Schools in their Communities

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Introduction

The idea of school-community partnerships is intuitively attractive because of the benefits they can facilitate. These benefits include availability and access to complementary services to strengthen the focus on learning for students and teachers, and opportunities for continuing learning and skill development for parents and others in the community.[1] However, there are also a number of practical challenges with the development of effective and sustainable school-community partnerships.

This Policy Brief considers three models of partnerships in schools and communities that have been developed during the last fifteen years in Australia in response to a variety of national, regional, local and community agenda for learning and wellbeing, lifelong learning, and improved learning outcomes. We call these three models 1) schools as community hubs; 2) schools as community learning centres; and, 3) schools as centres of learning excellence. The Brief also distils key success factors from the models.[2] It concludes with a number of policy recommendations designed to support the continuing development of school-community partnership models.

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Overview

There is strong empirical evidence internationally and locally that school-community partnerships support a range of enhanced outcomes for young people and their parents, and their schools and communities. Children benefit from family-school collaborations when their parents are provided with opportunities to shape their children's learning (Weiss, 2000; Epstein, 1995). Parents play an important part in school-community partnerships through the learning of their children, as well as by helping to prevent the disengagement of their children from school (Brighouse & Tomlinson, 1991, cited in OECD, 1997).[3] School-related programs that help parents to support their children's learning also bring about improvements in learning outcomes (Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Morrow & Paratore, 1993). Communities benefit from sharing the physical and human resources of schools and when schools become key employers and consumers of local goods and services (Kilpatrick et al., 2001; Lane & Dorfman, 1997).

One policy response to the idea of school-community partnerships came from the Department of Education and Training in New South Wales, which developed 'Full Service Schools'. These Schools were promoted as a *model of collaborative service delivery* to ensure that complementary forms of support were available to disadvantaged and at-risk students and their families.[4] Prominent among the stakeholders that became involved were not-for-profit organisations which focussed on health, mental health and sport. These were seen as important collaborators in promoting student wellbeing and achievement (McLeod & Stokes, 2000; Black, 2008, c.2).[5] The model's guiding policy goal was the provision of more equitable access to educational opportunities, accompanied by forms of support designed to enhance educational participation.

Subsequently, the development of school-community partnerships in Australia has been influenced by the demand for higher skill levels. For example, in January 2001, the Hon. Lynne Kosky, then Minister for Post Compulsory Education, Training and Employment in Victoria, announced the creation of 15 Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENS). This policy reflected the Victorian Government's commitment to the development of strong school partnerships with industry, local government and the community. The establishment of the LLENS sought to exploit the benefits to be gained from principals networking with leaders in a range of public and private organisations and agencies.

There have also been other developments. For example, to ensure that students acquire the skills and capacities to build on their potential, some schools have established networks or linkages with pre-schools, other schools, and tertiary institutions to support 'readiness for school' and 'readiness for work and/or further education/training' (Black, 2008, c.2; Brabek et al. (eds) 2003, c. 6). In other instances, community organisations have taken the lead. A consortium comprising the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Centre for Adolescent Health and AnglicareVictoria has looked at the linkage between primary and secondary schools. It released practical guidelines based on a model of home, school and community partnerships which emphasises student engagement particularly for the middle years of schooling. The guidelines appeal to evidence for the ways transitions between primary and secondary school may be improved for these students (Butler et al, 2005).[6]

Most recently, in order to ensure that that all students achieve at higher levels there has been a shift in the policy focus of school-community partnerships from population sub-groups to the way the Australian population as a whole compares internationally on metrics of excellence and equity. In particular, the improvement of learning outcomes for low SES and indigenous students to reduce gaps in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students is now seen as part of a broader population-wide concern to develop a highly skilled workforce across all of society. In this policy context, the focus has shifted to a *model of learning for the whole community* whereby the capacity for lifelong learning becomes the predominant rationale and goal for coordinating services (OECD, 2009; Productivity Commission, 2010).

Key models

It is against this background that the following three key school-community models have evolved:

- Schools as community hubs
- Schools as community learning centres
- Schools as centres of learning excellence.

Schools as community hubs

The *School as a community hub* model facilitates the co-location or collaborative provision of a range of social services either in the school or in conjunction with the school. The goal is ready access for disadvantaged and at-risk students to complementary support to enhance student learning and achievement, as well as supplementary services that address barriers to learning. The rationale is threefold: 1) disadvantaged and at-risk children and their families require a number of complementary services to take advantage of education; 2) supplementary services also

support teachers in focusing on their educational responsibilities; and 3) supplementary services can make parents aware of services available for their own support and for encouraging their children to attain high achievement levels.

