be able to deal with academic problems that may arise, but rather so that the educational goals of the school can be achieved.”


The Catholic Schools Office Lismore (CSO) has a long history of endeavouring to fulfil the Church’s theological and pastoral emphasis on the importance of close partnerships with parents and families. The CSO sets out in its document, Catholic Education in the Diocese of Lismore - Foundational Values for Catholic Identity and Mission, the following systems, symbols and behaviours regarding partnership with families:

- Relationships founded in Jesus Christ are the source and inspiration for community.
- Parents are recognised and welcomed as co-responsible partners in Catholic education.
- CSO policy, programs and processes for parental partnership are applied and promoted.
- Families know, understand and support the parish school Mission and Vision.
- Parents are supported in their commitment to Christian witness in family life.
- Parish Priests, parents and staff act collaboratively in a unity of purpose.
- Parents are educated on best practice educational pedagogy.
- Communication is underlined by mutual respect.
What does government policy say about the importance of family-school partnership?

Family partnership in schooling is a priority for governments and educational authorities in Australia, as exemplified in the Australian Family School Partnership Framework. This sets out to encourage sustainable and effective partnerships between all members of the school community, stating that:

- Family-school partnerships are collaborative relationships and activities involving school staff, parents and other family members of students at a school.
- Effective partnerships are based on mutual trust and respect, and shared responsibility for the education of the children and young people at the school.

In addition, developing effective family-school partnership is a professional requirement within education, and is clearly articulated and highlighted within several of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Professional Standards for Teachers and Principals. For example:

- For principals, the 5th Professional Practice, Engaging and working with the community
- For teachers:
  - **Standard 1** – Know students and how they learn: particularly, 1.3 Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds; 1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
  - **Standard 3** – Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning: particularly, 3.6 Evaluate and improve teaching programs; 3.7 Engage parents/carers in the educative process
  - **Standard 7** - Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community: particularly, 7.1 Meet professional ethics and responsibilities; 7.3 Engage with parents and carers; 7.4 Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities

What does contemporary educational research tell us about the benefits of family-school partnership?

The research evidence demonstrates that strong family school partnership is equated with a range of positive outcomes for students, parents, teachers, schools and communities (Epstein, 1987; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). These include:

- Improved student motivation and engagement, their sense of wellbeing, belonging, academic competence and self-efficacy, and by extension can contribute to academic performance and reduced school dropout (Fan & Williams, 2010; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Wilder, 2014)
• Increased parental confidence, satisfaction and interest in their child’s and their own education (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010; Fox & Olsen, 2014)
• Improved parent–teacher relationships and school climate (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010; Luet, 2017; Menzies, 2013)
• Improved school effectiveness, stronger collaboration and innovation in schools, additional and more efficient use of resources (Chrispeels, 2006)
• Enhanced community connectedness and stronger social networks (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010)

How does the proposed Statement endeavour to address these interests?

The Family School Partnership Statement endeavours to address Church teaching, Catholic Schools Office Lismore mission, research evidence, and current educational policy by:

• Giving primacy to enhancing faith development, Catholic faith and values, and evangelising mission

• Identifying the responsibilities, capabilities and tasks of families that they may be stronger partners in the great mission of Catholic education

• Supporting development of a school community culture characterised by communication, collaboration, dialogue and welcome, with recognition and respect for all members

• Aligning as an explicit domain within the Framework for Catholic Education in the Diocese of Lismore, recognising parents as key partners in the educational mission of Catholic schools

• Providing a context of ‘common ground’ for family partnership, in which all families can partner with parish schools in the way/s most suited to them

• Articulating partnership roles, responsibilities and purpose, providing clarity for all members of the school community

• Providing a platform for mechanisms and processes to facilitate family engagement and partnership, and help manage the challenges that may be encountered

• Aligning closely with the work of the Diocesan Parent Assembly which seeks to involve families in their child’s educational and spiritual journey – promoting positive methods of communication and engagement in a spirit of respect and understanding
Dimensions of the Family School Partnership Statement

Effective family school partnership is enacted across a range of activities and relationships. These are recognised in the FSPS as clustering in four distinct, but overlapping, dimensions. The core foundation of family school partnership, underpinning these, is positive, authentic relationships, in which all stakeholders feel respected, cared for and valued. Different relational aspects of family school partnership are emphasised in each of the four different dimensions, as follows:

- **Communicating between school and home** builds family involvement
- **Connecting learning at home and at school** encourages and supports family engagement
- **Participating at school** builds on parent/family participation and collaboration
- **Consulting in decision-making** implies partnership at a strategic level, in sharing of power, responsibility and ownership

Acknowledging that individuals’ capacity, circumstances and opportunities for involvement vary, all partnership activities are recognised as valuable, as they are, if they are authentically grounded in respect and are focused on improving the learning (broadly defined) of the child. Similarly, the activities taking place in respect to each of the dimensions may be different, particularly across primary and secondary schools, but are geared towards the same end goal.

