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Families and Schools Together (FAST) at Gillen Primary School

The sustained impact of a
family-strengthening process

John Guenther



An Australian Government Initiative



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Executive summary

Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a family-strengthening program that helps build positive relationships between parents, schools and the broader community. At its core is an evidence-based eight-week program designed to facilitate social support, greater parental self-efficacy, better child behaviour and improved educational outcomes. In the Northern Territory, the program has been run since 2005 in a variety of locations from remote communities to more urban contexts. The Gillen School, in Alice Springs, has used the FAST program since 2011 as a vehicle for engaging families with the school.

The Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's (CRC-REP) Remote Education Systems project is investigating processes that work to support better outcomes for students in and from remote communities. While Gillen School is technically not a 'very remote' school, it shares many features of more remote schools – it has a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (71 per cent), many students come from low socio-economic backgrounds, and student academic performance is well below the national average. Like many other remote schools it has, in the past, struggled to engage families.

Rationale

The lessons to be learned from the experiences of Gillen School may have implications for other schools, and certainly have implications for FAST and potentially for other family-strengthening programs. The research conducted by the CRC-REP for FAST at Gillen occurred during the calendar year of 2013. The focus of this research was on the medium-term impacts of the program, at least 12 months after participants had been involved. Previous evaluations of the program, both at Gillen and elsewhere in the Northern Territory, indicate that the program has a range of benefits for parents, children and the school. Questions remained, however, about the sustained nature of these outcomes.

Methods

The research used a mainly qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with 11 parents, six team members and six staff (these last had had no direct involvement with the program). Interviews were designed to elicit responses about the sustained outcomes of the program. Previous evaluations of FAST had drawn on a Theory of Change model used to test assumptions about the program. However, previous evaluations had only been able to test short-term change assumptions. This research was able to test mid-term change assumptions. It also gave respondents freedom to report any sustained benefit (or problems) arising from the program. Data collected were analysed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Category themes in the data were summarised and quantified to give a sense of the relative weight attributable to each stakeholder group.

The research was based on the following questions:

1. How do parents use the skills and knowledge gained in the FAST program in the longer term: a) in terms of family functioning/parenting; b) in terms of relationships with the school?
2. What are the key elements of the FAST program that lead to longer term parent–school engagement?
3. How does parent-school engagement translate into longer term educational/learning outcomes for young people at school?
4. What is the cumulative impact of running a FAST program, over a number of cycles, for a school?

Findings

The data firstly pointed most strongly to sustained impact in terms of engagement and partnership between parents, school and the community. At Gillen, FAST has created an environment where participants now feel more comfortable with teachers and more readily connect with each other and the school community. Secondly, the improved relationship between parents and the school has been sustained. The relationship is reflected in improved participation in school activities. Thirdly, respondents observed how families were empowered through their participation in FAST. They observed how parents were more likely to take control of their role as parents. Fourthly, the program was seen to provide sustained support for families. Beyond the eight weeks, parents continue to identify ways they can access additional support from each other and the community. Fifthly, participants were observed to have much stronger and broader social networks than they had previous to their involvement in FAST. The qualitative results relating to attendance and behaviour were mixed. Some respondents noted positive changes and others either saw no connection between FAST and student behaviour and attendance, or were able to point to changes that were negative.

Response to research questions

The message from the findings is that families use the skills and knowledge gained from FAST in ways that contribute to the strength of their family. In terms of families' relationship with their school, there is a strong message that FAST contributes to a growing sense of community within the school. A recurring theme emerging from the data is the significance of improved social networks and support fostered during the eight-week program, notably through the sharing of a meal and the parent time, where they could talk about issues and concerns with other parents. The link between parent-school engagement and learning outcomes is not direct, and the data presented in this report do not suggest that FAST at Gillen has led to improved academic performance. However, based on the literature it may be reasonable to assume that better engagement leads to a better understanding of family needs, which in turn leads to more responsive teaching, better targeted resources, and subsequently better learning outcomes. Over the longer term, FAST has affirmed a culture of school-family-community engagement that permeates the school environment. The school's reputation in the community is enhanced. FAST parents report a sense of belonging and allegiance to the school that is reflected in their willingness to support the school as *their* school, not as *the* school.

Further exploration

Many of the outcomes can be grouped under a heading of increased social capital. That is, FAST has helped the promotion of stronger networks, norms and trust between the school, families and the community. The value of this built social capital will likely lead to improved health, wellbeing, social inclusion and educational and socio-economic outcomes. How these transitions can be successfully mediated and measured needs to be considered in separate research.

In terms of application to very remote contexts, it is likely that the dynamics of FAST produce similar effects in communities. That is, stronger families that are better connected to their schools are likely to lead to stronger communities. Part of that benefit should also translate into improved school governance, a reinforcement of the value of schooling, and stronger leadership in the community.

1. Introduction

An important issue identified in the literature about remote education in Australia relates to parent–school partnerships and engagement. There is evidence to suggest that strengthening relationships between schools, communities and families will result in better outcomes for schools and students (Ackley & Cullen 2010, Daniel 2011). There is also evidence in the literature to suggest that strengthening families can lead to a range of benefits (including educational benefits) for children and, ultimately, for communities (Knox et al. 2011b, Kumpfer et al. 2010, O’Dougherty Wright et al. 2013). This small research project uses one family-strengthening program in one Alice Springs school to test some of these assumptions and to build knowledge about the longer term nature and impact of parent–school engagement activities for families and the school involved. The focus of the research is the FAST (Families and Schools Together) program run at the Gillen School in Alice Springs.

This research informs the research agenda for the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) and its Remote Education Systems project. It involves three partners in the CRC-REP: Flinders University (which provides the principal researcher), the Gillen School (for the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training) and Education Transformations (which auspices the work of FAST Northern Territory in Alice Springs through funding from the Alice Springs Transformation Plan).

2. Literature review

The literature reviewed here is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it provides a brief overview, firstly of the context of the program at Gillen School and then of the literature about family-strengthening programs generally. The literature then considers the documented evidence for FAST both from within and outside Australia.

2.1 The context of FAST in Alice Springs and Gillen

Table 1 summarises a range of characteristics for Gillen and Australia based on data from the Census, the Australian Early Development Index and the 2012 myschool website. The Gillen school has an enrolment of 257, of which 71 per cent are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (ACARA 2013). The school population is therefore more reflective of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in the Gillen suburb, which as the table below shows, is markedly different from the non–Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The statistics below show that Gillen students are less likely than their non–Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers to go on to complete Year 12, to find a job, and, according to National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data for the school, less likely to achieve at national standards of literacy and numeracy performance. Gillen students are – drawing on the language of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) – considerably ‘more vulnerable’ than average primary school students in Australia.

