

Engaging by distance

At over 68,400 square kilometres in area, Tasmania and its islands are a large—*not small*—archipelago. Most settlements are rural, and some are remote. Many families live in such settlements or in isolated hamlets or on farms. Plans to engage with them about students' learning need to creatively account for distance.

E-mail, chat, and teleconferencingⁱ

The information schools share with families has usually been one-way and taken the form of newsletters, flyers, letters, and—more recently—automated and personal phone and text messages and Web pages.

If families have high-speed Internet access at home, staff can use two-way communication with e-mail, instant messaging, and teleconferencing, some of which also have translation capability. Younger parents—'digital natives'—feel especially comfortable with these modes of communication, having grown up with them. Teachers like being able to engage with parents in real time and in context, including in classroom situations. Chat rooms enable several parents to chat together, and boost 'attendance' at parents and friends or school association meetings.

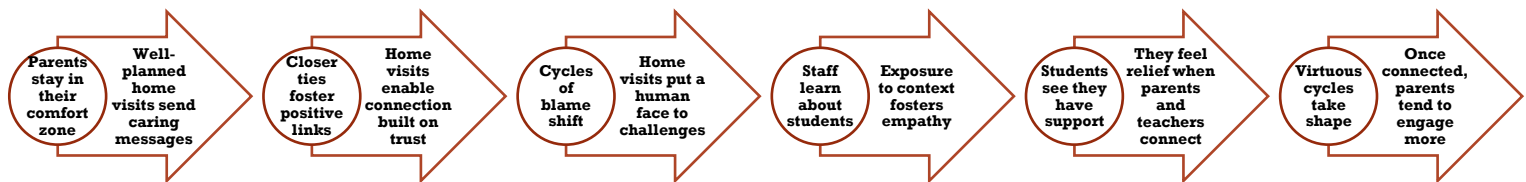
One Harvard Family Research Project study found that Internet-based family school communication was correlated with higher student academic achievement and higher educational expectations, even when controlling for prior achievement and other forms of family-school communication.

Such engagement needs answers to particular questions ...

- Does the school know what technology is available to all students in their homes, remembering that some children live between different parental homes?
- Do we know how reliable connectivity is in their residential areas?
- How computer literate are parents?
- Has the school considered having school association meetings and teacher-parent conferences using Skype, Zoom, or other web-based tools?
- How else could technology be used to bridge distances, including subtle ones?



Why are home visit so beneficial?ⁱⁱ



From school to community ... building social capital

Once virtuous cycles are in place, participation and engagement, including at a distance, can build social capital.ⁱⁱⁱ Project Appleseed, the United States' public campaign for vibrant public schools, points out the following in this regard:

A 10% increase in parental participation (a form of social capital) would increase academic achievement far more than a 10% increase in school spending. This is not an argument against school budget increases, but an argument for paying attention to social capital.

Other things to account for

Parents and students value peer support. Help kick-start an on-line Homework Club offered regularly to support them after hours. [Consider the school's homework policy, and map it against evidence of effect.]

Publish at the year's start your school calendar of events, publish it again on a regular basis so messages get through. Take account of farming seasons or other aspects of the regional context.

Plan home visits especially for those families whose students who travel by bus to school, and train staff in advance of those visit.

Ensure all communications are clear.

Timetable meetings and assemblies as breakfast or days' end sessions, and provide child care for parents with children not yet in school. Consider language and access issues.

ⁱ Closely adapted from Rothschild, J. & Lazarus, W. (2010). *Empowering Parents through Technology to Improve the Odds for Children*. Digital Opportunity for Youth Issue Brief Number 7: October. Santa Monica and Washington D.C.: The Children's Partnership. <https://goo.gl/HXRuvQ>.

ⁱⁱ Closely adapted from Project Appleseed (2017). *The Positive Effects Of Teacher Home Visits*. St Louis, MO: Project Appleseed - the national campaign for public school improvement. <https://goo.gl/nRKJjP>

ⁱⁱⁱ Sander, T.H. & Putnam, R.D., (1999). Rebuilding the stock of social capital. *School Administrator* 56(8), pp.28–30,32–33.