

LEVERAGING COACHING FOR  
IMPROVED PARENT ENGAGEMENT

PRESENTATION GIVEN AT THE 6<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL  
NATIONAL COACHING IN EDUCATION CONFERENCE

AUGUST 2019

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

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DARE TO CONNECT

DRAFT COPY

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the assertion that when **parent engagement** is leveraged by **a coaching approach**, it contributes to improved student outcomes and wellbeing as well as building a community of practice in schools.

In preparation for this conference presentation, I interviewed a number of school executives for their input on whether their staff training in coaching has had an impact on their relationships with parents or school practices in relation to processes involving parents. I have included their insights in the body of this paper.

The parent engagement agenda has been embedded in education reform since the time of Gillard/Rudd/Gillard imported from the U.S. and has been applied variously by subsequent governments. More than 50 years of research in US, UK and Canada confirms improved student outcomes when parents are engaged (not just involved) in their child's learning at school.

But part of the reason for not progressing this agenda is the current reality of demanding parents, overburdened schools staff and an exigent education system with an unwavering focus on standardised testing. Given, that there is so much negativity around parents being involved or engaged at their child's school, it requires a fresh way of looking at this, a framework for improving and leveraging relationships for better student outcomes and wellbeing.

The practice of a coaching approach leveraging parent engagement may just be the game changer needed. In this paper, the underlying principles of instructional coaching and parent engagement are juxtaposed to see where synergies occur when they can be leveraged to greater effect.

Following on from this is a roadmap for integrating a coaching approach as well as positive psychology interventions into everyday parent engagement practices.

In the spirit of cooperative learning, I plan to engage with workshop participants to develop the thinking and application of this framework.

## **NEXT STEPS**

To engage with parents, parent associations and school staff to test the framework and matrix of possible activities.

## **SECTION 1**

There is an unceasing negative narrative promulgated in the media characterising school parents as a problem for schools and downright dangerous for their children with headlines like:

- *Profoundly dangerous: A generation at risk from concierge parents*
- *School charter welcomed to deal with parents behaving badly*
- *Parents Behaving Badly*
- *Badly behaved parents placing more pressure on school staff*
- *Teacher knows best? Not any longer as parents muscle in on the classroom*

Parents are being chastised for their bad parenting by the media, their own parents and now esteemed adolescent author John Marsden has even weighed in with a damning missive on the failings of parents today, titled *The Art of Growing Up*.

The negative impact of this kind of objectification is recognised in van Nieuwerburgh 2012 in the chapter on empowering parents through coaching stating that “*We share the view advocated by Guldberg (2009) that parents can often feel undermined by media stories and our safety obsessed culture. (p 133).*”

Meanwhile, the other side of the story is not so rosy either with school staff being subjected to troubling rates of bullying by parents and even students, this trend leading to higher teacher attrition, a shortage of principals and staff burnout.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, this all takes place in a climate of pressurised testing regimes with an unhealthy emphasis on competition for top marks, the result being heightened anxiety in students. Van Nieuwerburgh 2012 highlights the effect of when there is too much emphasis on extrinsic goals at the expense of self-motivation.

*If people associated with schools solely value the pursuit of extrinsic goals (i.e. high academic scores equals higher education entry equals increased material wealth), then they might inadvertently be supporting misguided ambitions that could lead to disillusionment and self-destruction (Wong 1998.) (p 119)*

This applies now more than ever in NSW as we see an increase in a standardised testing regime, competition around ATAR scores, literacy testing at points in education that are too late to remedy which therefore only succeed in punishing students for bad teaching.