**Communicating between school and home**
Effective, respectful and timely communication underpins all dimensions of family school-partnership. It involves regular, meaningful, ongoing conversation about children’s needs, is grounded in positive, authentic relationships and builds a sense of belonging. It involves information sharing between home and school, and opportunities to learn about and from each other. Parish schools have a responsibility to ensure that inclusive methods of communication not only inform but also empower, enliven and encourage effective partnership with all families, including those who are culturally and linguistically diverse or experience other potential barriers to engagement with schools.

**Connecting learning at home and at school**
Connecting learning across home and parish school environments recognises the integral role of both and emphasises the value of partnership for children’s learning. Parents’ role as first and primary educators of their children, and their lasting influence on their children’s attitudes and achievements, is recognised and actively promoted by schools. Similarly, families encourage their children’s learning in and out of school and support school goals, directions and Catholic identity and mission. Parish schools and families work in partnership to support children’s learning, development and wellbeing at home and at school, and together they share high, but achievable, expectations for the child.
Participating at school
Families are welcome to use their expertise, knowledge, time, skills and energy to support faith based activities and student learning, thus contributing to the development of the parish school community. Parish schools recognise and value the contribution of families and provide opportunities to actively participate in a diverse range of formal and informal school activities.

Consulting in decision-making
Meaningful consultation with families and relevant stakeholders in parish school decision-making processes ensures their values, interests and perspectives are acknowledged, heard and respected and that the school is transparent and accountable to its community. An authentic and inclusive approach to consultation in school decision-making creates a sense of shared responsibility among families, teachers and school leaders.
Family School Partnership – A dynamic and relational model

Communicating between school and home
The various methods of sharing information and mutually learning from each other, characterised by:
- meaningful, ongoing, inclusive conversation
- empowering, enlivening and encouraging effective partnership with all families
- building a sense of belonging

Participating at school
The wide variety of ways families contribute expertise, knowledge, time, skills and energy to support parish school community development, faith based activities and student learning, characterised by:
- recognising and valuing the contribution of all families
- providing opportunities for families to actively participate in formal and informal school activities

Connecting learning at home and at school
Families and parish schools working together to promote children’s learning, development and wellbeing across home and school environments, characterised by:
- recognising and valuing the integral role of both home and the parish school
- the school recognises parents’ role as first and primary educators of their children
- families support school goals, direction and Catholic identity and mission

Consulting in decision-making
Schools consulting with families and relevant stakeholders concerning decision-making, characterised by:
- hearing, acknowledging and respecting families and stakeholders’ values, interests and perspectives
- transparency and accountability to the community
- creating a sense of shared responsibility, through an authentic and inclusive approach to consultation in school decision-making
This relational model depicts dynamic and inclusive processes, grounded in positive, authentic relationships.

At the core of the model is the individual child or young person, whom the partnership ultimately aims to support.

The multi-coloured spiral is a shared space that represents effective family school partnership.

- This multi-coloured space represents the ‘common ground’ in which partnership takes place – in all its many forms – across different but connected dimensions.
- The spiral design of the model indicates a sense of movement, with parent partnership relationships and activities supportive around the student.
- The different segments, with the wide external edges which spiral in within the shared space, signify that there are different ways and means of partnering, which are of equal value and provide multiple opportunities for families to join with parish schools to support and enhance the learning, development and wellbeing of their children and/or those under their care.

Each of the four coloured segments represents one of the four dimensions of the FSPS.

- These are the broad areas in which partnership is enacted, that is, the different ways in which families partner with schools. The dimensions are: communicating; connecting learning; participating; and consulting in decision-making.
- The four segments convey that families engage in partnership with the parish schools in ways that are best suited to them – none has more prominence than another. There is more than one pathway to partnership and more than one form of engagement.
- The segments also convey that families may enter into partnership in more than one way; moving in and out of different partnership activities and forms of engagement.