Earlier expressions of this model can be seen in Full Service Schools in NSW, Extended Schools in the UK, and Community Schools in the USA.[7] Schools as community hubs aim to have a simultaneous influence on learning and overall wellbeing, including physical, psychological and mental health. The model is particularly relevant for disadvantaged and at-risk students and their parents or carers. It presupposes the integration of services which provide a range of supports for the students and their parents or carers in centrally located schools.

Schools as community learning centres

The *School as community learning centre* model facilitates connections and links with pre-schools, other schools, and tertiary institutions, as well as with complementary social supports. It provides access for everyone in the community, not just children and their families, to opportunities to connect with learning. The goal which drives the coordination and provision of services in this model is the capacity for life-long learning. The rationale is threefold: 1) the need for learning and acquiring new capacities and skills does not stop with formal schooling; 2) in a global economy, progressively more sophisticated skills and capacities are required; and 3) lifelong learning is a prerequisite for the ability to adjust and adapt to changing capacity and skill requirements in the workplace.

Earlier expressions of this model can be seen in the whole of community learning model described in *Under one roof – the integration of schools and community services in OECD countries* (OECD, 1998) as well as in a report from the Australian Rural Industries and Development Corporation (Kilpatrick et al., 2002). In giving rise to positive outcomes for youth, whole of community learning partnerships have the potential to make significant contributions to the economic and social well-being of communities by building capacity for human and social capital. Both of these reports give examples of how the *School as community learning centre* model can benefit business and industry through training initiatives for adults as well as youth. All the communities that were studied identified cultural and recreational benefits from sharing of physical and human school resources, and most described economic benefits with the school as a key employer and consumer of local goods and services[8].

Schools as centres of learning excellence

The *Schools as centres of learning excellence* model places a premium on high performance levels for all students and facilitates the provision of support systems and services with that objective in mind. It takes on some elements of the previous two models. As with the community hubs model, the collaborative provision of supplementary services enhances educational participation, the engagement of parents in the learning of their children, and connections and links with other schools and learning institutions. The major difference from the community hubs model is the focus on all students, not simply those who are disadvantaged and at-risk.

Like the *Schools as community learning centres* model it emphasises the need for the capacity to continue learning in a global market for labour. The major difference from the *Schools as community learning centres* model is the dedicated priority assigned to high student performance levels for all students in comparison with all other objectives. The goal is uncompromisingly achievement at or above national and international benchmarks for all students.

In the United States, school-community partnerships designed to improve academic achievement have proliferated, often prompted by the public release of unsatisfactory student performance data (Brabek et al., 2003, p. 184). In the UK, the emphasis on schools becoming centres of learning excellence is reflected in the Specialist Schools Initiative (Penney, 2004, pp. 2-6). While there has not been an explicit earlier expression of the core academic outcomes model in Australia, four factors are contributing to the emergence of this model.

The first of these factors is the commitment of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade; and, to halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020.[9] The second is the evidence that high performing teachers can improve student outcomes in core areas (McKinsey & Company, 2007, p. 4).[10] The third factor, and a key component in halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements, is the administration of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).[11]

The fourth factor is the national and international evidence showing that it is possible for schools in both developed and developing countries to improve outcomes in core academic areas for all students in a range of very different circumstances (Caldwell, 2009). The evidence supporting the *International Project to Frame the Transformation of*

Schools conducted in Australia, China, England and Wales, Finland, and the United States (Caldwell, 2009, pp. 19-36) is consistent with the McKinsey & Company's report (2007) on the world's best performing school systems and other reports using data from PISA 2006 related to science competencies (OECD, 2007).

Success factors

A number of success factors for the establishment and continuing development of school-community partnerships can be distilled from, and understood in relation to, the three models discussed above.

Principals' leadership for strategic alliances

Successful partnerships that focused on collaborative services had school principals who looked for agencies or services with which the school could form a 'strategic alliance'. These principals understood that the parties to a partnership or alliance had particular interests and priorities and that these needed to be acknowledged and respected. In addition, they understood the importance of developing 'two-way flow' and becoming an 'interdependent system'. An overarching strategy was critical in bringing together a number or cluster of different linkages to produce strategic and sustainable outcomes. With such a strategy, successful partnerships were able to nominate an achievable and sustainable outcome and remain outcome and result focused (McLeod & Stokes 2000, pp. 27- 29; Caldwell, 2006, pp. 117-125).

