Preparing 21st Century Learners: The Case for School-Community Collaborations

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Highly effective schools have high levels of parent and community engagement.[i] 'Community' here includes parents, business and philanthropic organisations, and various services and not-for-profit groups. How 'engagement' is defined and what it looks like in practice will vary from school to school. But, as the growing body of research makes quite clear, support from those beyond the school gates is an essential part of preparing learners for the twenty-first century.

Schools are expected to prepare students for a complex and rapidly changing world. In addition to teaching subject content, schools are expected to develop young people who are information and media literate; critical thinkers and problem solvers; communicators and team players. They are expected to teach environmental awareness and civic responsibility and various other transferable and lifelong skills. Schools are seen to have an important role in enhancing wellbeing so that students can realise their full potential, cope with the stresses of life and participate fully in their community. Increasingly schools are expected to educate young people to behave responsibly in relation to drugs and alcohol, cyber safety, road safety and their sexual health. Schools cannot be expected to do this alone.

In the 1950s and '60s there was little interaction between schools and the wider community. Parents might attend parent teacher nights or visit their child's school during Education Week but schools in this era were more likely to have 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' signs on their perimeter than welcome mats for community groups. What went on in schools was not seen to be the business of the community.

In the past few decades, a different kind of relationship between school and community has emerged. Rather than being set apart from the rest of the community, the school is now often seen to be its hub. The community, in turn, is seen as an important source of resources and expertise for the school. For many rural and remote schools in Australia, the notion of schools and communities coming together has a longer history. Research shows that schools in these locations have often been both physically and symbolically a central place and focus for the community.[ii]

It is reported that in England 300 000 companies in 2008 engaged with education through the National Education Business Partnership Network.[iii] Both overseas and in Australia policy conditions are encouraging new social connections between schools and communities.[iv] For example, at a national level, the federal government has signalled its commitment to fostering greater business engagement in education with the establishment of the Business-School Connections Roundtable. In late 2010, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development launched the Business Working with Education Foundation, which is intended to foster business and school partnerships. Perth-based philanthropy umbrella group, Giving West, was established in 2010 to increase philanthropic investment in, among other areas, education by the state's wealthy.

School-community engagement can take many different forms, ranging from informal arrangements that might only involve a one-off activity, service or gift to more complex

partnerships with formal governance arrangements and programs that are developed and implemented over several years.

Research undertaken by ACER as part of the NAB Schools First program shows that community partners have conducted training sessions across a wide range of topics, provided relevant work experience for students, offered industry experience for teachers, helped teach specific skills and knowledge related to the curriculum, organised field trips and camp activities, showed students potential career and study pathways, worked with students to improve the physical environment of the school, provided social contacts within the community and given students greater awareness of the services available for young people.[v]

In broad terms, school-community engagement can bring social, intellectual, financial, psychological and performance benefits. Social benefits may include new, stronger or more diversified networks of support. Intellectual benefits relate to the development of improved or new knowledge and skills. Financial benefits can be in the form of funding activities associated with the relationship or a by-product of the relationship. Psychological benefits are associated in the literature with improved wellbeing, morale and feelings of making a difference. Performance benefits are associated with improved capacity and capabilities in organisations and individuals.

The nature of the benefits, and those who benefit, will depend on the original purpose in setting up the school-community relationship. For example, staff in schools, business, philanthropic foundations and trusts, and community organisations gain from being exposed to professional learning and training opportunities. Teachers and principals can strengthen and in some cases develop new knowledge and skills in project management, human resources, budgeting and marketing. Businesses can meet their corporate responsibility goals, be exposed to the innovative thinking of young people, and potentially have access to a more highly skilled future workforce in the local area. New possibilities for work and economic ventures can emerge.

Partnerships can lead to better interagency collaboration, greater understanding of the issues affecting young people in their communities, and greater connection between community partners and other families and groups. Communities can also benefit from the tangible products that are associated with some partnership programs, such as community gardens or environmental programs, and from young people who feel more connected to their communities through their participation in such programs. In turn, this can lead to enhanced community confidence. For example, some schools in the NAB Schools First program report fewer street offences and substance abuse issues than previously as a result of partnering with local community groups.[vi]

Governments, too, benefit from schools connecting more strongly with business and community groups. These kinds of relationships can help grow local economies and potentially reduce the costs of service provision through less duplication of services and shared responsibility.

