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School-Community Partnerships in Australian Schools

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School-Community Partnerships in Australian Schools

Australian Council *for* Educational Research



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1. Introduction

This report is based on an analysis of the data provided by Australian schools in their 2009 Schools First Impact Award applications. The data described the nature of the partnerships that schools had established with community and business groups, the reasons for these partnerships, the kinds of programs that were developed and implemented, and the effectiveness of the partnership/program.

These applications are a rich source of information about school–community partnerships in Australia. The report is organised around the following seven questions:

- What types of schools established partnerships?
- Who partnered with schools?
- What were the main reasons for setting up these partnerships?
- What evidence was used to identify student need or opportunity?
- How did partners contribute?
- What benefits were reported?
- What evidence was used to measure these benefits?

2. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to use the data provided in the Impact Award applications from 2009 to provide insights into the nature of the partnerships that schools have established around Australia. It is hoped the report will help:

- the Schools First partners to identify opportunities for the program in 2011
- schools to use data more effectively
- community and business groups to recognise some of the ways in which they could be involved and some of the benefits to be gained from partnering with schools.

3. Methodology

The report draws on information from the Impact Award applications submitted by schools and their partners in June–July 2009. There were 801 Impact applications describing discrete partnerships. An extensive process of data entry, cleaning, coding, interpretation and analysis was carried out. This challenging and time-consuming task is described more fully in Appendix A.

4. Findings

This section of the report summarises the information about school–community partnerships provided in the 2009 applications.

3.1 What types of schools established partnerships?

School Type

Figure 1 shows the number of partnerships that applied for an Impact Award in 2009. Each partnership is characterised by the type of school that made an application. The category ‘primary and secondary’ refers to schools that have some or all of the primary and secondary years combined, such as a P-12 school. While there were 801 discrete partnerships, some schools submitted more than one Impact Award application, meaning there were slightly fewer schools than the 801 partnerships. For the purposes of the analyses which follow, the applications are treated as if they were all made by individual schools. While this is not precise, it does allow differences

between the school types, sector, location and school type in the uptake of Schools First to be highlighted in a straightforward way. (These findings would not be substantially altered by adjusting for the schools making more than one application).

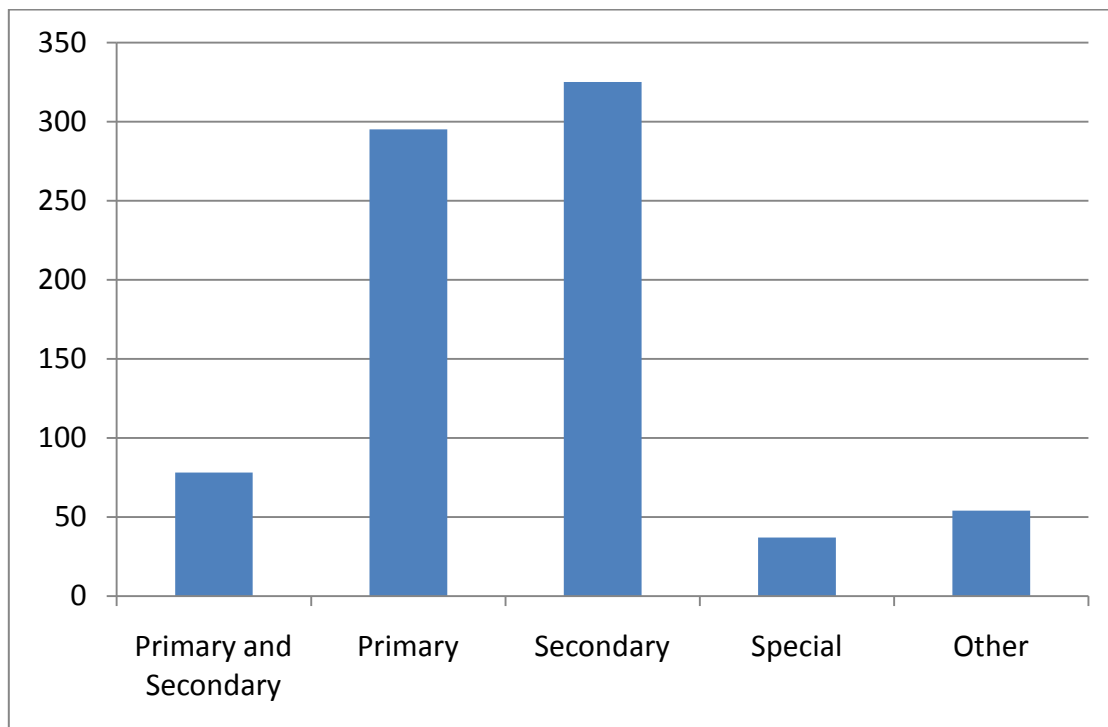


Figure 1 Number of partnerships by school type applying for an Impact Award

State/territory breakdown

Figure 2 shows the percentage of partnerships applying for an Impact Award by state or territory, compared with the distribution of all schools in Australia.

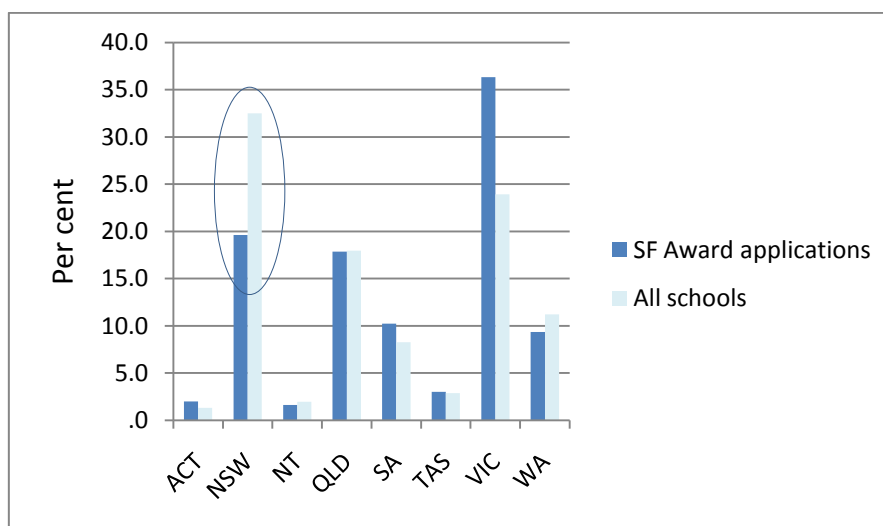


Figure 2 Percentage of partnerships applying for an Impact Award compared with the distribution of all schools in Australia by state or territory

Fewer than expected schools applied from NSW and more than expected applied from Victoria. All other states and territories applied around the expected rate. This suggests that NSW schools, regions and systems should be targeted for increased participation in Schools First.

Sector

Figure 3 shows the percentage of partnerships applying for an Impact Award by sector compared with the distribution of all schools in Australia.

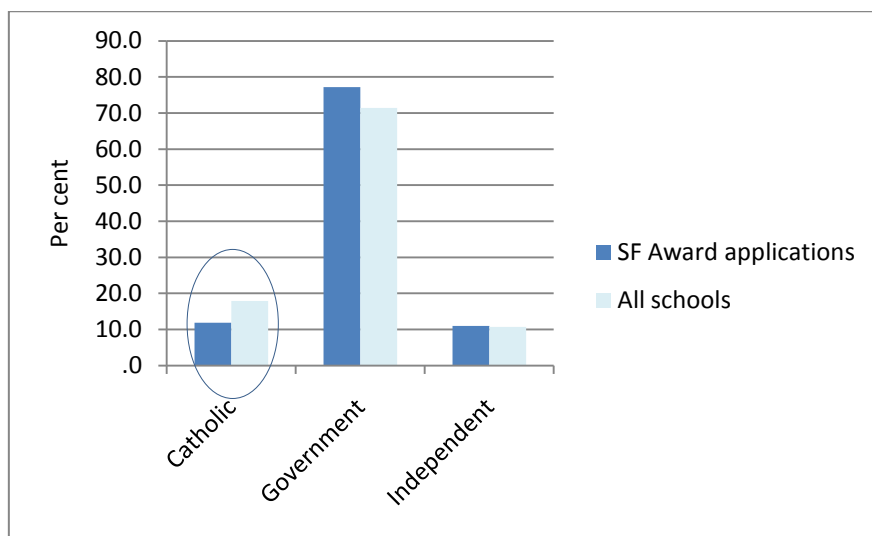


Figure 3 Percentage of partnerships applying for an Impact Award compared with the distribution of all schools in Australia by sector.

