



## Literature Review

# Schools as community hubs

*Schools as Community Hubs. Literature Review.*

The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd  
19 Prospect Hill Road  
Camberwell VIC 3124  
Phone: (03) 9277 5555

ABN 19 004 398 145

[www.acer.org](http://www.acer.org)

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PO Box 20768, World Square NSW 2002  
ABN 46 619 593 369  
[www.csnsw.catholic.edu.au](http://www.csnsw.catholic.edu.au)



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# Glossary

<b>Collectivism</b>	Giving priority to a group, rather than individuals
<b>Co-location</b>	Placing multiple organisations within a single location
<b>Extended service model</b>	Schools co-located with partners to provide services beyond formal education that meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community
<b>Full-service model</b>	Schools which provide a comprehensive range of services, including access to health services, adult learning and community activities as well as study support and long day childcare
<b>Individualism</b>	The tendency to prioritise an individual's liberty, as against external authority and associated activity
<b>Private value</b>	Private gain or personal value that comes directly to the participants of a service
<b>Public value</b>	Value an organisation or activity contributes to society
<b>School connectedness</b>	The extent to which a person feels accepted, valued, and supported in their school environment
<b>Social capital</b>	The quality and quantity of social interaction within a community
<b>Vulnerable person</b>	Person who may be unable to take care of themselves or are unable to protect themselves against harm or exploitation, either temporarily or ongoing
<b>Wrap around</b>	Individualised services designed to meet the specific needs of the child or vulnerable person

# Introduction

Education communities play a crucial role in providing opportunities for individuals to learn and to grow. Schools and education settings<sup>1</sup> are often the heart of a community, a place in which members develop a sense of being and belonging. This review explores the ways in which education communities operate as welcoming and enriching places that connect, share, and learn with, not only students, families, and educators, but also their wider community. It focuses on a specific model of school-community partnership, typically known as a school-community hub.

Examining the existing body of writing on schools as community hubs allows school and community leaders to consider the opportunities and benefits associated with building partnerships between educational settings and their community, and to base their planning on lessons learned from those involved in previous hub projects. While recognising that each school community hub has unique characteristics, the review considers contextual and implementation factors that underpin successful models of schools as community hubs, and which can inform educational settings seeking to improve levels of collaboration and engagement between the school and its community.

This literature review focuses specifically on hub models that include an education setting. A key logic behind hubs is the recognition that if the physiological, psychological, and relational needs of students are not being met, students will not be in an optimal state to learn. The goals of these hubs go beyond improving academic outcomes, and look also to the health and wellbeing of their community. For the Catholic education sector in particular, education settings that act as community hubs can address education, psychological, spiritual, and relational needs of members within a community, developing a shared accountability for supporting engagement and wellbeing as well as learning outcomes. Strong relationships and school-connectedness are crucial to long-term educational improvement, sustainability, and reform, and these connections can build intergenerational trajectories that flow from birth through to post-schooling and adult learning contexts.

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1 'School' is used throughout this review to refer to all places offering education, including early childhood education and care settings

The term 'caregiver' should be read to include parents, grandparents, families, legal guardians, foster or kinship parents, and out-of-home carers.

# Schools as community hubs

Communities and schools are on the one hand seen as independent entities, while on the other, schools are often regarded as 'hubs' by their community (Lonsdale & Anderson, 2012). Calls are being made for models of schooling that recognise that the future of young people is the responsibility of the whole community, and the basis of a new social alliance across school systems enabling all young people to take an active role in their community (Black, 2008). Community hubs represent a particular approach to school-community partnership. They are seen as both a place and a set of partnerships between a school and other community resources that holistically support the needs of their children (Blank et al., 2012). Hubs involving schools have the potential to produce benefits that support learning and development in children, establish supportive networks for caregivers, and enhance broader community cohesion (Playgroup Victoria, 2013; Woolcock, 2001).

Effective community hubs can foster "collaboration between school education systems and the other sectors to support the learning and wellbeing of young people, especially those facing disadvantage" (Black, 2008, p. 6). The emphasis within community hubs may include the needs of community playgroups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, individuals from low SES backgrounds, newly arrived migrant families and children, refugees, and women, particularly from migrant and refugee backgrounds with children (Community Hubs Australia, 2016; Deloitte, 2021; Playgroup Victoria, 2013; Rushton et al., 2017). This focus on vulnerable populations aligns the vision of community hubs with principles of Catholic social teaching; principles such as concern for the good of all humanity, and for a just society in which the dignity of all people is recognised (Catholic Social Services Australia, 2020).

