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## **SUBMISSION to the Inquiry into Engaging Parents in the Education of their Children**

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Paper 071/13

Prepared on behalf of COMET Auckland, 7 November 2013

## Whakatauāki

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi  
ki te raranga i te whāriki  
kia mōhio tātou ki ā tātou.  
Mā te mahi tahi o ngā whenu,  
mā te mahi tahi o ngā kairaranga,  
ka oti tēnei whāriki.  
I te otinga  
me titiro tātou ki ngā mea pai ka puta mai.  
Ā tana wā,  
me titiro hoki  
ki ngā raranga i makere  
nā te mea, he kōrero ano kei reira.

The tapestry of understanding  
cannot be woven by one strand alone.  
Only by the working together of strands  
and the working together of weavers  
will such a tapestry be completed.  
With its completion  
let us look at the good that comes from it  
and, in time  
we should also look  
at those stitches which have been dropped,  
because they also have a message.

- Kūkupa Tirikatene

## About COMET Auckland

COMET Auckland, Te Hononga Akoranga (Community Education Trust Auckland) is a charitable trust and Council Controlled Organisation (CCO) of Auckland Council. COMET Auckland was formed in July 2012 from the former City of Manukau Education Trust, to enable support and coordination of education and skills across Auckland. The Trust aims to advance education for Auckland through linking knowledge, needs, advocacy and initiatives, especially in areas of high education need.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment towards the Inquiry into Engaging Parents in the Education of their Children. We would welcome the opportunity to speak to this submission, if this can be done in Auckland.

## **Over-arching comments**

Active parent engagement in children's education makes a measureable difference. This has been most recently summarised by the Office of the Children's Commissioner whose 2013 report presents a clear and strong case for the measureable value added by parent engagement<sup>1</sup>. This reinforces the earlier Best Evidence Synthesis which shows that when parents engage with their children's learning (as opposed to being involved in non-learning-related school events), there is benefit for children's achievement<sup>2</sup>.

This engagement needs to be about more than merely providing information about children's progress, or giving parents strategies to read with their children at home. It is about a two-way partnership of trust where schools and families recognise the strengths each brings, and work to support each other's role.

## **Challenges for effective parent engagement**

Professor Gary Hornby's recent study<sup>3</sup> of parent involvement practices in 75 Canterbury schools identified many examples of effective practice, but these were not consistent across schools and there were some common weaknesses across the schools studied. Few of the schools had written plans or procedures for parent engagement; rather, schools' support for parent involvement was ad-hoc and dependent on school leaders' views and experience. Hornby suggests that schools appoint an experienced staff member as parent involvement coordinator, to develop, document and support coherent parent engagement practices in the school. Other issues identified were that parent-focused education needs to be of higher quality and more emphasis has to be made on linking the parents of vulnerable learners to parent education; more focus on working with culturally diverse families and new English speakers; and teacher education needs to prepare teachers for working with families.

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<sup>1</sup>NZ Children's Commissioner (2013). Parents', families' and whānau contributions to educational success. A working paper. Wellington, Office of the Children's Commissioner.

<sup>2</sup> Biddulph, F., et al. (2004). The complexity of family and community influences on children's achievements. Best Evidence Synthesis. Wellington, Ministry of Education.

<sup>3</sup> Hornby, G. (2012) The power of parental involvement. [New Zealand Education Review](#)

Evidence from the Pasifika Schooling Improvement research<sup>4</sup> shows that both schools and Pasifika parents want to engage with each other more effectively, but both feel unsure of how to go about this, and are often deeply frustrated that they are not able to engage more. This indicates that schools (especially those working with communities who have had a less-than-ideal experience of their own education, or for whom the New Zealand education system is unfamiliar) need more support to help them more effectively engage with their community.

We need to be aware that in cities such as Auckland, there is no such thing as a clear-cut community for any one school; rather, a community exists in its own right and is served by a number of schools that are located in and near the community. Schools can identify their parents community, but identifying a wider community that is unique to any one school is more problematic.