Table 1: Statistical snapshot of Gillen, compared with Australia

Indicator	Gillen, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Gillen, non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Australia, non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Persons aged 0–4 ¹	101	257		
Persons aged 5–9 ¹	72	237		
Total persons ¹	716	3356		
Per cent aged 0–9 ¹	24.2%	14.7%	24.1%	12.9%
Unemployment rate ¹	6.3%	2.2%	17.1%	5.4%
Per cent completed year 12 ¹	13.4%	42.4%	25.0%	52.1%
	Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander		Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	
AEDI: Developmentally vulnerable in 2 or more domains ²	17.9%		10.8%	
Per cent of families in bottom ICSEA quartile ³	40%		25%	
Year 3 reading score, NAPLAN ³	280		420	

Notes and sources: 1 ABS (2012), 2 Centre for Community Child Health and The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne (2013), 3 ICSEA = Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage; Gillen School only (ACARA 2013)

2.2 Family-strengthening programs

There are many family-strengthening programs that operate in Australia. These include international programs such as the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) and the Yachad Accelerated Learning Project (YALP), which both originated in Israel; and Parents as Teachers (PAT), which originated in the United States. Others, which have origins in Australia, include Parents and Learning (PaL) in Napranum, Mapoon and Hopevale (Qld) Newcastle (NSW), Echuca (Vic.) and Roebourne (WA); Play and Learn Groups in Arnhem Land (NT); Families as First Teachers (FAFT) in Kuranda (Qld and NT); Reading Discovery (Vic.), Let's Start Exploring Together Preschool Program (NT); Triple P Positive Parenting Program (based in Qld), and Parents as First Teachers (PAFT) in Napranum (Qld). All these programs have a place in strengthening families. There is considerable evidence in the literature of the value of such programs for building family functioning and resilience (O'Dougherty Wright et al. 2013) and parenting capacity and for reducing substance misuse (Kumpfer et al. 2010) and improving children's behaviours (Knox et al. 2011b).

In terms of resilience and prevention of future anti-social behaviours, the role that these programs play in providing positive social relationships and 'turning point' effects is potentially crucial (Hromek & Walsh 2012, Rutter 2012). Programs that work to achieve these results have been found to be built on a number of principles, including cognitive behavioural principles and social learning (Sanders 2012); the importance of design elements; the program's relevance; aspects of implementation, including a focus on well-trained and supported staff and fostering good relationships within and outside the family (Walsh 2013); as well as a commitment to assessment and quality assurance processes (Small et al. 2009).

2.3 Evidence for FAST

FAST was developed in the United States and has been running in Australia for a number of years. It has been adapted slightly in the Northern Territory for remote Aboriginal communities. The underpinning

assumption of the idea of FAST is that partnerships between families (as the first teachers of their children) and schools (which provide education for children to adulthood) are fundamentally beneficial for students by ‘improving children’s academic performance, social skills, pro-schooling behaviours and emotional development across a range of school settings and contexts’ (Daniel 2011, p. 169). Reported outcomes, based on program evaluations, include:

... preventing the target child from experiencing school failure, and reducing stress that parents and children experience from daily life ... enhanced family relationships, parent-school involvement, strengths of child as reported by parents, decreased peer problems, and parental self-efficacy. (Ackley & Cullen 2010, p. 185)

Other reported outcomes of FAST include improved social capital (Gamoran et al. 2011), reduced substance use, including smoking (Crozier et al. 2010), and improved ‘social problem-solving skills and perceptions of collective efficacy’ among immigrant families (Knox et al. 2011a, p. 74). Most of the studies are based on single or multi-site evaluations using a validated psychometric tool that assesses pre- and post- intervention perceptions. The findings are predominantly quantitative in nature and generally do not consider the long-term impact of the program.

The efficacy of the approaches used by FAST is supported by a body of literature that includes evaluation and research conducted by FAST internationally (Casper & Lopez 2006) and within Australia (Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia 2009, Coote 2000, Datatab & Burgess 2003, Seiffert 2005, 2006) and by other research conducted more generically relating to application of FAST operational principles and practices. These principles and practices translate into elements of the program model (Wisconsin Center for Education Research 2007) as a shared meal, communication games played at a family table, time for couples, a self-help parent group, one-to-one quality play, and a fixed lucky door prize in which each family wins once.

The basis of these activities is drawn from an extensive array of research sources drawn from work carried out up to the early 1990s. The literature cited by FAST (McDonald 2000) describes the importance of parent-child interaction (e.g. Dunst et al. 1988, Gettinger et al. 1992, Webster-Stratton 2002), child-initiated play (e.g. Barkeley 1987), and empowering parents to be involved in their children’s learning (e.g. Dunst et al. 1988, Rous et al. 2003). The importance of parental involvement in education is acknowledged in the international literature as an important factor contributing to student achievement in terms of academic performance, attendance and behaviour (Hattie 2009, Hornby 2011, OECD 2012).

2.4 Schools as sites for social capital development

Social capital is variously defined in the literature. It is characterised by social networks, trust and norms. The concept has its origins with social theorists Bourdieu (1983), Coleman (1990) and Putnam (1993). According to Bourdieu, who differentiated social capital from other forms of capital, membership of a group gives individuals some form of credit that can be used for personal gain, depending on the strength of the connections. Coleman and Putnam, going beyond Bourdieu, recognised the roles that networks, trust and strong social norms had for social benefit. Woolcock (1998) differentiated the quality of networks and relationships in terms of bonding, bridging and linking ‘ties’. He suggested that the socio-economic benefit derived from social capital was at least in part dependent on the nature of these ties in a community. Côté suggests that a close knit community may become exclusive on this basis:

Although strong bonding ties give particular communities or groups a sense of identity and common purpose, without bridging ties that transcend various social divides (e.g.,

religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status), bonding ties can become a basis for the pursuit of narrow interests, and can actively exclude outsiders. (Côté 2001, p. 31)

The wider benefits of social capital have been documented in various research and evaluation reports for some time. They include economic benefits (Knack & Keefer 1997), health and well-being (Côté 2001, Productivity Commission 2003), and, among other things, reduced social exclusion and marginalisation (Al-Yaman & Higgins 2011). More importantly for this study, the correlation between social capital and educational outcomes has been documented (Huang et al. 2009). Increased social capital has been found to be associated with improved academic performance (Goddard 2003) and increased participation in higher education (Sandefur et al. 2006). In all likelihood, the relationship between learning and social capital is a two-way relationship, in which the building of one supports the other.