Figure 3 suggests that Catholic schools were a little less likely to apply than expected.

School Year Level

Figure 4 shows the percentage of partnerships applying for an Impact Award by year levels of the school compared with the distribution of all schools in Australia.

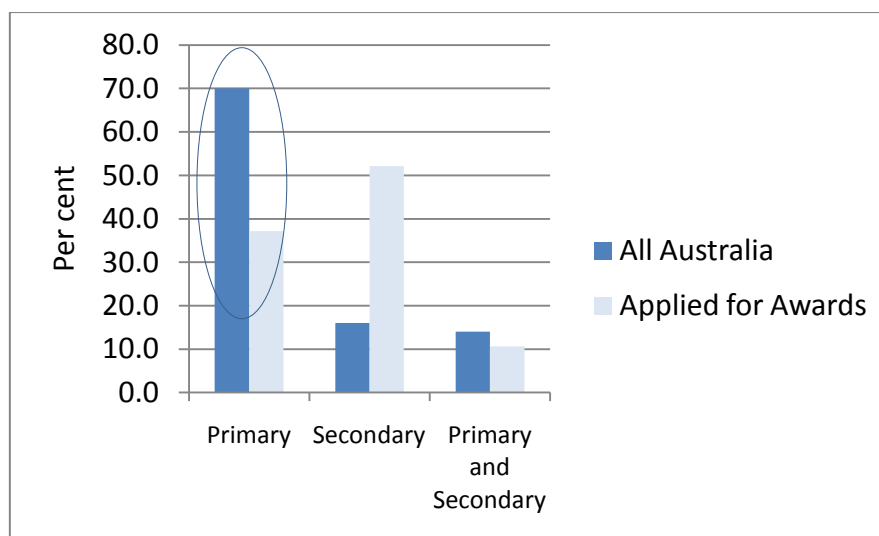


Figure 4 Percentage of partnerships applying for an Impact Award in 2009 by school level compared with the distribution of schools in Australia

Primary schools were much less likely to apply than expected, suggesting that primary schools should be targeted for increased participation in Schools First.

Target groups within schools

Most schools identified a specific group of students as the focus of their partnerships, with 'at risk' male students in Years 9 – 10 being a common target group.¹ In comparison with the high proportion of partnerships focused on boys, few focused on girls specifically. Students from refugee or ESL backgrounds, those at risk of leaving school early and Indigenous students were also popular targets for partnership-supported programs.

One partnership focused specifically on professional learning for teachers and several programs developed by partners sought to broaden the skills and experience of pre-service or trainee teachers.

3.2 Who partnered with schools?

The majority of schools had only one partner. Around 20 percent of applications referred to five or more partners. Those with large numbers of partners were generally associated with vocational programs being run with local industry providing work placements. In some schools the relationships were not necessarily partnerships in that the collaboration was either minimal or one-sided. A key feature of a successful partnership is that all partners benefit from the collaboration.

Based on the data provided, schools partnered with a wide range of groups and organisations, including:

- Government: local government (such as local councils and shires) and state or federally funded partners (such as research organisations, Government departments, and Local Learning and Employment Networks)
- Community organisation: health-related organisations, such as community or regional health centres; sporting clubs or associations; charities; community support services such as youth outreach centres; youth, family and disability services; and local community environmental groups, such as conservation and sustainability organisations. Community partners also included Rotary Clubs, charitable agencies, aged care facilities and the Returned Services League of Australia.
- Business: small local businesses (such as the local computer store or café) through to large multi-national corporations (such as BHP Billiton or *Nestlé*).
- Educational institutions: universities, TAFEs, Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), and apprenticeship centres.
- Other: This category included art galleries, statutory bodies, religious organisations and fee-for-service programs.

Figure 5 shows the percentage of applications for an Impact Award by type of partner.

¹ 'At risk' students are those who are either disengaged from learning or at risk of becoming so, and/or engaged in risk-taking activities that could compromise their health, safety, ability to gain employment or connectedness to the community.

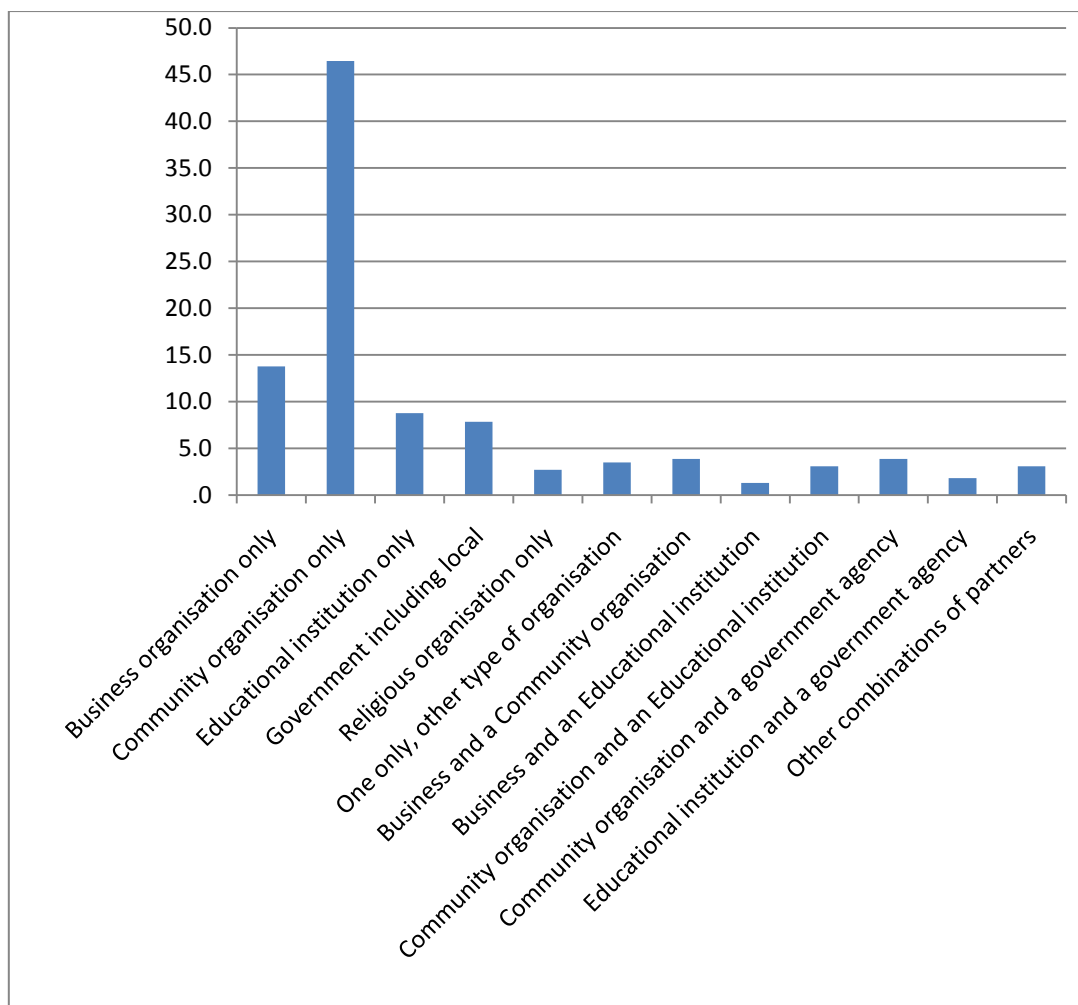


Figure 5 Percentage of applications for an Impact Award by type of partner

The most common partners chosen by schools were community groups. Only around 20 per cent of applications had a business organisation as one of its partners. The data show that Catholic schools were a little more likely to have a business organisation as their one partner (19.6 per cent), compared with the other sectors (around 14 per cent). Independent schools were a little more likely to have a community organisation as their one partner (54.8 per cent) compared with other sectors (around 44 per cent).