## Building on a multi-faceted blueprint

Conceptualising educational settings as community hubs is not new. In Australia, the early days of the twentieth century saw the rise of the kindergarten movement, a philanthropic and educational response to the needs of young children and families in inner city areas (Press & Wong, 2013). Kindergartens, nursery schools and clinics were established by organisations motivated by philanthropic, educational and health concerns, and, in addition to early childhood education and care, many of these provided a range of integrated services such as specialised nursing, medical and psychological support to parents.

In England in the 1920s, Village Colleges established in Cambridgeshire to "...provide for the whole person, and abolish the duality of education and ordinary life" (Haig, 2014, p. 1023). These colleges were intended to be fully integrated and contiguous with the communities they served, and communities would be willing participate in these colleges as part of their everyday lives. A similar social model was developing at about the same time in the United States, where schools became platforms for providing poor and marginalised migrants with necessary educational, recreational and social supports (Haig, 2014).

Almost a century later, the goal of developing schools into community hubs was reactivated in Australia with a decade of renewed interest and experimentation. In 2002, for example, the *Schools as Core Social Centres* project was established between the then Catholic Education Office of Melbourne and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), recognising schools as protective “against social fragmentation and a crisis of values” (OECD, 2001, p. 85). Specifically, this project aimed to develop a model for improving inclusivity, learning outcomes, and the interaction between health and education across three primary schools, as well as facilitating the “promotion of wellbeing and the development of social capital” (Cahill et al., 2004, p. x). Since then, several models of community hubs have been trialled and researched within Australia (Community Hubs Australia, 2016; Deloitte, 2021; Sanjeevan et al., 2012).

Much of this attention has been on extended and full-service community hub models in which the school is co-located and works with a range of partners to “provide services beyond formal education that ‘wrap around’ and meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community, typically in an area of socio-economic disadvantage” (Black et al., 2010, p. 5). The underlying principle behind these models is the recognition

that “schooling, for many, can only be approached once a range of welfare and health services are in place” (Wilkin et al., 2003, p. 3). Formation of partnerships, networks and collaborative relationships are at the centre of this initiative and the school is the focal point that works to integrate these connections. This model of hubs has been part of government programs in the UK since 2003 and there are referred to as full-service extended schools. Examples of this model in Australia include Victoria’s ‘School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) that worked with vulnerable young people aged 10-18 years (Black, 2008), the NSW Full-Service Model and the Extended Service model in Western Australia (O’Donoghue & Davies, 2014). Recent Australian initiatives have used alternative names to describe hub-like programs, for instance Language and Culture Nests (Aboriginal Affairs NSW, 2020).

While the scope of this review is a focus on school community hubs, it is important to acknowledge a large body of related literature, such as the extensive work on parent engagement published in the last twenty years (Axford et al., 2019; Barker & Harris, 2020; Cronin, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012), and school-community partnerships (Clerke, 2013; Department of Education Queensland, 2020; Griffiths et al., 2020).

#### **Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests**

An Aboriginal Language and Culture Nest is a network of communities bound together by their connection to an Aboriginal language. The Nests bring communities together around their traditional languages and link to schools, TAFE NSW, universities and other community language programs and/or groups. Each Aboriginal Language and Culture Nest has a base school which receives funding each year for administrative support and to employ Aboriginal language tutors at schools within the nest (Aboriginal Affairs NSW, 2020).

## School-community partnerships and school improvement

School improvement research highlights many benefits of school-community partnerships in which families and other stakeholders in the wider educational community influence student learning and development. Given the identified impact of school-community partnerships, it is not surprising that building partnerships has been highlighted as a key school focus for school improvement. The National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) highlights the importance of school-community partnerships as one of nine key domains for school improvement (Masters, 2016), with findings from a comprehensive literature review on school improvement in 2021 confirming a growing recognition of the importance of school-community partnerships in promoting improved student outcomes, engagement and wellbeing, post schooling trajectories, and the development of cultural and social capital (Van der Kleij et al., in press).



# Core features of community hubs

Having considered some background to community hubs, the next section provides a more detailed description of the core features and functions typically seen in a school community hub and attempts to explain what hubs are; what they do; why they exist; and how they work. In reviewing examples of schools as community hubs, and summarising the related literature, this review focuses on four core features of hubs. These are 1) people (of multiple generations), 2) partnerships, 3) place (shared or co-located spaces), and 4) programs (holistic service delivery). These four core features come together in a school community hub to serve the needs of a defined group of people, in partnership with other organisations, providing access to facilities and offering a broad or focused range of integrated, co-ordinated, co-delivered activities or services.

## People

Hubs serve distinct individuals and community members. Typically they adopt an intergenerational focus, working with young children, school-aged children, and adults. Schools operating as a community hub focus on engagement with their own students and their families. By strengthening school-family partnerships they seek to enhance teaching and learning by delivering a range of provisions to students and their families that extend their capacity to engage in learning.