Schools are social institutions. They are not merely instruments for delivery of knowledge and skills. They are equally about values, identity formation and creating a sense of belonging (de Leo 2012, Ministerial Council on Education 2008). Schools that promote social capital and civic participation; foster tolerance, diversity and social inclusion; and that support the development of strong bonding, bridging and linking ties are playing a part in what could be described as a good or advantageous education (Biesta 2009, Guenther & Bat 2013, Guenther et al. 2013a). Beyond the educational benefits accruing from schooling, the promotion of social capital has benefits as ends in themselves. Schools with higher levels of social capital should be more trusting, safer, tolerant, friendly places. This does not just happen: it depends on leadership and intent on the part of the school (Robinson 2012, Robinson et al. 2008).

The FAST program at the Gillen School is part of a social institution in which the nature and levels of social norms, networks and trust are reflected in the culture of the school. The promotion of a particular culture, which creates a supportive, socially cohesive learning environment, is to some extent intentionally engineered. FAST plays a role in this engineering process.

3. Methodology

The research took a qualitative methodological approach using semi-structured interviews to gather information from FAST stakeholders: parents, FAST team members, and school staff associated with the FAST program. Information from the three stakeholder groups was triangulated to determine points of congruence and divergence. Ultimately the research was built on foundations of ‘grounded theory’, where the data is produced and analysed inductively, comparatively and iteratively through processes of ‘abductive reasoning’ (Charmaz 2011). This approach allows for generalisations to be made on the basis of qualitative data (see for example Falk & Guenther 2007). It should be noted that this approach often yields a set of findings that does not always relate directly to the research questions. The survey instruments (see Appendix 1: Survey instruments, p. 19) were created with the research questions in mind, but as often happens with semi-structured interviews in narrative inquiry approaches, the responses did not always align with the questions; the narrative is what is most important (Chase 2011).

3.1 Aim and purpose

This research aimed to determine if the changes reported by parents on completion of an initial eight-week process were sustained, and how (or if) the skills they learned in the program were used after at least one year. The purpose of the research was to provide a deeper understanding of how programs designed to build relationships between schools and parents, and strengthen families, can be better designed. The

research also measured the longer term efficacy of the program in terms of its stated aims. In the context of research into education in remote Australia it informs an understanding of the significance of school–parent relationships as a component of school–community partnership development. Further, because the FAST program has been conducted at Gillen School over two years, it is anticipated that there is a cumulative effect coming from the program at the school. This research tested whether this had occurred and, if so, in what way.

3.2 Research questions

The research was based on the following questions:

1. How do parents use the skills and knowledge gained in the FAST program in the longer term: a) in terms of family functioning/parenting; b) in terms of relationships with the school?
2. What are the key elements of the FAST program that lead to longer term parent–school engagement?
3. How does parent–school engagement translate into longer term educational/learning outcomes for young people at school?
4. What is the cumulative impact of running a FAST program, over a number of cycles, for a school?

The clear intent of these questions was to consider what the sustained impact is of FAST. The interview questions (see Appendix 1) were designed to capture this intent too. However, participants sometimes find it difficult to separate out the immediate impacts from the sustained impacts. With that in mind, questions were asked a year after program participation to focus participants' minds on the lasting impacts.

3.3 Theory of change

FAST works on the premise that the program affects participants and schools. The assumptions behind the changes are to some extent articulated in the evidence for FAST, discussed above (see p. 2). While the use of Program Logic and the embedded Theory of change assumptions (Pawson 2003) to assess FAST may appear to constrain the outcomes to those that are anticipated in the model (see Figure 1), it should be seen more as a tool to help frame monitoring and evaluation in terms of the Program's logical progression from inputs to results (Frechtling 2007, WK Kellogg Foundation 2004). It 'portrays a reasonable, defensible, and sequential order of inputs through activities to outputs, outcomes and impacts' (Patton 2002, p. 163). The model itself represents anticipated changes based on the experience of FAST team members in the Northern Territory. The anticipated outcomes should, however, be considered in the light of limitations discussed later (see p. 7). Normally in an evaluation of FAST the focus is on the low level outcomes described in the Program Logic model (see Figure 1), but in this case the research is looking to a greater extent at the mid-level outcome, that is, those outcomes that are not immediately attributable to the eight-week program but which can reasonably be expected to follow on a year beyond the program.

Figure 1: Program Logic model for FAST

The objective of FAST is to strengthen families, empowering them so that their children are more likely to succeed at home, school and in the community.



Source: Guenther (2011)

3.4 Research activities

The following activities have been conducted in relation to the FAST research at Gillen School. Ethics clearance was achieved at the end of February 2013. First-round interviews were conducted during March and April. A final focus group with three families was held in November.

A total of 11 families, six team members and six staff at the school (these last were not involved with FAST) were interviewed or participated in a focus group. The 11 family members represent about 20 per cent of the total pool of family members who had completed FAST more than 12 months ago.

3.5 Data sources and analysis

Interviews and focus group recordings were transcribed. The resulting text documents were imported into an NVivo (qualitative analysis software) project for analysis. Each transcript was examined for themes and 'coded' accordingly. This process is consistent with standard practice for qualitative analysis (Bernard & Ryan 2010). The data were categorised according to whether they came from a team member, a family participant or a staff member from the school. The number of coding references for each group and theme were tabulated, typical of standard approaches in quantitative narrative analysis (Franzosi 2010). In addition to the data collected through interviews, program reports were received and reviewed.

3.6 Limitations

The research had a number of limitations. First, in terms of families as participants, the self-selecting nature of participation in the research may result in some bias in favour of the program. Second, the research is not focused on those families who did not complete the eight-week FAST program. Those families' responses may be quite different. Third, the perceptions of FAST participants and team members about the attributable and sustained impact of the program may be overly favourable because of their belief in the program. Their responses may not take into account other external influences that contribute to impact. Fourthly, the impact of school factors should not be underestimated when considering the findings. The success (or otherwise) of the program has probably as much to do with the strength of the school, its leadership and the quality of staff generally. Finally, care should be taken not to generalise from the data. The findings apply directly to the Gillen School program. However, as a basis for further research they may provide the beginnings of a larger evidence base about the sustained impact of the program.

4. Findings

4.1 Summary of key themes

Table 2 below summarises the themes emerging from the data as they apply to each stakeholder group. The responses reflect the narratives of the research participants and are deliberately not ordered as responses to the research questions. The synthesis, in terms of responding to research questions, will come later in the Discussion section (p. 13). The most frequent observations for all groups were about engagement and parents' relationship with the school.