Figure 6 shows the percentage of applications within each state and territory applying for an Impact Award by type of partner.

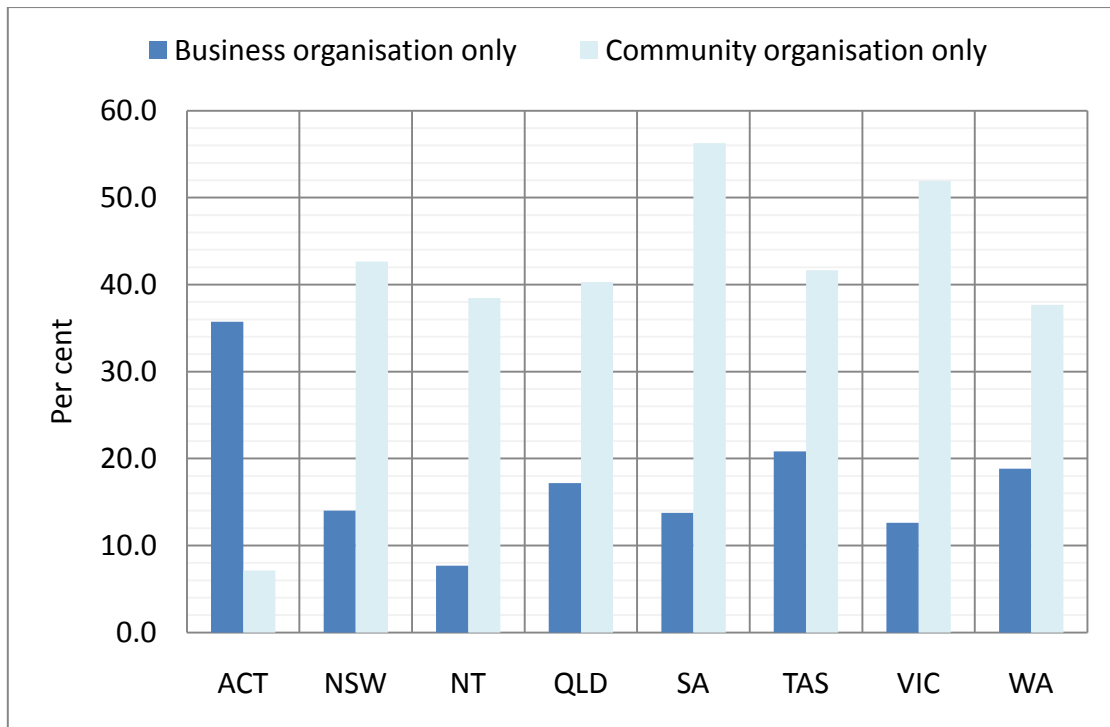


Figure 6 Percentage of schools within state or territory by type of partner(s)

Figure 6 indicates that ACT schools were more likely to have a business organisation as their only partner and South Australian schools were more likely to have a community organisation as their only partner.

Of those schools that partnered with business organisations, most chose local businesses rather than larger corporations or industries. Figure 7 shows a breakdown of business organisations by type.

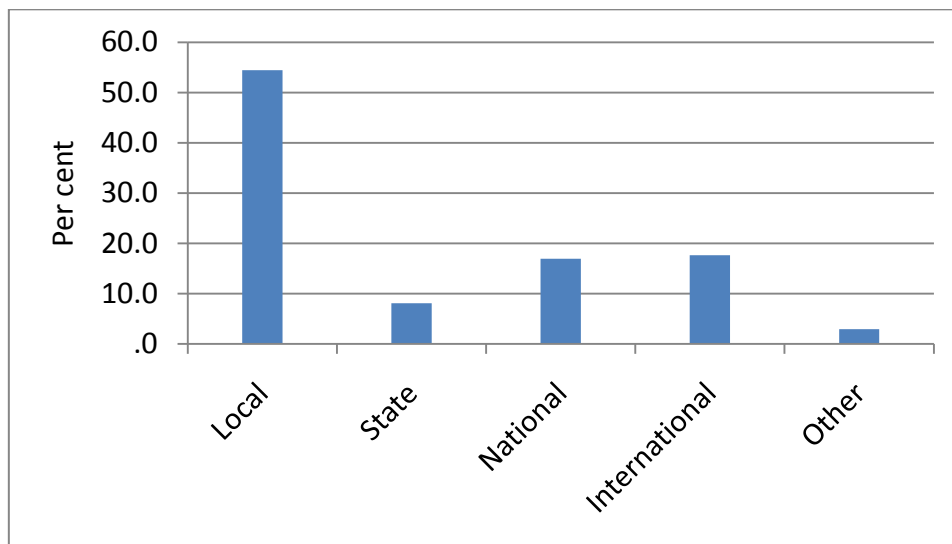


Figure 7 Percentage of business partnerships by type

Figure 7 shows that around 53 per cent of the business organisations partnering with schools were from the local community. Examples of local businesses partnering with schools included Cowell Oyster Growers, Naracoorte Health and Fitness Centre and Richmond Football Club. National organisations included the Housing Industry Association, Ardoch Youth Foundation, Capital Chemist

Group and Bunnings. International companies included Telstra, BHP Billiton Worsley Alumina Pty Ltd, Nestlé, Rio Tinto Alcan and Dow Chemical. 'Other' refers to those business partners where the nature or reach of the business was unclear.

3.3 What were the main reasons for setting up these partnerships?

The main reasons given by schools for forming partnerships with business and community groups were to:

- improve student engagement
- improve academic outcomes for students
- enhance the social wellbeing of students
- broaden vocational options and skills.

These overlap to some extent. For example, some schools wanted to improve student understanding of the environment, which was also associated with improving student engagement, increasing knowledge about the environment and informing students about future 'green career' options.

Improving student engagement

Many schools were motivated to form a partnership by the desire to re-engage students in learning. These partnerships focused on the emotional, behavioural or cognitive dimensions of engagement. With their partners, schools developed programs that would improve student motivation to succeed, reduce inappropriate behaviour, improve attendance at school, and reduce the number of students dropping out of school.

Improving academic outcomes

Schools either approached, or were approached by, potential partners in order to:

- improve student literacy or numeracy skills
- expand the performing arts curriculum (including improving musical performance, enhancing creativity)
- use science-based projects to connect students with the world outside school
- generate greater interest in mathematics and science
- develop bi-lingual capabilities in students and staff
- develop a better understanding of local history or Australian history
- increase knowledge and appreciation of other cultures
- provide learning around livestock breeding, farm management, horticulture, agriculture
- teach students about the impact of human behaviour on the environment, including on marine life.

Some schools wanted to help improve the academic outcomes of specific groups, such as Indigenous students, students from newly arrived migrant and refugee families, students with disabilities or special needs, and students with poor literacy and numeracy skills. Others wanted to extend the academic potential of highly able students.

Underpinning almost all partnerships was a desire to improve student learning in one form or another, such as exposure to new scientific concepts, improved self knowledge or better understanding of the requirements needed for a particular job.

Enhancing wellbeing

The desire to improve social and emotional wellbeing led to a number of partnerships targeting physical inactivity, poor nutrition and obesity. Schools and their partners aimed to teach students about growing healthy food, preparing healthy meals and the benefits of exercise and being fit.