School community hubs can take multiple forms, and they may choose to address broad community interests, or specific groups in the community such as young children, new parents, younger adults, the elderly, newly arrived migrants/refugees, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, or vulnerable populations. Others may focus on quite specific groups, such as

students with additional health or learning needs, or students at-risk of disengaging from education. Those that address broad, generalist needs will engage multiple community connections and links with partners. They typically provide social support or open-ended learning programs that are open to all. Some hubs target their programs to specific purposes and groups. The provision of their services, opportunities, supports and events may cater specifically for elite or high performing participants, for cultural cohorts, or for certain contexts such as early childhood services provision, or newcomers to the community (Simons, 2011).

## Partnerships

Partnerships that go beyond parent engagement initiatives and contribute to learner engagement, progress and achievement, are core to schools as community hubs. Australian education policy documents such as the *Mparntwe Declaration* stress the importance of inclusive and reciprocal development of partnerships and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and of wide community engagement.

*Partnerships also create opportunities for young Australians to connect with their communities, business and industry and support the development and wellbeing of young people and their families. These connections and associations can facilitate development, training and employment opportunities, promote a sense of responsible citizenship and encourage lifelong learning (Education Council, 2019, p. 10).*

Hub partnerships might involve collaboration between schools and key agents, particularly parents and caregivers of children enrolled in the school, but also allied health professions, the public (government) and private sector (small businesses to large multinational corporations), philanthropic groups, and post-school educational institutions (universities, TAFE institutions, Registered Training Organisations, and apprenticeship centres). The hub partners can be linked by geography, mutual interest, shared faith, culture or goals. Such partnerships require cultural and inter-organisational change and commitment, as well as coordination. In Australian school community hubs, external funding is central, with partner organisations typically the source of much of that funding (O'Donoghue & Davies, 2014).

School-community partnerships can be differentiated by the extent of active involvement by students, families and community members in the partnership. Well-functioning hubs are often positioned as social centres where different community groups can gather to address pressing issues (whether political, economic, and sociocultural) and they serve as primary sites for, and of, reform. Another category of partnerships aims to transform multiple communities. The Bright Spots Schools Connection is an example of this (Singhania et al., 2020). Each level of partnership requires organisational and cultural change that focuses on framing families and community as essential and engaged decision making partners.

## Place

Hubs include a strong sense of 'place' in which co-located community facilities, resources and services are integrated (Sanjeevan et al., 2012). Co-location, or access to shared space is a feature of hubs, which typically provide for a cluster of social services in an 'anchor facility' (Rossiter, 2007). Hubs provide access to space, whether onsite, offsite or virtually, for the use of community groups, learning and support services, and events. Such arrangements may involve activities such as a community dance class, yoga lessons, adult learning programs, men's shed, day care, or refugee counselling.

Motivation for these shared spaces include return on investment for specialist physical facilities, avoiding duplication of facilities in a location, and increasing access across the community. Examples include onsite playgroups and preschools, school community libraries, and school-owned sporting facilities. This may provide cost savings and reduce the duplication of services or facilities for the contributing parties. Use of hub premises may involve a fee for service or be covered by funding (Clandfield, 2010). Hubs involve extension of school opening hours and additional costs for staffing, whether that is school staff, caretaker and/or administrator.

Community hubs also provide touch points for service provision to address practical and structural barriers experienced by some in the community, and thus increase the equity of access to facilities and online spaces for marginalised or disadvantaged community members. These hubs promote the school as a point of contact for otherwise isolated community members and call-in services to ensure they are readily available to all (Sanjeevan et al., 2012).

### **Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs**

This project operating out of The University of Melbourne's Learning Environments Applied Research Network (LEaRN) investigated how best to plan, design, govern and manage schools to operate successfully as 'more than a school', encouraging the development of resilient and connected communities. Their publications and conference presentations deal extensively with integrated and shared school-community facilities developed as part of green-field and school renovation projects (Chandler & Cleveland, 2020; Cleveland et al., 2020).

Opportunities for participants and partners to gather regularly at a specified central, or shared space not only broadens access, but deepens connections. The position of the hub is important to ensure it provides a central point of connection, for example, near other core services and public transport to support people with limited mobility. Ensuring the space is neutral and not seen to 'belong' to one partner in an exclusive way, is key to being open and welcoming as for example, communities perceive their library, shopping centre, shared hall or recreation space. Following the recent pandemic experience it is likely that hubs will want to consider online meeting spaces in their planning.

## **Programs**

Hub partnerships within the local community are coordinated to co-deliver an array of programs, or services. The community hub offers a gateway to a suite of co-delivered programs promoting holistic service delivery and offering reciprocal benefit for partner organisations. Hubs may result in service provision to those with no previous connection to the school.

