

SNAPSHOT

OF SCHOOL–COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS
IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS



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INTRODUCTION

Schools across Australia are increasingly connecting and engaging with community groups to create opportunities for their students. From marine parks to art galleries, radio stations to local councils, aged care to football clubs, neighbourhood houses to garden centres, the possibilities for collaboration are endless. Schools are reaching out into the broader community to build exciting and innovative relationships that are designed to have a positive impact on student learning.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) conducted extensive research into effective school–community partnering, which underpins the NAB Schools First Awards. ACER’s research defines school–community partnerships as those that are based on an identified need; aim to improve student outcomes; have a strong and committed leadership team; share decision making; communicate effectively and frequently; implement well-organised programs; establish clear roles and responsibilities; regularly monitor and review the program and the partnership; can point to tangible evidence of improvement; use data to inform decision making; and are sustainable. These are the characteristics of an effective school–community partnership and schools are increasingly able to confidently address each one of these as criteria on the NAB Schools First Awards application form.

This report describes some of the ways that schools and community groups are collaborating using information contained in Impact Award applications submitted by schools in 2010 and 2011. The NAB Schools First national awards program has been operating since 2009. By 2011, over 25 per cent of all schools in Australia had applied for an award. The most obvious sign of school interest in the program is the number of applications received each year for either an Impact or Seed Funding Award. Schools have also participated in a range of other activities run in conjunction with the Awards, such as workshops, forums and the annual national conference.

In 2009, ACER analysed the Impact Award applications submitted by schools in that year and prepared a report: *School–Community Partnerships in Australian Schools*.¹ This analysis showed an exciting and diverse range of school–community partnerships operating in Australia. The current report demonstrates that these relationships are still varied and rich and that students, schools and communities are continuing to benefit in tangible ways from their school–community partnerships.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to share the findings from ACER’s analysis of the 627 Impact Award applications from 2010 and 2011 so that other Australian schools and communities can benefit. The following questions guided ACER’s analysis of the 2010–11 Impact Award applications:

- Who have schools partnered with?
- For what main reasons?

1 Lonsdale, Michele, ‘School–Community Partnerships in Australian Schools’ (2011). http://research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/7

- ▶ What kinds of expertise were schools and partner organisations looking for?
- ▶ What are the main types of partnerships that have been established?
- ▶ What is the understanding of ‘partnership’ that exists?
- ▶ What are the most common types of programs that have been set up?
- ▶ How have partners sought to ensure sustainability?
- ▶ What do the 2010–11 applications show about the characteristics and effectiveness of school–community partnerships in Australia?

FINDINGS

WHO ARE SCHOOLS PARTNERING WITH?

As in the 2009 applications, the 2010–2011 Impact Award applications continued to show a trend among schools to partner with community groups over business groups, with businesses making up around 20 per cent of school–community partnerships.

Community groups included Rotary clubs, volunteer groups, retirement and aged care facilities, Indigenous groups, local radio stations, various landcare and conservation groups, youth services, health centres, neighbourhood houses and community centres. A small number of partnerships have been with charitable organisations, such as The Smith Family, St Vincent de Paul and the Stride Foundation.

Schools in regional areas were more likely to partner with local councils than their metropolitan or remote counterparts. Many school–community partnerships formed with local councils were focused on environmental issues and sustainability, with some of these partnerships being established after an opportunity presented itself in the local area.

Businesses partnering with schools included mainly local or small businesses, such as incorporated community groups, art galleries, hospitals, automotive services, animal centres, farming equipment retailers and suppliers, building industry partners and garden equipment suppliers. There were also some national companies involved in partnerships such as BHP Billiton, Alcoa, Coles, Nestle and Microsoft. Nearly half of the partnerships that schools formed with businesses focused on vocational or industry training, work experience, traineeships or onsite learning experiences for students.

Case Study – partnering with a local council

A high school situated on the north coast of New South Wales partnered with a shire council to enhance the school curriculum by working together on local marine and environmental issues. The partners developed a marine discovery centre, not only for use by the school, but for the community and other schools to access and learn about marine life, the ocean environment and local waterways.

