



SCHOOL COMMUNITY Research Document 5

This research document has been developed by the Student Wellbeing Unit to support schools in their explorations of school community partnerships within the context of the School Improvement Framework. The challenges for schools in building partnerships 'beyond the school gate' are many and varied. The document seeks to provide ideas for consideration by schools to effectively build meaningful partnerships (as defined in the broadest possible sense) in the knowledge that these will contribute to improved learning outcomes for students.

Within the walls in which any school exists, there exists a community. Individuals have to get along together; they play together; they work together; they use a place in common; they share materials; they care for their rooms, buildings and grounds; and they have practically all the institutions that exist in the larger outside community.

Henry Harap (1947)

The purpose of a school is to help a family educate a child (Don Edgar 2001).

A school is a community and is part of a community.

Children and young people live, learn and grow in communities where strong affiliations and personal connections can make a powerful impact on their sense of belonging, self-worth and attachment. A school community includes students, teachers, parents, parish, community members and organisations who work collaboratively to create supportive and inclusive environments that promote health, wellbeing and enhanced learning outcomes.

Schools are also vital organisations within communities. They are unique in their capacity to reach out to community members, to engage with people of diverse backgrounds and access the range of resources and opportunities available.

Carnoy recognises the changes that are taking place in communities and says, 'The central organising point in our society at the neighbourhood level is the school – elementary and secondary, as well as childhood development centres. Because schools' location patterns are pervasive and residence-based, and because sociability is made easier through children's connections, school could become the platform for a variety of neighbourhood issues' (OECD 2001, pp. 53).

Too often the school is spoken of as the provider of education and the important role and contributions of other institutions are minimised in the process. Joyce Epstein in *School/Family/Community Partnerships* (1995) says, 'The three major contexts in which students learn and grow [are] the family, the school, and the community.'

If this is where learning and growth of young people takes place then it is reasonable to assert that the more these three institutions work together on education, the more effective the learning outcomes will be.

'A school community partnership is a collaborative relationship among the family, school, and community designed primarily to produce positive educational and social outcomes for children and youth, while being mutually beneficial to all parties involved' (Ellis & Hughes 2002).

There has been much research over the past decade that demonstrates the vital role that families play in the success of their children and the success of the school. Henderson and Mapp (2002) concluded that 'the evidence is consistent, positive and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life'.

Parents are involved in school education. As Bastiani (1989) puts it, 'parents are their children's first educators' and therefore parents play a vital and ongoing role in teaching young people.

'Parents have a particularly important role to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children's education belongs' (Congregation for Catholic Education 1997).

If this concept, that the main contributors to the education of young people within society are the family, the school and the community, is agreed with, then how best can these three key influences work together to ensure the best possible outcomes are achieved. Schools have a choice; they can work with parents and the community or they can work in isolation from others. There is ample evidence to support the view that working together is better, that is, it is more effective and produces better outcomes.

Schools can influence this involvement by helping to create positive partnerships between school and community, where parents, students and teachers become partners in learning. Joyce Epstein et al. (2002) identified a number of elements of involvement: These are:

Create a positive home environment – this involves assisting families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support learning.

Improve communication – there needs to be effective strategies for home-to-school and school-to-home communication.

Volunteers – schools can provide opportunities for volunteers to contribute to the life of the school at different times and locations and in a variety of ways.

Promote learning at home – opportunities for parents to assist with homework and other curriculum activities and to influence students' decision-making.

Include parents in decision-making – schools need to include families as participants in decision-making, to develop parent leaders and to enable parents to influence school climate and direction.

Collaborate with the community – schools can help coordinate resources and services from the community for families, students and the school and they can provide services to the community.

How does social capital impact on schooling?

