



# Case Study

## Bridging the Tyranny of Distance Between Boarders and their Parents

### THE SOUTHPORT SCHOOL

**For thousands of Queensland students, school is also the place they call home. This year more than 3,400 students are starting and finishing their day at an independent boarding school across the state. For parents whose children live away from home – sometimes thousands of kilometres – keeping in touch with their child's life at school can sometimes be a challenge.**

### Engaging Boarding Families in their Child's School Life

118-year-old Gold Coast boys' boarding school The Southport School (TSS) has extensive experience in maintaining the emotional connection between boarders and their parents despite their physical separation.

The school currently has more than 300 boarders on campus – 70 percent of whom hail from rural and regional towns including Cloncurry and Goondiwindi, while the remaining come from northern New South Wales or overseas.

In recent years Dean of Boarding Tony Watt had been toying with the idea of leveraging technology to give boarding parents a more personal "behind the scenes" glimpse of their sons' lives at school. The school, like other GPS schools, already livestreams its rugby games and has been doing so since 2012.

"A lot of parents sit back on a Saturday afternoon who live thousands of kilometres away and feel like they're sitting in the grandstand, whether their child is in the team or not. It's about feeling connected and part of our school community," Mr Watt says.

### Allowing Parents to be a "Fly on the Wall"

In 2018 the school embarked on an Independent Schools Queensland Research in Schools project, with added funding support from the Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network, to examine how it could use video to more meaningfully connect with its rural and regional families.

"The objective was to allow parents who aren't here, or who rarely get the chance to visit the school, to have more of an insight into their son's boarding experience and journey," Mr Watt says.

The result is a [fortnightly boarding video newsletter](#) for parents that reflects activities based on the rhythms of the school calendar as well as recaps some of the events, extra-curricular activities and programs the boarders have been involved in. Mr Watt narrates the video, keeping it upbeat as he recounts the exploits and endeavours of the boys over the past fortnight. This year the videos have featured boarders at etiquette lessons, dance lessons, golfing, kayaking, Sunday afternoon tennis, hosting social visits from neighbouring girls' schools, dorm inspections and exam preparation. They have also showcased the incredible array of food on offer on the boarding menu.

"Food can sometimes be the whipping boy in boarding," Mr Watt laughs. "By videoing the food parents can see the consistency of the choice and quality of food available to the boys and they've enjoyed seeing that."

But the project also had a secondary objective – which was to share boarders' hometowns with the rest of the TSS community. The first video

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Boarding at The Southport School

showcased life on the land for boarders from Cloncurry with a second revealing what it's like growing up in Goondiwindi.

"The boys get a huge boost of pride, confidence and reassurance when they showcase their area and talk about their home. You can see the emotional impact it has on them," Mr Watt says.

## The Ripple Effect Across the School Community

Mr Watt says the project has had a range of impacts across the entire TSS community including:

- more parents opening the boarding bulletin, watching the video and engaging with the school about their son's education
- improved engagement by the boys in their learning and school life and a greater sense of belonging
- raising the profile of boarding within the TSS community and its role and contribution to the school's history and culture
- an increase in the number of parents attending the Boarder Parents' Support Group, particularly parents of day students keen to support boarding families
- building greater connections between day and boarding parents
- bringing leaders across different parts of the school together to brainstorm and deliver the project.

"The project has affirmed the important role the boarding service plays in the life of the school and has brought parents of day students and boarders closer together," Mr Watt says.

The school is continuing to refine and improve the newsletter and videos based on parent and community feedback.

Mr Watt, who has been involved in boarding education for more than 20 years, nine at TSS – five as Dean of Boarding – is so passionate about the role and impact of boarding, he is undertaking a PhD through Southern Cross University exploring the wellbeing of Australian boarders. Mr Watt says his love for boarding didn't grow out of being one – but of witnessing the camaraderie and friendship of his boarding school mates at Brisbane Grammar School.

## FUNDING FOR PARENT ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS IN SCHOOLS

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

The Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network website features a wide range of evidence-based research, articles, papers and practical resources on parent engagement in its For Schools section.

The QIS Parents Network also provides funding support to independent schools that want to build and enhance how they engage parents in their child's education. This funding is administered through Independent Schools Queensland's Research in Schools Program.

Queensland independent schools that would like more information on how to apply for parent engagement project funding should contact:

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"I begged my father in Year 10 to allow me to board in Years 11 and 12. I just saw the depth of the relationships – I could sense the journey they had gone through was quite a human one," he recalls.

"I think boarding is an incredible human experience that adds a depth to relationships fostered during school. But there's also the risk of things not going well which is why it's so important that schools get key staff, key cultures and that sense of student belonging and parent engagement right."

Visit [www.parentsnetwork.qld.edu.au](http://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.