



Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers  
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## **AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS (ANZASW)**

Submission on the inquiry into engaging parents  
in the education of their children

To the: Education and Science Select Committee

Submissions due 7<sup>th</sup> November 2013



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## **2. INTRODUCTION**

Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, or ANZASW, is the professional body for social workers in New Zealand. It is imperative that we provide a voice for our members on the Victims' Orders against Violent Offenders Bill and its direct effect on the social work profession.

In order to be in a position to write this submission ANZASW put together a working group of members who provided information and opinions from their knowledge of, and experience in, the education sector.

Social work practice is about providing assistance, understanding and encouragement to sensitive, stressed and vulnerable clients. Social workers are focused on improving client wellbeing whilst effecting long term change. Our members have a significant professional interest in the potential or intended effects of the inquiry into engaging parents in the education of their children.

## **3. AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) is the professional body for a national collective of more than 3,500 social workers, who have day-to-day involvement with the most vulnerable people in our society. Our work is guided by a Code of Ethics that is aligned with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).

Social work is founded on principles of human rights and social justice. We are guided by the Treaty of Waitangi and respect the equality, worth and dignity of all people. In accordance with the March 2012 IFSW Global Agenda<sup>1</sup> "we commit ourselves to supporting influencing and enabling structures and systems that positively address the root cause of oppression and inequality. We commit ourselves wholeheartedly and urgently to work together, with people who use services and with others who share our objectives and aspirations, to create a more socially-just and fair world". We believe the overarching principles of social work are respect for the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, doing no harm, respect for diversity and upholding human rights and social justice.

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<sup>1</sup> International Federation of Social Workers, International Association of Schools of Social Work and International Council on Social Welfare (2012). 'The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment to Action'. Available at [isw.sagepub.com](http://isw.sagepub.com) (accessed 13 June 2012)

Our mission is to enable people to develop their full potential; our skill-set is problem solving and facilitation of positive change in individuals, organisations, whānau and communities. We recognise the environment contains opportunities for people to be both agents of change and victims of factors beyond their control. As a profession, we strive to alleviate poverty, foster social inclusion and liberate those who are vulnerable or oppressed. Social work is evidence-based and draws on theories of human development, behaviour and social systems.

Social workers respond to crises and emergencies along with the personal or social problems that arise from experience of barriers, inequities and injustices within our society. Our interventions involve problem solving, development of coping strategies, one-on-one counselling and therapy, family and group work, agency administration, community organisation and helping people to access services, resources and support systems within their community. We work across government and non-government settings including community organisations, iwi agencies, private practice, youth justice, child protection, mental health, addictions and disability. We are involved in research, training, education, professional development, competency assessment, data gathering, risk assessment, structural analysis, interagency protocols and the improvement of social policy.

#### **4. USING INFORMATION THAT IS ALREADY AVAILABLE**

We question why this inquiry is necessary considering the amount of information and evidence about engagement of communities in education that is already available. There is ample local and international research which supports the involvement of parents and communities in schools and outlines the positive and negative effects of the various approaches. Biddulph, Biddulph and Biddulph (2003) undertook an extensive literature review on the impact of family, school and community factors on children's achievement in New Zealand and internationally. Victory School in Nelson has had an evaluation completed also which highlights strong support for community engagement with schools (Stuart, 2010).

Studies have also shown that the aspirations of a mother for the education of her children determine the educational outcomes for the child(ren). This information needs to be acknowledged, explored and analysed in order to implement effective strategies. The successes and failures of the existing literature and research provide an ideal platform to develop a unique framework centred on our diverse communities.

Also essential for consideration is the underlying agenda of community engaged schools and the research surrounding them. The literature from the United States and the United Kingdom on community schools can be positioned as community capacity building approaches aligned with Neoliberal principles of putting responsibility on communities to provide for their own. There is a strong push to develop community schools in impoverished communities; those very communities who tend to have little or diminishing access to resources and networks in order to support their needs.

Community school models tend to draw on theoretical assumptions that prioritise notions of shared values and norms in schools (Sergiovanni, 1994). However, such schemas and models are being increasingly critiqued (Young, 1986; Furman, 1998; Shields, 2000) for their exclusionary practices and

for perpetuating social divisions within schools reflective of broader societal inequalities. Biddulph et al (2003) found that parents from low socio-economic backgrounds, or ethnic minorities are the individuals who are excluded or, because of their experience of difference, do not get involved.

The research and literature surrounding the engagement of parents and communities in the education of their children outlines and explains in detail what is currently happening in New Zealand and around the world. Successes and failures have been identified time and time again and rather than spending money on this inquiry the government should turn their attention to the information we already have. We should be writing a submission about the intended strategies/models to be employed in our communities as a result of the analysis of the extensive research and literature with the intent to create better community based systems which encourage parents to engage in the education of their children.

