



Case Study

Overcoming Distance and Gaining Trust: How One Boarding School Brought its Remote Parents Closer

IPSWICH GRAMMAR SCHOOL

As one of Australia's oldest independent schools, Ipswich Grammar School, established in 1863, has a proud history – and plenty of experience in building great relationships with its families.

But when the global COVID pandemic hit in 2020 and put an end to the school's usual face-to-face events for parents, the school was forced to re-think its approach to connecting with parents in the boarding community.

The newest boarding families were the cohort the school was particularly conscious of needing to help establish meaningful connections with the wider Ipswich Grammar School community.

Pivoting and improving

"We realised in 2020 that the majority of the work we do connecting with families was focused on the parents of 'day' boys and relies on parents' ability to attend events or be physically present at school," Ipswich Grammar School's Director of Marketing and Community Erin Sorrensen says.

"Our boarders represent ten percent of our student population and have always been a highly valued part of our community.

"We wanted to better engage with new boarders' parents and help them create deeper connections – with school staff, with each other and with our long-term boarding families who have so much knowledge and support to offer."

"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.

Tapping into expert advice

Ipswich Grammar School signed up to take part in Independent Schools Queensland's Research in Schools program in 2020/2021, which gave them expert guidance in what to focus on and how to achieve their goals.

The Research in Schools program receives added funding support from the QIS Parents Network.

Their first trial 'event' for boarding parents organised in 2020 was a virtual morning tea. A cookie was posted out to all boarding parents with an invitation to join online and hear from longer-term boarding parents – a group the school dubs their 'boarding parent champions'.

The feedback received was overwhelmingly positive and has now led to regular night-time online gatherings where boarding mums and dads connect virtually in a group setting with a glass of wine in hand.

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Regular pictures of Ipswich Grammar School boarders with resident puppy Broxy, shared on Instagram, bring parents closer to their sons' boarding school life.

Multiple communication channels for parents

As a result, a closed Facebook group for boarding parents – created and moderated by the school – has been another communication channel to flourish.

It's a forum for boarding parents to discuss everything from strategies to support boys with homesickness, to practical discussions around how to remotely get students organised for formals and graduations, says Community Development Manager Carol Levinge.

But more powerful connections are also being established between families and school staff, as well as between new and experienced boarding parents, which is in turn bringing boarding parents closer to their sons' school and boarding house life.

"We can see from the Facebook interactions that parents are sharing experiences at home and asking each other for advice and hints. Posts are also generating conversation and sharing the life of an IGS Boarder," Carol says.

"The parents now have conversation starters when the boys call home and an awareness of what they have been up to in their free time. They are also beginning to ask each other questions rather than directing them to the Boarding Director."

Parents looking out for each other

There are many other good news stories flowing from the project.

"When some of our international boarding students couldn't get home due to COVID," Carol says, "all boarding parents felt a sense of responsibility to care for them. One of our students from China for example was invited to one of our family's homes in Atherton (in far north Queensland). Photos of that student fishing and camping with the family were then posted to the Facebook group.

"There's also regular posts from families saying things like 'I'm driving down to Ipswich for a visit, is there anyone else from out West who needs anything brought down to the school?'. 'I think the fact those connections are now happening authentically and organically is a sign of success: we've provided our parents with the tools and they've run with it."

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

Welcoming 'Broxy'

By far the most popular member of the boarding community is Broxy – a Border Collie puppy who moved into the boarding house in early 2021 and has his own Instagram account.

As most boarders have pets at home, regular pictures of the boys with Broxy create another heart-warming link between home and school.

"Those pictures give parents another conversation starter when they next speak to their son about what has been happening at school," Carol says.

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.