

# Case Study: Holy Cross College

## Family-School Partnerships Framework

A guide for schools and families

Holy Cross College, a Year 7–12 Catholic boys school in Ryde, New South Wales, had 650 students in 2016 with more than 40% from a language background other than English.

Holy Cross College aimed to deepen parent understanding of how boys learn and build the capacity and confidence of parents to support their children's learning and wellbeing. The project strengthened the sense of partnership among students, families and teachers, increased student wellbeing, and increased satisfaction and involvement in school initiatives.

### Project snapshot

The Holy Cross College project aimed to provide parents with a better understanding of how boys learn by implementing school-based initiatives including 'Target Setting' and 'Parents in Touch' to improve learning outcomes.

Through this project, the school built a model of parent engagement that complements its broader strategies for school improvement.

The project links to six of the key dimensions in the *Family-School Partnerships Framework*:

- ✓ Communicate
- ✓ Connect learning at home and at school
- ✓ Build community and identity
- ✓ Recognise the role of the family
- ✓ Consultative decision-making
- ✓ Participate

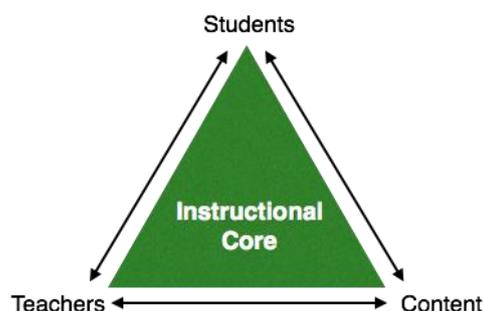
### Project overview

There were two main parts to this project:

- 'target setting' for students to determine and work towards personal learning targets
- active engagement of parents in their son's learning and target setting.

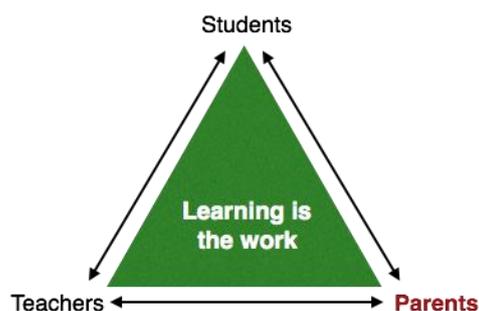
As part of an overarching journey of school improvement, the school considered Elmore's model (2010) of the instructional core, which focuses on interactions between teachers, students and content in the classroom.

#### Elmore's model



Holy Cross College expanded this model to include parents, shifting the school's traditional understanding of the learning relationship to include parents.

#### Holy Cross model



## Target setting and parent engagement

Parent engagement initiatives to support the 'target setting' process included:

- Horizons Night to explain the target setting process
- Target Setting Meetings with parents, student and homeroom teacher
- Parent–Student–Teacher Interviews with a focus on targets
- mid-year meetings with each student to discuss aids and roadblocks to achieving targets
- regular 'Parents in Touch' evenings to discuss learning and wellbeing issues
- Family School Partnership Group—established around topics of interest: Learning, Wellbeing, Social and Community Connections, Faith Development and Home School Communication
- Parent Online Portal—including individual student attendance and performance data, and information on assessment tasks
- use of technology to enhance communication with families.

Students interviewed as part of the project described the approach as 'that triangular thing between the teacher, students, and parents' with the understanding that 'it's a three-way conversation'.

The project was overseen by a committee involving the school leadership team, a parent and 'critical friends' including the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau.

### Evidence base

Holy Cross College had been gathering data and documenting its journey over two years with the assistance of a grant and partnership with the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau. This involved three stages.

Stage 1: data gathering, including school enrolment data (which had been declining), student performance and wellbeing data, parent participation data at school events, and a parent survey on issues relating to their son's learning and wellbeing.

Stage 2: student focus groups, teacher focus groups and parent interviews.

Stage 3: review of enrolment, performance and wellbeing data, and looking at parent participation in the target setting process and related initiatives.

## Project outcomes

### Parent engagement

Parent interviews indicated changes in parents' confidence in relation to their children's learning and wellbeing:

*'When they're in high school the input of a parent seems to disappear. But with target setting, you have to sit down and talk to your son.'*

*'[Target Setting] helps the parents become engaged as well I think. It's good that the school pushes to make [parents] become involved...When a mark comes back which he doesn't like, we'll sit down with him and say, "Okay, what didn't you do that you think you could do?" That all came out of the target setting as well, whereas before we probably would have said, "Study more".'*

*'By having the target you engage the parents and I felt that when he started high school...I felt like I started high school too; I felt like I had no way of knowing what to do. I felt a little lost. [With target setting] you feel like you have something, you have a hold on what's happening. You're involved in their education.'*

### Student success against learning targets

The number of students meeting or exceeding their personal learning targets increased.

