



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

Submitter: St Anthony's School Noble Park
Submitting as a: Other (Schools as Banks For Social Capital Project Manager)
State: Vic.

Summary

The Schools as Banks for Social Capital program has been added to the Australian Institute for Family Studies list of Promising Programs.

The list describes the program as:

Schools as Banks for Social Capital (St Anthony's Catholic Primary School) Develops the capacity between child and family support services and schools to help change, improve and enhance lives across local communities.

Key Findings include:

- The total number of partnerships recorded increased over time with a dramatic increase in the second year of the study; Schools noted the number and range of opportunities available to students, families and staff within the community was not something they could have predicted.

There was a measurable and positive change in staff attitude towards collaboration over the course of the study. At the outset, a notable number of staff at both schools expressed a lack of willingness to be involved. However, the end of the study documented evidence of teacher buy-in and a positive shift in perspective. Staff recorded an increase in the number of experiences working collaboratively and felt, on average, more clear about their role in the partnership, that goal were usually well articulated, there was effective communication, relevant personnel were involved, and that strong leadership was directing collaborative efforts.

- Schools need to continually develop staff professional knowledge around community-school collaboration and work towards securing staff support. Ongoing professional development, as opposed to training being delivered only at the beginning of the project, is vital to the success of the initiative, and research has highlighted that this is especially true for culturally sensitive contexts.

Main submission

Community-school partnerships' ability to improve outcomes for children, families and communities is continually being documented and projects nationally and internationally have demonstrated that highly effective schools are ones that have high levels of parent and community engagement (Adelman & Taylor,)

This report presents the findings from a two-year study of the developing collaboration between two Victorian primary schools and their community partners. The aim of the study was to learn about the workings of collaboration between the two schools and their communities to build social capital, assess their collaborative efforts, highlight elements that worked well, and identify opportunities yet to be seized.

When compared with other school-community partnership initiatives around Australia (Clerke, 2013), the sheer number of connections made, wide variety of partnering organisations and the range of needs being addressed at these two schools in a space of two years indicate the SBSC Project is on a trajectory to be amongst the more comprehensive of school-community collaborations in the country.

A discussion section in the report attempts to interpret the results and place specific findings in a wider context. This paper concludes with questions raised by the study and implications for the two schools' collaborative efforts going further.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was employed to reflect the views of families, the SBSC Project Worker, the Catholic Education's Cluster Engagement Leader, The two school Principals and community partners between March 2013 and December 2015. Surveys, interviews and telephone consultations were used to document stakeholders' feedback.

Participants included the SBSC Project Officer, Catholic Education's Cluster Engagement Leader, over 50 school staff across both schools, 71 partnering organisations / agencies / programs / community members, 33 families from Dandenong West Primary and 28 families from St. Anthony's Catholic Primary School.

All data obtained in surveys were collated and tabulated using Survey Monkey. Interview data analysis drew from both thematic and descriptive content analysis frameworks.

Findings

Key findings resulting from this study related to the evaluation of the collaborative efforts by families, project workers, principals and school staff and are as follows:

Findings: About the School-Community Collaborations

- The total number of partnerships recorded increased over time with a dramatic increase in the second year of the study; Schools noted the number and range of opportunities available to students, families and staff within the community was not something they could have predicted.

Number of Collaborations, Schools and the SBSC Project

1st year of study 2nd year of study

SBSC Project 10 21

St. Anthony's Noble Park 8 31

Dandenong West Primary 6 37

- Commonly identified by both schools and community partners were a list of strengths echoing previous research in the field around best-practice principles and inter-agency working, these included:
 - having a shared vision,
 - respectful relationships,
 - trust at an organisational level,
 - clear and open communication,
 - present and effective leadership,
 - being flexible,
 - the provisioning of the project worker/ dedicated staff,
 - willingness of staff,
 - supportive relationships and
 - access to a wide knowledge base and resources.
- An overall movement forward was recorded on the scale of collaboration for schools. A step towards the highest level being 'collaboration' indicates a step towards partnerships increasingly characterised by high trust, stable relations, thick communication flows, tactical information sharing, systems change, dense integration relations/goals, shared power, pooled collective resources and commitment and accountability (Keast, Glasby, Kerry, 2009, pp 6).
- In the first year, schools and the SBSC Project rated the majority (52%) of their collaborative activities as 'very successful – 75% of mutual goals met' or 'ideal'. In the second year of the study, this figure increased and steadied at

approximately 70% and the amalgamated figure consisted of slightly more partnerships being described as 'ideal' than as 'very successful'.

- There is a large body of literature available that can help explain the exact factors that have determined the success of SBSC Project up to this point. The appointment of a coordinator has been vital, and has allowed for a coordinated delivery model of inter-agency working whereby a wide range of services and programs have been tailored to meet a unique set of needs
- The SBSC Project Officer skill has been vital to the connection making and relationship building process. Community partners view the project workers as integral to the development of services and programs and thereby access to children and families. Without the coordinator role, relationships would likely deteriorate as school leadership and teaching staff lack the time and resources required to attend to the existing relationships, let alone seek out and develop new ones.
- The SBSC Project leadership has been stable committed and inclusive, qualities conducive to building a strong culture of collaboration.
- Relationship building takes time. Often, after the initial contact relationship building activities will go on for months before specific partnership ventures are discussed.

Findings: School Staff

There was a measurable and positive change in staff attitude towards collaboration over the course of the study. At the outset, a notable number of staff at both schools expressed a lack of willingness to be involved. However, the end of the study documented evidence of teacher buy-in and a positive shift in perspective. Staff recorded an increase in the number of experiences working collaboratively and felt, on average, more clear about their role in the partnership, that goals were usually well articulated, there was effective communication, relevant personnel were involved, and that strong leadership was directing collaborative efforts.

Findings: Families

Families highly valued the programs and activities offered by the schools as well as their relationships with the staff that deliver them. Families felt they were treated well and found facilitators easy to talk to and clear in their objectives. Services and programs on offer were meeting the needs of many families and almost all families indicated willingness to continue their involvement with activities at the school.

Considerations and Implications

- The SBSC Project Officer role is vital to the continued trajectory of the SBSC Project. In order to continue developing and maintaining a high number of partnerships tracking success in mutual goals and to eventually realize potential outcomes, it is recommended that ongoing support for the role of coordinator be secured.
- Many interagency-working models use a horizontal integration continuum to describe the different levels of intensity of joint working. It is plausible that the SBSC Project, if it were to continue on its current trajectory, would continue with the positive trend toward optimal joint working on the integration continuum.
- The schools were charting a path forward on the scale of collaboration. A step towards the highest level being 'collaboration' indicates a step towards partnerships characterised by high trust, stable relations, thick communication flows, tactical information sharing, systems change, dense integration relations/goals, shared power, pooled collective resources and commitment and accountability.
- The progress made over two years implies that, if allowed to continue, it is plausible that the SBSC Project would reach the relational time frame requirement described in other similar models and thus realise the associated outcomes.
- Schools need to continually develop staff professional knowledge around community-school collaboration and work towards securing staff support. Ongoing professional development, as opposed to training being delivered only at the beginning of the project, is vital to the success of the initiative, and research has highlighted that this is especially true for culturally sensitive contexts.