School partnerships with sporting associations generally focused on teaching students particular skills, such as surf lifesaving, sailing or ice sports.

Schools were especially keen to address the needs of 'at risk' students. Many of these partnerships aimed to connect with young people and/or families who were feeling isolated from their communities.

Some partnerships wanted to improve student awareness of global issues, teach students about the value of active citizenship and assist overseas schools. Others sought to build capacity and a collective identity within the immediate community. In these partnerships the aim was often to reduce feelings of isolation and encourage a stronger sense of community to combat the impacts of drought, bushfire, poverty or other challenges.

Broadening vocational options and skills

Vocationally-oriented partnerships were set up to help students make informed career choices. Some partnerships aimed to improve knowledge of particular professions, such as engineering, law, marine biology or architecture. Others offered practical experience in manual activities related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation. These partnerships aimed to teach students the specifics of a trade or job, and generic workplace-related skills such as communication, team work and problem-solving.

3.4 What evidence was used to identify student need or opportunity?

Schools used both qualitative and quantitative evidence to identify their particular needs. The quality of the data varied however. Award-winning partnerships were able to use a range of evidence to show why the partners had come together and the outcomes they expected to achieve.

Award-winning schools used baseline data to enable improvement to be measured. These data, together with specific reference to other studies or examples of effective programs addressing similar issues, also provided an evidence base for the program to be developed by the partners.

There were two main sources of baseline data used by schools in identifying need or opportunity: school-based data (such as Attitudes to School surveys) and external research (such as studies on the mental health needs of students from refugee families). Other evidence used by a small number of schools included pilot programs, professional learning sessions and the experiences of other schools.

The following categories show the main types of evidence used by schools to identify need or opportunity prior to establishing a partnership:

Records/reports/test results

Schools using this kind of data generally cited statistics on the socio-economic status of families at the school or similar statistics such as the number of families eligible for the Education Maintenance Allowances (EMA). Statistics were cited regarding the family structure of students, such as single-parent families, and the cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds of students. Data relating to student attendance, connectedness to school, truancy, behaviour incidents, retention levels and post-school destinations were used. Test results included in-class or in-school assessment, higher education standardised assessment results (such as the Victorian Certificate of Education, Higher Schools Certificate), and National Assessment Program results (such as NAPLAN). Test results were generally used to show poor academic performance as a reason for entering into a partnership.

Anecdotal

Anecdotal commentary was the second most common form of 'evidence' provided by schools. Strictly speaking, this kind of non-scientific information does not constitute evidence but has been

included here because so many schools relied on it to identify need. Examples of anecdotal information included:

'A major concern in the community is the increasing number of younger students (grades 3-6) displaying aggressive and violent behaviours at school resulting in suspensions.'

Similarly:

'The need for the project came out of the welfare team and principal's observations that there were quite a number of students with issues such as anger, low self esteem and trouble getting along with others.'

While these comments highlight the kind of reasoning or observations that led to the formation of the partnerships and programs, they lack the detail and evidence of systematic data gathering that award-winning schools were able to show. The professional judgement of teachers is a legitimate source of evidence but it needs to be linked to systematic and structured data collection to support the judgement being made.

Surveys

Schools administered surveys or questionnaires to students, parents, school staff or the wider community to obtain feedback on general issues or the specific area of need.

Observation

This kind of observation was systematic and planned, not simply describing anecdotally an informal observation. For example, schools may have used a checklist or gathered behavioural observation data and written observations into a formal report and cited this report.

Other

This included evidence such as interviews, letters of support or other testimonials. There were not many examples of interviews. Where these had been conducted they were generally formal interviews rather than informal chats with students, parents, school staff or the community to obtain feedback on general issues or a specific area of need. Letters of support were generally from the partner rather than an independent observer.

Figure 8 shows that the most common type of evidence used by schools to identify the needs addressed by their partnership was based on records, reports or test results. Anecdotal evidence was used by over a quarter of schools applying for an award in 2009. Other analyses showed that independent schools were more likely to use anecdotal evidence (39 per cent) than other sectors (around 27 per cent). Catholic and government sectors were more likely to use records, reports or test results (around 44 per cent) than Independent schools (around 25 per cent). Secondary schools were more likely to use records, reports or test results (just over 50 per cent) compared to primary schools (just over 40 per cent).

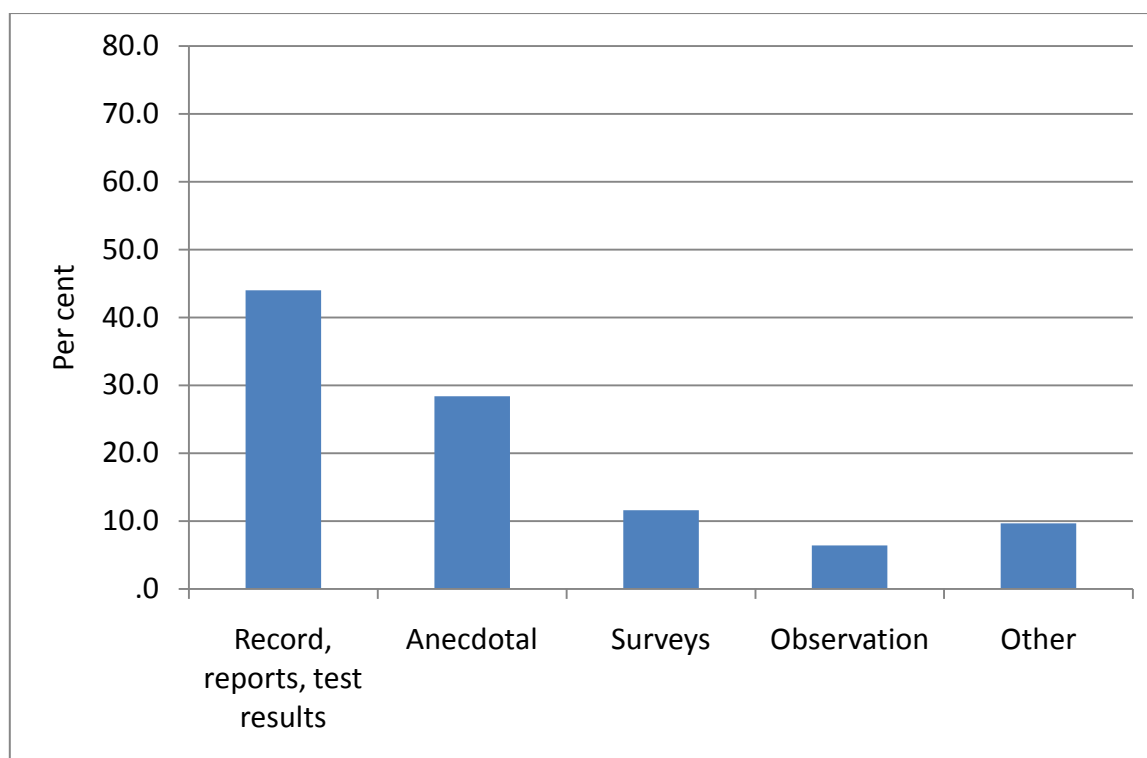


Figure 8 Types of evidence used to identify a need

Reference to other research

Around 22 per cent of applications referred to relevant external research that had been conducted at the local (community, state or national) or international level showing the effectiveness of their program. Local research included studies conducted by the local community (such as a research report written by a shire council); state-wide research (such as that conducted by state or territory government departments), and national studies (such as Commonwealth research reports). International studies showed improved student outcomes arising from programs that had sought to address similar student needs to those identified by the school.

Also included in this category of ‘external’ research were references to models used by other schools. Some schools set up their own pilot study and then used the results of this to expand their program with partners.

The award-winning partnerships were those that used baseline data collected at the school level supplemented by relevant external research to show how the partners became aware of the issues needing to be addressed. They then developed programs based on this evidence.