Table 2: Themes and coding references by stakeholder group

Theme	Observations about	Team (n=6)	Families (n=11)	Staff (n=6)	Total references
Engagement and partnership	School–parent–child interactions, working together, joining in, listening, sharing, bonding, being involved, school community, belonging; school–community, school–NGO and school–family partnerships	61*	35	54	150
Relationships with school	School support, rapport with teacher, parents responding to student/teacher needs, community relationship with school, more comfortable	21	18	20	59
Empowerment	Parenting capacity, feeling strengthened, parents as allies for teachers, greater control	19	6	2	27
Social networks	Friendships, parents connecting with other parents, teachers connect with families out of school, kids mixing with others	16	9	12	37
Support for struggling families	Bullying, children with problems, families facing challenges, bouncing ideas off each other	15	19	8	42
Identity and confidence	Feeling free to ask, more comfortable with school, parent and child confidence in roles	10	9	6	25
Attendance, performance and behaviour	Attitudes, participation and performance in class and at home, learning	9	2	18	29
Communication	Respect and listening, school–parent communication, parent–child communication	8	8	5	21
Family relationship	Improved relationships within the family, spending time together, respect	3	12	3	18
Children promoting FAST	Children enthusiastic and advocating for FAST	2	4	2	8
Total references		164	122	130	416

* Shaded cells represent the top three responses by each group

The numbers in the table represent the number of times the themes were raised. It should be noted that there is a considerable degree of overlap between themes. In the one sentence, for example, a respondent may talk about engagement, social networks and confidence. What follows is a descriptive explanation of the key points emerging from the table above. A selection of illustrative quotes is provided to give specific examples of how respondents represented the ideas.

4.2 Engagement and partnership

More than one-third of all references fell under the theme of **engagement and partnership**. Comments from respondents were almost all about the significance and outcomes of the FAST program in terms of the quality of interactions between the school and parents and between parents and children and between children and their peers. Respondents talked about ‘joining in’, ‘sharing together’, bonding between parents and children and children and their peers, and about being involved in the school community. They described these things as both process and product of the program. During the interviews, participants often spoke about what they had experienced during the program, but it was evident that the changes in regard to this were sustained. One parent reflected on the learning that happened as a result of participating in engaging activities, and how the child was able to see the parent as their personal teacher:

Their [the children’s] faces lit up when I was doing a one-on-one activity with them and to have that, ‘you’re mine’ attitude – and I’ve always said to them if you want something

come and ask but before they would say that they would want something but now they have been asking a lot more because they have learned quite a bit as far as I can see.

Another parent attributed those engaging activities to a sustained improvement in the family relationship and dynamics:

I think because of FAST... I think we are getting more and more close and with the help of FAST we are still [close].

These and other comments point to the catalytic nature of FAST activities leading to a sustained change in the way that some parents and children related with each other. One team member, reflecting on the longevity of the program at Gillen commented about the significance of bringing ‘community back together’:

I think it's just trying to get community back together, families coming together and sharing with each other. Having a place where they can sit together and talk. Especially the parents. To see that they are not the only ones, and how we can work as a community helping our kids.

This respondent went on to affirm that the greatest benefit of the program came from people sharing with each, sitting down together and discussing important issues with each other. A number of staff and team members talked about the quality of interactions between parents and teachers after they had participated in FAST. For example, one staff member noted how other parents:

... drop their kids off at the door and they won't [come in] ... And I find now the ones that have done the FAST program will always make a point of poking their head around the door and saying g'day.

The selection of quotes above suggest that FAST has built a sense of community, has helped facilitate conversations between FAST parents and between teachers and parents. It has broken down some of the barriers that would otherwise make parents feel intimidated about coming into school and discussing educational issues with teachers.

4.3 Relationships with the school

Linked closely to the above, the theme of **relationships with the school** also stood out strongly. Respondents talked about the improved rapport children and parents had with classroom teachers. There were examples given of parents who were previously apprehensive about coming into the school who now were actively involved with the school in their child's learning. The strengthening of relationships was also discussed in terms of parents responding more constructively with teachers about educational issues. Parents saw teachers as being more approachable and not just teachers, but people who they could have conversations with.

The improvement in relationship between parents and the school was evident in the way some respondents spoke about how things had changed. For example in one exchange, parents (P1 and P2) commented that FAST was:

P1: ... getting us involved with the kids at school instead of just sending them off to school and saying, what issues we might find at home with homework and stuff like that – how the families and school interact.

I: So did you have some interaction with the school before?

P1: Not like that.

P2: I would support them when it was sports days and stuff like that ... but in their classroom and staff, no.

Other parents talked about being more comfortable coming into the school and talking with teachers. One staff member (not on the FAST team) commented on the consequences of this.

You've got a more direct channel, you've got the parents coming and if they are more likely to come into school for fun days and things like that they are more likely to be coming to parent-teacher when you can seriously sit down and talk ... about the child's performance. And if there are problems they're more likely to be responsive.

The same teacher suggested that the better teacher-parent relationship was like having an ally at home.

Yeah, an ally at home, the child knows when you say you are going to ring mum or dad or whatever it can be a powerful thing in a lot of different ways.

Another teacher, who was a team member, commented on the change that FAST had helped create in terms of parent involvement in the school:

To me, forming relationships with the kids in my class, and around the school, FAST has been really influential. I had a parent afternoon last year where traditionally at Gillen we would get two or three parents along and this year I got 18. There were families everywhere, a lot of those, probably half of those I had contact with through FAST. These are people that would not normally come to the school, so I formed relationships that were stronger than would normally be for kids that haven't been to FAST.

4.4 Empowerment

Team members saw **empowerment** as the next most important issue arising from FAST. They described how parents appeared to be more in control as parents of their children. They saw this in terms of increased responsibility and leadership within the family. One team member described it as follows:

I guess that word empowerment comes to mind because it makes parents mindful of their responsibilities as parents. That it is not just about coasting along and going along, but they need to think about the parenting process and how it affects the family unit.

Another team member talked about empowerment in the context of sustained family strength:

It's a program that empowers them to become stronger and there are parents and I still see that. I work with some of their children and it's really lovely seeing them come to school and being comfortable coming into school and not feel ashamed. So it's broken down that stigma in a way.

Two parents reflected on this idea of empowerment in terms of control. One described FAST as a kind of 'bargaining chip' that could be used to ensure children were better behaved. However, another was more specific about the way that the program had a lasting effect on her ability to take control of her role as a parent:

For me personally, when I was single mum trying to bring up two kids out of control, it was perfect and I do know a few other single mums who have gone through it and it's

really helped them gain confidence and control and continue on happily ever after. I can't fault it at all really.

4.5 Support for struggling families

Parents, in particular, raised the significance of how **struggling families were supported**. They discussed the issues of bullying and children and families who were facing challenges (e.g. separation and mental illness) and how the program had supported them through these difficulties. Parents talked about the sustained impact of the program in relation to these concerns. There was a sense in which the mutual sharing that occurred, particularly in the 'parent time', became a powerful vehicle for mutual support:

Parents started sharing our experiences, and knowing we all have the same issues and dealing with different things, you realise that you're not alone struggling and people aren't going to say that you are silly if they hear about your daughter ...