Hubs may provide access, or referrals, to third party services or expertise. Personnel providing this expertise may be school staff, or external providers. A specific person is

often needed to oversee or coordinate this kind of access, which may be provided in a school or in collaboration with schools so that they can be made accessible to all, and especially to children at risk (Sanjeevan et al., 2012).

While some hubs focus on providing access and programs, there is an intensive form of community hub that seeks to provide a holistic suite of services to meet the needs of their often-complex community. Designed and offered in partnership with government, local providers and community members, schools offering this type of hub aim to transform themselves into a different institution through a range of academic, health and social supports. In contrast to program provision discussed above, this type of hub emphasises the community as its focal point, rather than programs. These extended service hubs complement what occurs in the classroom through a range of health and education programs and community activities and events that often target those from disadvantaged or at-risk backgrounds. These are delivered at specific times such as before and after school, and/or during school holidays (O'Donoghue & Davies, 2014). Full-service hubs offer even more services, opportunities, supports, and events and provide these over the course of the year.

# Benefits of community hubs

The promise of schools as community hubs lies in positive outcomes for students, which have been reported as including improved behaviour, social skill development and school transition, and improved educational attainment (O'Donoghue & Davies, 2014, p. iii). Some studies also indicate an increase in the confidence, self-esteem and sense of security in children; increased student attendance in primary school students, and improved prospects as a result of addressing inequity (O'Donoghue & Davies, 2014). The benefits of increased parent engagement in schools are well documented (Axford et al., 2019; Barker & Harris, 2020; Stefanski et al., 2016). Parents involved in school community hubs also report reduced social isolation.

Schools also benefit at the organisational level from partnerships with community leaders or community organisations, other schools, businesses, or service providers (Moore et al., 2017; Van der Kleij et al., in press). Literature highlights the reciprocal benefits of school-community partnerships beyond the school level, in which schools offer opportunities for leadership and employment, which helps the community become "a more nurturing and thriving place to live" (Milgate, 2016, p. 200).

## Collectivism and creating social capital

Collectivism is the concept of giving priority to a group, rather than individuals within a collective. In community hubs, the principle of collective impact can be achieved when educational settings "realise that they can accomplish more by working together and sharing resources than they can by working alone" (Blank et al., 2012, p. 12). Collective impact draws upon community strengths, and the diversity of a community working together to achieve a shared purpose or goal.

Community hubs are premised on the notion that social connections and networks have the potential to enhance mutual cooperation, effectiveness, support and trust through the sharing of knowledge, resources, and spaces, otherwise known as social capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Putnam, 2000). Social capital relates to the notion that social relationships between people can lead to productive outcomes (Szreter, 2000; Woolcock, 2001), reduced disadvantage for vulnerable groups, and improved economic and social outcomes related to equity and opportunity (Claridge, 2018; Deloitte, 2021; Playgroup Victoria, 2013). Community hubs that aim to engender these positive outcomes typically engage in *bonding*, *bridging* and *linking* activities.

**Bonding social capital** activities emphasise the development of exclusive relationships within close-knit groups (for example, families, neighbours, and community and religious groups), and how these relationships support intergenerational and reciprocal networks amongst parent groups, educators and students (Putnam, 2000). Faith-based communities, in particular, have the potential to benefit children by facilitating the creation and reinforcement of social norms, within a community of parents, caregivers, educators and church that exemplify "dense, reciprocal, and intergenerational networks" (Murray et al., 2020, p. 2214).

**Bridging social capital** activities aim to develop inclusive relationships between socially distant and diverse groups (for example, schools, businesses, and research bodies). These have the potential to improve equity, enhance cooperation, spread and exchange information, and build trust horizontally, so that coalitions can be formed. For example, traditionally disadvantaged groups can be supported by organisations that provide social, cultural and linguistic opportunities, parental/family supports and networks, and learning pathways (Murray et al., 2020; Putnam, 2000).

**Linking social capital** refers to vertical links between groups and emphasises the relationships and opportunities that might be formed between traditionally disadvantaged groups and individuals/institutions with greater resources and power. Specifically, it refers to activities and processes that enable disadvantaged individuals to access ideas, information and resources that are out of reach to leverage further opportunities (e.g. access education to leverage opportunities for further schooling or employment) (Woolcock, 2001). For example, providing vulnerable children in early childhood education and care, and their families and caregivers, with access to a network of holistic services, professionals and educators has the potential to reduce risk and support children's transition to school (Krakouer et al., 2017).

