

The importance of community participation in the future of education

[Power Point slide 1]

Thank you for inviting me to be the keynote speaker at the Schools First national conference today.

It is very satisfying to see how successful the Schools First program has become.

From an idea first discussed over coffee in a Melbourne cafe in 2008, Schools First has evolved into a program that is making a genuine contribution to education in this country.

By celebrating and sharing good practice in school-community partnerships, Schools First reminds us of the importance of working collaboratively to improve outcomes for young people.

By sponsoring events such as today's national conference, Schools First brings together people with ideas, energy and goodwill to identify the ways in which we can support schools to achieve their goals.

It is clear that the topic of school-community partnerships requires a consideration of the role of government as well as community and that both local government and business are part of a local community.

Steve Bracks will be talking later today about the role of government and Adam Smith will be focusing on the role of corporations. My topic today is the important role of community participation in education. If I don't mention government or corporate support it is only because my colleagues will be exploring these topics later in the day.



By 'community', I mean organisations or groups in the local community that could assist schools to improve their effectiveness and contribute to the social capital and educational outcomes of students by working in partnership with schools.

Common examples include not-for-profit groups, local business, sporting clubs, service clubs (such as Rotary or the Lions Club) and local government, but there are many more examples of groups within a local community who could potentially work with schools.

I want to begin my presentation by considering six key features that are typically associated with highly effective schools.

By 'highly effective', I mean those schools that achieve high standards regardless of socioeconomic status or other factors commonly associated with disadvantage.

We know from educational research that highly effective schools have the following characteristics in common:

[Power Point slide 2]

Such schools have **strong and effective school leaders**.

These leaders are committed to fostering a culture of learning in their schools.

They drive school policies and set the school's improvement goals.

They recognise the importance of professional learning for their staff.

They are in regular, meaningful communication with their school communities and recognise the importance of building and sustaining partnerships beyond the school.

A second feature of highly effective schools is that they are **fundamentally committed to learning**.



Improving learning is the primary goal, underpinning all policies and practices, curriculum development, professional learning, and classroom teaching.

Teachers and principals in these schools believe that every student has the capacity to learn.

They have high expectations of their students.

They recognise and celebrate successful learning and high achievement.

In these schools, students are encouraged to value learning and academic achievement.

Learning is about more than high scores on national or state tests, however. It is about every child being equipped with the skills and knowledge to be able to contribute meaningfully to society.

A third feature of highly effective schools is that they have **well informed and skilled teachers**.

Teachers in highly effective schools have an excellent understanding of their subject areas.

They understand how children learn and can adapt their teaching to suit individual needs.

They provide their students with strong foundational skills in reading, writing and mathematics.

Teachers in these schools encourage critical thinking, creativity and problem solving.

They encourage students to be responsible for their own learning.

They give their students the skills to be lifelong learners.

A fourth feature of highly effective schools is that they have **outstanding school cultures**.

Students and teachers feel a sense of belonging and pride.



Students are engaged in learning.

The environment is safe and nurturing.

There is a culture of inclusion and respect for difference.

Parents and community members feel welcome and take pride in the school's achievements and approach to learning.

There is a commitment to continuous improvement.

A fifth characteristic of highly effective schools is the presence of **well developed evaluation and monitoring processes**.

These schools regularly review their policies and practices as part of an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement.

They collect a range of data to inform decision making.

They identify gaps early and develop appropriate measures to address these gaps.

They give timely feedback to students and encourage self-appraisal.

They provide parents with meaningful information about student performance.

Finally, and of most relevance to today's conference, highly effective schools are characterised by **high levels of parent and community involvement**.

Highly effective schools are seen as an integral part of their local communities.

They actively engage with business and community leaders for the benefit of their students.



Highly effective schools recognise the possibilities for support and enrichment that communities provide and, in turn, are willing to share their own resources with their communities.

Parents are encouraged to have an active role in supporting their children's learning.

Highly effective schools develop strong and reciprocal relationships with their communities to meet school goals and improve outcomes for their students.

Schools First is a timely reminder of the contribution that school-community partnerships can make to helping schools become more effective in meeting their goals.

Let's stop for a moment and consider how far we have come in our thinking about the role of community in education.

[PowerPoint Slide 3]

This slide shows (in a very simplistic and generalised way) the kind of relationship that used to exist between schools and their communities in the 1950s and '60s.

As you can see from this diagram, school and community were separate entities. There was little interaction between the two.

Teachers were expected to teach. Students were expected to learn and parents were expected to attend parent teacher nights and to visit their child's school once a year during Education Week.

In her speech at a Schools First function last year, Bronwyn Pike, Minister for Education in Victoria, reminded her audience of a time when schools had 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' signs on their fences.

Schools were enclaves and their inner practices were not seen to be the business of the community.



[PowerPoint Slide 4]

This slide shows a different kind of relationship between school and community.

In the twenty-first century, parents are now regarded as an integral part of the school.

Many small schools depend on the crucial work of their Parent and Citizens Associations to survive.

Rather than being set apart from the rest of the community, the school is now often seen to be the hub of the community.

The community, in turn, is increasingly being seen as an important source of resources and expertise for the school.

One reason for this evolving relationship is that schools and communities are recognising the mutual benefits that can come from collaboration. As Steve Bracks will also point out, education departments are also increasingly recognising the value of this kind of partnering.

We know from educational research that, when schools link up with community groups, a range of positive outcomes can occur.

The Schools First Impact Award winning applications from 2009 support the notion that community participation in education can make a significant difference to the effectiveness of schools in meeting their goals.