One long-time team member described what she saw emerging from parent time:

The first week was a bit nerve-racking, finding out what it's all about, but once the parents realised that they had the parent time ... they hung out for that. I had parents who would come just for that throughout the FAST program, but the thing is the gelling of all the parents, and I think, too, that empathy and understanding and just knowing that sometimes we are going through challenges and that there are others who might be going through their set of challenges that are even worse than what ours could be. But it was that support, supporting everyone.

Another team member saw the significance of the support coming from the school itself:

I think there is support from the school itself and the school body knowing that FAST is part of the overall school wellbeing program ... There is knowledge of FAST within the school ... and I think that's strengthened each time the program is run. There is an understanding in that school that FAST assists those families that are part of FAST and that those families can be easily connected within the school by the teachers.

The data suggest that a diversity of parents in the group provides an environment in which parents feel comfortable sharing their experiences, learning from each other and ultimately supporting each other. The above comments are about the support received during the program, which was not necessarily sustained to the same extent beyond the eight weeks. However, it would be fair to say that the awareness and knowledge gained was sustained. That is, for those families that continue to struggle, the knowledge about where to go for help, and the awareness that their issues were not unique, remained with participants.

4.6 Attendance and behaviour

For staff, the third most frequently discussed issue was about **attendance and behaviour**. They suggested that for some children the program had made a difference, but for others it had not, or any difference had not been sustained. They tended to be somewhat cautious in their assessments, one way or the other, not necessarily wanting to attribute cause to FAST. Some were concerned that increased confidence had turned into cockiness and that there was, at times, a disruptive element when children left the classroom to help set up for FAST nights. Staff were asked to reflect on specific cases that they could recall. One of the common threads was that the improved relationship between parents and teachers resulted in changes in student behaviour. For example:

I think for the student, he would have seen that his mum and I were speaking, and visually seeing it ... I think it is powerful for the teacher ... because the teacher has that connection with home and can say to the student, 'I'm going to talk to mum about this' ... I suppose for the student, it's maybe stopping and thinking about certain behaviours before they are undertaken.

On the other hand, another staff member commented less positively:

There is one that does stick out, one of the students ... very low attendance, she was on the truancy list and I know that her family did attend but her attendance and the way that she was at school didn't change at all, so there wasn't a vast improvement in her attendance and it still is very low, and I know now that we are still lucky to have her at school.

Another staff member saw a negative impact of the program, where a child's confidence had turned into disrespect:

But it was just ... my goodness, you have been to FAST, and it had all this involvement with parents and families and friends and staff and yet, and now you think it's okay to just jump up and scream out ... whereas before you weren't doing that.

Other staff looked at FAST not so much as a program but as a process that facilitated building more constructive relationships. One staff member was asked if it was 'too long a bow to suggest that having that improved relationship makes a difference to things like behaviour and learning?' Her response suggested not:

I don't think it is. I think it directly relates. Building the rapport and relationship is an invitational aspect of the relationship and that means then that that can be assisted if there are behavioural issues, or, just in learning in general, there is a greater openness. So if it's a class discussion they are more likely to be speaking up in that context and they are more likely to have trust ... for example, they are more likely to come if they trust you ... if there is that relationship, if there is that rapport.

4.7 Social networks

The **socialisation** elements of the FAST program also stood out for some family respondents and was very evident to the team. The process built trust, stronger connections in and out of school and a stronger awareness of the challenges that all parents face in that role. Parents talked about the value of meeting other parents and being able to talk freely with them about parenting and education issues they were facing. For staff, the process was also good for building relationships with parents as well as other contacts with community agencies. For some team members, FAST built relationships that extended beyond school into other social meeting places. For example, one team member commented on how the rapport with children had extended to parents:

And also I see [the FAST children] around town and they'll say, '[Name] from FAST' and they'll recognise you and say 'hi' and the parents will be shy: 'Ah right, hello'; and now the parents are stopping to say 'hi'.

Beyond the relationships formed between parents, some program participants reported how their children formed stronger bonds with other children, sometimes older, who would then look after younger FAST children. For example, one parent related the following story:

My youngest daughter was in transition, Grade 1 when we first started and she was getting bullied ... and we found that the bigger kids within the group would stick up for them in the playground and they had an amazing bond. The older kids would go, 'Don't you hurt my FAST sister'; so they weren't necessarily kids that they would interact with, they were kids from across the demographic at school.

These kinds of relational interactions point to the development of social capital within and outside the school community. We can see here the emergence of what are described as 'bridging ties', which transcend the familial, cultural, ethnic boundaries in which tight social networks typically operate. These ties tend to break down the prejudices and inhibitions that people have when relating to people who are somewhat different from each other.

4.8 Other themes

Observations about improved **confidence and identity** were mostly noted by team members and FAST parents. These observations suggest that FAST parents – particularly those who were previously reluctant to come into school – were more likely after the program to come into the classroom, talk to the teacher and see themselves as important supports for the education of their children. There were also observations about shy children becoming more open and willing to engage in class. These findings suggest that parents' and children's identity as members of the Gillen School community were strengthened.

Communication was raised by a number of respondents from each group. They talked about improvements in communication between parents and teachers, between parents and children, between parents and the school, and between the school and the broader community. These outcomes arose from the activities in the program itself, from the connections built up through engaging external agencies from the community, and through participation of key community members, particularly on the celebration night.

Improved **family relationships** was identified as an important outcome, particularly for parents. Some parents described being more patient with their children, being more encouraging, more approachable, more likely to interact with their children, and more likely to spend time together. Some also indicated that their children were more respectful of them, and more willing to help around the home.

A number of respondents talked about the way **children promoted FAST** to their parents and other students. For some parents, this was the reason they participated in the program. What this meant is that the next time the program was run at the school, the internal network of the school did the promotion for the program and therefore made it easier to attract families as participants.

5. Discussion

The discussion section synthesises the findings, drawing particularly on the interview/focus group data. Following on from this, the discussion will consider, based in part on the findings and in part on the literature, how the program could be improved. Then some consideration of the findings in light of the Theory of change model will be given. Next the discussion will turn to the topic of social capital and the corresponding implications for FAST in school contexts. Finally, the implications of the research for implementation of FAST in more remote contexts will be considered.

5.1 Response to research questions

How do parents use the skills and knowledge gained in the FAST program in the longer term: a) in terms of family functioning/parenting; b) in terms of relationships with the school?

The message from the findings is that families use the skills and knowledge gained from FAST in ways that contribute to the strength of their family. That is, they tend to modify their behaviours in ways that mirror the learned behaviours modelled in the eight-week program. For example, some report spending more time with their children, listening to them and sharing with them more. The quality of communication between parents and children improves. Parents tend to feel more confident in their roles as fathers and mothers and more in control of the family dynamics. Many respondents report that children tend to embrace the modelled behaviours with enthusiasm.

