

# School-community partnerships: A summary of the 2008 desktop analysis

**As the social, economic, political and environmental challenges faced by the world become more complex, there has been a growing shift towards strong and effective collaborative approaches to these problems. In education, there has been a growing interest in the difference that school-community partnerships can make to outcomes for young people.**

One of the key strengths of the Schools First Awards initiative is that it promotes excellence in school–community partnerships. It does this in two ways:

- by showing schools (through the criteria) the qualities that characterise outstanding partnerships; and
- by disseminating the stories of the award winning schools (through the case studies) so that good practice can be shared.

To develop the criteria, and to gain a better understanding of the qualities that characterise highly effective school–community partnerships, ACER undertook a desktop analysis of the research on school–community partnerships.

## Purpose

The purpose of this research was to identify the key characteristics of highly effective partnerships. These characteristics subsequently formed the basis for the five criteria that were developed.

The criteria are used to assess the quality of applications for a Schools First Award. The desktop analysis has provided both a context and an evidence base for the awards.

## Issues

There are three difficulties or methodological issues associated with research in the field of school improvement.

- Establishing a direct causal relationship between a program and improved student outcomes can be difficult. Because schools have so many activities going on at any one time, it is not always clear if a particular partnership has led to particular outcomes. Often the most that can be said with confidence is that the partnership has contributed to these outcomes.
- It takes time to bring about change. The benefits of collaborative partnerships might not be known for years. The complexity of some relationships means they can be difficult to evaluate as there are multiple levels of involvement and linkages.
- Much of the education partnerships literature that exists focuses on school–parent or school–family partnerships rather than school–community partnerships. There are not many studies of effective models that have been evaluated over time and involve the broader community. This is slowly changing as more and more educators are promoting the advantages of these kinds of linkages.



## Definitions

Another difficulty highlighted in the research is that of defining what is meant by 'community' and 'partnership'. Based on the research, the Schools First understanding of a 'community' is that it can be a geographically defined location, a collective that is brought together for a common purpose, or a virtual community that transcends geographical boundaries.

The partnership between school and community group is of a non-commercial nature, is mutually beneficial to each party, and leads to improved outcomes for young people. For the purposes of the Schools First Awards, there is a strong focus on the school partner playing an active role in developing, nurturing and sustaining the partnership.

The partnership is not a one-off arrangement but is able to be sustained even after the initial financial/material resources have been used up. The school is able to draw on a wider pool of resources and expertise than simply parents or teachers. At least one of the partners needs to be a 'non school' partner from the community.

## Social capital

The first section of the 2008 report examined the importance of social capital. Building social capital is about building personal and community assets. The concept of 'asset building' is at the heart of effective school–community partnerships. Such partnerships enable students, teachers, parents and community and business groups to draw on a wide range of skills and expertise.

By pooling physical, intellectual and other resources, school communities have access to a potentially richer source of support than would otherwise be available if each partner were acting alone. For students, an effective school-community partnership can provide links to the community that will help them feel more connected and less isolated.

## Evidence

School leaders draw on a range of quantitative and qualitative data to identify the outcomes of their partnership programs. There appear to be few longitudinal studies. Few school-community partnerships are adequately documented, evaluated and disseminated. Of those that are, the main tools used to measure outcomes are various kinds of surveys, analyses of reading tests, analyses of attendance data, and interviews.

## Findings

The desktop analysis indicated that strong partnerships between schools and local community organisations – including businesses, service groups, local government, sporting organisations and a range of other agencies and groups – can lead to a range of positive outcomes, including increased skills, greater engagement with learning, more positive attitudes to schooling, and improved transitions into the workforce, further education or training.

Research also shows that students' social capital is increased by being exposed to the expertise and knowledge of others in the community and that students can develop a stronger sense of civic responsibility and citizenship.