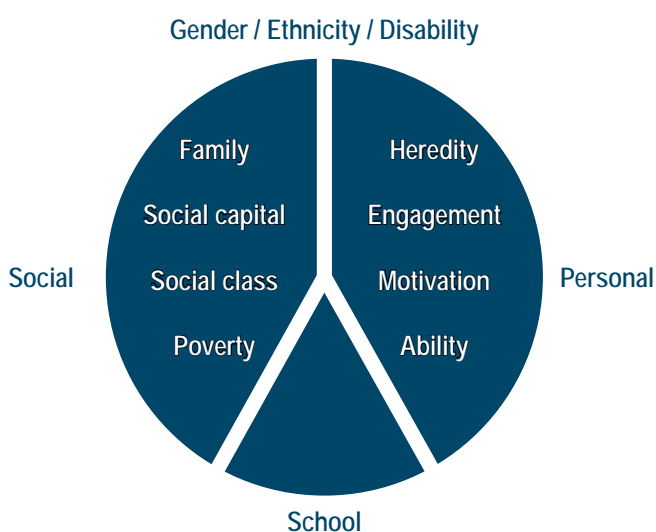
Robert Putman in *Bowling Alone* (Putman 2000) contends that social capital and education are not only linked but indeed education is an indicator or measure of social capital. James Coleman was one of the main sociologists who developed thinking around social capital in the 1980s. In his work studying the differences between schools in the USA he concluded that when social capital is high there are educational benefits (McGaw 2007).

The OECD publication, *The Wellbeing of Nations* (2001), uses the following definition of social capital: 'networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups'.

West-Burnham and Otero conclude that 'social capital is essentially about networks, trust, engagement, communication, shared values, aspirations and interconnectedness' (West-Burnham & Otero 2004).

In *Schools and Communities – working together to transform children's lives*, West-Burnham et al. (2007) discuss in some detail the social context of education and the school improvement agenda in particular. Underpinning their approach is a study of the variables that influence a child's educational success and life chances.

They contend that 'if 80% of student achievement is explained by student background and then only 20% is attributable to the school, then schools show a wide range of effectiveness' (West-Burnham et al. 2007, p. 20).



Adapted from West-Burnham et al. 2007

The social factors that they identify as being important in influencing educational success or otherwise are: the quality of family life, the level of wealth or poverty, the level of social capital in the community and the social class of the family. Schools work best when all these factors are positive and available to a high level. With respect to school improvement and effectiveness it is the 'level of social capital in the community' that the school can influence most directly. This causes us to consider the relationship between social capital and education. In what ways does education contribute to the development of an individual's social capital and how does social capital influence educational outcomes? Tom Bentley at the Centre for Strategic Education Symposium summarised the relationship well when he commented that 'the best we can tell from the evidence at this stage is that social capital is somehow both cause and effect' (Redman 2007, p. 6).

School – Community Connectedness & Wellbeing

There is a strong and mutual interconnection between wellbeing and learning. The *Future of Schooling in Australia (Federalist Paper 2 2007)* recognised that building partnerships between schools, families and the community enhances student learning, values, aspirations and wellbeing. 'Schools can better address barriers to learning and teaching and promote positive development when they are an integral and positive part of the community' (Taylor 2000, p. 299). School connectedness and school climate therefore are directly related to the role of school community in promoting wellbeing. When students feel happy and connected to their school, they are more likely to participate more fully, to build stronger, more positive relationships and avoid risky behaviours.

School community partnerships have the capacity to weave together a critical mass of resources and strategies to support students and their families. Such resources are not limited to service agencies. Within a community schools can establish enriching links with a variety of people, businesses, community-based organisations, faith-based civic groups, local government, other educational facilities and health and recreational clubs. Community partnerships give the schools the capacity to connect young people and their families to role models and life options. These partnerships provide opportunities that enhance young people's social, emotional

and physical development. They offer students a source of social capital – the network and relationships that create a sense of belonging and communicate the importance of education and belief in the future (Blank, Melaville & Shah 2003). As Holloway (2004, p. 89) suggests, 'efforts to improve student performance must focus on the community as a whole, not just on the school.'