In terms of families' relationship with their school, there is a strong message that FAST contributes to a growing sense of community within the school. That is, there is an apparent increase in commitment to the activities of the school and an increase in the support of families for the school's desire to actively engage parents in the learning of their children. FAST parents tend to feel more comfortable coming into the school (particularly those who were previously isolated); they tend to feel more comfortable talking with the teachers, both in and out of the school; and they are described as acting as allies for teachers of FAST children. Many have a stronger sense of belonging to the school community. In summary, they are using the skills and knowledge gained in FAST in ways that promote stronger school–family partnerships.

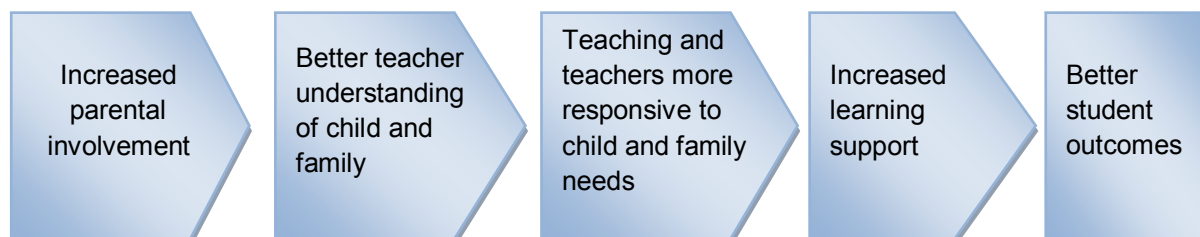
What are the key elements of the FAST program that lead to longer term parent–school engagement?

Each respondent reported different elements of the program that they valued. However, a recurring theme emerging from the data is the significance of improved social networks and support fostered during the eight-week program, notably through the sharing of a meal and the parent time, where they could talk about issues and concerns with other parents. Further, the process of FAST more generally supports parents and carers to form connections, networks and friendships that would not have been possible without an activity of this kind. The data suggest that the connections forged during FAST remain well beyond the life of the program and, in a community like Alice Springs, are supported by 'chance' meetings in supermarkets, at the post office or in other places such as church, playgroups or other community meeting places. In effect, FAST kickstarts networks that become self-sustaining.

How does parent–school engagement translate into longer term educational/learning outcomes for young people at school?

There is mixed evidence in the data to suggest a direct and causal connection between FAST and short- or long-term educational outcomes. Attribution is often a problem for evaluation of programs where there are complex factors at play, so this should not be a surprise. However, if, as the literature suggests (see for example Hromek & Walsh 2012, Rutter 2012), building relationships with trusted adults is a key to addressing issues of trauma and overcoming barriers to learning, it is reasonable to suggest that building a supportive social network of peers and adults is foundationally critical for young children's development and learning. The data do suggest that parental involvement in their children's education has improved and been sustained as a result of FAST. Again, the literature suggests that parents are one of the greatest influencers (if not teachers) in the early years of a child's life, and their involvement in childhood education can have a profound effect on learning, behaviour and attendance (e.g. Hornby 2011, OECD 2012).

The question though is ‘*How* does parent–school engagement translate into longer term educational/learning outcomes for young people at school?’. The data here may suggest a pathway like this:



Of course, the pathway is not necessarily linear and is potentially influenced by a range of other factors. However, the point to make from this is that a link does exist, though it would be reasonable to suggest that the time between the first step and the last is quite a bit longer than allowed for in this research.

What is the cumulative impact of running a FAST program, over a number of cycles, for a school?

The cumulative impact of running FAST repeatedly for a number of years is reported in a number of ways. First, the program affirms a culture of school–family–community engagement that permeates the school environment. Second, the reputation of the school in the community is enhanced. FAST parents report a sense of belonging and allegiance to the school that is reflected in their willingness to support the school as *their* school, not as *the* school. Third, the program is seen as a normal part of the school’s activities, not an add-on. Parents, children and their younger siblings expect the program, they know the program, and they advocate for the program. Further, the networks established with partner agencies, facilitate additional connections to supports that are recognised and accepted by the school community. The ‘shame’ factor of being engaged with an organisation like Holyoake or Targeted Family Support Services (TFSS) is removed, because they become an integral part of the broader school community. This in turn makes it easier to introduce other initiatives, such as restorative practice or anti-bullying programs, because there is an established culture of community engagement. These outcomes all affirm the importance of social networks in the school community and provide a set of connections, particularly for vulnerable families that would not otherwise be possible.

5.2 Program improvement

By and large, respondents were generally satisfied with the FAST program, its structure and its outcomes. Individual preferences do not necessarily demand a change in the way the program is delivered. However, the data do point to a few considerations.

Firstly, there is always a risk that the program is seen to be an additional unnecessary burden on staff. Staff who had been part of the team recognised the value of the program and saw the investment of their time as worthwhile. However, for some staff who were not directly involved, there were some points of tension. The issue of FAST children leaving class to help set up was of concern for some staff who found this to be disruptive. All staff need to be fully briefed about what might be expected of them and their FAST students. It may be worthwhile giving them the option of not letting children leave class. Secondly, promotion of FAST as a program that helps young people succeed at school and supports improved engagement in learning and better behaviours raises expectations among staff. When confidence turns into ‘cockiness’, as one staff member described it, the program’s other strong benefits may be negated in the minds of teachers. These situations need to be handled carefully and sensitively. Thirdly, to reinforce the

social capital gains made through the eight-week program, consideration could be given to having a more intentional and supported ‘FAST works’ program. Given that FAST has now been delivered in a number of Alice Springs schools, it may be worth considering offering inter-school activities to add to the bridging ties built through the program.

5.3 Do the outcomes match the Theory of change model?

Consideration is now given to outcomes in the light of the program’s logic, as shown in Figure 1, page 6. Before attempting to respond to this, it is important to recognise again the limitations of this study (see page 7). In particular, the qualitative nature of this study and the size of the sample mean that some outcomes may not have been found in the data, and, while in this study other outcomes may have been found, the findings should not be generalised across all FAST sites. With those caveats in mind, attention is first given to those mid-level outcomes that the data do support.

Firstly, in terms of volunteering and contributing back to the community, there is evidence in the data to support that this has occurred, particularly in terms of volunteer support for the school. For example, there were instances where parents were taking up positions on school council, becoming parent partners in the FAST program, and generally supporting the teaching and learning activities in classrooms, such as helping with reading.

Secondly, there is evidence of sustained family strengthening (‘stronger, more organised families’). A number of respondents talked about families being more supportive of each other, and, for some blended/separated families, there was some evidence to suggest that relationships between parents had improved. Within families there were several reports of increased time spent doing family activities together, such as playing games, helping out with homework and helping children work through school-related issues. In general, it is fair to say that the sustained impact of FAST has been for some families to become more involved in their children’s lives.