Such a nail-biting educational environment instils anxiety and tension in parents who have grave concerns for the future prospects of their children which are being borne out in study after study by institutions like the Foundation for Young Australians, Grattan Institute and Mitchell Institute.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.principalhealth.org/au/info.php>

With such conditions prevailing, it is not surprising schools are reluctant to seek out ways to invite parents to engage in their child's learning even though the research unequivocally proves that doing so leads to improved student outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

However, given the success of a 'coaching approach' in building relationships in schools' staff, there is hope that by extending these same practices to parents, a community of practice can be built up to alleviate the tension between schools and parents for the benefit of student achievement and wellbeing. This paper will explore the ways that a 'coaching approach' can be used to leverage the impact of parent engagement strategies and suggest a framework to combine the strengths of each of these approaches.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/framework/FE-Cap-Building.pdf>

## **SECTION 2**

In a recent tweet from the World Congress of Positive Psychology 2019, a slide from Anthony Grant's presentation showed evidence to confirm that coaching "works": Solution focussed, goal orientated cognitive-behavioural coaching is effective and the most validated approach

- Coaching enhances goal attainment
- Coaching enhances well-being and SF thinking skills
- Effects of coaching generalise to other areas.

Therefore, the assertion of this paper is that if the same principles of coaching were applied to interactions with parents then it would logically lead to positive results around goal attainment, well-being, and solution-focused thinking skills.

In fact, this was a strong point that came through in an interview with an Assistant Principal of Wellbeing, Nathan Beckett. He spoke about trying to get parents to be solution focussed in difficult conversations, since a conversation that could be over in 10 minutes was taking on average 40 minutes. (See Case Study One).

Naturally, parents can be very emotional when it comes to negative perceptions of their child but if previous induction or relationship-building around a coaching 'way of being' had taken place, it may well reduce the extent and duration of excess emotion allowing for a quicker resolution.

Mr Beckett confirmed that because of the coaching training undertaken by all of the staff, the quality of the conversations with parents has already improved just by modelling a solution focussed approach.

The jump need not be so far since we know that by and large parents and schools share the same objective for their children. After conducting hundreds upon hundreds of cases of parent complaints over ten years in a diocese of fifty-six schools I found that most parents with very few exceptions were all looking for the same thing: fair treatment and the best outcome for their child.

Similarly, in van Nieuwerburgh 2012 it reinforces the good intentions of teachers for students in "that coaching in education is driven by a desire to make a difference to student learning" as found by Creasy and Paterson, which is where it intersects with parent engagement which also has as its aim, improved student achievement.

Meanwhile, schools are struggling with attaining real parent engagement. Parent involvement on the other hand persists in most schools with the usual suspects turning up for P&C meetings, canteen duty, reading, sports carnivals, fetes and other fundraising events. However, this does not forcibly lead to real parent engagement and often parents can feel sidelined when they wish to get a closer 'look in' or if they don't particularly fit the typical parent profile. Recently, I heard the notion that instead of thinking about 'hard to reach' parents we should be asking questions about 'hard to access' schools.

Is it possible then that applying the skills of coaching to interactions with parents could lead to better access on both sides? Knight and van Nieuwerburgh 2012<sup>3</sup> referred to Creasy and Paterson's seminal booklet in which they identified five key skills for effective educational coaches:

- establishing rapport and trust
- listening for meaning
- questioning for understanding
- prompting action reflection and learning
- developing confidence and celebrating success

with one of the aims of this non-directive approach to support the development of the thinking and learning processes of the professional learner.

One interviewee I spoke to, Mr Len Nixon works as a teacher coach in a large independent school. Mr Nixon referred to the videos on Dr Jim Knight's Instructional Coaching website which suggest a set of habits around empathy, listening, being in the moment, honesty, and trust and how important these attributes were in all relationships even with school parents.

In one of these videos, Dr Knight talks about prejudice by one group of teachers toward African American students – and it begs the question - do we feel that way about parents as a group – do we have prejudice toward them universally especially for 'hard to reach' parents. He asserts "Judgment is a relationship killer" do we view parents as incompetent, less-than, inarticulate, single-minded or are we open to seeing that they are doing the best they can?

So, what if the skills listed above were extended to parents so that teachers/principals in their conversations with parents refrained from offering answers or advice, seeing parents from a deficit view but instead endeavoured to develop the thinking of the parent in finding their own solutions or co-constructing a solution?