Case Study – partnering with a large law firm

A high school in Sydney's west and a law firm, MinterEllison, formed a partnership to improve learning outcomes at the school and start a reading program for Year 8 students. The partnership expanded and the partners introduced a breakfast program. MinterEllison staff went on to provide mentoring, work experience, scholarships, traineeships, social skills development and an Aspirations Career Preparation Program for the students.

'We felt that the most important element of our partnership would be for all students involved to become valued members of the community. The partnership agreed to start small and address a couple of needs this then expanded into a broader framework for addressing several needs.' High school principal

WHY ARE SCHOOLS PARTNERING?

For many schools, partnerships were formed to share expertise and resources, both human and material. Businesses wanting students to know more about employer expectations and the realities of the workplace provided sites for work placement and work experience. Educational institutions partnered with schools to provide access to post-school pathways or to further students' knowledge in specific areas.

Some schools partnered with community or business groups because they offered specific specialist expertise or they were able to help fill a gap in the curriculum, and others partnered to take advantage of the expertise being offered. Partnerships were established to run breakfast programs or after school, homework or tutoring programs. Some partnerships developed programs for older, at risk students who were often marginalised or who did not fit into mainstream education.

WHAT KINDS OF EXPERTISE WERE SCHOOLS AND PARTNER ORGANISATIONS LOOKING FOR?

VOCATIONAL OFFERINGS OR TRAINING

Opportunities provided through these partnerships included traineeships, apprenticeships and work placements, and many of these were incorporated into vocational certification of students. Staff and students were offered career-related professional development workshops, work experience and skills-specific training. MinterEllison Lawyers, Ertech Holdings, Eden Gardens and Garden Centre and other local and international businesses shared their skills and expertise with schools and offered students mentoring, work experience and traineeships.

EXPERTISE WITH AT RISK AND VULNERABLE STUDENTS

Partner organisations with expertise in working with at risk students or vulnerable students, such as health and welfare services, youth organisations and charities, helped schools develop a range of programs. Some of these were programs for the benefit of children and their families, connecting them to services in the community or to resources.



MENTORING

These partnerships provided positive role models for students and often involved educational mentor programs to help students with their literacy. In many cases at risk adolescents were matched with an adult mentor to provide them with a positive role model or an industry mentor.

SERVICE LEARNING

Partners engaged students in projects centred on volunteering and community service. Students visited aged care residents, helped newly arrived refugee students with their English, raised money for disadvantaged groups, and assisted those in the community in need of transport or social support.

HEALTH AND FITNESS PROMOTION OR IMPROVEMENT

Schools and their partners developed programs around wellbeing, first aid, mental health, bullying, drug and alcohol abuse and training in sporting or recreational activities. Partners included sporting clubs and associations, local councils, recreation centres, gyms, mental health services and community centres. Partner organisations mainly contributed to the partnership by teaching students specific fitness skills and sharing knowledge of nutrition and healthy lifestyle choices.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS

Many partnerships that were established to achieve an environmental outcome developed educational programs including environmental or garden projects, lessons on sustainable practice or wildlife preservation. These schools worked mainly with local councils, landcare or conservation groups and horticultural businesses.

CREATIVE PRODUCTIONS OR EXHIBITIONS

Partners provided opportunities for students to participate in creative endeavours such as circus performance, dance, art, drama and theatre, and musical productions. Other programs involved schools and communities working together on literary and cultural festivals.

SPORTING/COACHING

These partnerships mainly involved large sporting groups that develop programs in schools – for example national football, rugby or soccer organisations. There were also many schools working with local clubs to train older students as leaders and coaches for the younger students.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN REASONS FOR PARTNERING AND THE BENEFITS?

The main reasons given by schools for forming partnerships with business and community groups are related to either improving learning outcomes for students or broadening vocational skills. Over half of the Impact Award applications in 2010–11 report one of these reasons as primary motivation for partnering. Enhancing student health and wellbeing and re-engaging students are other common reasons for schools to form partnerships. A growing number of schools are focusing on increasing students' sense of connectedness with their communities. Schools are developing innovative ways of addressing multiple needs by partnering with an external group.