Thirdly, the evidence points to some parents taking stronger leadership roles, either as members of the school council or as parent helpers in the FAST program.

Fourthly, there is evidence to suggest that FAST parents have a greater desire to see their children succeed at school. However, this is largely reflected in terms of their socialisation, being able to deal with conflict or bullying, and getting on better with peers. Similarly, the improved educational outcomes that were reported for children were more about social interaction than about academic performance.

Finally, there is strong support for the suggestion that the school was engaging more easily with parents as a result of FAST. This was reflected in comments about parents feeling more comfortable and confident coming into the school, and being more likely to attend school–family events such as barbecues, parent–teacher days or other special events where parents were invited.

With these considerations in mind, a revised Theory of change model takes the findings of this research into account (see Figure 2 below). This model attempts to show more clearly how activities connect causally with outcomes for three end-user groups: families, schools and communities. Perhaps the most notable difference in the figure below is the inclusion of the ‘community level’. In the development of Figure 1 the program was envisaged more as an intervention delivered by FAST into the school for families. In the revised model, the significance of community involvement in the process is acknowledged. The consequent outcomes are also recognised in terms of improved partnerships between schools and the community. The other notable difference is the inclusion of the longer term impacts, which can more confidently be anticipated because of this research.

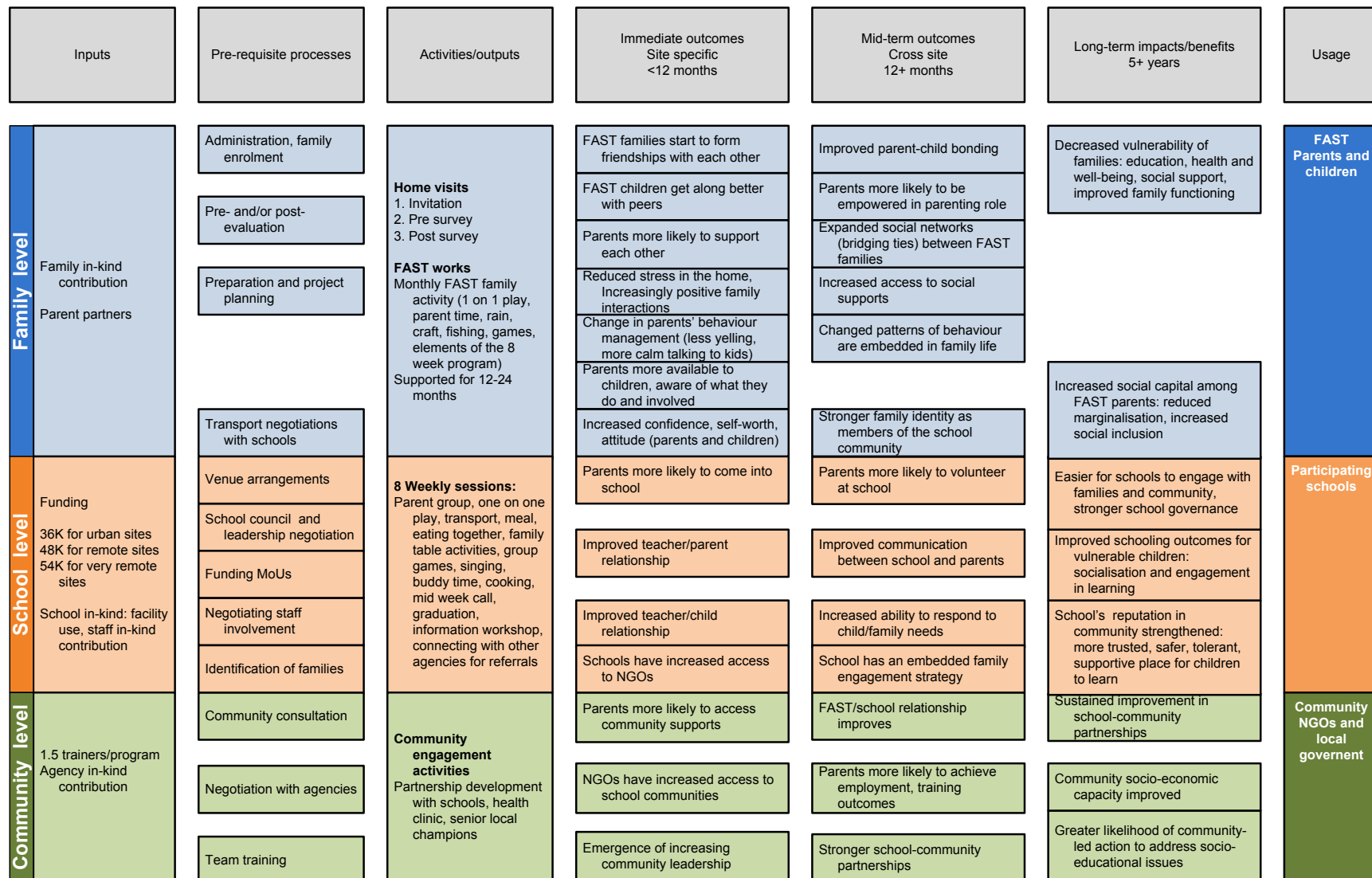


Figure 2: Revised theory of change model

5.4 Points for further exploration

Social capital

The social capital generated through the repeated implementation of a FAST program is arguably significant – at least based on the data at Gillen School. Educationally though, in terms of the school's priorities, what does this mean? It appears that the expansion of networks, trust, shared norms and reciprocity are worthwhile outcomes in themselves. But do these things make schooling better? And can better learning outcomes be expected from a school where levels of social capital increase? This, to some extent, depends on what education is for. From a philosophical perspective the aims of education are broad (see for example Marples 2010, Portelli & Menashy 2010, Pring 2010), but the popular discourse is dominated by a rhetoric of knowledge and skills, which is in turn represented by a focus on test scores and educational service delivery (Guenther et al. 2013b). For students and families that are potentially more vulnerable than their peers in other areas, as Table 1 suggests, FAST potentially provides a distinct educational advantage. The experiences of families in FAST have the potential to help them navigate a future that crosses multiple cultural boundaries and allows them to explore social choices that perhaps may not have been open to them before.

Operation in very remote contexts

FAST has operated in a variety of contexts across the Northern Territory. To a large extent the program is the same in very remote settings. While it is not the intent here to suggest that the findings of this research are generalisable, it is noted that in previous evaluations of FAST in remote settings, the evidence pointed to something other than what was being measured (Guenther 2011). The findings from Gillen provide a framework for a re-examination of FAST outcomes at remote communities. If, as the literature suggests, building social capital is a worthwhile exercise (for intrinsic, educational and other reasons) then FAST, as one vehicle to pursue this goal, has proved its worth. Given the vulnerability of children in remote communities, programs of this type should contribute to educational and social advantage.