Once trust has been established in the relationship between the individuals at the school and the parents it acts as a de facto permission to engage more closely and work with the parent to develop their problem-solving and parenting (learning processes) skills. In a recent conversation with children's author, John Marsden, he said to me that so often parents appreciate the advice he gives them because they aren't getting it elsewhere. Demographic research supports this saying that Gen X parents lack confidence in their parenting skills and so not surprisingly are reluctant to take responsibility for their parenting roles. No doubt, he has spent much time and effort building trust with these parents.

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<sup>3</sup> Jim Knight & Christian van Nieuwerburgh (2012) Instructional coaching: a focus on practice (p2)

Just as in teacher coaching, parent coaching can lead to self-awareness and personal responsibility as in:

*The coaching approach focuses on the use of powerful questions to enable parents to understand themselves and their children better; a total belief in parents' ability to succeed; asking instead of telling; the idea that people have the solutions to their problems within them, and that by owning their own solution they will be more likely to implement it. (van Neiuwerburgh p 133).*

So how do we make this happen – to bring it to life? How to create the circumstances, climate and processes to enable schools to interact with parents in a way that is non-threatening, non-judgmental and yet assists in leading them to self-awareness and greater personal responsibility?

### **SECTION 3**

One way, is to use the same partnership principles as in instructional coaching. Because instructional coaches honour the professionalism of the teachers, they are able to set up “an authentic partnership between equals and not a relationship between an expert and a novice” which is laid out in the partnership principles.<sup>4</sup>

When it comes to their children, it is evident that parents have knowledge about their child which when combined with teacher knowledge makes a powerful combination (Pushor 2015). Therefore, the same ‘partnership approach’ stylised on the instructional coaching model would fit well here. Underpinning the philosophy of instructional coaching are the partnership principles which can be equated to similar principles of parent engagement.

Equality – Parents as Equal Partners

Choice – Parents as first educators

Dialogue – Co-constructors

Praxis – Meaningful engagement

Voice – Parent knowledge

Reciprocity – Leveraged outcomes

***Parents as equal partners*** – remembering that children have already amassed a coterie of learning and experience even before they enter pre-school or formal schooling situations means recognising the critical role the parent has already played and will continue to play in their formation.

#### ***Parents as first educators***

As part of her PHD study Amy Graham came to see that “parents/carers are a child’s first and forever teacher and so what they invest alongside the environment they create during these formative years affects the scope and extent to which the school can make a difference”.<sup>5</sup>

#### ***Co-constructors***

Amy Graham also says that schools have a “responsibility to leverage parents’ knowledge and understand the beliefs or activities to which children have been exposed”. This is aligned with a coaching approach in which coachees are encouraged to arrive at their own solutions aided by powerful questioning from coaches to be active in constructing or co-constructing their child’s learning agenda.

#### ***Parent knowledge***

Parents have a specific knowledge of their child, subject to the context and dynamic of the family environment. This is knowledge that needs to be ‘heard’ and combined with the knowledge teachers have of the student in a way that maintains their place as parent and not imitation of a teacher.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid p 4

<sup>5</sup> Graham, Amy, AEL Vol 41, Term 3 2019 pp 52-55

<sup>6</sup> The Wiley Handbook of Family, School, and Community Relationships in Education 2018



### **Meaningful engagement**

Most schools invite parents into the life of the school through volunteering, classroom, sport or excursion activities. Such involvement activities can enrich the relationships between the parent and the school but do not necessarily positively impact student achievement. For this to happen there needs to be the intention that the activity is linked to student learning which is what differentiates parent engagement from parent involvement.

School leaders can model and nurture a culture that promotes parent engagement through the following ways:

1. school protocols and processes that support partnership principles
2. capacity building of staff and community (coaching skills)
3. commitment to problem-solving and relationship building

*“leaders should model the dialogue and personal approaches that create a culture of high-quality coaching interaction across the school”. .... But it is worth noting that school and college leaders who embrace a “coaching style” of leadership can have an immediate positive impact on their organisations.<sup>7</sup>*

### **Leveraged outcomes**

Once we have achieved improved relationships, bringing all voices to the table and recognising the value of their contribution, then joint learning will coalesce to design and implement high-quality parent engagement instruments leveraged by partnership principles. Examples of these will be explored in greater depth in the final section of this paper.

