The neighbourhood just got bigger: Schools and communities working together for change

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school leaders to grow and resource their educational projects to maximise impact. She researches and writes in the areas of school leadership and school/business/philanthropy engagement. In partnership with The Ian Potter Foundation and the Origin Foundation, Dr. Anderson is leading a three-year national study on the impact of philanthropy in education, LLEAP (Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy). She contributed to ACER's 2011 paper 'The benefits of school-business relationships for the Business-School Connections Roundtable' and is the co-writer of a federal government commissioned school-business evaluation guide. Dr Anderson is on the Board of the Business Working with Education Foundation.

Abstract

There are many things that schools can do to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for their students. Increasingly schools are choosing to look beyond their gates to connect with other groups in their neighbourhood. Businesses, not-for-profit organisations, philanthropic organisations and others are also looking to connect with schools for mutual benefits. Whether you are the local real estate agent, someone from Rotary, a TAFE teacher, a university lecturer, a pre-school parent, a football club president, a resident in an elderly citizens' home, or from another community group and wanting to share resources and ideas with a local school, there are plenty of opportunities for collaboration to improve student outcomes. This presentation looks at the benefits of collaborating and offers research evidence and practical tips for developing strong and productive school–community relationships that ultimately support better outcomes for students.

Introduction

Highly effective schools have high levels of parent and community engagement.[i] Whether you work in local business or a large corporation, volunteer with Rotary, teach in a TAFE or university, serve on the local kindergarten committee, run a youth services program, play for a football or netball club, reside in an elderly citizens' home, or offer art classes in the local neighbourhood house, there are plenty of opportunities for you to collaborate with schools to improve outcomes for students. Whether your school is in the city or a remote area, primary

or secondary, government or independent, there will be a wide range of resources and skills in 'the neighbourhood' that you can draw on to improve your school's effectiveness.

Changes in school-community relationships

In the 1950s and 1960s there was little interaction between schools and the wider community. Parents might attend parent teacher nights or visit their child's school during Education Week but schools in this era were more likely to have 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' signs on their fences than welcome mats for community groups. What went on in schools was not seen to be the business of the community.

In the past few decades, a different kind of relationship between school and community has emerged. Rather than being set apart from the rest of the community, the school is now often seen to be its hub. The community, in turn, is seen as an important source of resources and expertise for the school.

School–community engagement can take many different forms, ranging from informal arrangements that might only involve a one-off activity, service or gift to more complex partnerships with formal governance arrangements and programs that are developed over several years.

Outcomes and benefits

ACER's research undertaken as part of the NAB Schools First program shows four main outcomes that schools are hoping to achieve when entering into partnerships: increased student engagement, improved academic outcomes, enhanced social wellbeing and/or broader vocational options and skills.[ii] Within these categories, more specific outcomes may be identified, such as improving reading as an academic outcome.

The NAB Schools First program shows that community partners have conducted training sessions across a wide range of topics, provided relevant work experience for students, offered industry experience for teachers, helped teach specific skills and knowledge related to the curriculum, organised field trips and camp activities, showed students potential career and study pathways, worked with students to improve the physical environment of the school, provided social contacts within the community and given students greater awareness of the services available for young people.[iii]It is not only students who benefit from these connections. Staff in schools, business, philanthropic foundations and trusts, and community

organisations gain from being exposed to professional learning and training opportunities. Teachers and principals can develop new knowledge and skills in project management, human resources, budgeting and marketing. Businesses can meet their corporate responsibility goals, be exposed to the innovative thinking of young people, and potentially have access to a more highly skilled future workforce in the local area. New possibilities for work and economic ventures can emerge.

Effective collaboration can lead to better interaction between agencies, greater understanding of the issues affecting young people in their communities, and greater connection between community partners and other families and groups.

Communities can also benefit from the tangible products that are associated with some partnership programs, such as community gardens or environmental programs, and from young people who feel more connected to their communities through their participation in such programs. In turn, this can lead to greater community confidence. For example, some schools in the NAB Schools First Program report fewer street offences and substance abuse issues than previously as a result of partnering with local community groups.[iv]

Governments, too, benefit from schools connecting more strongly with business and community groups. These kinds of relationships can help grow local economies and potentially reduce the costs of service provision through less duplication of services and shared responsibility.

Challenges

These kinds of collaborations are not easy to build or sustain, however. Not all school–community partnerships run smoothly. Finding potential partners and resources, knowing who might have the professional expertise to advise and guide program development all take time and require different kinds of knowledge and skills. Gathering information about an area of identified need and knowing how to monitor and evaluate the impact of a collaboration can also be challenging.

There can be other challenges too when partners have unrealistic expectations around the relationship or what it is aiming to achieve. Sometimes one partner might be less committed to a collaboration than others. Some school leaders may be sceptical about entering into a relationship with, for example, a business. A non-school partner might not fully understand the day-to-day operations of a school and therefore under- or overestimate what's possible.

Effective engagement

ACER's project Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy (LLEAP) has shown the importance of laying strong foundations for a school–community partnership.[v] From the fieldwork analyses of the LLEAP project, ten factors for highly effective engagement have been identified:

- having a 'good fit' (e.g. aligned values, objectives, priorities)
- building capacity (e.g. increasing the skills, knowledge and understanding of partners)
- making well-informed decisions (e.g. evidence-based identification of need)
- having relevant knowledge (e.g. knowledge of the community or school context)
- having appropriate levels of resourcing (e.g. having a realistic understanding of the needs of the project)
- being clear about roles (e.g. partners in the project having clearly defined roles and objectives)
- having genuine reciprocity (e.g. bringing strengths to the relationship)
- having built relationships based on trust (e.g. perceptions of competence)
- having effective communications (e.g. communicating clearly and openly)
- being impact focused (e.g. clarity around what is being sought to change).

Other evidence from NAB Schools First confirms the importance of collecting information along the way to measure this impact.

In setting up an effective partnership these are the things you could think about:

- Do you have a shared vision and common goals?
- Are your objectives clear and achievable?
- Are there clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each partner?
- Are the expectations of each partner fair and reasonable?
- Does each partner have a good understanding of the other partners' requirements?
- Have you set in place opportunities for regular communication between partners?
- Is the collaborative project adequately resourced?
- Do you know how (and how often) you will measure the impact of your collaboration?
- What will you put in place to help make the collaboration sustainable?

Concluding comments

A consistent finding from the research in Australia and overseas is that strong school–community engagement can bring a range of benefits, not only to students but also to teachers, schools as a whole, partners and the wider community. However, for these benefits to occur, school–community partners need to have a shared vision, work in genuinely collaborative ways, and monitor the progress and effectiveness of their partnership activities. Sharing the results of this good practice means others can recognise the important role that community groups can play in supporting education and schools. Preparing 21st century learners depends on everyone in the community seeing this as their business.

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i Masters, G. N. (2004). What makes a good school? *ACER eNews*,
   http://www.acer.edu.au/enews/2004/02/what-makes-a-good-school

ii Lonsdale, M. (2009). *School–community partnerships in Australian schools*. ACER,
   http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=policy_analysis_misc

iii Ibid.

iv Ibid.

v Anderson, M. & Curtin, E. (2011). *LLEAP: Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy, 2011 survey report*. ACER, www.acer.edu.au/lleap.