'A high percentage of students in our school have very low literacy and numeracy skills. Behavioural issues are prevalent and student engagement is problematic. To ensure student success and achievement, creative teaching approaches that promote learning beyond the four walls of a classroom, were researched and implemented.' Principal of a regional primary school referring to their creative way of addressing the school's multiple needs by partnering with a university on an environmental project.

Schools recognise that establishing a partnership can benefit not only students but the community partner, often through the sharing of expertise, knowledge and skills.

'The partnership has increased the feeling of being part of a community, as the community is working together towards a common goal – keeping our kids at school and looking for local employment when they leave.' Impact Award applicant from a small farming town in South Australia

'The partnership between the school and the health service was established with a commitment to work together to provide quality health promotion programs for the school community to meet environmental, health, social and educational needs.' Impact Award applicant from metropolitan Melbourne

IMPROVING LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

Underpinning almost all Impact Award partnerships from 2010 and 2011, and consistent with the information provided in the 2009 applications, was a desire to improve student learning. Communities are recognised as potential sources of expertise ranging from specific subject content, a particular skill set and an alternative source of learning. Many schools wanting to enrich their curriculum have partnered with groups that have specific interests such as the

environment, local history, marine studies or wildlife. Schools have partnered with art galleries, theatre companies, radio stations and local councils to advance creative arts in the school, for example, the Queensland Theatre Company partnered with a local high school and students at high schools in regional New South Wales worked with professional artists from local art galleries. Other schools have partnered with technical and industrial groups to expand their students' understanding of technology, science and maths. With access to the knowledge held by experts in the community, schools have been able to offer a wider range of curriculum choices.

Some schools are tapping into the knowledge of experts in universities to upskill teachers, train students and share resources. Other partnerships have focused on improving learning about the environment and schools have collaborated with a diverse range of environmental groups to achieve this goal, including the Lake Cowal Foundation, the Gold Coast and Hinterland Environment Organisation, Greening Australia, and Edendale Farm. Many local councils formed partnerships with schools to develop environmental projects aimed at improving learning outcomes.

Case Study – improved student learning in the creative and performing arts

One example of schools drawing on community resources to improve learning in the creative and performing arts area is the partnership between the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and a primary school. This collaboration provided students with opportunities, which were otherwise unobtainable, to engage with music by learning a musical instrument and having access to musicians and experts in the music field.

BROADENING VOCATIONAL OPTIONS AND SKILLS

Vocational and employability skills-based partnerships have been set up to help students make informed career choices; provide hands on learning experiences and access to industry experts; and offer career pathways, traineeships and apprenticeships. In this way, students have been given the opportunity to connect with industry in a real work environment and develop work and life skills. Regional schools, in particular, were keen to be able to offer students career pathways in their own communities. AWB Grain Flow, Kewpie Stockfeeds, Joppich Stockfeeds and Feedlots, and the Queensland College of Wine Tourism partnered with schools to provide access to industry expertise and workplace experiences in primary industries. Regional and remote schools have also partnered with Indigenous groups, such as Yuku Baja Muliku Land Trust in Queensland and the Indigenous Social Inclusion Company in New South Wales, and with companies like BHP, Rio Tinto and Alcoa to broaden students' post-school options and job skills.

Partnerships with businesses, in particular, have helped contribute to better vocational outcomes for students, including encouraging more realistic perceptions of post-school study and career options; better access to training, paid work and industry-based expertise; a recognised qualification; better knowledge of occupational health and safety issues; and improved employability skills.

ENHANCING THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF STUDENTS

A growing number of schools are partnering with local councils, health services, hospitals and university and government health departments to address the issues of students' poor health and nutrition. Schools are collaborating with sporting organisations specifically to improve the fitness of students. Partnerships were set up to develop students' fitness and skills in swimming, tennis, yachting, football, hockey and volleyball, while several partnerships with local Police and Citizens Youth Clubs and local councils concentrated on improving the general fitness of students. Other examples of these types of partnerships are those developed with community health services such as hospitals and rehabilitation units and with church or community groups such as Lifeline, Red Cross, Good Beginnings, Scripture Union, Search Light and Berry Street. The aim of these partnerships is to improve not only the physical health of students but their emotional and social wellbeing as well.