The school believes the improvement with each iteration of Target Setting has come from the greater engagement of parents, as they collectively build confidence and capacity in relation to their son's learning.

### Student wellbeing

There was an increase in student wellbeing and sense of connectedness within the school, with parents and the community (based on ACER Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey data).

Students had higher positive perceptions of their home life, school life and connections to the community compared with the national average, with students rating school life at 13% above the national average.

### Teacher language and engagement

The language and engagement of teachers in relation to parents in the target setting process was another indicator of success. Teachers said:

*'I think having the parents involved certainly gives them some ownership as well into their son's educational journey. Also, it's just a way that everybody can put their cards on the table.'*

*'The parents were...so excited about this idea and being brought into the conversation with the extended interviews we have at the beginning of the year. It gives something to be accountable for.'*

*'Parents have to be involved at the beginning of the year when we're discussing the targets... it must open up some lines of communication with boys and parents at an age when boys virtually say nothing or, you know... 'How was school?' 'Good'. And that's all you get.'*

### Additional unintended outcomes

As part of the target setting process, teachers were asked to reframe the way they traditionally engaged with parents around boys' learning.

Teachers now lead an annual Horizons Night for parents where the target setting process was explained and relationships were formed that became the foundation for home-school communication throughout the year.

### Qualitative data

The qualitative data from student focus groups was a rich and significant source of information for the parent engagement and target setting initiatives.

The student focus groups provided a valuable insight into what students thought about parent engagement in their learning and in the life of their school, debunking the common belief that teenagers, and in particular boys, don't want their parents involved in their learning.

The boys said they want their parents to:

- understand what they're learning, how to help them, and what's going on at school
- respect who they are and where they are at—based on a contemporary understanding of learning, not parents' memories of school
- be involved with the school—and for the school to communicate regularly with parents about things that matter (not just a note at the bottom of the school bag).

In relation to the target setting process, the boys made observations such as:

*'The language has definitely changed in my house. It's gone from, "Have you done your homework?" to "Are you on track to achieving your target? What can we do to support you, to help you to achieve this target?'''*

### Challenges

- Encouraging parents and helping them better understand how important their role is, and that students wanted their involvement/engagement.

- Working around structural barriers of a school environment to allow greater ‘access’ to the school for families—the use of technology was critical in this regard.
- Maintaining the momentum and keeping parents, staff and students engaged—this required a flexible approach.

### Project success factors

- A supportive and ‘visionary’ school leadership team.
- Building the evidence base and understanding the ‘Why’ before embarking on the ‘What’ and ‘How’.
- Understanding that parent engagement is not a program or a standalone initiative—it needs to be clearly defined, intentional, strategic, meaningful and connected to the broader learning and wellbeing work of the school.
- Bringing in ‘critical friends’ early and being informed by the Family-School Partnerships Framework contributed to a greater understanding of parent engagement and provided a clearer direction for the parent engagement strategy.
- Developing a whole-school understanding of parent engagement and the target setting process.
- Ensuring there is more than one ‘champion’ especially in the event of key parent and/or staff turnover—it is necessary to build a ‘critical mass’ of supporters in key roles.

### Lessons learnt

Holy Cross College’s experience has shown that many elements of the Elmore model are transferable across school contexts, both primary and secondary.

Wellbeing and student perception data provided an important perspective and added richness to the evidence base for this project.

A key lesson was that context matters—schools need to tailor their efforts and respond to the needs and aspirations of their own students and school community.

### Future directions

The initiatives commenced in this project have become core business for the college, fully embedded into the life of the school. Future work will include:

- further integrating technology to support parent engagement with target setting
- follow-up focus groups and interviews
- ongoing reflection on the effectiveness of the parent engagement strategies to support target setting
- support for new families and staff regarding their participation and engagement
- writing up the case study in the form of research paper(s) for peer review and publication.

Holy Cross College has become known for its innovative approaches to target setting and parent engagement, and is sharing this journey with other schools.

Developed by the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau. The Bureau is a partnership between the Australian Council of State School Organisations and the Australian Parents Council, with support from the Australian Government. Visit the [Department of Education and Training](#) website for more information.