

# new awards

for school-community partnerships



ACER is a partner in Schools First, a new initiative to help build school-community partnerships, as **Michele Lonsdale** explains.



*Michele Lonsdale is a Principal Research Fellow in Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation*

Schools First is a national initiative that aims to build stronger partnerships between schools and their local communities. Schools First will provide regional, state and national awards to schools to the value of \$15 million over the next three years.

The Schools First Awards have been developed by National Australia Bank and three not-for-profit organisations: ACER, Australia Cares, and the Foundation for Young Australians. National Australia Bank has committed to funding the awards and all operating costs for the program over the initial three years.

In recent years there has been a growing recognition that responsibility for the learning and development of young people needs to be shared across the community rather than vested solely in schools. ACER reviewed the research on school-community partnerships to identify the benefits such partnerships can bring to schools and the key characteristics of highly effective partnerships.

Strong school-community partnerships have been associated with greater student engagement, improved attendance and retention, and better academic performance. In

particular, effective school-community partnerships give schools a much broader range of resources and support networks on which to draw.

The research highlighted the importance of partnerships which are genuinely co-operative and sustainable. Highly effective school-community partnerships have strong leaders; a shared vision that prioritises improved outcomes for students; regular processes for the joint monitoring of goals, activities and outcomes; and tangible results.

ACER's research findings are consistent with current federal and state/territory approaches to social inclusion which see education as the key to overcoming disadvantage and opening up opportunities for young people to participate meaningfully in society. School-community partnerships provide collective strength and mutually beneficial outcomes for schools and the communities they serve.

This research has shown that strong partnerships between schools and their communities can have considerable benefits for students, and we have been keen to find ways to encourage effective partnerships.



Schools First will support and recognise highly successful school-community initiatives.

The primary objective of Schools First is to improve student outcomes – by recognising and strengthening the social networks that already exist between schools and their communities, and by encouraging new relationships and initiatives.

There are many ways in which community groups, parents and businesses might work with their local school to improve outcomes for young people. Schools First encourages local, tailor-made solutions to the challenges facing schools. Communities could provide support in the form of financial or human resources, time, infrastructure, skills, tools, talents and enthusiasm.

The awards program involves three stages: up to 60 regional awards, eight state/territory awards, and one national award. There will be two types of awards. Impact Awards will recognise effective school-community partnerships that can demonstrate successful outcomes. There will also be a smaller number of Seed Funding Awards that will recognise fledgling partnerships with great potential. In these cases the awards will provide initial funding to progress the collaboration.

Schools First is open to every primary and secondary school in Australia. Potential partners could include small or large businesses, health providers, libraries, parents, local government bodies, Chambers of Commerce, retirement villages, Rotary, Apex, Lions clubs, other schools, TAFEs, universities, kindergartens, and child care centres. A school might even partner remotely with a community group via technology.

### **Awards criteria**

ACER developed the entry and judging criteria for the awards, will train the judges to ensure consistency in the assessment of schools' applications,

and will provide customised feedback to schools. Schools First is intended to recognise and celebrate excellence in school-community partnerships. Applications for the awards are assessed on a number of criteria. In particular, schools must show that their partnership:

- has been set up to address an identified need or opportunity
- is well-planned and genuinely collaborative
- has been managed and implemented effectively
- has led to improved outcomes for students; and
- can be sustained.

The award criteria are based on research findings and have been developed by ACER with input from Australia Cares and the Foundation for Young Australians. The criteria have been piloted with a small number of teachers and principals from a range of schools.

The judging will be undertaken by a group of experienced educators with a deep understanding of schools, the award criteria and the goals of the Schools First program. Site visits will be made to each of the state/territory award-winning schools, enabling the assessors to verify the information provided in the applications.

The awards program will be supported by a series of 80 regional workshops to assist schools in developing their applications. Workshop facilitators will provide toolkits for participants including templates for planning partnership projects and examples of successful school-community partnerships. Principals, teachers, students, parents, local government, health organisations, local businesses, community leaders and interested citizens will be able to attend the workshops.

Following the judging, schools will receive short customised reports about their applications, incorporating feedback from the assessors. These

reports will help schools to identify what they are doing well and what they might do to further develop their community partnerships.

Another feature of this initiative will be the development of a 'knowledge bank' of information and advice on the Schools First website. All schools will have access to this knowledge bank and winning schools will contribute to this resource each year.

The impact of Schools First will be formally evaluated, making it one of only a handful of award programs globally to have its effectiveness measured. This monitoring will enable the program to be refined over time.

Launching Schools First in Melbourne in October 2008, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard said, "Schools First shows real vision and real commitment, and I know it will make a real difference... The education of the next generation is not just a task for parents and teachers, but a task for all of us."

The Deputy Prime Minister also noted that one of the ideas presented at the Australia 2020 Summit earlier in the year had been to create a coordinated partnership between Australia's top businesses and Australian schools, and that the Schools First initiative was exactly the kind of national collaboration that would help that to happen.

Visit the Schools First website [www.schoolsfirst.edu.au](http://www.schoolsfirst.edu.au) for more information and to register your interest in the awards program. ■