Schools seeking to improve health, fitness and emotional wellbeing reported that their partnerships had contributed to improved student relationships with peers and family; greater self esteem, confidence and self-awareness; higher aspirations for the future; improved goal setting, teamwork and conflict resolution skills; enhanced leadership skills; a greater ability to learn independently; healthier lifestyle habits; a more positive outlook on life; and increased awareness of the work of community groups.

'The focus on wellbeing has resulted in increased student confidence, engagement in learning activities and academic outcomes. Teachers, parents and carers all feel their concerns are followed through and addressed, and no child is left wanting. The support provided is comprehensive and inclusive of all students.' Principal of a primary school in partnership with Ardoch Youth Foundation

CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH COMMUNITY

A significant number of schools in the 2010–11 Impact Award applications sought to use their partnerships to connect students more closely with their local communities by providing services to groups within the community, volunteering or building relationships with particular community groups. In these partnerships, the aim was often to reduce feelings of isolation experienced by students and encourage a stronger sense of belonging to a community. There were many partnerships with aged care facilities, Returned and



Services League clubs, Indigenous organisations and local councils, where students were engaged in providing their services to various projects. Groups such as the Men's Shed and the Woodwork and Craft Club Inc provided students with practical hands on activities and the older participants acted as mentors.

Schools have engaged students in a wide range of partnership activities designed to build social capital, such as visiting aged care facilities to read to the residents and teach them about technology; working with local councils to support disadvantaged youth and homeless, housebound, or elderly members of the community; and volunteering with community houses and organisations like Volunteering Queensland, Rotary, Lions Clubs and Ardeer House. Schools have partnered with health services, partly to improve the health and wellbeing of students through cooking, gardening or nutrition programs, and partly to develop stronger links in the community. Schools report that the strengthening of students' engagement with their local communities has contributed to improved educational performance and achievement.

Case Study – connecting students with their local community

An alternative school in regional Queensland is working to connect students with their local community through a mentoring program established in partnership with the Toowoomba Older Men's Network. The Network is made up of a group of retired older men who mentor vulnerable students at risk of dropping out of school and provide a strong link with the local community.

Case Study –community service

A metropolitan school in Sydney collaborated with a regional shire council and developed a program which involved senior students from the school spending a week in one of two remote New South Wales towns. The students undertook community service in the towns and work closely with residents, particularly children, to reduce social isolation and engage in positive experiences.

'These communities have benefited and the council has been able to extend community services to many more residents. Our students have become role models and the local children and youth are able to see community service in action. Strong relationships have been built and students value being able to make a lasting contribution.' Principal of a secondary school in Sydney

IMPROVING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Schools formed partnerships with different groups – community, religious, Indigenous – and local businesses to develop creative and innovative ways of re-engaging students with learning. Schools report that students who are disengaged are more likely to be failing academically. To counter this disengagement, schools have partnered with industry groups, environmental organisations, design companies, Men's Sheds and music groups to provide students with activities to excite and motivate them.



Some schools drew on the expertise of community groups with the aim of re-engaging students through music, including partnerships with Blokes' Notes, the Victorian Police Band, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and The Song Room.

A number of schools wanting to improve student engagement also aimed to improve vocational outcomes through their partnerships. The schools reported that the programs developed with their partners had helped enrich the curriculum being offered; provided professional learning opportunities for teachers; contributed to improved student attendance; helped reduce anti-social behaviour; improved students' work ethic at school and the quality of their work; and led to more positive student-teacher relationships. Students were involved in a variety of programs designed to re-engage them by offering alternative activities outside the scope of the school curriculum. Schools partnered with Riding for the Disabled, Westside Circus, Hands On Learning, the Astronomical Society of New South Wales, Marine Rescue Toukley and St John Ambulance.

Many schools saw partnering with sporting organisations as an effective way to re-engage students with their education through sport. Partnerships were formed with local and national basketball, AFL, rugby and soccer clubs; sailing, rowing and hockey clubs; surf life saving and surf clubs; and the South Australian Ice Sports Federation.

WHAT DO THE 2010–11 APPLICATIONS SHOW ABOUT THE CHARACTERISTICS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SCHOOL–COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN AUSTRALIA?

