

## The Influence of Parental, Caregiver and Family Support<sup>71</sup> on Students' Achievement

Several studies from the United States of America have found a relationship between student achievement after the transition to secondary school and the level of parental support they received generally, as well as the level of parental involvement in their schooling (McGee et al, 2003). Alton-Lee (2003) also emphasises the importance of developing effective home–school relationships, focused on student learning, as a means of improving student outcomes. In the following chapter we will investigate some aspects of parental support further in light of the data collected from students, parents and teachers in our study.

Specific aspects of parental input and support identified in the research literature as encouraging student success at school after transition are:

- having books in the home;
- having a quiet place to study;
- parents who have rules limiting television viewing;
- parents who discuss school with their children and frequently check their homework;
- parents who are involved with their child's school through parent–teacher organisations;
- parents who monitor their child's academic progress;
- parents who take an interest in their child's social life;
- parents who have knowledge of the school system and who have the confidence to challenge the school and the teachers in the best interests of their child;
- the ability of parents to provide time, energy and resources to support their children at home and at school; and
- parents who encourage and support their child's involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Teachers were more likely to rate parents of the high achieving students as 'very supportive' of their child's schoolwork.

Findings reported earlier in this report have shown that low achieving students in the study were more likely to have fewer books in their homes and were less likely to say they enjoyed reading in their spare-time. The low achievers, particularly in reading and writing, were also more likely to indicate that watching television was a favourite spare time activity and, on average, watched more hours of television than the high achievers.

To determine the level of parental support the students in our study received teachers were asked in Phases 1 and 3 about the contact they had had

with students' parents and whether they considered them to be supportive of their child and their schoolwork. In addition, students were asked a number of questions over the course of the study regarding the type and level of support they received from their parents in regard to their schoolwork and learning. Their parents were also asked for their views on the help and support they provided for their child.

### Teachers' views on support provided for students

While teachers in Year 8 considered that the majority of students' parents were either 'supportive' or 'very supportive' of their child's schoolwork, the parents of the high achieving students were generally thought to be more supportive than the parents of the low achieving students.

Teachers were more likely to rate the parents of the high achievers as 'very supportive' of their child's schoolwork than they were for the parents of the low achievers. A few teachers of the low achievers also indicated that they did not know the students' parents well enough to be able to comment on the level of support that these students received; however, no teachers of the high achievers gave this response.

Around a third of teachers in Year 8 indicated that they had either almost no, or infrequent, contact with the parents of the students in their classes during the year. Teachers were least likely to have had frequent contact with the parents of the low achieving students.

Well over a third of the teachers surveyed in Year 9 also indicated having no contact with parents during the students' first year at secondary school.

<sup>71</sup> Parental, caregiver and family support are referred to simply as parental support in this chapter.

Teachers were more likely to have had contact with the parents of the high achieving students through parent–teacher interviews and additional meetings than they were to have had contact with parents of the low achieving students.

As found a year earlier, Year 9 teachers were more likely to describe the parents of the high achievers as being ‘very supportive’ of their child than the parents of the low achievers.

One Year 8 teacher considered that the parents of one of the low achieving students in her class, Isaac<sup>72</sup>, were not at all supportive of him and provided very little input, if any, into his schoolwork. This teacher also indicated that she had had almost no contact with this student’s parents during the year.

The short profile of Isaac which follows highlights how, when appropriate, ongoing parental support,

such as identified by the literature, is not present, schools and teachers that take particular care to provide the right support and encouragement, in conjunction with appropriate agencies, can ensure that students from troubled home environments are able to make progress in their learning and development at school.

Isaac’s case also emphasises the importance of the need for good communication between primary and secondary schools in terms of passing on and using relevant information about students. Another important message from this case is that sometimes schools may need to be proactive about contacting some students’ parents, even if it is to help them decide they may need to work around some parents rather than with them in the best interests of the student.

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## Isaac

From our interviews with Isaac over the course of the study, as well as information received from his teachers, it was clear that Isaac had a difficult home life.