We also need to acknowledge and support the initiatives that are being successfully employed throughout New Zealand. The Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), Strategies for Kids Information for Parents (SKIP), Parents as First Teachers (PAFT) and Whānau Toko I Te Ora (WTITO) are all currently engaging parents in the education of their children in the hopes to create a better learning environment and brighter futures. We should be modelling and building on these early intervention processes so that support is available for parents and children after “graduating” from these programmes because the child has exceeded the age limit. Time, effort and funding applied to supporting and improving these initiatives will assist to make long term, intergenerational changes that will benefit parents and children alike.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OR IMPROVEMENT**

As mentioned above we need to commission a review of the local research on community engagement in schools to ascertain the different approaches and key strategies. This research should focus on ‘bottom up’ models of school community building where children and parents are central to setting the agenda for community engagement. There should also be funding allocated to research and analysis of the outcomes for children who have been through current initiatives, playcentre and kohanga reo. This way the successes and failures can be identified clearly as well as plans developed to implement changes that will encourage the engagement of parents in the education of their children from an early age. From here we can look into developing some pilot projects, utilising existing resources such as SWiS and Public Health Nurses, which could be evaluated with a view to extend the approach.

### **Tackling poverty**

Before any of the above can be implemented we need to acknowledge and look to eradicate the systemic issues of non-engagement of families in their children’s education, the most prominent and important being poverty. There is an alarming increase in the number of children living in poverty in New Zealand, according to the Expert Advisory Group (EAG) there are currently 270,000. We cannot expect to make any changes through this inquiry unless we simultaneously strive to decrease poverty levels in New Zealand and assist people living in poverty within our communities. As mentioned in the section above, if the communities are left to ‘fend for themselves’ with no

strategies to improve social and economic equality then we are essentially going around in circles. This inquiry and the actions/strategies to follow must seek to recognise the issue of poverty and its direct effect on how parents engage in the education of their children if improvements are to be made.

It seems the 2013 welfare reform seeks to get parents out to work as well as increase school attendance. The Young Parent Payment requires children of beneficiaries attend Early Childhood Education (ECE) from age 3 for 15 hours per week (unless they have good reason not to do so); to attend school; and to be enrolled with a primary health care provider. On the surface of it, this seems to be good for the children and encourage their progression and schooling, however there is no evidence to suggest that these methods will be effective and no explanation as to why this only applies to the children of beneficiaries (CPAG 2013). Even with an increase in school attendance children need their parents to be present and engaged to increase school attainment, a task which is difficult to do under the stress of poverty and the welfare reform.

### **Acknowledging Culture and Religion**

All cultural factors and religious beliefs need to be taken into account when considering the expectations of parents engaging in the education of their children. In the cases where English is not the parent's first language parents feel they cannot help children with school work and are embarrassed to admit this. In some religions education can be seen as challenging to their faith after a certain age which can cause a reluctance to be involved in school and community. These misunderstandings or conflicts with language barriers and religious beliefs can discourage parents to be a part of the school and their child's schooling, and 'restrict or prohibit parent and community involvement in school life' (Gorinski and Fraser 2006: 23). In order to overcome these issues we must understand them better.

### **Community Work**

Social work supports community-led work and schools can be viewed as centred communities for many families. It needs to be recognised that engaging community is hard work and that there are internal and external power dynamics that impact on the success of any community building project. There is the potential for Social Workers in Schools (SWiS) roles to be extended into community building, to work alongside the educators and other professionals to work in ways that support community building and social change in schools and their neighbourhood communities.

It would also be encouraging to have the communities that are currently making improvements in this area being promoted, encouraged and supported. This is not only to model their effective strategies and processes but to provide inspiration for other communities. In the long run these strengthened communities will have the ability to help others. This would create an environment in which organic development can occur.

### **Resources and Funding**

In order to support and promote the communities that are effectively engaging parents in the education of their children there must be funding allocated to resources, information and information systems throughout New Zealand. The good work, and those at the forefront of this, needs to be seen and heard throughout the country. There should be some sort of resource similar

to a newsletter or bulletin (electronic or hard copy) that is easily available via download or request for schools and parents that updates them on what is going on, highlights success stories, as well as encourages them to get involved. If we try to implement all the strategies and frameworks without this funding and resourcing it is not likely to be something people have confidence in.

Parents also need more avenues to ask for and receive resources and education on their child's learning and development. This could be through funding for parents to stay home, education for parents on teaching children through play time and sufficient information and resources for all families explaining how to engage in children's education and why it is so important. There should be no stigma surrounding this, and all members of the community should feel comfortable and confident to ask for or find information and education.

## Conclusion

There needs to be an understanding of all cultural, financial and religious circumstances of parents before placing expectations upon them that they cannot meet or do not understand. In order to promote the engagement of parents in the education of their children we must consider the correct strategies and factors to encourage parents of vulnerable families to participate and not feel alone or embarrassed to ask for help and resources. Increased levels of understanding from teachers and community leaders are essential.

Once all of this is in place there should be room for effective bottom-up strategies that, if implemented correctly, will educate and encourage parents to engage in the education of their children to give the children of New Zealand a brighter future with more opportunities.

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