As for 2009, the data show that schools applying for an Impact Award in 2010 and 2011 are more likely to partner with a community group than a business and that the main reason for forming partnerships is to improve student learning outcomes.

The applications also show that while schools might begin a partnership with a particular purpose this can often change as the partnership evolves and new opportunities arise. In some schools, for example, their initial motivation was to improve learning but during the course of the partnership it became clear that issues to do with student confidence and self esteem could also be addressed through the partnership activities. Schools noted that their partnerships began with one goal, but when they measured the impact of the student activities, they found they were also having an impact on other areas of students' education.

CONCLUSION

The NAB Schools First Impact Award applications from 2009–11 show that school–community partnerships are having a significant impact on participating schools. The most common benefits reported by schools are that the partnership activities have assisted students to re-engage with education. Project activities have enabled students to feel good about themselves, recognise a connection to their communities and see themselves as capable learners. Stronger links with industry and increased post-school options have helped students develop career pathways they might not otherwise have pursued. Many of the partnerships have also given students a wide range of work experience opportunities. Schools also report that school–community partnerships have contributed to improved student learning by providing students with skills and subject knowledge they might not otherwise have gained.

More than half of the schools submitting an application for an Impact Award during the first three years of the Awards have partnered with community organisations and, despite the growing push by governments to promote the value that can come from working with businesses, more work needs to be done with businesses to encourage them to see the benefits that can be gained from collaborating with schools.

The 2010–11 Impact Award applications show that the main reason for schools seeking to establish partnerships continues to be to improve learning outcomes for students, followed closely by the need to broaden vocational and post-school outcomes. In 2010 and 2011 there was an increase in the number of schools partnering for the purpose of connecting students to their community than was evident in the 2009 applications.

In recognition of the growing interest in establishing strong and innovative partnerships, NAB Schools First has increased the number of Seed Funding awards on offer in recent years. This means that schools can be supported in their initial ideas and first steps towards building high quality school–community connections.

Overall, the 2010–11 applications confirm earlier trends that emerged from the 2009 data and show that Australian schools are continuing to invest time and energy in building vibrant and innovative collaborations with a range of partners to support student learning and engagement in education.



APPENDIX

NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS

In 2009, 1552 Seed Funding and Impact Award applications were received from schools across Australia for the inaugural year of the NAB Schools First Awards. These figures reflect the interest generated by a new national Awards program. The Awards judges have noted that, although the total number of applications submitted in 2010 (880) and 2011 (863) decreased, the quality of applications has improved as schools develop a better understanding of school–community partnering and are better able to address the criteria and provide supporting evidence.

USE OF DATA BY APPLICANTS TO SHOW EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

As in 2009, applicants in 2010 and 2011 have referred to anecdotal evidence to show the impact of their partnerships. The 2010 and 2011 applications contain growing evidence that teachers in schools are using a wider variety of data to report improvements in student outcomes. Teachers' and parents' comments and general observations about student behaviour and attitudes were often mentioned as being evidence of improved engagement, wellbeing, confidence and self esteem. Some applicants made formal observations that highlighted the beneficial outcomes of their partnership.

As they routinely make assessments and decisions based on their professional judgement, teachers' observations have been used as evidence of improvement. When performing an analysis on the applications, the main issue is whether teachers' knowledge has been collected in a systematic way, such as via an interview, structured observations or a questionnaire, or whether the conclusions are based on informal observations. In this last case, such statements would be considered anecdotal.

Applicants have increasingly used data from reports and student records, such as attendance data, records of phone calls and interviews with parents and detention records, to provide evidence of improved retention, attendance and behaviour. Data to produce statistics, such as numbers of students taking particular subjects or participants in a program, or number of specific activities undertaken, numbers of students completing courses and receiving certificates, were used as evidence of the effectiveness of programs being implemented. Pre- and post-test results were used to show improved student performance.

Some applicants used feedback gathered from participants, partners, parents and teachers to show the impact of a partnership and sent out questionnaires and surveys to identify how student attitudes had changed towards particular issues addressed by a program.

DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOLS APPLYING FOR AN AWARD

The total number of schools in states and territories across Australia varies each year with 9468 schools recorded in 2010.² In 2010, 32 per cent of Australian schools were in New South Wales and 23.7 per cent were in Victoria.

² *Schools, Australia, 2011*. Catalogue No. 4221.0. ABS: Canberra, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4221.0main+features202011>.

From 2009 to 2011 almost 25 per cent of schools in Australia have submitted a NAB Schools First application for either an Impact Award or a Seed Funding Award. In the Australian Capital Territory, 48 per cent of the total number of schools in that territory have applied; New South Wales, 27 per cent; Northern Territory, 29 per cent; Queensland, 31 per cent; South Australia, 35 per cent; Tasmania, 40 per cent; Victoria, 40 per cent; and Western Australia, 31 per cent.

TYPES OF SCHOOLS APPLYING

From 2009 to 2011, 1311 Impact or Seed Funding Award applications were from primary schools, 1352 applications were from secondary schools and 333 applications were from special schools. Some schools have multiple partnerships operating in the schools and some applied with multiple applications over the three year period from 2009–11. By 2011, 16 per cent of all primary schools, 60 per cent of secondary schools and 22.7 per cent of all special schools in Australia had applied for an Award. Twenty-eight per cent of combined schools have applied (these are, most commonly, P–10 or P–12 schools).

REASONS FOR PARTNERING IN 2010 AND 2011

Five broad categories have been developed from the student need that each applicant identified. Information contained in the Impact Award applications indicated the main reasons for partnering were ‘improving learning outcomes’ or ‘broadening vocational skills’ (Figure 1).

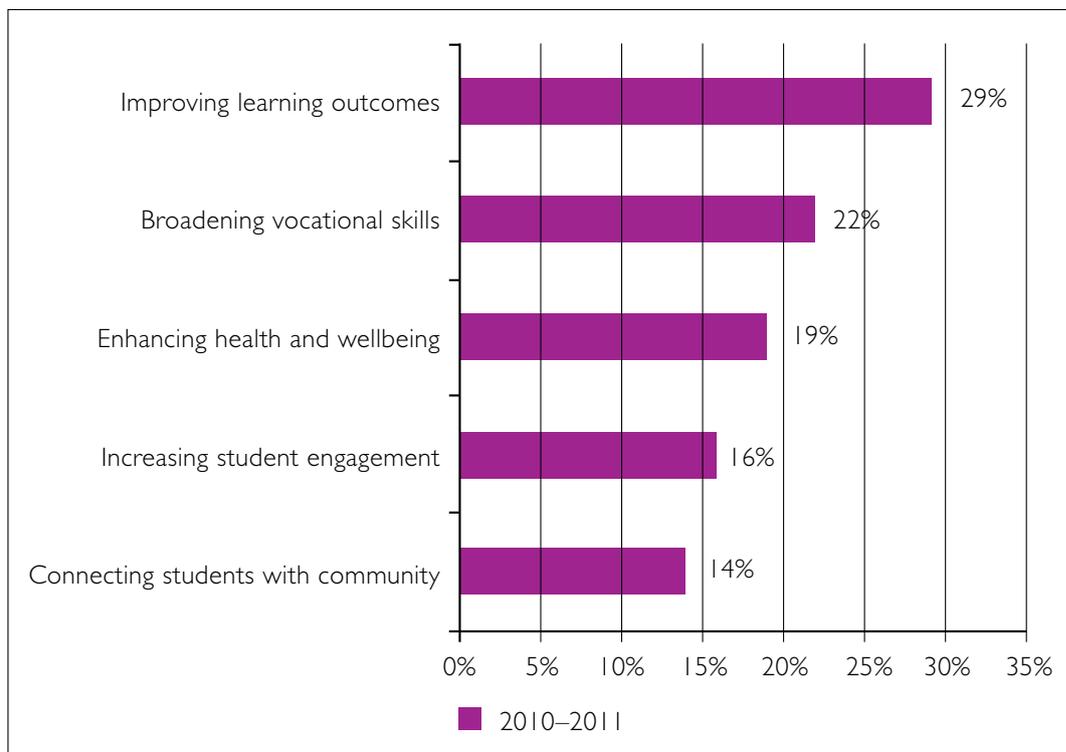


Figure 1 The main reasons for schools partnering in 2010–11

PARTNERSHIP FOCUS

Applications were attributed a partnership focus based on the need identified and the activities being undertaken as part of the program that was implemented (Figure 2).