Throughout most of the study, he lived with his father, mother, sister and two other relatives. His father was on a Sickness Benefit through Work and Income and his mother worked in a low-paid, factory job. Domestic violence and alcohol and drug abuse were commonplace at home.

Isaac had a number of chores to do around the house. He had to clean, wash the dishes and look after his sick father and younger sister. He also was expected to take time off school to help the family move house. Unfortunately circumstances at home worsened for Isaac at the end of Year 9 and he moved out of the family home to live with his aunty. He appeared to be much more content with his new living arrangements when we interviewed him in Year 10.

Earlier in the study, Isaac reported that there were very few resources at his parent’s home and he indicated that in his spare time he never or almost never used a computer, played electronic or video games, hung out with friends (he told us he was not allowed to do so), talked to friends on the phone or by text messaging, played sports for fun or participated in art, music or dance classes. To the statement ‘*I do interesting things with my parents*’, Isaac most often answered ‘not very often true’.

Isaac’s teacher in Year 8 expressed concerns about his emotional well-being, which she felt caused him difficulties. At times she said Isaac could be aggressive towards other students while at other times he appeared to be sad and depressed, commenting that:

*“This student has potential and skills in sports but home circumstances have led this child to think he has to be aggressive and tough in order not to be hurt.”*

Isaac enjoyed playing most sports, particularly rugby, volleyball, basketball and softball when he had the chance. He also enjoyed playing the guitar and listening to music.

<sup>72</sup> This is not the student’s real name (nor is it the name of any other student in our study).

### Isaac – *continued*

Academically, Isaac struggled with mathematics, achieving in the bottom quartile of all students in the asTTle assessments we administered. His reading skills, however, were described by his Year 8 teacher as ‘average, but very good in some aspects’ and his writing skills were also considered to be ‘average’. Over the course of the study Isaac’s asTTle scores in reading and writing were towards the lower end of the middle half of all students.

We received conflicting information about the level of family support Isaac received. His Year 8 teacher considered Isaac’s parents to be not supportive at all of his schoolwork. This teacher had had no contact with his parents during his last year at primary school. His English teacher in Year 9 also said she had had no contact with his parents. But, in contrast, his form teacher in Years 9 and 10 said he had contacted Isaac’s parents a few times and felt they were supportive when he spoke to them.

His parents also said they had been in contact with his teachers at secondary school<sup>73</sup> through parent–teacher interviews and phone calls. They felt that Isaac was happy and getting on well at school. They also felt that he did not have any problems that made learning difficult for him and that his behaviour was ‘about average’. Early in Year 9, we asked parents whether they had worked with anyone at the school to sort out any problems their child might have been having. Isaac’s parents answered ‘no’ to this question, despite a special learning programme being developed for Isaac and his teachers enlisting the help of a social worker to work with him further. They also did not mention that Isaac was no longer living with them when they completed their parent questionnaire early in Year 10 and answered the questions as though there had been no major changes in Isaac’s life.

Accurate information about Isaac’s background was sent through from his primary school to the secondary school and his new school was able to closely monitor Isaac’s behaviour and attendance during his first term at secondary school. Early in Year 9, an individual programme of learning was developed for Isaac whereby his Year 9 form teacher worked closely with Isaac’s other teachers and his social worker to modify his behaviour and monitor his progress. Isaac responded well to this special attention. His English teacher commented that his social skills and behaviour had improved and that he had started to make some progress academically:

*“Isaac is a strong and remarkably astute young man. He seems to have had a troubled history. But his transition to secondary school has been relatively smooth and [with the support that has been provided at school] he seems to have had no problems making the leap.”*

By Year 10, Isaac’s form teacher felt he was getting on extremely well at school so far that year and described his academic progress as ‘above average’. He commented that:

*“His teachers are impressed by his aptitude and his obvious enjoyment of learning.”*

Students generally rated their relationship with their family very positively over the course of the study.

### Students’ views on the support they received

Over the course of the study students were asked a range of questions regarding the type and level of support they received from their parents, as well as aspects of their relationships with them.