Local dispersed leadership for national goals

Under one roof (OECD, 1998) identified three foundational success factors for partnerships that focus on whole of community learning: 1) nationally set goals and standards; 2) empowered local authorities; and, 3) collective community leadership, particularly in rural settings. These factors were also in evidence in studies of whole of community learning in rural Australia, albeit with the greatest emphasis on local leadership. In rural settings, the commitment and leadership of school principals were critical in fostering closer ties between their schools and communities and in empowering others in these schools and communities to formulate and contribute to a shared vision (Kilpatrick et al., 2002, pp. 11-16). With the school bringing together physical, human and social capital resources, it comes to be viewed progressively by the community as a learning centre for the whole community (Kilpatrick et al., 2003).[12]

Broad agreement and accountability on evidence-based responses for a core academic goal

Core academic outcomes-based school-community partnerships have the potential to focus schools, families, policymakers, and community agencies on key academic milestones in children's lives. In this context, evidence-based strategies and responses are required to achieve a clearly stated goal. Equally important for a strong and clear goal, is a shared interest and support among constituents as diverse as funders, political leaders, and ethnically and economically diverse families. It is essential that a publicly accountable monitoring process is sufficiently transparent to allow constituents to assess whether or not particular initiatives are contributing to the achievement of the goal and partners are fulfilling their respective roles (Brabek et al., 2003, pp. 187-194).

The key success factors

In summary, the key success factors identified in the research literature suggest that policies to support successful school-community partnerships in Australia in the 21st century should focus on:

- enhancing leadership autonomy and flexibility for school principals to act strategically
- providing national goals against which teachers and other community leaders can respond to local needs
- dissemination of renewable evidence-based practice guidelines and accountability processes.

Key challenges and policy responses

The continuing development of the models of school-community partnerships identified above is contingent upon:

- decentralisation of governance (Caldwell, 2006, pp. 117-125)
- promotion of teaching excellence (OECD, 2005; Barber & Mourshed, 2007)
- replication of effective practice (Caldwell & Harris, 2008, p. 141).

This section now looks at the challenges to be faced in these three areas and proposes policy responses to each of them.

Decentralisation of governance

It is clear that principals need local autonomy and flexibility to form effective school-community partnerships. They need decentralisation of governance so that they can generate the cooperation, trust and participation that

nurture a broad based sense of ownership and empowerment.[13]

A centralised model of governance has traditionally characterised state jurisdictions (Boyd, 1998, pp. 3-4). Australian Departments of Education provide differing degrees of autonomy to principals and school communities over budgets and in employing teaching staff (Masters, 2007, p. 12-13). Centralised governance tends to limit the leadership principals can provide in facilitating school-community partnerships. It can also impose regulatory processes that restrict their capacity and flexibility in the selection of teaching and administrative staff aligned with the vision, goals, and objectives of the school.

There are examples where a centralised model of governance supports the level of autonomy needed for school-community partnerships. The Victorian DET's (2005) guidelines for schools as community facilities in various types of settings are similar to the 'collective community leadership' cited by Kilpatrick et al. (2003) in rural settings. These guidelines emphasise strong cooperative relationships among the partners, entrepreneurial leadership and a willingness to make things happen; and shared arrangements that deliver benefits to both the school and the community (VIC DET, 2005, p. 6).

A policy framework is needed so that principals are empowered to adapt administrative arrangements, be responsive to the complexities of managing school-community partnerships and enlist the best teachers and staff for the learning needs of the school and community.

From this, the following policy recommendation flows:

> Principals should be given greater local autonomy and flexibility to be responsive to student, community and industry needs in developing school-community partnerships (Masters, 2007, p. 13).

Promotion of teaching excellence

The key challenge here is how school-community partnerships can support teachers in the development of educational skills which contribute to national learning goals. Research consistently shows that the single greatest influence on levels of school achievement is the quality of the teaching to which students are exposed (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2007, cited in Masters, 2007, p. 9).

Policies are required to ensure that teachers can develop their capacities for teaching excellence. Teachers need ready access to evidence about what works for whom and in which situations. Regular information about new developments

and research findings, as well as opportunities to 'share practice' with high performing teachers and schools, should also be readily available (Masters, 2007, p.10; Penney, 2004, p. 8).

