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School– community partnerships benefit all

Michele Lonsdale explains new research into the nature of school–community partnerships.

New research into the NAB Schools First program shows that school–community partnerships are having a positive effect on student outcomes.

This national awards program, which is based on a partnership between National Australia Bank (NAB), ACER and the Foundation for Young Australians, has pledged \$15 million over three years to recognise and reward outstanding school–community partnerships.

More than 1500 schools applied for either an Impact or Seed Award in 2009, the inaugural year of the program.

ACER conducted a review of the 800 Impact Award applications from 2009 to investigate the nature and impact of the partnerships that schools have established around Australia.

This review, *School–Community Partnerships in Australian Schools*,

has created a rich database of information into why schools are forming partnerships with business and community groups, the kinds of partnerships that are being formed, and the positive impact these partnerships are having on students and schools.

Underpinning almost all these Impact Award partnerships was a desire to improve student learning.

Schools either approached, or were approached by, potential partners for a wide range of reasons, including to:

- improve student literacy or numeracy skills
- expand the performing arts curriculum
- develop bilingual capabilities in students and staff
- develop a better understanding of local history or Australian history



Case study: Centenary Heights State High School

In 2010, Centenary Heights State High School was awarded \$500 000 to maintain and improve an outstanding school–community partnership with The Older Men’s Network (TOMNET), the University of Southern Queensland, Rotary East Toowoomba, the Toowoomba Regional Council, and the Friends of Flexi network.

At the time of its NAB Schools First application in 2010, the school comprised 1193 students from the regional city of Toowoomba and the surrounding rural communities in southern Queensland. Of these students, 70 attended the annexed Toowoomba Flexi School campus, which provides relevant educational opportunities to break the cycle of disengagement for students faced with significant social and emotional disadvantage.

The school faces particular challenges arising from some of the issues affecting their students, such as homelessness, drug abuse, single parenting or mental illness.

To help address these issues, a school–community partnership involving 50 members of TOMNET provides volunteer support within the school. TOMNET’s membership is made up of retired professional men and tradesmen from around the region. The volunteers visit the school weekly to interact with and mentor students, improving their numeracy and literacy and undertaking specific projects, such as gardening, cooking and trade work. They also support the unit financially through donations of money to purchase equipment, improve the facilities and provide food for students. The University of Queensland produced an online Mentoring Training Program,

a Governance Group oversees the planning for the students and provides human resources to undertake activities, Toowoomba Regional Council provides the facility where the activities are held and Toowoomba East Rotary provides financial support for the projects.

The program has improved students’ health and wellbeing, with the school noting:

- a reduction in student drug taking and drinking
- a significant reduction in student smoking, and
- a reduction in student sick days and visits to the school nurse.

The impact on students’ vocational outcomes includes the following:

- 95 per cent of 2009 graduates have found employment
- 32 per cent of current students have a school-based traineeship
- 95 per cent of previously disengaged students are now motivated to take on work placements or work experience, and
- there has been a significant increase in regular student attendance.

School staff members have also benefited, because the exceptional experience, skills and knowledge of the TOMNET volunteers makes them an invaluable resource and support for teachers.

There have also been benefits for the wider community and the partner organisations, such as TOMNET, as the program keeps senior volunteers active, connected with their community and less prone to depression.

- increase knowledge and appreciation of other cultures
- generate greater interest in mathematics and science
- use science-based projects to connect students with the world outside school
- provide learning around livestock breeding, farm management, horticulture and agriculture
- teach students about the impact of human behaviour on the environment
- give students a better understanding of the workplace and of educational and vocational pathways
- improve students' physical and mental wellbeing, and
- provide opportunities for students to demonstrate leadership capabilities.

Many schools wanted to help improve the academic outcomes of specific sub-groups of students. Others wanted to extend the academic potential of highly able students.

The review shows that school–community partnerships benefit students and schools as well as the community, business and government organisations that partner with them, in a number of ways.

Students benefited through improved engagement and academic outcomes, wellbeing, and broader vocational options and skills.

School staff benefited directly from professional learning as a part of some partnerships, but also indirectly if the partnership resulted in improved behaviour of students, allowing teachers more time to concentrate on teaching, with less time spent on behaviour management.

Parents and families benefited from partnerships that focused on the whole family. They may have gained access to a range of services, including parenting support and counselling.

Partner organisations also benefited in a number of ways. Partnerships involving student community service contributed to the wellbeing of members of the

partner organisation, such as aged care residents. Employers had access to students and were sometimes able to address particular staffing or skill needs, and some organisations, such as environmental groups, were able to increase their volunteer base.

Community and business groups were exposed to new ideas generated by young people and developed a better understanding of the capabilities and potential of young people. They reported a sense of satisfaction from investing in the future of local youth and contributing to positive outcomes for the wider community.

Partners also benefited from positive local media attention and public acknowledgement. The resulting higher profile enabled partners to extend their reach to others in the community.

While the review found positive benefits for the partners involved, it also found that not enough businesses were committing to partnerships.

The majority of school partnerships were with community organisations.

Of the school–business partnerships, around half involved state or national corporations and around half involved local businesses.

ACER suggests that more could be done to support businesses in particular to develop partnerships with schools.

Schools clearly benefit from the skills, resources, ideas, training, mentoring and support that community and business organisations can offer. There are many activities and programs that community and business groups could be doing to support schools and, in return, many ways in which they can also benefit, including raising their profiles and expanding the reach of their services to others in the community.

To help build viable and productive partnerships with schools, community and business organisations could consider:

- Thinking about the kind of support that they could provide. For example,

what skills, expertise and interests do members of these organisations have? What could the organisations potentially offer to schools? What could schools potentially offer these organisations?

- Meeting with the local school to identify the particular needs or opportunities that exist.
- Community and business groups could also contribute to the data collection that has helped identify the needs.
- Identifying how the organisations and schools might work together to develop a program or project that would meet the school's needs, make good use of the partners' expertise, and bring benefits to all.

The review highlights the need for industry, business and government to invest more heavily in school–community partnerships. This conclusion is further supported by another recently-released report, the *First Interim Report of NAB Schools First: Evaluation of the 2009 awards*, by ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Robert Simons, which shows the positive impact of corporate investment into school–community partnerships on the capacity of these schools to deliver innovative and sustainable partnership programs that help bring about positive outcomes for students.

The *School–Community Partnerships in Australian Schools* report is available from <research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/7>

The *First Interim Report of NAB Schools First: Evaluation of the 2009 awards* report is available from <research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/6>

Applications for NAB Schools First Impact Awards for established partnerships and Seed Funding Awards for new or developing partnerships close on 29 July.

Further information about the program, including details of how to apply for 2011 awards, can be found at <www.schoolsfirst.edu.au> ■