Regardless of the nature or longevity of the engagement, the primary motivation for school-community collaborations should be about improving outcomes for students.

ACER's research shows four main outcomes that schools are hoping to achieve when entering into partnerships: increased student engagement, improved academic outcomes, enhanced social wellbeing and/or broader vocational options and skills.[vii] Within these categories more specific outcomes may be identified, such as improving reading as an academic outcome.

Engagement-related benefits include having an enriched curriculum as a result of interaction with external partners; enhanced professional learning opportunities for teachers; improved student attendance; reduced anti-social behaviour; improved quality of student work; improved work

ethic at school; greater cultural awareness and empathy (for example, better appreciation of the needs of the elderly and greater respect for past generations); and more positive student-teacher relationships.

It can be more difficult to show a direct causal connection between academic outcomes and school-community collaborations. Some schools in the 2009 NAB Schools First p reported a new culture of academic excellence. Others reported a deeper understanding of particular subjects (such as improved musical, carpentry or photography skills) or improved literacy, numeracy, communication or ICT skills. Others reported enhanced critical and analytical skills, improved understanding of nutrition and the benefits of exercise and greater awareness of ecology. Some schools were also able to show a better integration of theory and practice in subjects as a result of partnering with business and community groups.

Wellbeing-related benefits are reported to include improved relationships with peers and family; increased confidence and self-esteem; higher aspirations for the future; taking the initiative through improved goal setting and time management, teamwork and conflict resolution; leadership skills; greater ability to learn independently; healthier lifestyle habits; a more positive outlook on life and increased awareness of the work of community groups.

Among the vocational outcomes identified for students were more realistic perceptions of post-school options; a better understanding of education pathways; better access to training and paid work; improved school-based expertise; a recognised qualification; knowledge of Occupational Health and Safety issues; employability skills; and leadership skills.

Despite the clear benefits that can come from schools engaging with their communities, these kinds of collaborations are not easy to build or sustain. Not all school-community partnerships run smoothly. Finding potential partners and resources, knowing who might have the professional expertise to advise and guide program development, gathering information about an area of identified need, knowing how to monitor and evaluate the impact of a collaboration all take time and require different kinds of knowledge and skills.

For example, in partnership with The Ian Potter Foundation and the Origin Foundation, ACER is researching the impact of philanthropy in education through the project Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy (LLEAP). Among the findings in year one was the importance of laying sound foundations for effective school-community engagement.[viii] From the fieldwork analyses, ten factors for highly effective engagement were identified. These included evidence of role clarity, reciprocity, alignment of objectives and values, and the education-philanthropy relationship having a focus on impact.

Ethical considerations can inhibit partnering. Some schools, for example, are wary about engaging with business. There is scepticism that businesses might enter into collaborations for no other reason than to promote commercial products and services. This is why there needs to be clarity around the type of relationship a school is entering into. Sponsorship, for example, is not a gift. It is reasonable to expect that a relationship with a school configured around sponsorship will have commercial returns on investment at its core: brand building, expanded networks, selling of products or services. The Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations is currently preparing a publication on school-business principles that will assist schools and businesses in making decisions based on their respective institutional values.

There is also a degree of scepticism in some quarters that, by encouraging school-community collaborations, governments are somehow being 'let off the hook' in terms of the investment they could otherwise be making in public schools. While this tension needs to be identified and

acknowledged, it is not an argument against entering into these kinds of collaborations. Research shows clearly that both schools and communities can benefit from working together to improve outcomes for students.

Knowledge about school-community collaborations is a developing area of research and practice in schools. But a consistent finding from the research in Australia and overseas is that strong school-community engagement can bring a range of benefits. These are not only to students but to teachers, schools as a whole, partners and the wider community. For these benefits to occur, school-community partners need to have a shared vision, work in genuinely collaborative ways, and monitor the progress and effectiveness of their partnership activities. Sharing the results of this good practice means others can recognise the important role that community groups can play in supporting education and schools. Preparing twenty-first century learners depends on everyone in the community seeing this as their business.

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[vii] Ibid.

[viii] Anderson, M and Curtin, E. (2011). LLEAP: Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy, 2011 survey report, ACER, www.acer.edu.au/lleap.