The research from the Australian Council for Educational Research's (ACER) longitudinal surveys of Australian youth (Marks et al. 2001; Fullarton 2002) found that student participation in a wide range of activities led to improved wellbeing and closer connections to the school community. In turn, this had positive flow-on effects to academic performance including increased skills, greater engagement with learning, more positive attitudes, and improved transitions into the workforce, further education or training (ACER 2007). Epstein (2005) also states that high quality partnerships 'contribute to positive results for students, including improved achievement, attendance and behaviour'.

Hands (2005) identified several other benefits that resulted from the development of school–community partnerships including:

- schools raising their profiles in the community
- students increasing their social capital by being exposed to the expertise and knowledge of others in the community
- community opportunities leading to employment for some students after partnership activities finished
- a renewed focus on civics and citizenship among students.

Effective school–community partnerships can bring a wide range of benefits to students, schools and communities. These partnerships are characterised by the following key principles identified in the Family–School Partnerships Framework (DEEWR 2008):

- Sharing of power, responsibility and ownership, with each party having a different role
- A degree of mutuality that begins with the process of listening to each other and that incorporates responsive dialogue and give-and-take on both sides
- Shared aims and goals based on a common understanding of the educational needs of children
- A commitment to joint action.

School – Community Partnerships Types of Involvement

The School–Community Partnerships: Types of Involvement Chart may assist schools to collect data to analyse the current status of their school community partnerships, identify community resources available and inform future action within the school community partnerships sphere.

Types of Involvement (Epstein et al. 2002)	Engaging Parents in the School (Epstein et al. 2002)	Engaging the Community in the School	Engaging the School in the Community
<p>Parenting</p> <p>↑↑↑ In this space list the initiatives/ activities undertaken by your school in this area.</p>	<p>Example: School conducts parent forums on current issues and parenting related skills, e.g. cyber safety.</p>	<p>Example: Members of the broader community (e.g. kindergartens, maternal and child health centres) are invited to join in planning and attending parent forums.</p>	<p>Example: School staff participate in parenting forums conducted in partnership with the local kindergarten.</p>
<p>Communicating</p> <p>↑↑↑ In this space list the initiatives/ activities undertaken by your school in this area.</p>	<p>Example: School newsletter, use of email, meet and greet, to inform parents of school matters. What about home-to-school communications?</p>	<p>Example: Community organisations encouraged to contribute items to the school newsletter.</p>	<p>Example: Schools promote and advertise via noticeboards and posters in local shopping centres, libraries, community centres, etc.</p>
<p>Volunteering</p> <p>↑↑↑ In this space list the initiatives/ activities undertaken by your school in this area.</p>	<p>Example: Parents are provided with a variety of opportunities to volunteer for in/out-of-class activities.</p>	<p>Example: Local businesses volunteer their staff to participate in school activities.</p>	<p>Example: School students volunteer to work in the local community via structured programs such as cross-age tutoring and service learning.</p>

<p>Learning at home</p> <p>↑↑↑</p> <p>In this space list the initiatives/ activities undertaken by your school in this area.</p>		<p>Example: Parents are provided with an overview of key curriculum requirements and deadlines.</p>	<p>Example: Community organisations work with the school to establish and staff a homework program.</p>	<p>Example: Local businesses/service clubs provide personnel and resources to support home study.</p>
<p>Decision-making</p> <p>↑↑↑</p> <p>In this space list the initiatives/ activities undertaken by your school in this area.</p>		<p>Example: Parents are provided with a range of opportunities to be involved in school decision-making, e.g. school boards, parent groups, class representatives.</p>	<p>Example: Members of the community are invited to use their skills and expertise to assist the school.</p>	<p>Example: School staff are encouraged to participate in local community organisations and activities.</p>
<p>Collaborating with the community</p> <p>↑↑↑</p> <p>In this space list the initiatives/ activities undertaken by your school in this area.</p>		<p>Example: Parents provide information about community resources and how they can be best accessed by the school.</p>	<p>Example: School focused Youth Service (SFYS), local agencies/organisations establish partnerships with schools to deliver services.</p>	<p>Example: School provides information to new families about the local area.</p>
<p>Sponsorship</p> <p>↑↑↑</p> <p>In this space list the initiatives/ activities undertaken by your school in this area.</p>		<p>Example: Parents are encouraged to use their networks and skills to access resources.</p>	<p>Example: Community groups provide support to schools in seeking additional resources.</p>	<p>Example: Schools actively approach businesses to seek sponsorship and establish local partnerships.</p>