3.5 How did partners contribute?

Community and business partners helped schools to address their particular needs in a wide variety of ways.

Professional Training/Professional Development for staff

Although students were the main beneficiaries of the partnerships, a number of partnerships focused on improving teacher confidence in their instruction of science or music. Others gave insight into Indigenous or overseas cultures to improve teachers’ understanding of their students’ cultural backgrounds. Several educational partners provided pre-service or trainee teachers with opportunities to act as mentors to students.

Vocational offerings or training

Opportunities provided through the partnerships included traineeships, apprenticeships and work placements, which were often incorporated into vocational certification of students. Staff and students were offered career-related professional development workshops and skills-specific training. Businesses wanting students to know more about employer expectations and the realities of the workplace provided sites for work placement and work experience. One award-winning partnership involved volunteers from a range of occupations (including plumbing, engineering, catering, electrical trades and carpentry) working with students on practical projects such as restoring old train carriages.

Creative productions or exhibitions

Partners provided opportunities for students to participate in creative endeavours such as circus, performance, physical theatre, and musical productions. Other programs involved schools and communities working together on literary, writers' or cultural festivals. Partners also provided opportunities for students to form music bands and perform to an audience outside the school.

Government or quasi-government programs

A wide range of programs were funded and actively facilitated by government or quasi-government organisations. These partnerships included vocational or employment programs; community development ventures designed to strengthen the capacity of communities to respond to local issues; health and early development initiatives; and refugee settlement programs.

Health & fitness promotion or improvement

Schools and their partners developed programs around wellbeing, first aid, mental health, bullying, drug and alcohol abuse, and training in sporting or recreational activities. Partners included sporting clubs and associations, local councils, recreation centres, gyms, mental health services, Departments of Health, martial arts therapists and community centres. The main contribution of partners was through the teaching of specific skills and knowledge around fitness and healthy lifestyle choices.

Environmental projects

Many environmental partnerships developed educational programs that involved field excursions to local catchments or swamp lands to monitor wildlife or which constructed facilities to help in the sustainability of particular flora or fauna. Other partnerships encouraged students to recycle and reduce their carbon footprint. A number of partnerships implemented garden programs designed to teach children about the natural world, how to care for it, and how best to use existing resources. Partners included local councils, environmental groups and horticultural businesses.

Service learning

Students were also engaged in projects with aged-care residents, tutored newly arrived refugee students who needed extra assistance with their English, raised money for disadvantaged groups, and assisted those in the community in need of transport and social support. Community partners encouraged the involvement of their clients and sometimes provided transport to or from the school or aged care facility.

Expertise with 'at risk' and vulnerable students

Partners with expertise in working with 'at risk' or vulnerable children helped schools develop a range of programs, including child and family support services, relationship counselling, breakfast programs, parenting courses and youth work.

Mentoring

A number of partnerships provided positive role models for students. Examples of such partnerships included educational mentor programs where a friendly 'buddy' helped students with their literacy,

'at risk' adolescents were matched with an adult mentor to provide them with a positive role model, and industry mentors assisted Indigenous students to reach their potential. Some universities also partnered with schools to offer one-on-one mentoring opportunities to students.

Other

Some partnerships provided different kinds of services and opportunities, such as assistance with social justice projects, issues management, advocacy, financial management, grant-writing skills, construction of facilities and sponsorship.

The award-winning partnerships were those where the contribution of the partners went beyond the provision of goods or money to helping schools develop programs designed to address specific needs relating to improving outcomes for students. Specific examples of how community and business partners have helped schools included:

- conducting training sessions across a wide range of topics
- providing relevant work experience, including industry experience for teachers
- helping teach specific skills and knowledge related to the curriculum
- donating equipment and produce
- organising field trips and camp activities
- linking other community groups and support services with the school
- providing facilities, materials, advice, resources
- helping students with resumes and interview preparation
- helping students get drivers' licences so they could get to work
- helping students complete official employment-related documents
- showing students potential career and study pathways
- working with students to improve the physical environment of the school
- helping create market gardens and harvest food produce from these
- and providing social contacts within the community and giving students a better awareness of the services available for young people.

3.6 What benefits were reported?

This section looks at who benefited from these school-community partnerships and the ways in which they benefited.

Students

Schools described benefits for individual students (whose stories were generally told in the form of mini case studies), groups of students (such as a group participating in a challenging outdoors activity), specific cohorts of students (such as Year 6 students working with residents in an aged care facility) or students more broadly (for example, students in Years 10-12 taking part in industry work placements). Nearly all applicants (98 per cent) in 2009 were involved in a partnership that was said to have benefited students.

Teachers

Staff often benefited from professional learning as a result of involvement in some curriculum or vocationally focused partnerships. This enabled them to learn more about their students' backgrounds or about the subjects they taught. Some partnerships provided benefits for pre-service teachers. If the partnership resulted in improved behaviour of students, teachers also benefited indirectly by having more time to concentrate on teaching, with less time needing to be spent on behaviour management.

Partners

Partner organisations benefited in a number of ways. For example, the community service of students was shown to have contributed to the wellbeing of members of the partner organisation (such as the RSL or aged care residents). Employers also benefited from access to students, which helped address particular staffing/skills needs or increased the volunteer base of organisations (such as environmental groups).

Other benefits to partners included:

- Community and business groups have been exposed to the new ideas generated by young people.
- Working with young people enabled the partner organisations to develop a better understanding of 'at risk' youth in the local community, not only of their needs but also of their capabilities and potential.
- Mentors and employees reported personal satisfaction in working directly with children and young people and from seeing the improvements in self esteem, confidence and ability that resulted from this contact.
- Educational institutions with teacher education courses benefited from having trainee teachers gain one-on-one experience with students prior to the completion of their teaching qualification.
- Local industry benefited from the availability of a more highly skilled workforce in the local area, particularly in areas of skills shortages.
- Employees benefited from the professional development opportunities that have been associated with some partnership programs.
- Partners reported a sense of satisfaction from investing in the future of local youth and contributing to positive outcomes for the wider community.
- Partners benefited from positive local media attention and public acknowledgement of the work they were doing with schools and young people.
- The partnerships helped bring about a higher profile for the partners and enabled both businesses and community groups to extend their reach to others in the community.

Parents/families

Parents and families benefited from partnerships that focused on the whole family. Through the partners' expertise and contacts, families gained access to a range of services, including parenting support and counselling. One award-winning partnership helped link students' families into a network of local support services. Some families benefited from the introduction of a breakfast program, homework tutors, healthy garden initiatives and parental participation in a homework club with their children.

Whole school

Schools reported improved profiles in their communities as a result of their partnerships. For some schools the physical infrastructure and surroundings improved. The creation of new facilities had flow-on effects to students, staff and families. As a result of some programs, individuals felt increased pride in their school and gained access to better facilities. Schools as a whole benefited through the additional resources and expertise that partners provided, which often helped bring about a higher community profile for the school and, in some cases, increased enrolments.

Community (local and abroad)

Specific groups, including elderly members of the community and newly arrived immigrants, gained from targeted programs developed by the partner organisations. For example, elderly people in aged care facilities gained personal satisfaction from having young people recording their life stories;

older volunteers reported similar feelings of satisfaction from helping students with practical projects, literacy and other skills.

For the community as a whole, partnerships between schools and community or business groups helped bring about tangible products, such as community gardens, an Internet café, food for families in need and income for community projects. Some schools reported fewer street offences and substance abuse issues in the local area as a result of their program. Some projects led to a strong sense of pride in what had been achieved, such as in environmental programs that had led to more sustainable practices in a locality. Some partnerships between schools and business groups led to new possibilities for work and economic ventures. Schools reported improved efficiency through interagency collaboration, better delivery of targeted services and reduced duplication of services. Others reported a better understanding of young people's needs, more positive attitudes to education, and a greater sense of bonding as a community. Collaborations with schools also led to improved adult learning opportunities within communities. Whole communities benefited through environmental projects, reduction of crime, and financial or in kind donations for communities that had faced hardship because of fire or drought. Others benefited from the networking opportunities provided through the partnership.