### **Coaching Culture**

The lintel of the *Partnership with Parents* framework is the coaching culture which holds it altogether. Van Nieuwerburgh and Passmore (2012) define a coaching culture for learning as one in which coaching...

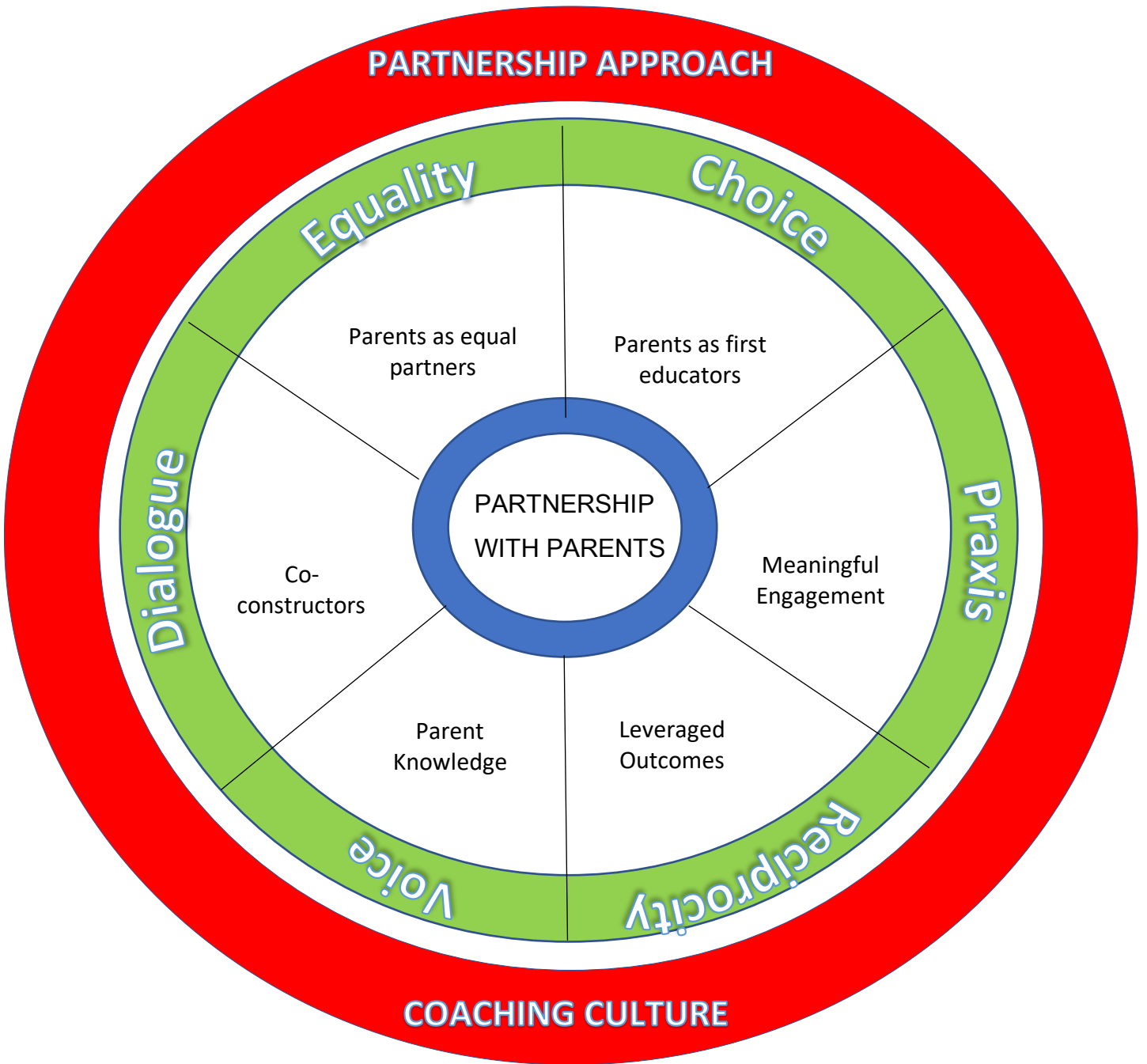
*‘is used consistently by all partners across the school community, to help develop learning, understanding and personal responsibility in others from staff to parents and from students to governors and wider stakeholders’*