## Developing the whole person

The main purpose of school-community partnerships should be to contribute towards the wellbeing, sense of belonging, and lifelong learning and vocational outcomes of the community. Research shows such partnerships can have substantial benefits to student outcomes. In the words of Lonsdale and Anderson (2012), "support from those beyond the school gates is an essential part of preparing learners for the twenty-first century" (p. 1). This includes student outcomes in the broadest sense, not just academic achievement. Given the importance of family culture and support on student outcomes, one of the most important benefits of school-community partnerships is helping families understand how they can best support their child's education (Milgate, 2016). Integrated community support programs are a response to widespread recognition of the need to address non-academic needs, such as student health, safety and wellbeing as

critical to student success (Moore et al., 2017). There are benefits to either or both parties beyond the immediate concern for student outcomes, which depend on the purpose of the partnership.

## Improving wellbeing

Research demonstrates that school partnerships which engage families can have a significant impact on student wellbeing. Engagement in a community hub network, and the relationships accessed therein, can provide parents with shared expectations and closer intergenerational relationships, and improve children's overall socioemotional behaviours (Murray et al., 2020). Schools may also establish community partnerships with mental health care providers (Moore et al., 2017). Participation in hubs provides families with social benefits including stronger support networks and connections, while "students develop self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of self-worth" (Clerke, 2013, p. 8). Participating in a community in which a sense of belonging can be cultivated is also beneficial for the mental health of school leaders, teachers, students, and community members.

The provision of wrap around services through hubs can support learning for schooling and further training, parenting and caregiving, wellbeing (physical, mental and emotional health), social interaction, settlement in a new community, language learning, and pathways to employment and volunteering. Educational and health staff with knowledge of student needs and understanding of appropriate referral processes are in an ideal position to provide early identification and support. Allied health programs can be aligned to existing practices that support the health and wellbeing of children in learning settings, while integration and linguistic support programs can reduce marginalisation

and celebrate diversity. Holistic service delivery can also promote post schooling trajectories, and participation in activities that benefit the community and create bonds, trust, community support and reciprocity.

## Promoting inclusion and belonging

Recognition of the need to support relationships within the broader school context, rather than focusing on individual level change is also important (Branson et al., 2019). Fostering a collaborative and proactive approach to building relationships moves participants away from reactive 'solutions' to connection becoming part of the structure and culture of the school (Conway & Andrews, 2019). Catholic education hubs also offer a chance to rebuild community and strengthen the ties between family members and education settings (Udoh, 2019). For new members of a community, hubs also provide a welcoming and safe environment in which diversity can be supported. This is often seen in support for migrants and refugees, in which transition and integration can be promoted through access to language learning, legal support, and employment services delivered by hubs. Milgate (2016) also describes a mutually beneficial partnership between a school in rural New South Wales and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. This school had "developed the capacity to open and access a wealth of information by working alongside our community in a meaningful and respectful way" (p. 195). This community partnership was credited with bringing benefits to the school, such as enhanced sharing of cultural knowledge and broader recognition of student success.

## Enhancing learning

Enhancing learning is a key goal of schools as community hubs, with opportunities to pursue learning for everyone in the community, not just school children (Sanjeevan et al., 2012). This focus on lifelong learning is a feature of community hubs where the school is seen as core to education provision from or 'cradle to career' or even 'cradle to grave' (Blank et al., 2012). Programs may include early childhood programs, playgroups, adult learning, faith-formation, vocational training, and parenting courses. The hub employs additional educational staff beyond core school staffing allocation.

Hub services for young children, such as playgroups, set a foundation for learning and provide access to health and support services designed to detect developmental delays at an earlier stage. Principals have identified that community hubs improve enrolments and attendance to kindergarten, as well as parents' engagement in school-based activities (Deloitte, 2021). The aspirations and expectations of families and other significant community members are critical factors in influencing student engagement in schooling, which is, in turn, strongly related to their success in school. In addition, when families directly support student learning, this enhances student achievement.

Creating conditions for social capital, in the context of schools, also leads to collective teacher efficacy: When educators participate in communities that focus on student progress and maximising the impact of their teaching, motivation is greater amongst teaching staff, and student growth is more likely to occur (O'Leary, 2020).

School-community partnerships can be a vehicle for enriching students' learning experiences. Schools can make curricula locally relevant and enhance student engagement by ensuring that what is taught aligns with what is valued in their communities (Van der Kleij et al., in press). School-community partnerships may provide additional opportunities within school curricula to influence pedagogical practices and to provide an out-of-school learning context. For example, a study showed that technology integration within a school was realised through partnerships with technology businesses and universities. The partnership provided financial benefits in the form of donations or grants, as well as intellectual and social benefits via access to external expertise, and opportunities for students to learn and apply their learning in a work setting through internships (Levin & Schrum, 2014). Within the school context, school-family-community partnerships can enhance student learning outcomes by helping students make real-life connections and transfer their learning beyond the classroom walls (Anthony & Walshaw, 2007).