Alignment with the Framework for Catholic Education in the Diocese of Lismore

- The FSPS, as described here, is an explicit domain within the Framework for Catholic Education in the Diocese of Lismore.
- Family school partnerships is therefore encompassed within, and permeated by: the mission and all other domains within the framework.
- Family school partnerships strengthens outcomes for students, predicated on building and enhancing authentic relationships; who are located at the centre of Catholic education in the Diocese of Lismore, as exemplified in its mission of ‘enabling students to achieve fullness of life’ (John 10:10).
Communicating between school and home

- Effective, respectful and timely communication underpins all dimensions of family school-partnership, and:
  - is grounded in positive, authentic relationships and builds a sense of belonging
  - involves regular, meaningful, ongoing conversation about children’s needs
  - involves information sharing between home and school, and opportunities to learn about and from each other
- Parish schools have a responsibility to ensure that inclusive methods of communication not only inform but also empower, enliven and encourage effective partnership
- Communication involves effective partnership with ALL families – including those who are culturally and linguistically diverse or experience other potential barriers to engagement with schools

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<th>Sample Strategies for Parish Schools</th>
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<td>1 Look at ways to ensure families feel acknowledged, welcomed and accepted into the school – ‘visitors’ book family sign in; front-desk practices; images of children and young people around school to remind parents/staff of shared purpose.</td>
<td>Explore ways to ensure families feel welcomed acknowledged and accepted e.g., new family welcome processes, family buddy practices.</td>
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<td>2 Use a range of tools and channels to enhance communication and communicate frequently with families, including newsletters, websites, emails, social media, assemblies, parent/teacher interviews, Parent Assembly meetings, web conferencing and text messages.</td>
<td>Monitor communication channels to keep up to date with key information from the school. Communicate relevant information about your child/ren to the school any, e.g., change in health status, family circumstances, or contact details.</td>
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<td>3 Ensure every family in the school has been contacted personally in Term 1 by at least one member of the school staff (teacher, coordinator, home-room teacher etc.) so that they have at least one known contact point at school for that year.</td>
<td>Introduce yourself to your child’s teacher or Year Coordinator in Term 1 and share any relevant information about your child.</td>
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<td>4 Develop alternative methods of parent-teacher meetings when personal circumstances prevent parents from attending these face-to-face, including options for telephone and email contact.</td>
<td>Seek opportunities to communicate with teachers e.g., attending parent teacher meetings or contacting your child’s teacher via phone or email if unable to attend.</td>
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<td>5 Develop a welcoming and culturally sensitive environment at school in consultation with local community e.g., signage, Aboriginal artwork.</td>
<td>Identify the cultural richness within the school community and draw on this, where possible, to create a welcoming and inclusive environment at all parent events.</td>
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Sample inquiry questions for use within school and parent body meetings:

- In what ways are our methods of communication active, personal, frequent and culturally appropriate?
- Who are we missing and why / how? What can we do differently?
- In what ways do our current forms of communication build authentic relationships with families? How effective are our current communication channels in terms of every student’s needs, concerns or successes being shared with parents?
- Do we know how parents perceive the school, what might be influencing this, and how it might impact on communication?
- How do we convey to families from the outset that we genuinely value their role in their child’s education?
Connecting learning at home and at school

• Connecting learning across home and parish school environments:
  - recognises the integral role of both home and school
  - emphasises the value of partnership for children’s learning
• Schools recognise and actively promote parents’ role as first and primary educators of their children, and their lasting influence on their children’s attitudes and achievements
• Families encourage their children’s learning in and out of school and support school goals, directions and Catholic identity and mission
• Parish schools and families work in partnership to support children’s learning, development and wellbeing at home and at school
• Together parish schools and families share high, but achievable, expectations for the child

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<td>1 Include in parent teacher information sessions a time to gather from parents their insights into how their child learns best and communicate to parents ways to support the children’s learning at home.</td>
<td>Make the most of parent teachers interviews, e.g., by discussing any learning or school issues with the child prior to the meeting; bringing a list of questions or concerns; taking note of suggestions from the teacher.</td>
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<td>2 Review the ways in which classroom practice recognises the home environments of the students and uses texts and other activities from home and the wider community to ensure cultural inclusivity.</td>
<td>Share cultural stories and events with your child’s teacher, e.g., telling the teacher about children’s participation in cultural events and activities, encouraging children to share news of important events with the teacher.</td>
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<td>3 Foster the practice of student led conferences with parents and in involving parents in goal setting around learning and in career planning discussions.</td>
<td>Accept invitations to engage with their child/ren and school in goal setting conversations and activities around learning as well as discussions around career planning.</td>
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<td>4 Provide an opportunity for families to share in the faith experience and learning of their children after Student Discipleship events.</td>
<td>Support and share in your children’s faith experience and learning, e.g., following Student Discipleship event.</td>
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<td>5 Organise discussions, meetings or workshops around areas of priority for students (e.g., resilience, literacy and numeracy, learning content, study and time management, homework) which allow families to understand what their children are learning and how they might be able to support them.</td>
<td>Attend talks, workshops and events offered by the school and identify any key areas that you would like more information or support from the school with, and ideas you would like to try out at home.</td>
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Sample inquiry questions for use within school and parent body meetings:

- How are families given timely and sufficient updates in relation to children’s learning?
- What flexibility is there around parent-teacher interviews?
- Is the language we use to communicate about learning to parents easy to understand?
- What are the expectations we have about family engagement in sacraments and faith formation?
- In what ways does our school actively engage with families to support children’s learning at home?
# Participating at school

## Families:
- Use their expertise, knowledge, time, skills and energy to support faith based activities and student learning in parish schools
- Contribute to the development of the parish school community through their participation

## Parish schools:
- Recognise and value the contribution of families and provide opportunities for them to actively participate in a diverse range of formal and informal school activities

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<td>1. Ask parents how they would like to participate at their child’s school and respond in a timely manner to those indications, e.g., establish a bank of parent skills, talents and availability to draw on when required.</td>
<td>Assist school leadership teams to identify parents with different gifts and skills, e.g., to help create a bank of parent contacts.</td>
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<td>2. Invite parental involvement in discussions on specific issues or areas of school life e.g., uniform changes, Year 12 graduation, school camps.</td>
<td>Approach the school leadership team with any issues or ideas about particular areas of school life. Parent Bodies encourage parents to raise issue or ideas, e.g., by including an agenda item that calls for parent ideas or concerns at the school’s Parent Body meeting.</td>
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<td>3. Invite parents to become involved at school in areas such as guest speakers (about their jobs/career opportunities etc.), assist with excursions, chaperones, coach sporting teams, canteen helpers, and so on.</td>
<td>Share your skills and gifts with the school, e.g., coaching teams, assisting with excursions etc.</td>
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<td>4. Make sure family participation at school (and other forms of partnership) is a focus at staff meetings, professional development and in the induction of new staff, to strengthen commitment, knowledge and skills.</td>
<td>Parent Body meetings include learning about family engagement throughout the year, e.g., by connecting with the Parent Assembly Cluster Organiser who can support this.</td>
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<td>5. Consult with students about the kinds of parent participation and family-school partnership they would like to see.</td>
<td>Discuss participation ideas with your children and approach the school leadership team with these.</td>
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Sample inquiry questions for use within school and parent body meetings:

- How do parents and other family members know that they are welcome to participate at our school, including the ways in which they might do this? (For example, can we provide a list of jobs to parents, develop a ‘bank’ of parents’ skills, be flexible in relation to what parents might do and when?)

- What ways can parents participate with learning activities inside the classroom? (reading help, careers talks)

- What ways can parents participate in activities outside the classroom? (sport carnivals, school Masses, parish run activities e.g., youth group, morning teas)

- How do we provide ways for new families, and those who may experience barriers in relation to education, to be welcomed and invited into school life and established parent social networks? How do we invite parents to participate – newsletter, email, Facebook?

- How have parents assisted schools through their participation in the past? When/why has this worked well - and not worked well?
Consulting in decision-making

- Meaningful consultation with families and relevant stakeholders in parish school decision-making processes ensures their values, interests and perspectives are acknowledged, heard and respected
- Consultation ensures the parish school is transparent and accountable to its community
- An authentic and inclusive approach to consultation in school decision-making creates a sense of shared responsibility among families, teachers and school leaders

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<td>1 Provide justification / feedback as a result of decision-making process – include a summary of opinions and information gathered.</td>
<td>Seek to understand the complexity of factors involved in decision making in schools, ask questions where necessary and convey your support where appropriate.</td>
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<td>2 Consult with families when developing or revising relevant school policies e.g., homework, bullying, reporting, technology use etc, well before these are finalised.</td>
<td>Engage in opportunities to be consulted on new school policies.</td>
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<td>3 Encourage participation in the Parent Assembly, the Parish School Forum or any other structure or process intended to facilitate consultation and decision making – and provide training or induction if/as required.</td>
<td>Participate in the structures and processes that facilitate effective partnership e.g., Parish School Forum, Parent Assembly initiatives.</td>
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<td>4 Seek out, invite and include diverse parent representation in consultation and decision making activities (from all socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural and other groups at the school).</td>
<td>Be open to invitations to engage with the school and be part of planning and decision-making.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 When appropriate, include students in the consultation process, along with family members and outside agencies.</td>
<td>When appropriate, support your child to participate and express their views in consultation processes.</td>
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Sample inquiry questions for use within school and parent body meetings:

- What does our school currently consult with parents / families about?
- Are there any other aspects of school life we need to consult about?
- How do we consult with parents? Do parents / teachers understand the consultation opportunities and processes, and how these fit with the governance of parish schools?
- How can we effectively share decisions that are made without consultation with the whole parish school community?
- How do consultation processes at our school authentically engage families, beyond merely seeking their compliance or approval of decisions already taken?
Key References


