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Policy and Social Research Consultants

AN EVALUATION OF FAMILIES MATTER

SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT FOR

COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND AGEING

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL

AUSTRALIAN PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

JULY 2006

INTRODUCTION

This evaluation of the Families Matter program was commissioned in August 2005 by a panel consisting of representatives from the Department of Health and Ageing, the Australian Council of State School Organisations, the Australian Parents Council, the Australian Principals' Association Professional Development Council, and a representative of the MindMatters evaluation committee.

This evaluation was one of a number commissioned for various elements of the MindMatters suite of programs.

Initially the contract called for a final report to be delivered by 31 December 2005, but about halfway through the fieldwork it was recognised by those who had commissioned the work that there would not be time to complete every element of it before the school year ended. So it proved. However, only a very small amount of work remained: visits to two schools where the program had been running for some time; visits to two schools where it had just been introduced; the garnering of one school's parent-feedback data.

On 24 October 2005 it was agreed at a Families Matter committee meeting in Adelaide that we would write a draft of the main report by 31 December, and follow it with a supplementary report by early 2006 covering the additional material described above.

This is the supplementary report. It was delayed somewhat by the necessity to wait until schools convened Families Matter activities in the new school year, compounded by the very short (seven-week) first term in Victoria to accommodate the Commonwealth Games.

We said in our main report:

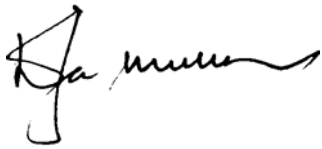
We would be astonished if the small amount of additional data made any difference at all to the body of evidence already gathered, and hence to our conclusions and learnings.

That has been borne out by our experience. For that reason, this report is brief. It describes the additional work, and draws some conclusions. It should be read in conjunction with the main report.

The evaluation was carried out by Denis Muller and Irving Saulwick, who also jointly wrote this report.

We would be happy to discuss any aspect of this report at any mutually convenient time.

Once again, people in the school communities we visited were generous with their time and insightful in their views. We would like to thank them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Denis Muller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

DENIS MULLER
PRINCIPAL

DESCRIPTION OF THE ADDITIONAL WORK

The project brief originally called for us to select 10 schools at random from those who had sent people to training sessions in at least two States, and follow up the implementation of Families Matter in those schools. For reasons fully explained in our main report, it was later agreed in consultation with the two peak parent bodies, ACSSO and APC, that we should visit three “new” schools and seven “experienced” schools.

Of the “new” schools, only one was able to arrange a parent session before the end of 2005. Of the “experienced” schools, we visited five of the seven before the end of the 2005. Thus in 2006 we had to visit two “new” schools and two “experienced” schools to complete this schedule.

The “experienced” schools we visited were:

A government secondary school in rural Victoria where Families Matter had been running since 2004, and

A Catholic primary school in Melbourne where the program also had been running since 2004.

The “new” schools we visited were:

A cluster of Catholic primary schools in Melbourne where the program was introduced in 2006, and

A group of government schools in and around Alice Spring where the program was in the process of being introduced in 2006, albeit with people who had great experience in running Families Matter in the Northern Territory.

This additional work was carried out in March, April and May 2006. It consisted of observations of meetings, and interviews with trainers, parent presenters, parent participants, and relevant school staff.

As indicated in the introduction, we also followed up a large government secondary school in Melbourne to try to obtain some quantitative data from a parent survey they had done following their initial Families Matter session. We were advised in June 2006 that they had been unable to find this material.

CONCLUSIONS

None of the findings, conclusions and learnings set out in our main report were contradicted in any way by the observations made and data gathered in this supplementary work. The experience of the program by school communities was uniformly favourable and for the same main reasons we had heard before.

These are important ones and bear re-stating.

Families Matter gives parents a means of coming together and discussing issues about the raising and educating of children in a way that adds to their own coping and parenting skills. It does this, moreover, by allowing parents to decide what it is they want to talk about, and how they want to talk about it.

Families Matter creates a vehicle for partnerships between families and schools. It is prized by principals and school staff for this quality.

Families Matter gives some parents new self-confidence and contributes to their personal development.

An important additional finding from the “experienced” schools was that while the original Families Matter session had provided the impetus for the parent body to come together in the first place to talk about resilience and related issues, the format of subsequent sessions tended to vary according to the wants of the parents.

For example, in one school parents had wanted a psychologist to come in and talk about adolescence. We attended this session and it was clearly regarded as a success. In a small rural school community, 17 parents had turned out to this occasion.

In a metropolitan school, parents at the initial Families Matter session had said they wanted to hear about how to deal with the issue of drugs. No fewer than 200 parents had come along to hear a guest speaker on this topic at an evening arranged by the Families Matter team under the Families Matter auspices.

While these various sessions were conducted under the rubric of Families Matter, they did not draw on the program materials or format.

In one of the “new” schools, the development of Families Matter was proceeding along similar lines. We attended a planning session held as a follow-up to the initial Families Matter evening. This initial meeting had been conducted exactly according to the program’s script, as it were. It had been a success, and now a small group of parents – some of whom had been presenters and some of whom had not been – had convened, with the school’s welfare co-ordinator, to plan the next steps.

Learning from the example of another school, they had adopted a vibrant colour – a most arresting blue – for all their fliers, and already the name “Families Matter” had become synonymous with “something worth going to” among the parents. At this planning session issues that parents had raised at the initial session were reviewed and a timetable drawn up for holding a series of sessions, each focusing on one of these issues.

These observations have led us to think that it might be useful to think about asking Families Matter schools to hold an annual “refresher” so that each generation of new parents has an opportunity to be introduced to the Families Matter concepts.

Families Matter provides a vehicle for much good work. It helps to inform parents about important concepts such as resilience, and helps them articulate challenges and find solutions. Thus equipped, parents are enabled to act. It is like dropping a pebble in a pond. There is no telling what, on some far embankment, those ripples might touch: they take on a life of their own. At the same time, the value of the originating force should not be forgotten.

The concepts presented in the materials are informative, enduring and empowering. It seems to us that a means of renewing people’s acquaintance with them and of exposing some people to them for the first time is a way not only of embedding the program but of generating new ideas for keeping it relevant to the lives of parents, young people, and their schools.

At least one Families Matter session, held early in each school year and conducted according to the program’s formant and using its materials, would accomplish this, even if subsequent sessions took a different form.