While most of the literature on schools as hubs focuses on inclusion of marginalised members of the community, there are examples of school-based centres that facilitate the provision of support systems and services with the objective of high performance. The collaborative provision of supplementary services such as competitive entry sports academies, performing arts ensembles, or STEM centres of excellence also enhances educational participation but differs from the community hubs model as it focuses on opportunities for growth for all students, not only those who are educationally or socially disadvantaged (Simons, 2011). The focus in these programs is access to specialists, development of facilities beyond what a school can typically provide on its own, and resourcing of scholarships.



## Supporting transitions

Hubs often have a connecting role at key transition points. The supporting of children and young people with clear referral pathways and processes that integrate health and education across the lifespan, can promote intergenerational benefits and learning. Engagement and connectedness between community members can also facilitate help-seeking and positive health and wellbeing. Early intervention and shared intervention between education settings and health professionals also encourages effective partnerships with specialised support mechanisms, to ensure a child or young person's learning and development is integrated and holistic.

There is an increasing interest in establishing school-community partnerships, in particular at two key transition points, namely starting school, and moving into post-school training and careers. The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2018) Standard 6 recognises that collaborative relationships with families and communities are fundamental to achieving quality outcomes for young children and enhance children's inclusion, learning and wellbeing, and community hubs serving young children have been well-researched (Clark et al., 2022; Krakouer et al., 2017).

Examples of hubs that focus on pathways from secondary school are less well documented in the literature, but their importance is reinforced in recent policy documents.

*Strengthen school-community engagement to enrich student learning through the establishment of mechanisms to facilitate quality partnerships, including engagement in mentoring, volunteering and extra-curricular activities, between schools, employers, members of the community, community organisations and tertiary institution (Department of Education and Training, 2018).*

The National Community Hubs Program was a place-based program designed to support the transition and engagement of newly arrived families, through English language programs, early childhood services and vocational pathways. Community hubs assist a child's development through playgroups and other services, supporting the physical, cognitive, and social development of participating children. An evaluation of the benefits of this program indicates that in 2019, for every \$1 invested in the program, there were \$2.2 in social benefits realised (Deloitte, 2021).

# Challenges of implementing hubs

There are challenges to implementing community hubs in Australian schools, and these range from philosophical and political to practical challenges. Fundamentally, hubs run counter to an individualistic society. Individualism privileges the needs of individual members of a community over the needs of the community as a whole, whereas hubs centre on community. The extent to which individualism continues to influence young people, their parents and educators is unknown, given a future that is inherently challenging. In addition to philosophical and political barriers, there are structural and cultural challenges to be addressed in establishing and sustaining hubs in educational settings. Systemic barriers to successful school community hubs include competing priorities and time pressures, culture and governance (Epstein et al., 2019).

## Governance

Partners will come to a hub with competing priorities, and possibly unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved. It takes time to build trust, shared commitment and an appropriate balance of power and boundary setting (Epstein et al., 2019), recognising that goodwill can be undermined by day-to-day pressures. Just as educators lack the time to form and integrate partnerships, community and

industry partners face similar challenges (Shergold et al., 2020). Both schools and their partners bring existing staff and resources to a new school community hub, and then need to recruit and bring additional staff into the mix, which may be particularly challenging in rural areas or highly specific areas of practice. A range of new processes may have to be negotiated, including procurement policies, child protection, and workplace health and safety requirements, all of which add a layer of complexity to partnerships. There is an indication that a shared governance mindset may be more difficult to achieve in an existing school compared to a new build (Chandler & Cleveland, 2020).

Financial challenges and most importantly, sustainability beyond initial funding or grants must also be addressed. A key issue of sustainability arises if partnerships are 'hero-driven' or centred on an individual, such that if that person leaves, the partnership is more likely to fall apart. A well-functioning hub requires a multi-dimensional governance structure that is representative of all stakeholders and has the right expertise and influence, without being unwieldy in size. Connected Communities (NSW) and Stronger Communities for Children (NT) provide two examples of governance (Griffiths et al., 2020; Winangali & Ipsos, 2017).

### Connected Communities

The Connected Communities strategy in rural and remote New South Wales schools have a School Reference Group to provide advice and to support implementation. Reference groups operate according to a Terms of Reference, are chaired by the local NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group President, and are made up of parents; Aboriginal Elders or Community members; Parents and Citizens representatives and an Executive Principal (Griffiths et al., 2020).