From this, the following policy recommendations flow:

> The professional development of teachers should be supported and encouraged with more paraprofessional assistance and better access to evidence-based research and high quality teaching materials (OECD, 2005)

> Provision should be made for explicit standards for highly accomplished practice, credible methods of assessing whether teachers meet these standards, and accompanying financial recognition to retain excellent teachers in classrooms (Masters, 2007, p. 10).

Replication of effective practice

The basic challenge here is how the experiences and outcomes of successful school-community partnerships in particular locations can be replicated in other areas and regions while simultaneously respecting differing sets of local priorities, resources and needs. This challenge could be understood as 'scaling up' successful models, where 'scaling up' involves sharing effective programs, practices, or ideas so that their benefits can be spread more broadly (Weiss, 2010, p. 1). Scaling up also requires that successful school-community partnership models are able to incorporate the views, concerns and interests of various stakeholders while recognising opportunities for learning 'beyond the school fence' (Hayes & Chodkiewicz, 2003, cited in VIC DEECD, 2008, p. 25).

Evidence of what works and how to overcome barriers needs to be disseminated and shared effectively so that schools and communities can benefit from the lessons learned and build on the experiences of others. Building networks[14] between schools and school regions could be one way of ensuring that effective practice is disseminated widely and becomes the basis for broad based implementation.

In 2008, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development released New School Ties: Networks for Success.[15] This paper refers to networks that facilitate reform by addressing some of the systemic and structural barriers to success for children and young people facing disadvantage. It identified a number of factors that facilitate collaboration across Victorian schools and between schools and other agencies that could also strengthen teacher capacity in adapting to and responding to the challenges of a more complex environment.

A policy framework is also needed which can facilitate the dissemination and implementation of effective practice that assists teachers and school administrators to develop the skills and capacities for collaboration with relevant staff from other schools and community agencies, and with parents.

From this, the following policy recommendation flows:

> Structures should be established to facilitate the development of networks among schools and school regions for the sharing of innovations in effective practice in school-community partnerships (VIC DEECD, 2008, p. 26).

Conclusion

Despite differences in starting points and levels of priority assigned to particular goals and outcomes, the three school-community partnership models outlined here are ultimately complementary frameworks that can take in broader sets of goals and purposes as school-community partnerships mature and develop.

In some situations, however, systemic and structural barriers may stand in the way of further growth and development. The continuing growth of successful school-community partnerships may come to a halt if new organisational structures and forms of leadership cannot accommodate the growth. While there does not have to be a conflict between school-community partnerships, networking and existing educational jurisdictions, the challenge is to discover how jurisdictions and networks can influence each other to become more effective (Groves, 2008, cited in Caldwell, 2009, p. 8). Head teachers in England, who are participating in the specialist schools networks, have shown how networking can complement and reinforce jurisdictional lines of authority in supporting positive learning outcomes (Caldwell, 2009, p. 5).

The key challenges for the continuing development of school-community partnerships – decentralisation of governance, promotion of teaching excellence and replication of effective practice – require 'system re-design' to accommodate the challenges. Hargreaves (2008) has identified three 'reconfigurations' that will need to take place in the re-design of school systems: institutional reconfiguration from the autonomous school to multiple institutions; role reconfiguration facilitating co-construction among stakeholders; and leadership reconfiguration resulting in new staff structures and responsibilities. Among the three reconfigurations, Hargreaves (2008) considers leadership as the most critical (pp. 3-4). Leadership was also emphasised explicitly in the first two

success factors for school-community partnerships and is implicit in the third.

This Brief recognises that school-community partnerships in urban, regional and rural settings have the potential to contribute to improved educational outcomes for children and young people from disadvantaged as well as advantaged backgrounds. The keys to realising this potential are, first, a policy framework to leverage the resources that are already present in many schools and communities and, second, leadership in re-designing school systems so that they can accommodate and support the growth and development of school-community partnerships.

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Notes

1   The Coalition for Community Schools in the United States has developed a Rational Results Framework which makes the case for school-community partnerships being a primary vehicle for increasing student success and strengthening families and communities. See *Community Schools: Promoting Student Success – A Rationale and Results Framework* at http://www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/Results%20Framework2.pdf accessed 17 May 2010. The Coalition comprises an alliance of more than 170 national, state, and local organisations representing organisations engaged in community development and community building via education, family support and human services. The Coalition's mission is to mobilise the assets of schools, families, and communities to create a united movement for community schools to strengthen schools, families, and communities to improve student learning.