Today, I want to share with you some of the benefits that the 68 Schools First Impact Award winners have identified in their applications.



[Power Point slide 5]

The outcomes or benefits identified in the 2009 winning Impact Award applications fall into four broad categories.

- Vocational
- Engagement
- Academic
- Personal

These categories are largely self-explanatory.

Vocational covers outcomes related to work experience or vocational training.

Engagement refers to levels of student motivation and commitment to learning.

Academic refers to a wide range of learning outcomes, skills and subject knowledge.

Personal covers personal development, health and wellbeing, self-esteem and social skills.

I want to talk briefly about each of these categories of outcomes because this is original data that have been collected through the Schools First program.

ACER is currently undertaking an analysis of this data. Already we can see from the 68 Impact Award winning applications alone, the enormous benefits that community partners can bring to schools.

And, remember, these applications needed to provide clear and tangible evidence of student benefits derived from the programs that were implemented. The best applications were also able to show benefits to the school, partner and wider community.

As a result of these partnerships, schools and students benefited in the following ways:



[Power Point slide 6: Vocational outcomes]

- More realistic perceptions of post-school options
- Better understanding of education pathways
- Better access to training and paid work
- Improved school-based expertise
- A recognised qualification
- Knowledge of OH&S issues
- Employability skills
- Leadership skills

Community involvement in partnership activities also improved outcomes associated with student engagement:

[Power Point slide 7: Engagement outcomes]

- An enriched curriculum
- Enhanced professional learning opportunities for teachers
- Improved attendance
- Reduced anti-social behaviour
- Improved quality of student work
- Improved work ethic at school
- More positive student-teacher relationships

Establishing a direct causal relationship between partnership activities and academic outcomes is difficult. However, the Schools First award winning partnership activities have contributed to the following academic outcomes in these schools:

[Power Point slide 8: Academic outcomes]

- A new culture of academic excellence
- A deeper understanding of particular subjects
- Improved musical, carpentry, photography skills
- Greater cultural awareness and empathy
- Improved literacy / numeracy / communication / ICT skills
- Greater awareness of ecology
- Enhanced critical and analytical skills
- Better integration of theory and practice in subjects
- Better appreciation of the needs of the elderly
- Improved understanding of nutrition and benefits of exercise



The fourth category of outcomes is very broad these were among the most commonly cited benefits of community partners collaborating with schools.

[Power Point slide 9: Personal outcomes]

- Improved relationships with peers, family
- Increased self esteem, confidence, self-awareness
- Higher aspirations for the future
- Improved goal setting, teamwork, conflict resolution
- Improved leadership skills
- Greater ability to learn independently
- Healthier lifestyle habits
- Greater respect for past generations
- A more positive outlook on life
- Increased awareness of the work of community groups

It's important to remember that these outcomes have been substantiated using a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence.

How have the community partners contributed to these positive outcomes?

What role have they played in the success of these highly effective programs?



Here are some of the ways in which community partners have assisted schools to become more effective:

They have:

- conducted training sessions
- provided relevant work experience, including industry experience for teachers
- helped teach specific skills
- donated equipment and produce
- organised field trips and camp activities
- linked other community groups and support services with the school
- provided facilities, materials, advice, resources
- helped students with resumes and interview preparation
- helped students get drivers' licences so they could get to work
- helped students complete official employment-related documents
- showed students potential career paths
- worked with students to paint doors and buildings and improve the physical environment of the school
- helped create market gardens and harvest food produce from these
- provided social contacts within the community and given students a better awareness of the services available for young people

If community participation in education is so beneficial, how do we encourage these partnerships between school and community groups to grow and thrive?

One of the ways in which we might encourage greater community involvement with schools is by highlighting some of the clear benefits that such collaboration brings to community partners and the wider community.



[Power Point slide 10]

If we turn to the 2009 Impact Award winning applications again, we can see some of the benefits that are being reported for community partners.

Through partnering with schools, community partners have:

- exposure to novel and original ideas
- a better understanding of ‘at risk’ youth in their community
- a more highly skilled future workforce in the local area
- professional development for own employees
- improved efficiency through interagency collaboration
- extended reach to other families and groups
- public acknowledgement / positive media attention
- satisfaction from investing in the future of local youth

These are only some of the benefits documented in the 2009 winning applications.

There are also benefits to the wider community.

[Power Point slide 11]

Through school-community partnerships, the wider community has benefited from:

- tangible products, such as community gardens, an Internet café, food for families in need, income for community projects
- fewer street offences and substance abuse issues
- a better understanding of young people’s needs
- a strong sense of pride in the program
- new possibilities for work and economic ventures
- adult learning opportunities in areas of interest
- better delivery of targeted services
- more positive attitudes to education
- a greater sense of bonding as a community.



It is by continuing to highlight benefits such as these that we can help school communities to recognise the important role that community groups can play in supporting education and schools.

It is through programs such as Schools First that we can help school communities build robust and productive partnerships that will contribute to highly effective schools.

In conclusion, we can see from the rich and diverse range of outcomes that schools and students have benefited greatly from partnering with community groups.

If we can continue to promote the potential benefits for **community partners**, and provide the skills and information needed to build and sustain partnerships, then the **wider community** can also benefit from such collaboration.

I'd like to finish with a quote from one of our winning schools:

[Power Point slide 12]

'Our partnership has developed community spirit and a sense of belonging in students. Students have a sense of purpose in their lives.'

I think this sums up eloquently the important role that community participation in education can play.