### Students’ views on their relationship with their family

The data in Table 11 show that despite diverse backgrounds and circumstances, students in general rated their relationships with their parents very positively over the course of the study. There was also a great deal of consistency in their responses over time for most of the aspects listed in Table 11. However, there were several exceptions, where considerably lower proportions of students in Phase 4, compared with Phase 1, answered that particular aspects of their relationship with their parents were always, or almost always true.

<sup>73</sup> We did not receive a completed parent questionnaire from Isaac’s parents in Year 8.

Student opinion decreased most noticeably to the statements ‘*My parents/caregivers know when I am upset about something*’, ‘*I can tell my parents/caregivers my problems and troubles*’ and ‘*I do interesting things with my parents and caregivers*’. The relevant data have been highlighted in Table 11.

It would seem that although students felt there was dependability in fundamental aspects of their relationships with their parents — such as that their parents cared about them and would help them if they needed help — they were also signalling that changes were occurring in their relationships as they became more independent and/or were spending more time with their peers.

Students’ responses indicated that their parents were less likely to ask them about what they had been doing at school once they were at secondary school. The proportion of students answering always or almost always true or usually true to the statement ‘*My parents/caregivers ask about what I do at school*’ dropped from 85 percent in Phase 1 to 77 percent in Phase 4. It is of interest to note that the students who were low achievers in mathematics were more likely than the high achievers in this subject area to tick the most positive option to this statement (i.e. always or almost always true). In contrast, the high achievers in reading were more likely than the lower achievers in reading to state that their parents always or almost always asked them about school.

Once at secondary school, students’ parents were less likely to ask them about what happened at school.

**Table 11:** Students’ views on aspects of their relationship with their parents

Aspect of relationship	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
	%	%	%	%
	Always or almost always true/Usually true			
I get along with my parents/caregivers	94	96	91	89
My parents/caregivers praise me when I do well	92	93	86	95
My parents/caregivers ask about what I do at school	85	82	73	77
My parents/caregivers worry too much about what I do with my friends	49	47	44	43
My parents/caregivers like my friends	87	79	75	78
My parents/caregivers know when I am upset about something	79	68	67	55
I can tell my parents/caregivers my problems and troubles	72	68	58	59
My parents/caregivers trust me	91	88	78	86
My parents/caregivers want to control whatever I do	36	32	25	28
My parents/caregivers care about me	98	99	97	97
My parents/caregivers understand me	93	86	79	84
My parents/caregivers expect too much from me	32	34	25	25
I do interesting things with my parents/caregivers	74	68	58	55
I feel close to my family/whānau	94	90	87	88
My family/whānau asks me about school	88	87	76	77
My parents/caregivers help me if I need help	96	95	87	88
My parents/caregivers let me do what I like	35	38	31	29
My family/whānau really help and support each other	93	89	89	88

**Note:** To simplify presentation of the data, in this table we have combined the two response categories ‘Always or almost always true’ and ‘Usually true’. Although some of the detail is lost by doing this, it still provides a useful idea of overall trends in students’ responses regarding relationships with their parents/caregivers and family.

Low achieving students were more likely to indicate that their parents always or usually **checked** that they had done their homework.

### Students' views on parental input with their homework

More than two-thirds of students in Phases 1 and 2 reported that their parents 'always or almost always' or 'usually' checked that they had completed their homework. However, this proportion dropped to 55 percent in Phase 3, but rose again to 61 percent in Phase 4.

Interestingly, students in the lowest achievement quartile for one or more of mathematics, reading, and writing were more likely than the high achievers to indicate that their parents 'always or almost always' checked that they had done their homework.

Although the majority of students in Phases 1 and 2 indicated that their parents regularly checked they had completed their homework, at the other end of the scale, eight percent of students in Phase 1 reported that parents seldom or never did this. Corresponding figures for the subsequent three phases were 13 percent, 19 percent and 20 percent. Students who responded in this way were equally likely to be high or low achievers.

A greater proportion of high achieving students said their parents usually or always **helped them** with their homework when they needed it.