### **Stronger Communities for Children**

The Stronger Communities for Children (SCfC) initiative is a place-based community development program in Northern Territory communities with strong children and schooling outcomes. Governance involves Local Community Boards (LCBs) of residents from the target community, resourced by Facilitating Partner organisations whose role is to support the community to own and lead local decision-making (Winangali & Ipsos, 2017).

## Agency

There is nothing more demoralising to a developing partnership as when well-intentioned partners lack the agency or autonomy to make decisions that are best for their community. All participants from school councils, leaders, health professionals, local government, community organisations, parents, educators and students must navigate a complex personal, professional, and regulatory landscape, which involves challenging external expectations, and being trusted to find new solutions to issues of funding, shared access, risk management and engagement of stakeholders.

Supportive relationships that facilitate personal and professional development are crucial in school settings, however the hierarchical nature of many educational settings means that decisions can be made without the authentic input of those who are ultimately responsible for supporting young people - educators and support staff (O'Leary, 2020). The consequence of such structures can be a sense of disempowerment, combined with a perceived loss of both agency and autonomy, which can impact on teacher motivation, connectedness, and the ability to engage fully in community hubs that support children and their families. For Catholic school staff, building bonds within schools, and supporting staff to be part of a community is essential to facilitate individual and community wellbeing for teaching staff.

## Funding

Schools are not automatically funded to provide the services their students may require to be ready to learn. Funding and support for holistic service delivery typically relies on federal and state government budgets that are compartmentalised and short-term. Otherwise they must identify external funding and risk being beholden to another organisation's priorities. While new flashy buildings are not a requirement for a successful hub, some older school facilities are simply not designed to support shared use (Cleveland et al., 2020). Successful hubs require a level of flexibility that enables them to respond to emerging community needs, for instance to accelerate mental health and wellbeing support for young people in the face of growing demand.

## Safety

While the equity, efficiency and engagement value of shared facilities is recognised, community access also raises safety and security concerns from educators, parents, facility managers and other stakeholders. Safeguarding children in shared spaces where they may be mixing with adults from the wider community requires a different level of awareness and supervision, which is unlikely to be found in a standard facility design (Chandler & Cleveland, 2020).

In summary, alongside all the research showing the value of schools as community hubs, sit the practical challenges of governance, agency and relationship building. Cleveland et al. (2022) highlight other factors that cause hubs to falter, including adherence to old attitudes, rushed consultation and scrambled vision, assumptions about community profiles, and ignoring feedback from stakeholders. Some sources caution that “far from equalising the effect of different socioeconomic environments, the strategy of linking schools very closely with their communities might only serve to exacerbate the gaps” (OECD, 2001, p. 88).

Given the diversity of models in such different contexts and limited formal evaluation of community hubs beyond pilot stages, it is difficult for those interested in the field to find evidence of successful long-term hub implementation (O’Donoghue & Davies, 2014), with Moore et al. (2017) concluding that building productive school-community partnerships is an area in need of improvement in many schools. As such, the next section draws on practice-oriented literature on partnerships to highlight decisions facing schools and systems who are considering establishing a school community hub.





## What can schools do?

It is not a simple activity to establish and sustain a school-based community hub, and there is no standardised playbook for guaranteed success. Although an effective community hub may look different depending on the context, there is a wide body of evidence to suggest the importance of connections between education communities and broader services and settings. This section provides several key considerations for education systems seeking to establish or sustain effective community hubs. These discussion starters are based on a scan of policies and programs, recognising that educational, church and community program and policy initiatives are often not evaluated, and if evaluated are not necessarily published in academic literature. The stories that organisations tell about their own hub programs provide a valuable source of information about opportunities, risks, trends, important lessons, and weaknesses related to schools as community hubs.

Research defines a long list of factors that contribute to successful school–community or school–industry partnerships, including being based on an identified need, and with an aim to improve student outcomes. Important also to partnerships is a strong and committed leadership team that shares decision making; communicates effectively; establishes clear roles and responsibilities; and implements well-organised programs that are regularly monitored and reviewed (Clerke, 2013). Four key phases of hub planning involve 1) identifying the role the school community hub is to serve, 2) establishing the best partnerships, 3) planning to ensure the hub is sustainable, and 4) determining how to evaluate the outcomes.

### Identify community strengths and vision

Determining why a school community hub is of value to a community starts with that community. At this phase, schools considering a community hub look to:

- **illuminate strengths** that can be brought to a successful collaboration, and then conduct an extensive community needs analysis.
- **take a multidisciplinary approach** to assessing and understanding what the community wants well before the start of any planning for facilities or programs. This is challenging, particularly if the hub opportunity arises as part of a new school build. While investment in infrastructure is welcome, the clear message from research is not to design a hub for the community and then invite them to come, but to design it with them.
- **create a collective vision** for a hub with the community, thinking creatively about the strengths and needs identified, and balancing these in appropriate ways that genuinely support children, families and the community.
- **consider co-location** in terms of service delivery, ensuring there are convincing reasons for positioning the desired services as part of a school community hub, and taking care not to replicate or compete with existing services.
- **embed hubs in systemic reforms**, whether national, system-wide or local initiatives, engaging with policy and broader school improvement agendas ensures hubs are aligned to the core purpose of education, recognising that reforms that are not integrated into the school culture will be short-lived. The benefit of authentic collaboration ensures parent and family engagement is considered as a core component of any educational reform initiative.