School communities abroad benefited from fundraising and other contributions from partners. The global community was also reported to have benefited from partnership programs that were aimed at improving the health of the planet, such as by reducing greenhouse gases. The claim here was that, through the work of the partnerships, awareness was raised more broadly in the community about the impact of human activities on the planet.

Improved student engagement

Schools wanting to improve student engagement reported that the programs developed with their partners had helped enrich the curriculum being offered; provided professional learning opportunities for teachers; contributed to improved student attendance; helped reduce anti-social behaviour; improved students' work ethic at school and the quality of their work, and led to more positive student-teacher relationships.

Improved academic outcomes

Schools used a range of qualitative and quantitative data to show how their partnerships contributed to improved outcomes for their students, teachers or school. Benefits included:

- the emergence of a new culture of academic excellence in the school
- deeper understanding of particular subjects
- improved musical, carpentry, photography and other skills
- greater cultural awareness and empathy
- improved literacy, numeracy, communication or 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 particular groups, such as the elderly
- improved understanding of nutrition and the benefits of exercise.

Enhanced wellbeing

Schools seeking to improve social and emotional wellbeing reported that their programs had helped bring about improved student relationships with peers and family; greater self esteem, confidence, and self-awareness; higher aspirations for the future; improved goal setting, teamwork and conflict resolution skills; enhanced leadership skills; a greater ability to learn independently; healthier

lifestyle habits; greater respect for past generations; a more positive outlook on life; and increased awareness of the work of community groups.

Broadened vocational options and skills

For businesses in particular, partnering with schools contributed to better vocational outcomes for students, including more realistic perceptions of post-school study and career options, better access to training and paid work, industry-based expertise, a recognised qualification, better knowledge of occupational health and safety issues, and improved employability skills.

3.7 What evidence was used to measure these benefits?

Schools used a range of data to show the impact of the partnership and program. The most effective partnerships were able to use before and after data to explain clearly how their program contributed to improvements. They also used more than one source of data to support their conclusions.

Reports, records, test results

Schools cited reports to indicate the positive outcomes of the partnership. Individual student reports were also cited as evidence. Statistics such as numbers of students taking particular subjects or participants in a program, or number of specific activities undertaken (such as number of rescues performed in a life saving program), were examples of this category. Applicants in this category also used test results to show improved student performance.

Anecdotal

Examples of anecdotal commentary included: 'Students were more enthusiastic and confident as a result of the program'; 'Teachers reported an improvement in overall achievement'; 'Students showed increased independence in class'. These may well be legitimate outcomes but it was not clear how these conclusions were reached or what data were collected to show improvement.

Surveys/questionnaires

Schools used feedback gathered from participants, partners, parents, and teachers to show the impact of the program. For example, student feedback forms from one program showed that students had broadened their knowledge of different foods. Other programs used questionnaires to identify how student attitudes had changed towards particular issues addressed by a program. (Some projects lent themselves more easily than others to this kind of evidence).

Post-school statistics

Schools referred to a range of statistics which have been categorised as 'post-school statistics' in this report for convenience. This category includes certification, rates of retention, rates of completion, post-school destinations and employment figures for students.

Evidence of outcomes was provided by many schools in the form of numbers of Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), VET or higher education qualifications gained. Statistics were provided in some cases to show the retention rate prior to and after the program.

Some schools provided statistics of student destinations after leaving school, including acceptance into university, TAFE, apprenticeships, traineeships and work. These contrasted with figures gathered prior to the program.

Other

A small number of schools used case studies. Other types of evidence used to identify outcomes included observations, letters of support or interviews. Schools used letters from members of the community; media articles reporting the positive outcomes of partnerships; testimonials from

students, teachers, families and partners to help show the impact of the program. Applicants made formal observations that highlighted the beneficial outcomes of partnership. (Such observations needed to be systematic and planned. If not, they were categorised as ‘anecdotal’).

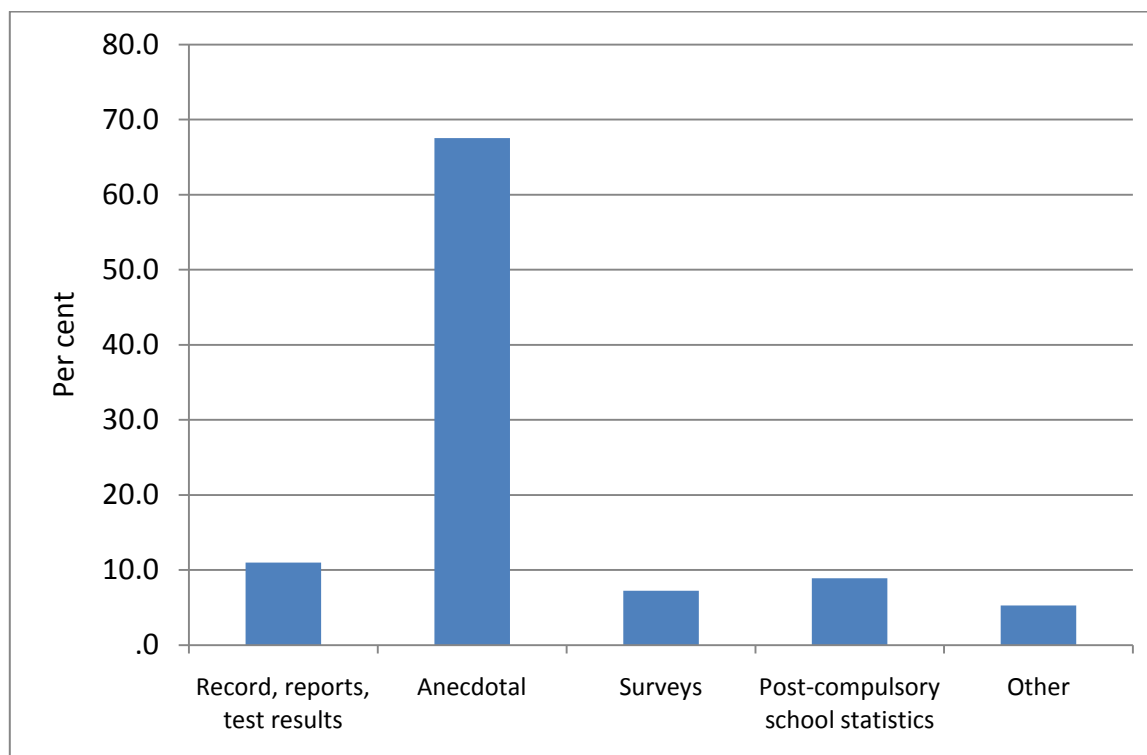


Figure 9 Types of evidence used to identify outcomes

Figure 9 shows the percentage of schools that reported using each type of evidence to measure outcomes. There are two interesting aspects to these data. In contrast to the evidence used to show identified need (see Figure 8), where more schools used tests, reports and records than anecdotal commentary to identify need, nearly 70 per cent of schools and their partners relied on anecdotal commentary to show the impact of the partnerships. It seems that schools found it easier to identify a problem through records and tests than to show a direct casual relationship between a program and outcomes.

It is possible that schools relied more heavily on teachers’ observations as evidence of improvement than to identify need. Teachers routinely make assessments and decisions based on their professional judgement. These judgements are legitimate and important sources of evidence. The issue is whether this knowledge has been collected in a systematic way, such as via an interview, structured observations or a questionnaire, or whether the conclusions are based on informal observations. In this last case, such statements would be considered anecdotal.