Student feedback about parents helping them with their homework 'when required' was mostly very positive, with 83, 89, 77 and 73 percent at respective phases saying that their parents usually or always helped them at such times. While a considerable number of low achieving students indicated positively in this manner, a much greater proportion of the high achieving students said their parents usually or always helped them with their homework when they needed it. In saying that, the frequency with which students required help varied considerably across individuals.

Over the course of the study, however, the proportion of students saying their parents seldom or never helped with their homework when they needed it rose from three percent in Phase 1 to 10 percent in Phase 4. The students to whom this situation applied tended to be predominately achieving in the lowest quartile or middle half of all students in mathematics, reading and writing.

High achieving students were more likely to become involved in extra-curricular activities.

### Students' participation in extra-curricular activities

As well as good family support and schools being responsive to the needs of individual students, students' participation in extra-curricular activities, both at school and outside of school, has also been identified in the research literature as an important ingredient in improving student outcomes, especially in the case of low performing students. Parental support and encouragement (along with that of teachers) is often a key factor in students' successful involvement in extra-curricular activities.

For example, the Competent Children, Competent Learners study<sup>74</sup> found that at age 14, students who were engaged in school were more likely to have supportive families and friends and to have interests outside of school. Conversely, those who showed signs of disengagement with school were more likely to feel pressured by their parents, alienated from their teachers, be involved in risky behaviour, and not have interests that engaged them outside of school.

We found that the high achieving students in our study were generally more likely to take part in extra-curricular activities at primary and secondary school, particularly the high achievers in reading. They mentioned taking part in a variety of sports, language classes, the school production, musical groups, dance events and external mathematics and science competitions.

Students in the lowest achievement quartile also participated in a variety of sports and cultural groups, as well as school productions and dance events, but to a lesser extent than the high achievers.

The high achievers were also more likely to take on special responsibilities at secondary school such as library or canteen duties, membership on student council, or captaining a sports team.

When we asked about the types of things students did in their spare time, the high achieving students were again more likely to indicate being involved in more formalised out-of-school activities such as art, music or dance classes, competitive sports or youth groups (e.g. Scouts, Guides, or Air Training Corps).

<sup>74</sup> Wylie et al (2006).

Two of our students, Marcus and Liam, who have been profiled in case studies earlier in this report (Chapters 4 and 6), provide examples of students who received a high level of parental support for their schooling, as well as for the extra-curricular activities they were involved in.

## Parents' views on support provided for students

### Point to note

- Sixty parents in Phase 1, 55 in Phase 2, 59 in Phase 3 and 62 in Phase 4 returned completed questionnaires. The parents of the high achieving students were more likely than the parents of the low achieving students to send back completed questionnaires.

### Parents' involvement with students' homework

In Year 8, and again early in Year 9, parents were asked whether they had helped their child with any of their homework.

Just under half (49%) of the parents who responded in Year 8 and in Year 9 said that they provided help, but only occasionally. A fifth of parents in Phase 1 and a quarter in Phase 2 said they provided help 'quite often', with fewer numbers in each phase saying they provided help 'frequently'.

Fourteen percent in Phase 1 and 18 percent in Phase 2 said they never helped their child with their homework.

When asked about the ways in which they provided help, parents most often said they simply helped their child when they needed it (e.g. providing guidance on what they were required to do or giving them initial ideas and suggestions to get them started), providing feedback on their work and providing supervision, as well as encouragement. One parent was quite explicit about the help provided for their child:

*"[I have] taken her to the library to take out books to help her understand particular subjects. I have sat with her and gone over examples to help her understand a problem she's having difficulty with. [I have] talked with her about how she feels about her homework. [I have] helped her find websites on the computer to help with project work."*

While a quarter of parents in Year 8 said they had no difficulty helping their child with their homework, 45 percent did indicate having difficulties with some of the homework given, especially in mathematics. A few parents commented that they felt that mathematics was taught differently from when they went to school and that they did not understand the 'new methods'.