## Establish partnerships

It has been confirmed in this review that partnerships are an essential ingredient in school community hubs, and also that many of the challenges facing hubs relate to establishing and managing these partnerships. Effective partnerships start from a shared commitment and a balance of power among partners. This requires having mutual clarity around the partnership objectives and purposes, roles, and mutual responsibilities (Van der Kleij et al., in press). Fortunately, there is an extensive set of literature and guidance available on establishing school-community and school-business partnerships (Clerke, 2013; Epstein et al., 2019; Lonsdale et al., 2011; Melaville & Pearson, 2009; Watters et al., 2016) and the following short list of strategies for effective partnerships is summarised from these authors, encouraging schools to:

- **understand partners' boundaries** and the human capacities that exist across the parties (Watters et al., 2016). Knowing where the intersections are will assist in establishing roles, challenging hierarchies and recruiting new staff.
- **engage a facilitator** or neutral intermediary who can prioritise the project, identify areas of risk, establish governance ground rules, and guide the planning.
- **negotiate through honest dialogue** about issues of common concern, governance and operations, which will help surface the assumptions each party brings to the partnership. This includes interaction with parents and community residents, and sensitive conversations, for instance about poverty and race, that create opportunities for more equitable decision-making.
- **prioritise professional development** for school staff that explains the importance of relationships, and expectations of the hub. Recognise and manage the professional, cultural and personal change required by everyone as a result of new priorities.
- **develop champions** and grass roots leaders with the skills and ability to inspire others. Empowering bi-level leadership, both top down and bottom up, keeps the goals of the hub central to the partnership and to operations (Melaville & Pearson, 2009).
- **be realistic** about goals and expectations. Operational planning should look to achieve early successes while reinforcing that the hub is a long-term investment.
- **organise around results**, documenting the hub's goals, benchmarks and progress indicators along the way.





## Evaluate, reflect, and share

There is a recurring theme in the literature on school community hubs decrying “an over-reliance on anecdotal evidence of success, rather than the application of thorough and established evaluation tools” (O’Donoghue & Davies, 2014, p. iii). Nonetheless, many of the intended outcomes of school community hubs are long-term, complex and intrinsically integrated with other initiatives making it difficult to conduct a rigorous evaluation (Black et al., 2010). If an evaluation is undertaken, how is it done, what does it measure and at what points? Depending on the goals of the hub and the requirements of funders, an evaluation may consider educational outcomes, school improvement, social benefits and/or financial measures of success such as cost-efficient access to resources or expertise (Zepeda, 2013).

The 2017 School Assessment Tool based on the Australian *Family-School Partnerships Framework* can be used by the school community to evaluate progress when implementing engagement strategies.

- **use data to inform decision making.** Select and monitor activities to collect data about the program and partnerships which can point to tangible evidence of improvement, and strengthen sustainability (Clerke, 2013).
- **evaluate against principles or frameworks,** considering both the hub’s components and the hub as a whole. Review and evaluate progress across a broad set of goals and indicators.
- **share your experiences** with other schools, whether these experiences are wonderful or woeful.

The four phases or actions promoted in this section are presented in a linear workflow. In reality, the development and work of a school community hub does not follow a step-by-step process, and it is important to revisit each phase throughout the life of the hub. As the people participating in the hub grow and change, so will the hubs’ partnerships, places and programs.

# Key messages

- Every school community hub is established for a unique set of reasons and operates in a unique context, based on the needs of the communities they are in.
- Hubs reflect a core set of principles about purpose, relationships, equity, and a mission to build on the strengths of their community.
- Community hubs embed schools and educational settings within their broader communities
- Community hubs promote collaboration and connectedness between staff, students, and community members, and promote a holistic notion of education.
- Effective community hubs build on the link between education and health, and support the whole child during the early years, and into post schooling trajectories
- Community hubs create opportunities for relationships, build social capital, and strengthen the bonds and bridges that exist within schools.
- When educators participate in communities that focus on student progress and maximising the impact of their teaching, motivation is greater amongst teaching staff, and student growth is more likely to occur.
- Assured, enduring funding is essential if community hubs are going realise their potential as critical social infrastructure.



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