



Case Study

Engaging Parents Reaps Rewards for Hills International College

HILLS INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE

When Hills International College decided to overhaul the way it taught literacy in its Junior School, it recruited a very special group of people to help with the rollout.

That group was the College's Junior School parents.

The teaching staff invited parents in from the very beginning to explain what was changing (a new structured phonics program that would help children 'crack the code' of reading) and why (ensuring there was an all-of-school approach in the early years).

There were on-campus meet-and-greet nights between teachers and parents; then the school ran hands-on mini-lessons for families so they could understand the complexity of teaching children to read.

Advice on how parents could support their children at home was a central part of the strategy, with free mini white boards and home readers (plus good coffee and cake) added incentives to attend.

Alert to the power of parents

Head of Primary Matt Noel says harnessing the power of parents in children's learning – which more than 50 years of academic research proves improves children's educational and social outcomes – had always been a firm part of the College's strategy.

"Fifty years of research tells us that parent engagement in children's learning makes a difference. When parents engage with their children's learning, particularly out of school, attendance increases, behaviour in school improves, homework return rates go up and, overall, children's achievement tends to improve. Children achieve more in school when their families engage in activities such as reading, asking thoughtful questions, and providing the structure children need to complete assignments."

Barker, B., & Harris, D. (2020). *Parent and family engagement: An implementation guide for school communities*. Canberra: ARACY.

"Parents are such a big and important part of their child's learning journey and they have so much rich data on their children's personalities and how they like to learn," Matt says.

"We've always been very lucky in that we have a community of parents at Hills that have always wanted to get involved. But we wanted to take that a step further, so we asked ourselves: 'how can we get parents engaged?'"

"We knew that in the past many of our Junior School parents had struggled to know how to help their Prep and Year 1 students with literacy – they were often unsure if they were following the process correctly or in a similar way to that in the classroom.

"So when we were overhauling our approach to literacy we knew bringing parents along on our new journey was an important step."

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Hills International College's Head of Primary Matt Noel:
"We knew bringing parents along on the learning journey was an important step."

Early signs very encouraging

The school's new approach to early years literacy – dubbed "The Hills Approach to Literacy", the result of months of research by Assistant Head of Primary and International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program Coordinator Stuart Ablitt – is now in its first year of implementation.

More parent-friendly initiatives, complementing this approach to literacy, are underway or in the works thanks to Educational Support Coordinator Melinda Bowyer.

The entire project is being steered by an Independent School's Queensland 2020/2021 Research in Schools project. The project receives added funding support from the QIS Parents Network.

While the effectiveness of the curriculum changes and the engagement of parents is still being assessed – the early signs are encouraging.

Stuart says the comments parents are now posting on their children's digital learning portfolios have changed from 'great work' or 'I love you' to 'Wow by blending sounds you made a huge list of words' or 'I thought Freddy the fish was going to be the most popular Prep R name, not third most'.

"That tells me parents are understanding what is happening at a deeper level and they are much more engaged."

Enrolments increase

Enrolments at Hills International College are also up: it has its biggest cohort of Preps in the school's 30-year history and Primary School enrolments have jumped from 180 at the beginning of 2020 to 271 in mid-2021.

The formation of a marketing team, consisting of two College parents and the Heads of College played a major role in promoting the educational approaches, as well as the pastoral support provided to families during COVID.

PARENT ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS IN SCHOOLS

Parent engagement in a critical focus area for schools and is enshrined in the Australian Professional Standards for Principals and Teachers.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) and the Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network (QIS Parents Network) have joined forces to elevate and enhance parent and community engagement in independent schools.

Queensland independent schools that would like more information on how to apply for parent engagement project funding should contact Natalie Horrobin, Education Services Advisor (Teaching & Learning):
nhorrobin@isq.qld.edu.au | 3228 1580

Schools that want to work with ISQ and the QIS Parents Network to prioritise parent engagement are invited to contact Shari Armistead, Director (Strategic Relations) and Board Chair QIS Parents Network:
sarmistead@isq.qld.edu.au | 3228 1543

Matt believes word-of-mouth, about the way the College connected and partnered with families during at-home learning, was a major factor in enrolment increases.

"We know that our kids are extremely happy when their parents are engaged," he says.

"We're confident results will also increase."

Visit www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au for more information on the research that underpins the importance of "parent engagement" and its impact on student achievement and wellbeing.