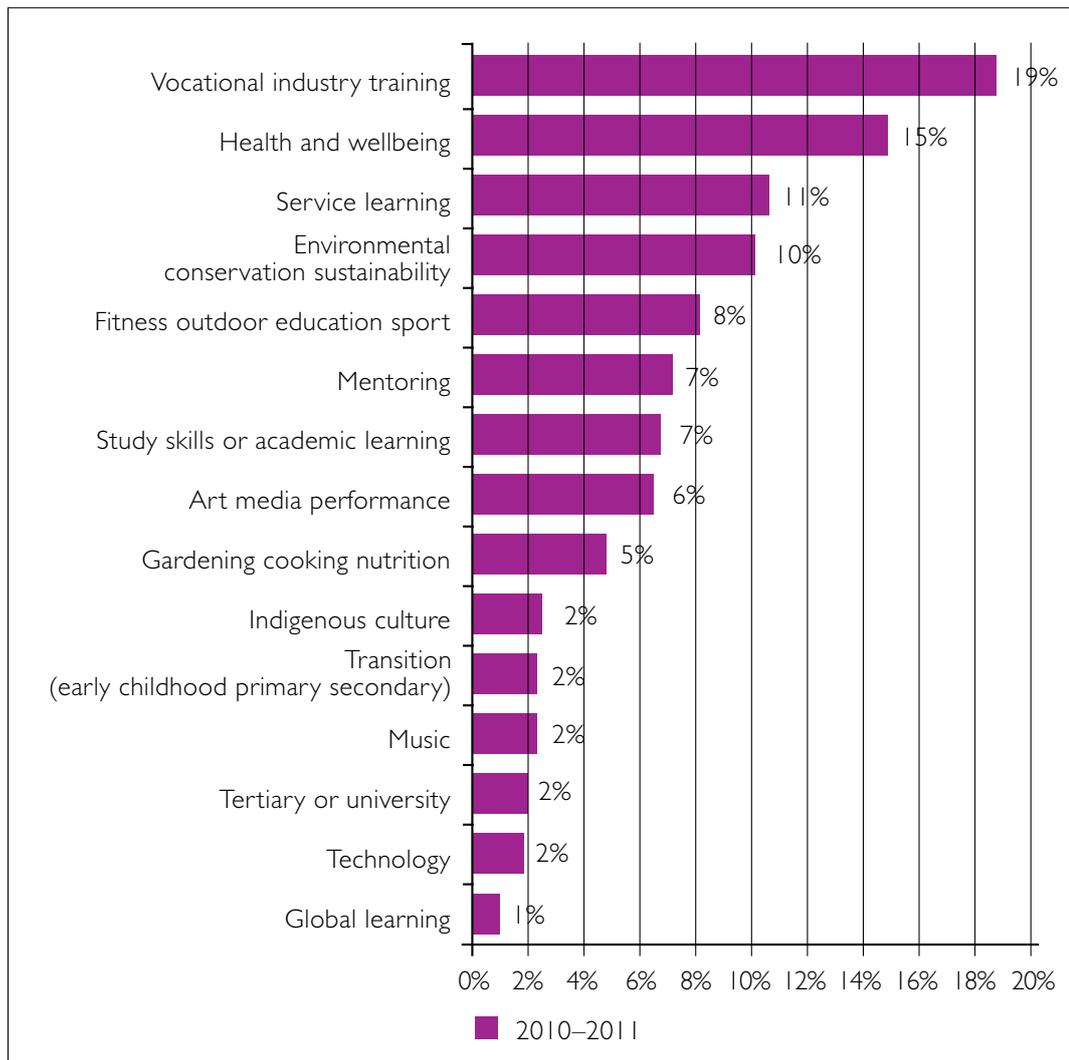


Figure 2 Partnership focus for 2010 and 2011 Impact Award applications.