They are unequivocal about including all partners across the entire school community as stakeholders in growing a coaching culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Van Nieuwerberg, C (2012) Coaching in Education p. 29

PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS - FRAMEWORK



#### **SECTION 4**

This section of the paper focusses on the practical application of coaching and parent engagement principles so that over time communities of practice can be built up.

In interviews with schools' staff, there were examples given of places where the coaching approach or coaching 'way of being' were having an impact on school/parent interactions even though parents had not been formally inducted into coaching principles or practices.

Assistant Principal, Nathan Beckett stressed that because of their coaching training, staff are more willing to have difficult conversations, his dream being that parents too would know how to have quality conversations. But the quality of conversations with parents has definitely improved.

Contrast this to P&F or P&C meetings, where old modes of planning and decision-making persist resulting in "bad quality" conversations and the need for a coaching approach can clearly be seen in this scenario as well.

Mr Greg Elliott, principal at an all-girls school, in our interview spoke about how he modelled a coaching approach to parents in interviews with students and parents. He finds it helpful to employ the hope acceptance theory. This is particularly powerful since as Hattie<sup>8</sup> has explained, the most positive influence parents can have on their child's educational experience is to share their hopes and aspirations and help their child shape their own hopes and aspirations.

This raises the connection of the coaching approach with the positive psychology movement which according to Prof Lea Waters in her 2011 article "A review of school-based positive psychology interventions") has far more impact when it is rolled out across all stakeholders.

Principals need to ensure that all key stakeholders are engaged and supported in the school's positive education transformation. These key stakeholders are leaders (including school leadership teams, school boards and councils), staff, students, parents, communities and educational governing systems. Creating 'buy in' across the key stakeholders allows a common language and ideology to be developed.

Mr Elliott noted that he used coaching style questions in letters to students, and coaching questions are reflected in the report proforma with the Ideal to train teachers to use coaching questions in parent/teacher interviews.

There is an infinite number of ways that a coaching approach can leverage parent engagement strategies to lift the quality of the parent engagement experience to positively impact student achievement and wellbeing.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>

Therefore, when parent engagement practices which, evidence shows lead to improved student achievement are housed within a coaching culture which is also linked to improved student achievement, it follows that the benefits will be even greater than the two programs applied separately resulting in:

1. Improved attainment for student learning and wellbeing goals
2. Improved staff and student wellbeing
3. More confident and effective parenting
4. Increased social capital of school

So, I leave you with this challenge. Are you ready to invite parents into the tent and give it a try?

If the answer is yes, then it is important to understand that it will require a concerted effort on the part of all staff. In most cases this will be a foreign concept to parents, not what they are expecting and not the way that they are used to communicating with their school.

Therefore, there will be a need for ongoing communication to parents about the approach, the processes, the success indicators, the language, the goals, the aspirations, the reality, the purpose, the suspicions, (for the haters who think it is just a pop phase).