Much of the literature focuses on the benefits to the school rather than the non-school partner. Research into five different rural communities in Australia in 2002, however, found the following:

- Increased retention of young people in these rural communities.
- Positive physical and environmental outcomes for the communities.
- Cultural and recreational benefits from sharing physical and human resources.
- Economic benefits in terms of the school being a major employer and consumer of local goods and services.
- The interaction generated by the partnerships led to improved capacity for both individuals and the communities.<sup>1</sup>

There are benefits, too, for agencies working with schools. Research shows that different kinds of collaboration with, between and across agencies and schools can lead to better professional understanding of student issues, better programs and activities, less duplication of services, reduced levels of misconduct and suspension and improved academic achievement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See S. Kilpatrick, S. Johns, B. Mulford, L. Falk, & L. Prescott, L, 'More than an education – Leadership for rural school community partnerships', Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See D. Anderson-Butcher & D. Ashton, 'Innovative models of collaboration to serve children, youths, families and communities, National Association of Social Workers, *Children & Schools*, 26, 39-53.

## Partnership qualities

Research shows that successful school–community partnerships are typically characterised by:

- an identified need or opportunity that the partnership is set up to address
- a mission to improve student outcomes
- a strong, committed leader and leadership team
- shared decision-making
- clear roles and responsibilities
- a structured and well organised program
- frequent and effective communication
- regular monitoring and review
- tangible results
- sustainability.

### An identified need or opportunity

The need or opportunity may be identified by either a school or community organisation. The need should be significant in the sense that addressing it will make a difference in educational outcomes. All partners are involved in discussing the need or opportunity. The need or opportunity is supported by evidence in the form of data.

### A mission to improve student outcomes

Goals are clear, shared and realistic. They may be short and/or long term. Ultimately, the primary goal is to improve outcomes for students. Partners work towards a common interest.

### Strong and committed leadership and leadership team

There is a clear commitment to the partnership at the top level of each partner's organisation. Distributed leadership – that is, providing leadership opportunities for a team of teachers/employees – is also important for building capacity in each organisation and thus sustainability.

### Shared decision-making

All partners are involved in the decisions that are made. Each partner contributes meaningfully to the planning and implementation of the program. The particular expertise of each partner is drawn on throughout the program.

### Clear roles and responsibilities

There is a management structure and clear processes in place. All stakeholders are represented in the governance structures. Each partner has a clearly identified role.

### A structured and well-organised program

Activities are student-centred, high quality and adequately resourced.

### Frequent and effective communication

There is a clear communication plan in place. Partners are in regular contact. There is a high level of awareness among stakeholders regarding the partnership.

### Regular monitoring and review

Goals, progress and achievements are regularly monitored and refined as needed.

### Tangible results

These could include better school attendance, improved academic achievement, increased family and community involvement, and improved school programs. It may be some time before tangible benefits are apparent.

### Use of data and evidence as a basis for decision-making

Data help schools identify a need or opportunity. Evidence is collected throughout the program. The data enable success in the form of improved outcomes to be measured.

### Sustainability

There are sustainable resources (financial, human) to maintain partnership activities. The partnership becomes an accepted part of the culture of each partner organisation.

Research also shows that developing a sustainable school–community partnership takes time and that partnerships need to be sufficiently resourced to ensure sustainability.

## Stages of a partnership

Research shows that effective partnerships go through several stages:

- identifying a need to be addressed;
- initial planning;
- implementing;
- evaluating; and
- further planning.

## Criteria

The criteria for the Schools First Awards have been developed on the basis of these research findings. Each of the five stages of a partnership identified above has an associated criterion that schools need to meet.

The criteria were piloted with a small number of teachers and principals from a range of schools to ensure the criteria were easy to understand, realistic, equitable and appropriate.

The constructive feedback that participants in the pilot provided enabled the criteria to be further refined.

## Other Awards schemes

The desktop analysis also included a review of 15 awards nationally and internationally to identify the key features of the awards, criteria used, evidence required by schools, and evidence of the impact of the awards. The purpose of this was to inform the development of the criteria, application forms and guidance material for the Schools First Awards.

## Conclusion

The Schools First Awards are intended to promote excellence in school–community partnerships. Through the financial incentives made available to successful schools, the implementation of targeted workshops and creation of a knowledge bank, the Schools First Awards are intended to encourage and inspire school communities to work collaboratively for the purpose of improving outcomes for young people.

The 2008 report provided an evidence base for the development of the criteria upon which the Schools First Awards are based and will also form part of the knowledge bank that will be developed as successful school–community partnerships are built and strengthened and their stories disseminated.

The complete report can be downloaded from the Schools First Knowledge Bank online at [schoolsfirst.edu.au](http://schoolsfirst.edu.au)