The highly transient nature of some communities creates an additional challenge for educators. Where students leave a school within months or even weeks of arriving, it is almost impossible for schools to build a relationship with that child's family. Communication about the value of children staying in one school, and housing strategies that enable families to stay in the same suburb if they are forced to move, would help reduce this issue.

## **Examples of effective approaches – Early Learning**

Early learning services are often a family's first introduction to the education system and can be a vital support for increasing understandings about how children learn and an essential link to the compulsory education sector. Parents of young children are often particularly receptive to opportunities to engage with their children's learning, and many ECEs do a wonderful job of engaging with them.

Early learning provision that recognises parents' crucial role as first teachers, and gives parents knowledge and skills to support their children's learning can bring about long-term benefits for children and families. Evidence shows that the first three years of life are key to ensuring children have the social, emotional, language and learning foundations that equip

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<sup>4</sup> Amituanai-Tolosa, M., McNaughton, S., Lai, M., and Airini (2010). Ua Aoia le Manogi o le Lolo: Pasifika Schooling Improvement Research - Final Report. Wellington, Ministry of Education.

them for success and contribution throughout life<sup>5</sup>. Programmes that support parents as first educators, from the earliest age (ideally from the birth of the child) can ensure all children have the best possible start in life and engage families with their children's learning from the start.

When Maori and Pasifika parents step into an ECE or school they want to hear and see other people who look and sound like them, who speak their language and who respect their cultural differences. For this reason it is valuable for services to employ staff who reflect and represent the communities in which they work and who understand and relate well to the whānau and aiga they are dealing with on a daily basis. Recruitment and retention of Maori and Pasifika teachers is vital as is the support of Maori and Pasifika languages being promoted and spoken as much as possible in mainstream education settings, and the inclusion of knowledge and skills in intercultural understanding/engaging with families as part of initial teacher training. Effective engagement hinges on good relationships which is unlikely to happen unless there is an understanding and awareness of cultural differences.

The Reading Together programme is proven to increase student achievement in literacy, through supporting parents to engage with their children's learning<sup>6</sup>. The current government support for low-decile schools to participate in Reading Together is a very valuable contribution to expanding this proven programme. There is opportunity to build on this by also making the sister programme, Early Reading Together, available on a fully-funded basis to early learning services that service priority families.

There is an opportunity for ECEs and schools to become community hubs, providing space for activities and services that community members want to engage with. This brings families to the school/ECE on a regular basis, so they feel more at home there and are more confident to engage in more education-focused ways. It also communicates a clear message that the school/ECE cares about its community.

There is evidence that less-formal, non-centre-based early learning programmes can be just as effective as the more expensive licensed services, and deliver additional benefits in the form of building parents' knowledge and skills to support their children's learning. For example, the HIPPY programme, which provides in-home training and support for parents to

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<sup>5</sup> Infometrics Ltd (2011). 1000 days to get it right for every child: The effectiveness of public investment in New Zealand Children. [http://www.everychildcounts.org.nz/\\_w/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/ECInfometricsInvestmentinchildrenAug11.pdf](http://www.everychildcounts.org.nz/_w/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/ECInfometricsInvestmentinchildrenAug11.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Tuck, B., Horgan, L., Franich, C., and Wards, M. (2007). Reading Together: School leadership in a school-home partnership. Ministry of Education: Wellington.

educate their pre-school children at home, is extremely well-researched<sup>7</sup> and backed by strong evidence of effectiveness, both for the child's learning and for the parent's self-efficacy and positive parenting. Similarly, supported playgroups based in schools have been shown<sup>8</sup> to lead to literacy levels at age 6 as high as, or higher than, children who have attended formal ECE, while also promoting changes in family relationships, parent engagement with learning, and preparing some parents for future careers in ECE teaching.

Home-based early learning programmes, especially whānau-based services, can enable family members who care for multiple children from across their extended family to be supported with training, learning resources and assistance to bring their home to the required safety standards. The Wellington Kindergarten association is trialling a service along these lines in Porirua, Etu Ao, ensuring quality learning for children in a familiar, caring setting, while often providing a pathway to employment for the trained carer.