School Improvement & the links with school community

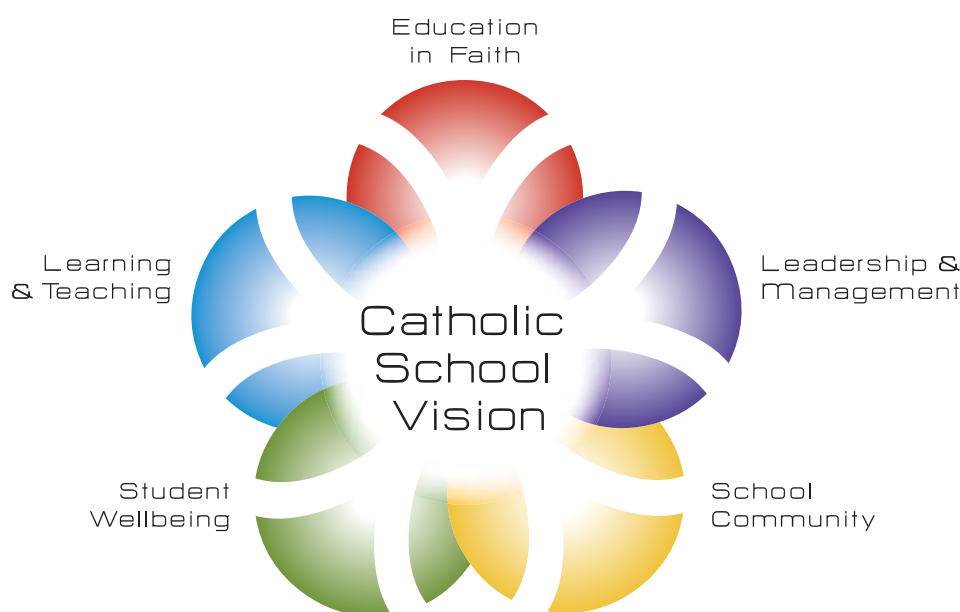
Community development has to be central to the school community sphere of the school improvement agenda. It is hard to see how schools can improve their effectiveness without understanding their community, its needs and culture, without helping to build capacity within the community and without creating a sense of belonging between a school and its wider community.

'Community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort' (Sergiovanni 1994).

A strong underlying theme of the *One Body – Many Parts: Strategy Plan 2006–2010 for Catholic Education in the*

Archdiocese of Melbourne is 'working together'. This strategy highlights the importance of strengthening partnerships.

A key strategy used to guide and support schools in building these key partnerships is the School Improvement Framework (SIF), which is the basis of the school review process. The School Improvement Framework promotes an inquiry approach to determine action planning within the local school context. It is a self-reflection process that requires schools to monitor and evaluate the extent to which they are achieving the standards to which they aspire. The five key spheres of schooling incorporated in the Catholic School Vision also provide the structure for the School Self-reflection Report.



School Improvement Framework



Figure 1. CEOM School Improvement Framework

The five spheres are:

- Education in Faith
- Learning and Teaching
- Leadership and Management
- Student Wellbeing
- School Community.

As indicated within Figure 1, the School Improvement Framework acknowledges the importance of recognising the interdependence of the five spheres of schooling. The aspects of community and student wellbeing included in Figure 1 (see opposite page), are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. The School Improvement Framework seeks to support schools in establishing the organisational conditions that support continuous improvement, ensure that the unique features of each school situation are recognised and that strategies are built on the basis of an analysis of that particular context.

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