2   Model is understood as a framework in which partnerships are developed among stakeholders in a given community to connect human and material resources to achieve a number of possible outcomes. These include improvements either in the provision of complementary support services for enhanced learning and wellbeing, or access to opportunities for continuing / lifelong learning, or in core academic outcomes.

3   "…'Parents are an essential part of the learning process, an extended part of the pedagogic process' (Harris & Goodall 2007). The clear message of the research is that … schools should provide opportunities for parents to be learners themselves…." (VIC DEECD, 2008, p. 27). Unfortunately, forming links with parents remains difficult for many schools in such communities where parents' engagement with the school is influenced by their socioeconomic status and their own experience of education (Black 2008; Harris & Goodall 2007; Hayes & Chodkiewicz 2003 cited in VIC DEECD, 2008, p. 27)".

4   NSW DET developed resources that gathered evidence in support of partnerships in which families, schools and communities work together to improve student learning outcomes (NSW DET, 2003, p. 5; 2003a). The resources were developed to support school communities participating in the NSW Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) in three areas: quality teaching and learning; classroom and school organisation and school culture; and home, school and community partnerships.

5   Two evaluations of Full Service Schools were undertaken: 1) Kemmis (2000). *The Full Service School Story*, Australian Centre for Equity through Education, Sydney; and 2) McLeod & Stokes (2000). *Linking Schools and Communities Program – An evaluation*, The Youth Research Centre Faculty of Education University of Melbourne, The Australian Centre for Equity through Education, Sydney.

6   Durlak, J.A., Common risk and protective factors in successful prevention programs; American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1998;68: 512-20; Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional and academic learning; American Psychologist 2003;58:466-74; and, Kaftarian S, Robinson E, Compton W, Davis BW, Volkow N. Blending Prevention Research and Practice in Schools. Prevention Science 2004;5:1-3, cited in Butler et al., 2005; and, Trickett EJ, Kelly JG, Vincent TA. The spirit of ecological inquiry in community research. In Susskind EC, Klein DC, eds. Community Research Methods, Paradigms and Applications, pp 283-333. New York: Preager, 1985;

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7   See respectively ACEE (1997) Making it work – the next steps: full service schools and communities: presentations from a national conference; Coleman, A., 2006, *Lessons from the extended school*, National College for School Leadership, Nottingham at http://www.ncsl.org.uk/media-56a-63-lessons-from-extended-schools.pdf accessed 17 May 2010 and, the Coalition for Community Schools at www.communityschools.org accessed 17 May 2010 using public schools as hubs, to bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities.

8   Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick, 2001 and Lane & Dorfman, 1997 also noted that communities develop an enhanced capacity to manage change when they evolve as learning communities.

9   The Australian Government has set three major priorities for schooling reform as part of addressing Indigenous disadvantage: raising the quality of teaching in our schools; ensuring all students are benefiting from the schooling they receive, especially in disadvantaged communities; and, improving the transparency of schools and school systems at all levels at www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/schooling/Pages/default.aspx accessed 25 May 2010.

10   In addition to its own research, the McKinsey article referred to two other supportive pieces of research confirming the importance of high performing teachers: Caldwell, B., *Rudd has a Long Way to go to Become the Education Prime Minister,* Sydney Morning Herald, December 6, 2007; and, Hattie, J. (1992), *Towards a Model of Schooling: A Synthesis of Meta-Analyses*, Australian Journal of Education, 36.

11   The NAPLAN tests were introduced in 2008 for all Australian school children in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. NAPLAN tests are designed to provide clear measures of improvement in learning outcomes through longitudinal data that will provide indicators of progress in halving the gap according to the projected timeline.

12   Caldwell, 2008, cc. 3-6, and Caldwell, 2009, pp. 30-31 offer alternate breakdowns of the relevant 'capitals' as intellectual, social, spiritual (wellbeing), and financial.

13   See Bennett, N, Wise, C, Woods, P, & Harvey, JA, 2003, *Distributed leadership: full report,* National College for School Leadership, Nottingham. Available at: http://www.ncsl.org.uk/publications-index.htm cited in VIC DEECD, 2008, p. 25 for an extensive review of the literature on distributed leadership.

14   "'Network' is one of a number of terms including 'partnership', 'cluster', 'alliance' 'collaboration', … that describes groups of organisations and sectors working together. This language is often used interchangeably to describe what is actually a multitude of different connections" (Department for Victorian Communities, 2007) cited in Black, 2008. Black further notes that networks can be formal or informal, expert or representative, centralised or decentralised, geographical or virtual.

15   Office for Policy, Research and Innovation, Paper No.15.