For example, a teachers’ comment that a program has worked because ‘students are happier when they come into the classroom’ would be considered anecdotal whereas a teacher’s judgment that students are happier at school (as a result of the program) because they are coming to class more regularly, or because they have written positively about their experiences in their journals provides stronger evidence of impact because it is based on information gathered in a structured way. It also shows the evidence used by the teacher, which adds further validity. Class attendance is verifiable through teacher records while journal or other writing from students indicates to the teacher in a tangible way how their students are feeling about the program, school or themselves.

If gathered more systematically, this kind of data would strengthen the partners' claims of noticeable improvement as a result of their program/partnership. One indicator of the impact that the Schools First program has made could be the extent to which the reliance on anecdotal information to show improved outcomes is reduced over the period from 2009-2011 in favour of a more systematic and cross-validating approach to data collection and analysis.

A second point of interest is that, in showing the impact of their partnership, schools have relied less on records, reports and test results than when identifying need. That is, there is a 'mismatch' between the use of data to identify need and measure outcome, suggesting that schools did not always follow through on the data they collected initially. Award-winning partnerships were able to show clear improvement by contrasting student attitudes and skills (for example) before and after participation in the program, using consistent measures.

Other analyses indicated that government schools were less likely to use anecdotal evidence (65.2 per cent) compared with Catholic schools (68.7 per cent) and Independent schools (83.8 per cent). Schools from Tasmania were much less likely to use anecdotal evidence (47.6 per cent) compared with the other states and territories (which were all around 65 to 70 per cent). Partnerships which target primary school students were more likely to use anecdotal evidence (74.9 per cent) compared with those targeting secondary students (65.8 per cent) and partnerships which targeted senior secondary only (57.6 per cent). Special schools were also less likely to use anecdotal evidence (59.4 per cent).

Figure 10 shows that there was also variation in the proportion of schools using anecdotal evidence according to the type or types of partners that they had. For example, those schools that partnered with community organisations were associated with an increase in the use of anecdotal evidence.

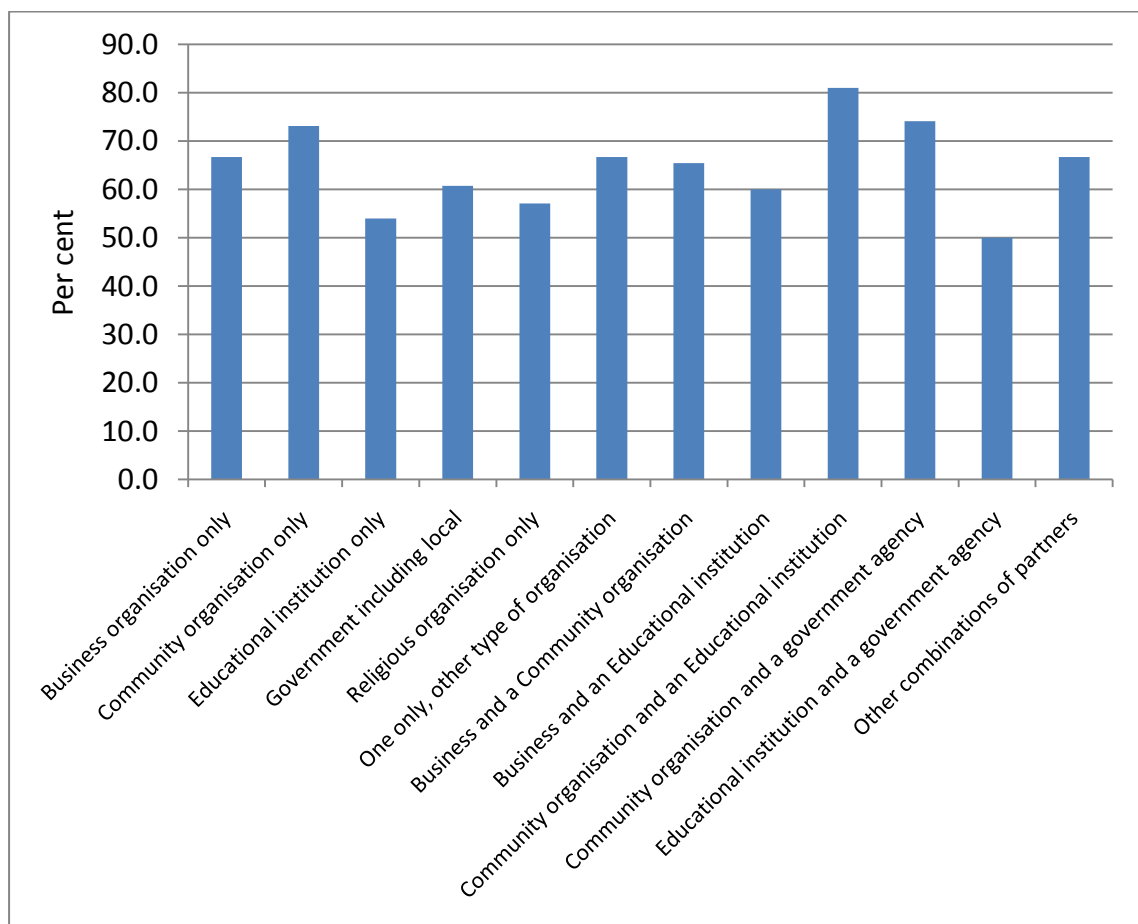


Figure 10 Percentage of partnerships using anecdotal evidence to measure outcomes by type and combination of types of partners

5. Winning and non-winning partnerships

The data show that in the 2009 Schools First Impact Awards, schools were more likely to win an award if their partnership was established before, rather than after, 2007. This is not surprising given that outcomes are more likely to be evident if a program has been going for several years rather than for only one or two years.

They were also more likely to be a secondary school than a primary, primary and secondary combined, or a senior secondary only. Possible reasons for this difference include the fact that secondary schools are more likely to have contact with local businesses and other organisations as part of their vocational programs, including VET, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. Secondary schools are also more likely than smaller primary schools to have access to a larger parent body, with all its potential community connections. Controlling for numbers of schools in the different sectors, winning partnerships were more likely to be government than Catholic or Independent.

Schools that showed evidence of need were far more likely to be winners than schools that did not. This is to be expected given that the Schools First Awards program is evidence-based and that schools needed to provide evidence to support their case for an award. This evidence needed to include the reasons for the partnership and program in the first place. Even in cases where a partnership was formed to capitalise on an opportunity rather than out of a demonstrated need, schools were still expected to show why they this particular program was likely to be effective with their students.

Various combinations of outcomes were examined to identify those combinations that rated most highly with the judges in 2009. Schools that had implemented programs which were designed to improve learning and academic outcomes were more likely to be winners than schools with programs aimed at improving any combinations of the following: social, wellbeing, student engagement, vocational and environmental outcomes. Those schools that could show improved learning outcomes *and* any combination of the above were also more likely to be successful in gaining an award than schools that did not demonstrate improved student learning as a result of their program.

Of the types of evidence used by schools to support their case for an award, those schools that used surveys or questionnaires to demonstrate improved outcomes were more likely to be a winning school than those schools relying on anecdotal or 'other' evidence. In particular, schools that used a wide range of evidence, drawing on data from different sources and using different methods of collection, were more likely to be among the winning partnerships than schools that relied on only one source of evidence.

Schools that included at least one community group in their partnership were more likely to win an award than schools with no community group as their partner. Schools that included parents or families in their partnership were less likely to be a winner. This is because the Schools First Awards are aimed at encouraging schools to develop *external* relationships with community partners, including business and community groups. For the purposes of the awards, parents, like teachers, are seen as an integral part of a school rather than as an external partner.

Schools whose partnerships included whole school benefits were more likely to have a winning partnership than schools that did not. Schools that aimed specifically to improve outcomes for students were more likely to be winners than schools whose partnerships sought to improve

outcomes for teachers. This is also not surprising as the Schools First Awards are primarily about helping to improve educational outcomes for students through partnership programs, and benefits for teachers, parents and the whole community, while valuable in their own right, are secondary to the impact on students.