## **Examples of effective approaches: Schooling**

Parents who had a difficult experience with their own education often find it daunting to even enter a school, let alone a classroom. Anything that makes a school a more familiar and welcoming place is therefore important – from ensuring planting and artwork reflect the local community to removing or minimising physical barriers such as fences. The school secretary/receptionist is a key role in making parents and community members feel welcome in the school. Specific training and/or guidelines for this position would be a useful resource for schools.

Parent engagement programmes need to be designed to fit with families' needs, for example delivered at a time when parents are available, in a place where they feel comfortable, focused on their interests (especially their own child's learning), and in language parents understand. This includes holding language-specific sessions and/or providing translators where needed. It also includes visiting families' homes rather than always expecting them to come to the school/ECE. At the centre is a relationship of trust where there is mutual respect, care for parents as people in their own right (not only for what they can do for the

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<sup>7</sup> BarHava-Monteith, G., Harre, N., & Field, J. (1999a). HIPPY New Zealand: An Evaluation Overview. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, vol. 12, pp. 106-121.

<sup>8</sup> Widdowson, D., and Dixon, R. (2011). *Final report for the evaluation of the Parent Mentoring project in Manukau*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

school), and mutual recognition of each party's role and commitment in the child's learning<sup>9</sup>. A recent UK summary of school-parent engagement could be a useful resource for schools as it gives some specific examples of effective engagement practices<sup>10</sup>.

Kura Māori and Māori immersion and bilingual units often achieve very high rates of parent engagement. This is partly due to the very clear expectations that many kura have of their parent community, and also the strong coherence between the culture and practices of home and school.

There is opportunity to use digital tools to engage with parents. For families that have access to computers, internet and digital skills, email and web-based communications that give parents access to their children's achievement information, samples of work, school publications, how-to guides on supporting learning or addressing disengagement etc can be a valuable resource. All this information needs to be available in hard copy through newsletters, meetings etc, to ensure families without digital access can still engage with the school. For these families, there is an additional opportunity to use the school's computers and digital skills outside school hours to support parents to gain digital skills and to provide access to digital resources. This can be a powerful way to bring families into schools and thereby build learning relationships.

Starpath research has shown that shifting the traditional secondary school parent-teacher meetings to three-way conferences (including student, parents and teacher) with one teacher who is responsible for a student's overall learning, focused on the student's learning goals and what each participant can do to support them, is effective in increasing attendance at parent-teacher meetings. Other evidence indicates that three-way conferences are also more effective than traditional parent-teacher meetings in primary schools. Increasing numbers of schools are using three-way conferences, and this proven method is the focus of a Learning Auckland<sup>11</sup> project in 2013/14 to encourage more schools to use them.

Enabling parents to take on formal roles within the school can also increase engagement, provided there is a clear link with teaching and learning. For example, the Manurewa Parenting Hub has been training local parents as teacher aides as a means of supporting the schools and helping parents to reduce their benefit dependence. Of the 27 parents who

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<sup>9</sup> Bryk, A.S., & Schneider, B. (2002). Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement. New York: Russell Sage Foundation

<sup>10</sup> Lucas, B. (2010). The impact of parent engagement on learner success. A digest of research for teachers and parents, Centre for Real World Learning

<sup>11</sup> [www.learningauckland.org.nz/current-project](http://www.learningauckland.org.nz/current-project)

have participated to date, 13 are now working and 3 others are studying towards higher qualifications. Initial feedback indicates that parents who participate in the teacher aide programme are more confident to engage with the school around their own child's learning<sup>12</sup>.

## **Examples of effective approaches: Family Learning**

Just released results from the Inquiry into family learning in England and Wales states clearly that family learning strategies, led by schools, are needed to raise achievement and reduce the gap between low and high achievers<sup>13</sup>. Such strategies provide families with the skills and resources (social and economic) that help them succeed in their role of supporting their children. This means “thinking family” in planning and decisions. By providing and supporting programmes that support parents as first educators and simultaneously provide pathways to stable employment, government can help break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. Family learning programmes can provide this type of support for vulnerable families, by delivering low-level tertiary learning that combines parenting education with career-focused upskilling in a community context. Such programmes need to last long enough to enable families to make long-term change.

