



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: ARACY  
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### Summary

Australia's schools could potentially play a far more valuable role in their communities than the current focus on children's schooling allows. There is emerging domestic and international evidence supporting school-based community hubs or partnerships to improve children and young people's outcomes, enhance parent engagement, and strengthen communities.

The traditional model of schooling sees a school used almost exclusively for teaching children during school hours in term time, and for teachers and administrators to prepare for that primary use. This is an outdated model. Approaches that involve extension of learning more broadly have been shown to be successful both internationally and in Australia, not only in improving learning in the community but also in engaging the community in children's learning and thus improving education outcomes for those children.

This submission provides an overview of Australian models, what benefits they can provide to children and their families, schools and communities, and how the promising efforts to date could be built upon.

This submission concludes with recommendations to promote school-community hubs and partnerships, to enable better access to school resources and local services and supports. It supplements previous submissions to the review, particularly that from the Australian Parent Engagement Network which explores how institutional and systemic change can enhance school engagement with parents and communities.

### Main submission

Increasing schools' capacity and motivation for participating in community-based partnerships and service provision can be an effective way to help meet the needs of children that go beyond the formal education setting, but are often critical to their learning outcomes.

The literature on international models supports the findings emerging from initial evaluations of Australian school-based community hubs and partnerships. As a service model they have been shown to result in improved outcomes for children, young

people and their parents across multiple domains (educational, health, employment, social and emotional well-being). Central to this is the meaningful engagement of schools with families and community partners, and vice versa.

There are three elements to the case for making better use of school infrastructure:

1. Improved learning in the community. Schools provide resources that can be helpful not only for children but for others in need of assistance and support in learning. As learning increasingly is seen as life-long and highly variable in its nature, such support will become more and more necessary.
2. Improved learning for the children at the school. The evidence about parent and community engagement in improving outcomes is overwhelming (see separate submission to the Inquiry from the Australian Parent Engagement Network). The more schools can be part of and engaged with their communities, the more likely community engagement is to happen, with the consequent flow on benefits to children.
3. Economic use of infrastructure. School buildings and grounds are (with some very well regarded exceptions) highly under-used assets, sitting vacant for a majority of their working life. Greater use for alternative purposes can, when properly managed, be a win-win for schools (income generation, greater interaction) and communities (enabling greater use of easily accessible infrastructure).

The following recommendations are based on the known features of successful school-community partnerships, and common challenges faced by schools and their communities.

1. Develop a national policy framework for school-community partnerships

Australian efforts to date are a mix of specific place-based initiatives (e.g. The Murri School, Challis), some State-based policy frameworks (eg Qld DET) and models targeting population groups (e.g. the National Community Hubs Program). A national policy framework for school-community partnerships could build on this work and provide the necessary leadership for further work.

Such an approach could, at a minimum, set common goals, as a guide to good practice and core principles, such as:

- schools to be encouraged and resourced to engage with parents, local community service providers, local employers and the community, to enhance social inclusion and cohesion;
- as a universal service, schools are in a key position to develop cross-sector collaboration (i.e. early childhood education/preschool; health and welfare

services, social and sporting groups) to better meet community needs, including disadvantaged families;

- community and parent engagement should be part of schools' 'business as usual' functions;
- the impact of school-community partnerships can extend beyond child-centred outcomes to building the capacity of parents and local communities; and
- recognition that building trust and reciprocity among parents, communities and other entities requires time and should be a long-term goal.

Immediate, practical actions to embed a national approach could include:

- Undertake a stocktake and meta-analysis of current models of school-community partnerships and their evaluated impacts; and
- Development of a national resource on good practice in developing school-based community partnerships - such as an information clearing house - drawing on the various State and national guidelines current.

### 2. Improve school resources and support for meaningful community engagement

One of the barriers identified in developing school-community partnerships is the perception that that it is not within the school's remit, or that they do not have the capacity to be involved (Horn et al, 2015; O'Donoghue and Davies, 2010). Possible actions that could address this include:

- support the professional development of practising teachers and pre-service teachers in parent and community engagement;
- authorize and support principals in engaging with communities and families, and better utilising the school's own physical and social assets [eg building and grounds during non-school hours];
- from the principal down, school staff are encouraged to develop and practice the cultural sensitivities which will enable them to best respond to their local community's needs; and
- develop opportunities for joint professional development and improved liaison between school staff, community service providers and community groups.

### 3. Routinely plan for formal partnerships

The following questions should be considered in the planning of school-community partnerships and coordinated service delivery, preventing the overburdening of school staff and ensuring that appropriate resources and infrastructure are provided:

- What partnerships are being sought, and what are the shared goals and outcomes for the short, medium and long-term?
- What existing school and community resources and assets can be used?
- What additional resources and infrastructure are required?

Further information:

What is a school-based community hub or partnership?

A 'community hub' most often refers to a physical place where multiple community services, events or activities can be accessed by the public (Rossiter, 2007). The integration and coordination of services and activities has since surpassed co-location as the central tenet of community hubs (Hellmundt, 2015), shifting the focus from a physical place to a model of collaborative service provision and partnerships with families and communities.

A school-based community hub refers to an integrated and collaborative partnership model catered to meeting the educational, health and wellbeing needs of children and families in a localised area. It is place-based and family-centric. It utilises primary and secondary schools' physical assets (outdoor and indoor spaces) and social assets (participation of school staff and principals, and existing social and professional networks). These partnerships are supported by meaningful engagement with families, the broader community and service delivery organisations. This definition reflects that used in the general literature (CCCH, 2017; DECD, 2017; Sanjeevan et al, 2012).