6. Conclusion

The findings from this study have implications for the future promotion of Schools First, the engagement of community and business partners, and the use of evidence to create, monitor, evaluate and strengthen partnerships.

Schools First partners

The data in the 2009 Impact Award applications show that the Schools First program reached a wide audience in its inaugural year. To extend the reach of Schools First further, the partners could consider:

- targeting NSW in particular – For example, what kinds of partnerships have been particularly effective in NSW? What opportunities exist for new partnerships to be established in NSW (perhaps with a view to submitting for a Seed Funding Award)?
- targeting Catholic schools and systems – How have Catholic schools benefited from partnering with community or business groups? Which Catholic schools have established effective partnerships and how did these schools go about developing these partnerships? What, if any, role have Catholic systems played or what role could they potentially play in promoting the benefits of partnerships?
- targeting primary schools – How have primary schools benefited from partnerships? Which primary schools have established effective partnerships? How did they go about this? How did they attract partner interest and commitment?
- targeting business groups – What are some of the ways in which business organisations have supported schools? What skills, expertise and opportunities have been provided? How have businesses benefited from partnering with schools? How did business groups contribute and what were the benefits to both schools and their business partners?
- promoting the benefits of business partnerships to schools – For example, what kinds of school-business partnerships have been particularly effective? How were these partnerships set up to ensure the needs of each organisation were met? What benefits did each partner gain from the program developed by the partners? If some schools had initial reservations about accepting assistance from the business sector, how were these overcome?

A key aim of the Schools First Awards program is to encourage the development of viable and productive school-community partnerships. On the basis of the 2009 data, promoting the benefits of these partnerships to groups with a lower-than-expected participation rate in 2009 could potentially increase the reach of the program in 2011.

Community and business organisations

Schools clearly benefit from the skills, resources, ideas, training, mentoring and support that community and business organisations can offer. There are many activities and programs that community and business groups could be doing to support schools and, in return, many ways in which they can also benefit, including raising their profiles and expanding the reach of their services to others in the community.

To help build viable and productive partnerships with schools, community and business organisations could consider:

- Thinking about the kind of support that they could provide. For example, what skills, expertise and interests do members of these organisations have? What could the organisations potentially offer to schools? What could schools potentially offer these organisations?
- Meeting with the local school to identify the particular needs or opportunities that exist. Community and business groups could also contribute to the data collection that has helped identify the needs.
- Identifying how the organisations and schools might work together to develop a program or project that would meet the school's needs, make good use of the partners' expertise, and bring benefits to all.

The data suggest more could be done to support businesses in particular to develop partnerships with schools. This could include more targeted promotion of the ways in which businesses have partnered successfully with schools and the benefits this kind of partnering has brought.

Using evidence to identify need and measure outcomes

Award-winning partnerships used baseline data supported by reference to external studies to identify the initial need or opportunity. They used data to monitor and review progress, and to identify the impact of their program and partnership on students and others. They recognised the importance of evidence-based programs, continuous improvement and sustainability.

To develop strong and sustainable partnerships, schools and their partners would benefit from all or a combination of the following:

- using local school data to identify student need (such as tests, questionnaires, Attitudes to School surveys, school audits, reviews or reports that highlight the issue to be addressed), interviews, case studies, structure observation
- collecting baseline data that would enable change to be measured (such as identifying student content knowledge or levels of confidence or attitudes to particular issues prior to participation in the program)
- referring to international or national studies that show how particular approaches or models have worked elsewhere in addressing similar problems (such as a health or vocational program implemented effectively overseas or elsewhere in Australia)
- implementing a pilot study to gather the evidence needed to show both the identified student need and why the program is likely to work
- collecting data during the program to monitor progress
- collecting data at the conclusion of the program to identify what changes have occurred (for example, by using pre and post tests; pre and post interviews with participants; feedback forms from participants)
- using a combination of data (such as a pre and post questionnaire for students, interviews with teachers and partners, and feedback forms from parents).

Award-winning partnerships used clear and sound evidence to initiate, develop, monitor and sustain their program. Schools need to be encouraged to recognise how data can be collected and used effectively to build and sustain partnerships that can make improve outcomes for students.

Summary

Based on our analysis of the 2009 Schools First Impact Award applications, ACER suggests the following actions could help improve the reach of Schools First, the level of business participation in these partnerships, and the quality of the evidence collected to build effective partnerships:

- More targeted promotion of currently under-represented groups, including NSW schools, Catholic schools and systems, and primary schools.
- More targeted promotion of the benefits to businesses of partnering with schools, including the ways in which businesses can assist schools and examples of successful school-business partnerships
- Better promotion of the various ways in which business and community groups can support schools to bring mutual benefits.
- More support for schools in the form of professional learning opportunities around the identification, collection, analysis and use of evidence to identify need, monitor progress and evaluate outcomes.

The data collected from the 2009 Impact Award applications show that Australian schools have been establishing innovative and productive partnerships with a range of community and business groups. The data also show some gaps that could be addressed.

Appendix A

The data contained in the applications were designed for administrative and judging purposes, and did not exist in a form amenable to statistical analysis. To get them into this form, information was coded into categories. These categories had to be mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive, meaningful, relevant to the proposed research and have appropriate distributional qualities. Mutual exclusivity and collective exhaustiveness are logical requirements. Once applied, they also have the practical benefits of ensuring that there is no double counting of data, and that all available data are used. The categories need to be meaningful to the intended audience and relevant to the research. Appropriate distributions are needed not just for analytic purposes but to ensure that the data have face validity – that is, that they look plausible to the audience. Because of these many requirements, the recoding of the data required careful judgement. An illustration of this process is the classification of school type. At first glance, this might seem relatively straight forward:

- Primary – Traditionally Preparatory² to Year 6.
- Secondary – Traditionally Year 7 to Year 12.
- P-12 – These schools begin with a Preparatory year and go through to Year 12.
- Special – These schools cater for students who have special educational needs due to mild to severe learning difficulties, physical disabilities or behavioural problems.

However, there were additional complexities, including:

- Variations on Primary, Secondary or P-12 schools (for example, P-7, P-9, P-10, Years 7-10). These groupings can be for a variety of reasons. (For example, in some states primary school can cover up to Year 8, new schools that are yet to take students in the senior years, or schools that do not cater for Year 11 and 12)
- Some non-mainstream schools legitimately identified themselves as ‘Other’, including Schools of Distance Education, Intensive English Centres, and Work Education & Training Units. However, a number of mainstream schools classified themselves as ‘Other’, perhaps because if they are a High School or Community School, they might not have identified themselves as belonging to the category of Secondary in their application.

Once the data were coded, they were checked to see if there had been any data entry errors, and if the variables making up the data had distributions amenable to good analysis and reporting. For example, if a variable had 10 categories, and the analysis revealed say, 650 cases in one category, 140 in another, and the remaining eight categories had only 11 cases spread across them, then this variable would need to be examined. In this hypothetical example, a solution would be to retain the categories with the 650 and 140 cases, and collapse the remaining cases into an ‘Other’ category.

Once the data had been cleaned and checked, the analyses commenced. The following variables were investigated:

- Type of school
- Target year level
- Target groups within the school
- Number of partners
- Type of partner

² There are differences between states regarding the terminology of the year preceding Year 1 (for example Reception, Kindergarten, Transition, Pre-Primary). However for the purposes of this report this year will be referred to as Preparatory or ‘P’, as this is the most commonly used term.

Duration of the partnership
Reasons for the partnership
Evidence used to identify the need or opportunity
Focus of the partnership
Impact of the programs developed by the partners
Evidence used to measure impact
Who benefited from the partnerships
How schools, if successful in their applications, intended spending the award money

There were three rounds of analysis undertaken: (a) univariate analysis, usually in the form of frequencies (b) bivariate analysis in the form of cross tabulations, and; (3) bivariate analysis using correlations. Where possible, results of these analyses were transformed into graphical displays to help the reader interpret them.