

# Supporting complex learners through family engagement

The following case study has been created by [Schools Plus](#), with support from [Clarke Road School](#), as an example of how to support complex learners through family engagement practices.

## Summary

Clarke Road School is a K-12 school in Hornsby, New South Wales. As part of a cluster of 7 New South Wales schools, we have worked together to support complex learning needs of our students through effective family engagement. We found success through developing partnerships with families and community members designed to improve learning outcomes for all students. In this case study, we focus particularly on how families were engaged through implementation of our learning and assessment framework, the 'Passport for Learning'.

## Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

Family engagement for learning is related to Focus Area 3.7 and Focus Area 7.3 from the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

## Australian Professional Standards for Principals

Family engagement for learning is related to 'Professional Practice 5 Engaging and working with the community' in the Australian Professional Standards for Principals.

## Overview

Most of the students in our cluster have severe developmental disabilities and learn at a pre-kindergarten level. While our work often lies beyond the NSW curriculum due to students' complex learning needs, learning and progress should be effectively evaluated and communicated to families.

**'Students at schools in this cluster sit outside the spectrum of the NSW curriculum, but this does not diminish their capacity to learn and make progress.'** – School leader

To better support our students' learning through family engagement, we engaged with a cluster of similar schools to develop a high-quality learning and assessment framework. We called this framework the 'Passport for Learning', with the intent of it being useful and understandable for school staff, as well as families. To develop this, we drew on the professional experiences of teachers as well as available research – working as a cluster gave us greater capacity to collect this information. Together, we developed a common framework to assess students' individual communication abilities. Questions like, 'Can the student understand spoken words or messages?' were tracked on a 7-point scale, from the student having awareness, to the student applying critical thinking. The framework meant teachers could better plan and develop lessons suitable for each student's level and more easily communicate key information with families, staff and other support services. Putting this shared language into practice, we saw that families can be partners in improving learning and that this engagement leads them to trust our schools' commitments to improvement.

### Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

Historically, Clarke Road School and schools in our current cluster project worked in isolation, without a shared language to communicate about student

'We had so many hopes for my child, then, in one diagnosis, it was all taken away. There was confusion for our whole family. I used to feel so demotivated, but now I am motivated to help him move through. The framework gives a clear pathway for parents and for teachers - we know and use common terms. We feel more confident working with therapists too. I feel more comfortable to discuss the strategies that can be helpful.'  
– Parent



needs. The Passport for Learning helped us develop a common language for better conversations about learning. By providing families with key information, we not only establish a stronger partnership, but we also equip parents and carers to support learning at home where possible.

### Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning

We provide regular opportunities for two-way, positive communication through targeted on-site events linked to our learning and assessment framework. Events include the 'Let's Chat and Learn' parent/carer sessions and 'Jannawi Group'.

**Let's Chat and Learn** sessions share knowledge, understanding and practices with all parents and carers about using the Passport for Learning. These events take place each term.

**The Jannawi Group** is an expert parent/carer group formed to trial aspects of the Passport for Learning. *Jannawi* is the Darug word meaning 'For me, for you'. We delivered family intensive days and mentoring with academic partners for these parents and carers as part of this project. The Jannawi Group has been a great resource for our school, advocating and engaging with other parents and families in the type of learning they have experienced. This group continues to meet, trial elements of the Passport for

Learning and will expand to include more parents and carers. Providing space for families to collaborate and learn from each other has given us a new way to tap into the knowledge and expertise of families in supporting student learning needs and achievement.

### **Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families**

We use a collaborative process with families to develop goals and milestones for students. When setting or tracking a student's individual goals, we can refer to The Passport for Learning as evidence of where a student is at in terms of their learning, and where they might go to next. Having a framework which clearly informs collaboration around a student's individual goals has been empowering for families, teachers and students. Another benefit of a transparent framework is that it allows all involved parties to be consistently informed about an individual student's progress against their goals – updates don't just happen during planning meetings. That way, when it comes to formal collaboration, there are no surprises. The other added benefit is that we ensure collaboration and problem-solving can happen between formal meetings as required, best positioning all stakeholders to support student achievement.

### **Where next?**

Parent/carer feedback was collected about the Passport for Learning project and their engagement with it. Results highlighted areas that demonstrated clear benefits:

- the open communication and transparency
- having a shared purpose
- parent agency in running their own groups.

School reflections highlighted that parents often hear about negatives associated with their children. We needed a shift of thinking. Now we can share positive approaches as a network which can include flexible programs to cater for changing needs of students, and a toolbox of strategies to use at home and school.

### **Our tips**

- Engage families as partners in learning, using consistent language, to create a consistent approach between home and school.
- Share with parents and carers how assessment data informs your decision-making around making content more accessible for their child.

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## **Reflection questions**

### **Teachers**

What role do your parents/carers play in developing goals for their child's learning?

How do you use data in parent/carer discussions about learning to support decision-making?

How is progress toward student learning goals shared with families? Is it accessible to all families?