Because when parents feel like outsiders it leads to

- Sniping in the carpark
- Social media disasters
- Legal cases – the principal in Queensland who thought she ran the best school but alienated a whole segment of parents causing so much angst for her own family, the other families, people's lives and businesses were ruined<sup>9</sup>
- More disturbingly disenfranchised students

It is recognised that implementing a coaching approach across the school builds professional learning communities and it is hoped that by extending similar induction and inculturation to parents of a coaching approach, then it will eventually lead to the formation of communities of practice.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-new-school-bullies-aren-t-children-they-re-parents-20190416-p51ej1.html?fbclid=IwAR28UCCP6lI8QVq\\_dGR47kGZyGoS98c54f4NmCAf18PIO4LRYd78EcMB9Ys](https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-new-school-bullies-aren-t-children-they-re-parents-20190416-p51ej1.html?fbclid=IwAR28UCCP6lI8QVq_dGR47kGZyGoS98c54f4NmCAf18PIO4LRYd78EcMB9Ys)

## EXAMPLES OF LEVERAGED PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Asset	Current Scale	Goal	One thing to move toward goal
P&C Meetings	1	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate a strategic planning meeting with the P&amp;C executive using GROWTH model.</li> </ul>
Parent/Teacher interviews	2	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model coaching questions for parents with students around their educational goals and reality.</li> </ul>
Staff induction on handling difficult parents			
Newsletter communication			
Curriculum support			
Strategic planning			
School improvement			
Positive Parenting			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gratitude exercises for parents about their child</li> <li>Parent evening on how to use coaching style questions to help your child with their study, subject choices, anxiety</li> </ul>
Difficult Conversations			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use coaching approach</li> <li>Curious listening</li> </ul>
Satisfaction surveys			
Complaints			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>publish solution-focused complaints policy with induction for parents</li> </ul>

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## CASE STUDY ONE – SAN CLEMENTE HIGH SCHOOL MAYFIELD, NSW

INTERVIEWED:	Mr Nathan Beckett, Assistant Principal, Wellbeing
GROWTH COACHING AT SCHOOL SINCE:	
NUMBER OF STAFF TRAINED:	All staff upskilled
MAJOR DEPLOYMENT OF METHOD:	

When speaking with Mr Nathan Beckett, AP, Wellbeing a few themes emerged:

- It has been beneficial to have the whole staff inducted into GCI to lead to quality conversations
- It has impacted the way that staff interacts with parents but there are still impediments in that parents do not tend to be solution-focussed
- Inducting P&Fs into coaching model would be a good start and might attract more parents
- There could be an opportunity for parent evenings to learn how to have quality conversations with their children
- This could lead to more positive connections with parents, teachers and students.

Mr Beckett said that they trained the leaders and then the rest of the staff. He confirmed that it is most effective to train all staff so that they are equipped to engage in quality coaching conversations with even a basic level of skill.

It is used for professional development, as part of accreditation to build staff members' professional skills. This helps them to be clearer about their goals, and while it can be challenging it is easier in the long run.

When it comes to difficult conversations with parents, staff members are now more willing to have difficult conversations. But because parents aren't versed in the language or skills of coaching conversations that should take 10 minutes can take up to 40 minutes. It would definitely be "a good outcome" for parents to be on the same page, Mr Beckett said it would be his "dream for parents to know how to have quality conversations". Still, the quality of conversations with parents has definitely improved due to the enhanced skills of staff and team towards solution.

As a parent, Mr Beckett has observed P&F meetings that have "bad quality" conversations and "the market is there" to induct them into a coaching approach. He felt that to "engage with P&Fs would be a good start" but questioned how that could happen. When P&F meetings are boring or confronting, demonstrating a coaching approach, or using coaching skills could attract more parents to come along to learn new skills. This could potentially build positive connections for teachers and parents as well.

Other opportunities to employ a coaching approach are:

- Parent/teacher interviews
- P&F meetings to build common goals
- Evening sessions – newsletters

## CASE STUDY TWO – CAROLINE CHISHOLM COLLEGE, GLENMORE NSW

INTERVIEWED: 30 <sup>th</sup> April 2019	Mr Greg Elliott, Principal
GROWTH COACHING AT SCHOOL SINCE:	
STAFF TRAINED:	All staff completed Introduction to Coaching 32 accredited coaches
MAJOR DEPLOYMENT OF METHOD:	Main methods of employing coaching are 'goal buddies' among teaching staff, and in learning interventions with students.