One of the greatest advantages that FAST brings to any school is its ability to engage families in the school environment. For many remote schools, the answers to effective community engagement remain elusive. If the improved school–community–family relationships that are evident at Gillen School are replicated in remote settings (and there should be no reason why they cannot be, in most instances) then FAST may act as a useful vehicle for achieving a range of desirable outcomes, including better community involvement in school governance, improved parental involvement in children's learning and improved family functioning (with attendant behaviour and socialisation results).

6. Conclusions

The overwhelming evidence from the data to date is that FAST is leading to sustained outcomes in families in a number of ways. While it is difficult to point to improved academic or educational outcomes (either in terms of behaviour, attendance or achievement), it is apparent from the data that FAST is building a stronger sense of community at Gillen School. This means that parents are more likely to be engaged in the life of the school and, more importantly, in the education of their children. The program supports a school–family–community partnership ethos and is increasingly recognised as an integral part of the school's activities.

Appendix 1: Survey instruments

Interview schedule for parents and carers who participated in FAST at Gillen School

1. Can you tell me briefly about how you came to be involved in the FAST program? When was it? What did you think about it then?

You may like to talk about how it was described to you, how you were invited, what you thought about that first session.

2. Now, looking back, what do you think you learned from your involvement? Can you tell me one thing that stands out about the program you were involved with? What parts of the program (or activities) did you get the most out of? What did you get the least out of?

You may like to comment on what you learned about yourself, your children, how you get on with your children, how your children get on with each other or other children, and how you connected with the Gillen School. You may also like to talk about connections with other FAST families.

3. Thinking about the impact of FAST, of the things that affected you and your family back then, what do you still do now that you learned to do during the FAST program? Are there things your children do differently now, as a result of their involvement in the program?

You could comment on your children's behaviour, how they get on at school, how they help out at home, how well they are engaged in learning. You might also want to comment on how you feel about your own confidence as a parent and what you do differently now.

4. Thinking now about your relationship with Gillen School (or the school your children currently attend), do you think your involvement in FAST made any difference to how you feel about the school and in particular the children's teachers or the school leaders? If so, in what ways?

For example, you could comment on whether you are now more involved in school activities than you were before, or whether you are more likely to see your child's teachers or the principal when you have a question or a concern.

5. (For those who answered positively to question 4) Has a better relationship with the school made a difference in any other way? Has it helped your children in any way? Has it helped you in any way?

You may like to comment on things like your child's attendance, their reports from teachers, your ability to help them learn, or their confidence.

Interview schedule for team members who participated in FAST at Gillen School

1. Can you tell me briefly about how you came to be involved in the FAST program? When was it? What did you think about it then?

You may like to talk about how it was described to you, how you were invited, what you thought about that first session.

2. Thinking about the families you saw in FAST, what do you think they learned from their involvement? Can you tell me one thing that stands out about the program parents and carers were involved with? What parts of the program (or activities) do you think they get the most out of? What did they get the least out of?

You may like to comment on what you observed in terms of what parents and carers learned about themselves, their children, how they got on with their children, how their children get on with each other

or other children, and how they connected with the Gillen School. You may also like to talk about connections with other FAST families.

This next three questions assumes that you have kept in touch in some way or another with FAST families. If you haven't, skip to question 6.

3. Thinking about the impact of FAST, of the things that affected those families back then, what do they still do now that they learned to do during the FAST program? Are there things their children do differently now, as a result of their involvement in the program?

You could comment on their children's behaviour, how they get on at school, how they help out at home, how well they are engaged in learning at school. You might also want to comment on how parents feel about your own confidence as a parent and what you do differently now.

4. Thinking now about their relationship with Gillen School (or the school the children currently attend), do you think their involvement in FAST made any difference to how they feel about the school and in particular the children's teachers or the school leaders? If so, in what ways?

For example, you could comment on whether they are now more involved in school activities than they were before, or whether they are more likely to see their child's teachers or the principal when they have a question or a concern.

5. (For those who answered positively to question 4) Has a better relationship with the school made a difference in any other way? Has it helped their children in any way? Has it helped the parents or carers in any way?

You may like to comment on things like the child's attendance, reports from teachers, their ability to help them learn, or their confidence.

6. FAST has now been run at Gillen School for about two years and a reasonable proportion of families have experienced FAST. What do you think the longer term impact of having FAST run in the school over that period has been? Has there been a cumulative impact that you have noticed?

In this question we are particularly interested to know if an ongoing FAST program makes a sustained difference to the culture of the school itself. For example, you may wish to comment on the school culture now (compared to two years ago) in terms of its inclusiveness, its values, or the way that teachers and staff respond to families.

7. Have you noticed any differences in the way parents and carers in general (not just FAST families) connect with the school? If so, what difference has that made? Have you noticed any difference in the way staff connect with families?

FAST is about 'Families and Schools Together'. The long-term impact of strengthened families and stronger parent-school relationships is worth commenting on here. It is one thing to encourage positive relationships, but what in practical terms does this achieve?

Interview schedule For school staff who have not participated in FAST at Gillen School

1. How did you first hear about FAST? What did you think about it then? What do you think about it now? Would you say you are supportive of the program or not?

You may like to talk about how it was described to you, what you thought about it and why.

Over the last two years, a number of families have been involved in FAST programs at Gillen School. I'd like you to think about some of the families and their children that you know have been involved.

2. Thinking about those families, what do you think they learned from their involvement? Have you noted any difference in their children? If so, what are those differences?

You may like to comment on what you observed in terms of parents and their children, how they got on with their children, how their children get on with each other or other children, and how they connected with the Gillen School.

3. Thinking now about their relationship with Gillen School, do you think there has been any difference in how they feel about the school and in particular the teachers or the school leaders? If so, in what ways?

For example, you could comment on whether they are now more involved in school activities than they were before, or whether they are more likely to see their child's teachers or the principal when they have a question or a concern.

4. (For those who answered positively to question 3) Has a better relationship with the school made a difference in any other way? Has it helped their children in any way? Has it helped the parents or carers in any way?

You may like to comment on things like the child's attendance, behaviour, reports from teachers, parents' ability to help their children learn, or their confidence.

5. FAST has now been run at Gillen School for about two years and a reasonable proportion of families have experienced FAST. What do you think the longer term impact of having FAST run in the school over that period has been? Has there been a cumulative impact that you have noticed?

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6. Have you noticed any differences in the way parents and carers in general (not just FAST families) connect with the school? Have you noticed any difference in the way staff connect with families generally?

FAST is about 'Families and Schools Together'. The long-term impact of strengthened families and stronger parent-school relationships is worth commenting on here. It is one thing to encourage positive relationships, but what in practical terms does this achieve?

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