One parent commented:

*"My daughter did not agree with the way I used to arrive at the [maths] answer. She told me 'that's not how we did it.'"*

The parents of the low achievers (around a third) were much more likely than the parents of the high achievers to indicate that they helped their child 'quite often' or 'frequently' with their homework. Around two-thirds of parents of the high achievers said they only occasionally helped their child.

One possible explanation for these findings is that the high achieving students knew what was required and were able to complete their homework without any assistance from their parents, unlike the low achieving students who perhaps needed more guidance and encouragement. We have already seen from the students' responses that low achieving students were more likely to indicate that their parents always or almost always **checked** they had done their homework. However, it was the high achieving students who were more likely to indicate that their parents usually or always **helped them** with their homework when they needed it (albeit their help was often not required).

The parents of the low achievers were more likely to indicate that they helped their child 'quite often' or 'frequently' with their homework.

A large proportion of parents had difficulties with some of the homework their Year 8 child was given, particularly in mathematics.

There was very little difference in the responses from the parents of the low and high achieving students to the question about whether parents found it difficult to help their child with any of their homework.

Some parents indicated that their child also received additional help with homework from brothers and sisters and other extended family members.

### Parents' views on the contact they had with their child's teachers and school

In Phase 1 of the study, when the students were in Year 8, parents were asked to specify the types of contact they had mostly had with their child's school during that year.

Parents' main form of contact with their child's school was through parent-teacher interviews.

Around two-thirds of parents said that their main contact with the school had been through parent-teacher interviews. Almost a quarter also said they had done voluntary work at the school such as helping on field trips, working in the school canteen or library and helping with sports teams or cultural groups, having regular talks with teachers, and/or attending school meetings and functions.

There was little difference overall in the responses from the parents of the high and low achieving students to this question. In saying that, the parents of the high achievers in reading were just slightly more likely than the parents of the low achievers in reading to indicate attending parent-teacher interviews or attending other school meetings and functions. Also, the parents of the low achieving students in reading were slightly more likely to indicate having only irregular contact with their child's school.

Parents were also asked to provide details of how often they had met or talked with their child's teacher.

The parents of the high achievers in Phases 2 and 4 were generally more likely to have had more frequent contact with their child's teachers.

Although in Year 8 just over a quarter of parents indicated they had met or talked to the teacher fairly regularly, 43 percent said they had not been in contact very often. Almost a fifth also said they had hardly been in touch at all with the teacher. Nevertheless, a significant number of parents (63%) felt positive or very positive about the contact they had had with their child's teacher, irrespective of how much contact they had had. We found there

was very little difference in how often the parents of the low and high achieving students talked to their child's teacher in Phase 1 of the study.

During the students' first year at secondary school the majority of the parents who responded (85% in Phase 2 and 83% in Phase 3) reported having met or talked to their child's teachers two to three times, or more frequently. At the end of Year 9 (Phase 3), just two parents indicated that they had had no contact at all. These parents cited work commitments and time as the main reasons for the lack of contact.

In Phase 4, almost two-thirds of parents said they had had contact with their child's teachers, mainly through parent-teacher interviews and phone calls. The remaining parents who had had little or no contact were asked to comment further on why this was. The timing of the parent-teacher interviews was an issue for a few parents who were unable to attend due to other commitments, while others said they had no concerns about their child's progress and therefore did not feel the need to get in touch with the school.

The parents of the high achievers in Phases 2 and 4 were generally more likely to have had more frequent contact with their child's teachers than the parents of the low achievers. However, there was very little difference in the reported level of contact between these two groups in Phase 3.

Although most parents felt happy with the level of (formal) parent-teacher contact, a few parents said they would have liked to meet with the teachers more often, particularly once their child was at secondary school. They said they missed the more frequent interaction with the teacher they had experienced when their child was at primary school:

*"The [parent-teacher] interviews are very quick and I'm always aware of other parents waiting. I am finding it more difficult to know what's going on [now]. I miss not being able to see the teacher after school for a few minutes to quickly catch-up."*

In saying that, most parents felt they could get in touch with their child's school if they were worried about anything.