In my interview with Greg Elliott the following themes emerged:

- The strategy has been to use coaching language on students in front of their parents to demonstrate the technique
- The use of “geurilla coaching” to engage parents more meaningfully at the point of need
- Promoting a strengths-based approach to parents for their student (VIA survey)
- Aligning reports to coaching principles and encouraging parents to use GCI style questions

One way the school has used coaching with parents is in the language in interviews and meetings. They will coach students in front of their parents in interviews about complex learning needs, attendance, social issues. This encourages parents and students to imagine different futures, with reality check-in being modelled. Coaching kids about their reality gives parents insight. Staff members use a hope centred approach.

The school holds parent forums once a month. One such example was a mental health first aid course which used a strengths-based format to engage with parents and students. The format for the evening included a presentation by staff, followed by table talking with stimulus of hypothetical cards for hypothetical situations to provoke conversation. These sessions are designed to acknowledge and honour parent expertise while assisting them to expand their thinking and skills.

Coaching questions are used in letters to students and reflected in the report proforma. The school is encouraging parents to have the conversation with their daughters using GCI style questions. Mr Elliott indicated the desire to shift parent/teacher interviews in the future to a coaching style as well. The ideal would be to train teachers to use coaching questions in parent/teacher interviews and to give parents the tools to have learning conversations in the home.

In discussion about a ‘preferred future’ we spoke about the prospect of a parent forum to introduce coaching philosophy and techniques to parents – how to talk to your kids, what a framework for that would look like along the lines of ‘coaching for learning’ and how to attract parents along to such an event.

### **Follow-Up**

Mr Elliott included a comprehensive set of questions based on the GROWTH model in a letter sent home to parents with the Term 3 2019 reports.



### CASE STUDY THREE – BARKER COLLEGE, SYDNEY NSW

INTERVIEWED:	Mr Len Nixon, Teacher Coach
GROWTH COACHING AT SCHOOL SINCE:	
STAFF TRAINED:	
MAJOR DEPLOYMENT OF METHOD:	

In my interview with Len Nixon the following themes emerged:

- A coaching culture at their school is embedded on a scale of 1 to 10 around 5.5 to 6
- Introducing coaching skills to parents in evening forums has been very effective
- That schools are communities which are strengthened at all levels by having quality conversations

The school ran a parent night on how to have difficult conversations with your son or daughter with a focus on the elements of a conversation using their model of GCI. There was an emphasis on skills for parents to help their children with anxiety during trials to HSC period. The seminar was attended by 120 parents and included role-play scenarios which were very positive because of the style of questioning and language used. Some parents have unrealistic expectations about their child and this process assists them to be more realistic while it is understood it is still not for every parent.

Mr Nixon spoke about how embedded the coaching culture is giving it a 5.5 to 6 on a scale of 1 to 10. He stressed the importance of focussing on the 'winnables' on the staff (usually the younger ones) to embed a coaching culture. This plays a huge role in how it brings into conversation the notions of fairness and equality and learning to expound strengths. This then impacts relationship with more cynical teachers tending to capture the shoulder group.

Mr Nixon spoke about the video series by Dr Jim Knight featured on the Instructional Coaching website and the importance of having a set of habits that includes empathy, listening, being in the moment, honesty and trust as featured in the videos and when these are in place it builds trust in all relationships, with staff and with parents.

<https://www.instructionalcoaching.com/videos/>

He also observed it would be useful for the P&C to facilitate a coaching style of goal setting meeting drawing on the culture of the school to impact interactions. Could be useful for goal setting, strategic planning, also to get better parenting, and better relationships with their kids.

Mr Nixon indicated there is still a need to do more of it and referred to the Canary theory Thomas Kuhn of a complete paradigm shift, a conceptual change.

His final comments focussed on the need for people to be prepared to invest the time in having the relationship, by *just checking in, on a scale where are we, how are you doing?* He said that Schools are communities and are strengthened through their conversations.