The OECD's recent publication *Lets Read Them a Story* suggests three simple low/no cost strategies families can use: read to children as they start primary school; talk to teenagers about topical issues; read themselves – children are more likely to be interested when parents read<sup>14</sup>.

Creating a whanau-focused tertiary foundation qualification as part of the Tertiary Review of Qualifications would provide a nationally recognised starting point for some tertiary priority learners – a pathways for learners whose main starting interest is helping their children. COMET Auckland owns a foundation level tertiary qualification, a local Level 2 Certificate in Family Learning and Child Development. Currently, 150 women, 40% Maori and 76% beneficiaries are completing the course, which systematically builds their understanding of child learning and development and family health and wellbeing while increasing their employability. The Certificate pathways to higher level education, social sector and health courses as well as work.

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Biggs, personal communication.

<sup>13</sup> NIACE (2013). *Family Learning Works: The inquiry into family learning in England and Wales*. Leicester, England, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

<sup>14</sup> OECD (2012). *Let's read them a story! The parent factor in education*. [PISA](#).

## Policy implications

The silos within and between government departments create barriers to effective support for tamariki and whānau, because they make it almost impossible to fund and monitor holistic, preventive support for whānau. Programmes that support families in multiple ways across generations and areas of need can protect vulnerable children in both the short and long term, in a very cost-effective way. However at present, no one agency funds and monitors both short and long term outcomes for children, adults and families; in health, violence-prevention, housing, education, and employment. Whānau Ora is a step in the right direction but the systems for funding and monitoring across departmental areas are still very under-developed and take too much effort for most community organisations to work around.

Another significant barrier to effective support for whānau is the lack of funding for coordination, to make it possible for several organisations that deliver different services to work together to provide more holistic, seamless services to families. Holistic services are more effective because they address several of the causes of vulnerability at once. However it is almost impossible to deliver services in a seamless way across organisations without an explicitly funded coordination function. At present, apart from Whānau Ora, it is extremely difficult to find such funding.

Parent engagement could be greatly increased by funding a specific community liaison role in each school, to work with parents, whānau and community to support their engagement with learning; and with school staff and systems to help the school become more family-friendly and community-facing. It is important that the community liaison position be filled by people who come from, understand and can relate well to the particular community the school serves. Ideally all schools with significant numbers of Māori and/or Pasifika students would have separate liaison roles or parent volunteers for each of these communities, so there can be a match of ethnicity, culture and language.

Given the increased risk of student disengagement at transition points (eg ECE to school, primary to intermediate, intermediate to secondary, secondary to tertiary), there is opportunity to focus specific support for parent and whānau engagement around these transition points as a means of smoothing the transition process and reducing disengagement.

Specific support should be available to parents whose children are showing signs of disengagement. This could happen through social media (similar to the Facebook page for

teens struggling with mental health issues) and through parent groups in schools run by the guidance counsellor, with support from parent volunteers.

Similarly, there needs to be greater support for teacher training providers to include family engagement skills in all pre-service training and to include whānau engagement skills in ongoing professional development.

There is opportunity for greater engagement between national and local government in supporting parents and children to learn together outside of formal education settings. Libraries, sports fields, swimming pools, museums and zoos are just some examples of resources provided by local government that support learning in the community. At present the links between these resources and centrally-funded formal education are patchy and ad-hoc. A Collective Impact approach would bring local and national government, educators, business and community together to plan connected action towards shared goals, and would have potential to engage parents, whānau and learners in the process.

Such a Collective Impact approach could happen in Auckland through strengthening the central government involvement in Learning Auckland, which already has strong engagement across all education sectors, local government and the community sector. We would be keen to discuss this possibility further with appropriate officials.

This submission has been assembled by COMET Auckland based on our own knowledge and experience, and on extensive discussions with education stakeholders.

### **Contact for communications:**

Susan Warren, COMET Auckland Chief Executive

[www.cometauckland.org.nz](http://www.cometauckland.org.nz)

Email [susan.warren@cometauckland.org.nz](mailto:susan.warren@cometauckland.org.nz)

Ph 09 307 2101. Fax 09 379 5053; Mobile 021 757 048.

COMET Auckland, PO Box 3430, Shortland Street, Auckland 1140.