### Parents' views on the support provided by teachers for their child

At each phase of the study parents were asked to indicate how much support they felt their child's teacher(s) gave them for their schoolwork. We asked parents this question partly to get an idea of how well informed they seemed to be about how their child was getting on at school.

Parents generally felt their child received better support from teachers at secondary school for their schoolwork than they did at primary school.

The majority (81%) of parents were particularly positive about the support their child received during their first term at secondary school, indicating that they felt they received 'fantastic' or 'mostly good' support, compared with 55 percent of parents who answered the same way in Year 8. By the end of Year 9 and early in Year 10, although still positive, parents were less positive than they had been early in Year 9 (69% and 70% respectively).

Over the course of the study, parents of the low achieving students were slightly more likely than the parents of the high achievers to consider that their child was receiving 'fantastic' support from their teachers.

### Parents' interest in what happened at school

One of the ways in which parents can encourage and support their child's learning is by taking an interest in what they do at school and asking them about what they have been enjoying and any problems or concerns.

In Phases 1, 2 and 4<sup>75</sup> parents were asked to indicate how often they talked to their child about school. Around 70 percent of parents in each phase said they talked about school often. A further 25 percent in Phase 1, 20 percent in Phase 2, and 22 percent in Phase 4 indicated that they sometimes discussed what happened at school with their child.

Two parents in Phase 2 and three in Phase 4 said they never or almost never talked to their child about school. Two of these parents in Phase 4 said that their child just did not want to talk about school, while the third parent said they had no time to do so.

The main things that parents discussed about school with their child were activities and projects they were working on, their teachers, their friends and social interactions, school trips, particular subjects, sports, and test results.

At each phase of the study, the parents of the high achieving students were more likely than the parents of the low achieving students to say they talked to their child often about school.

### Summary of the support students received

In this chapter we have looked at aspects of the support students received for their schoolwork and more generally, taking into account the perspectives of students, their parents and their teachers.

Generally, the high achieving students were more likely to become involved in extra-curricular activities and were also more likely to take on special responsibilities at school such as library or canteen duties or being on the student council. The parents of the high achievers were more likely to be described as 'very supportive' of their children by teachers.

Over the course of the study, students generally rated their relationship with their family very positively. We found, however, that students' families were less likely to ask them about what they had been doing at school once they were at secondary school. The parents of the high achievers were more likely than the parents of the low achievers to say they talked to their child often about school.

In terms of support with their homework, the low achieving students were more likely to indicate that their parents always or almost always checked that they had done their homework. Their parents were also more likely to say that they helped their child 'quite often' or 'frequently' with their homework. In contrast, a greater proportion of high achieving students said their parents usually or always helped them with their homework if they needed it.

The majority of the parents who participated in the study were positive about the support their child received at school and most felt happy with the level of parent-teacher contact they had had.

The majority of parents were particularly positive about the support their child received during their first term at secondary school.

The parents of the high achievers were more likely to say they talked to their child often about school.

<sup>75</sup> Question not asked of parents in Phase 3.

A few parents, however, said they would have liked to meet their child's teachers more often, particularly once their child was at secondary school.

In Phases 2 and 4, we found that the parents of the high achievers were overall more likely than the parents of the low achievers to indicate they had had more frequent contact with their child's teacher. Teachers were also more likely to mention having had contact with the parents of the high achieving students than with the parents of the low achieving students, through parent-teacher interviews and additional meetings. Teachers were more likely to mention having infrequent contact with the parents of the low achieving students.

It was not always easy, however, for parents to help with homework. Forty-five percent of parents

in Year 8 said they had difficulties with some of the homework their child was given, particularly in mathematics. This perhaps has important implications for teachers to ensure that students fully understand what they are required to do for homework, as well as to provide parents with some practical tips on how best they can assist their child with their homework.

While in general the great majority of parents were supportive of their child in terms of their learning and development at school, or wished to be, they did not always necessarily know how best to provide support in practice or were restricted in their capacity to do so by work and other commitments.