Current practice and evidence

Schools across Australia are already initiating and participating in school-community partnership activities (ACER, 2013, 2010; DET, 2015). The following are some examples of school-based community partnerships rolled-out and supported at a state and national level:

- National Community Hubs Program based on the earlier Supporting Parents—Developing Communities Program implemented in the City of Hume, Victoria. It consists of 39 community hubs across three states: Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland (Press et al 2015; Wong et al 2015) (<http://www.communityhubs.org.au>)
- South Australia Learning Together program (<https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-and-learning/early-childhood-education-and-care/playcentres-playgroups-and-parenting/learning-together-program>)

- South Australia Schools as Community Hubs Program – A practical guide (<https://www.decd.sa.gov.au/sites-and-facilities/community-use-facilities/schools-as-community-hubs>)
- Smith Family supported school-community partnerships (<https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/programs/community/school-partnerships>)

Several schools and centres in Victoria have also undergone a process of co-location and integration of education, early learning, health, vocational and family support services, supported by formal partnerships (DET 2015):

- Hume Central Secondary College
- Sherbrooke Early Learning Centre (not co-located but in close proximity to a local primary school)
- Moe PLACE (with Moe South Street Primary school)
- Yille Park P-8 Community College
- Frankston North (with Monterey Secondary College, Aldercourt Primary School and Mahogany Rise Primary School)
- Doveton College

Schools in Brisbane (Murri School, also known as the Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School; <http://www.murrischool.com>), and Western Australia (Challis Community Primary School; Minderoo Foundation, 2014) have similar formal partnerships with early learning, health, family support and vocational services for integrated wrap-around delivery to students and their families.

Evaluations of these models and similar ones in the United States and Canada (see Toronto First Duty, School of the 21st Century, Harlem’s Children Zone and Child Parent Centres in Chicago; Black 2008; Dobbie & Fryer, 2010; Fox et al, 2015; Reynolds et al, 2011) show a variety of benefits and positive impacts on children and young people, their families, schools and communities, such as:

- improved educational outcomes for children and young people (such as literacy and numeracy results; The Healing Foundation, 2017; Fox et al 2015; Sanjeevan et al 2012; Dobbie & Fryer 2010);
- increased school attendance (Sanjeevan et al, 2012);
- improved early cognitive and social development outcomes for children (DET, 2015; Minderoo, 2014);
- improved school readiness of first year primary school students (CCCH, 2017; Minderoo, 2014);

- a reduction in emotional and behavioural problems among students (The Healing Foundation, 2017); and
- sustained health outcomes for children and young people as they progress into adulthood (Reynolds et al, 2011; Fox et al, 2015).

Partnerships between schools, early childhood, family support, health and vocational services have been shown to increase parents' engagement, and sense of connectedness to the school, other families, and other local and community service systems (Wong et al, 2015). They can also create greater aspirations among children, school students, their families and the community (DET, 2015). The integration of early childhood services, preschools and schools in particular have been shown to support trusting relationships between school staff and parents and increase collaboration between preschool and school staff (Rushton et al, 2017) resulting in a smoother transition for first year primary school students (CCCH, 2017).

Programs involving multiple service partners (including schools) can enhance the collaboration and coordination between these services, if the starting point is the needs of children. The evaluation of school-based community hubs in Victoria showed promising evidence that the integration of early childhood education and schools with community services resulted in a more effective use of resources and infrastructure (DET, 2015). This increase in the effectiveness of coordination and collaboration was also shown to improve a school's ability to respond to a child's needs (The Healing Foundation, 2017; Press et al, 2015; Wong et al, 2015; DET, 2015; Sanjeevan et al, 2012), resulting in earlier detection of and intervention for developmental issues among children (DET, 2015) and improved access to community services (Wong et al, 2015).

In addition to the benefits outlined above, community hubs that provide services and support sensitive to the cultural background of their students have also been shown to:

- increase cultural competency of schools (Wong et al, 2015); and
- strengthen connection to culture among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (The Healing Foundation, 2017).

The school-community partnership noted above vary substantially in their nature and focus. Most are focused on children and parents with particular needs in specific locations, eg in areas with high refugee populations. While such variations may reasonably reflect local needs, there may be scope for greater consistency at least at the level of goals, broad approach and good practice. In short, there is scope for greater national leadership to promote and enhance school-community partnerships as a business-as-usual approach.

## Features of effective school-based community hubs

In broad terms, the literature suggests that outcomes outlined have been achieved using place-based approaches, and also comprise these features:

- Working in collaboration: collaboration with parents and across sectors should be a central component, based on soft factors (trust and reciprocity) and hard factors (resources and capability).
- Building integrated service systems: factors such as shared goals and a common vision based on children's needs, rather than inflexible program guidelines.
- Engaging disadvantaged or vulnerable families: a strength-based or empowerment approach to build local capability is effective.
- Family friendly service systems: school-based community hubs are most successful when providing a welcoming and accessible space for all families. This also helps reduce the stigma for disadvantaged or vulnerable families needing to access targeted programs.
- Parent engagement: engaging in dialogue with families, building on family knowledge, training parents in leadership and facilitating parents to connect childrens' learning contexts are effective ways to facilitate home-school relationships (see ARACY's submission on behalf of the Australian Parent Engagement Network Engagement for more detail).

Simons (2011) also highlighted the following structural and governance features of a successful school-community partnership:

- 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; and
- the dissemination of renewable evidence-based practice guidelines and accountability processes;
- decentralisation of governance;
- supporting and promoting the professional development of teachers; and
- information sharing of what works (and does not, and why).

These factors are partly reflected in guidance material for educational authorities and schools (eg Qld DET (undated), SA DECD 2017, ACER 2016, AITSL 2015), but it appears that their take-up has been limited to date.