



New School Ties: Networks for Success

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Executive summary

This report delivers the findings of a research project carried out from 2007 to 2008 for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The aim of the research was to identify examples and characteristics of collaboration amongst schools and between schools and other agencies in Australia and internationally that support better outcomes for students, particularly those who are underperforming in literacy and numeracy, at risk of leaving school early or less likely to enter university or to succeed in further or vocational education. As well as conducting a search of the local and international literature, the project collected qualitative data through four forums and a number of interviews with policymakers, researchers and representatives of leading business, philanthropic, community and education sector organisations. This qualitative data provides a strong base for the Victorian context.

The key finding of this research and consultation is that Victoria is already the focus of numerous collaborations operated by, with or for schools. Some examples of these collaborations are provided in this report as well as examples from other Australian states and territories and international contexts. These collaborations represent a wide range of applications, scope and membership and have a wide range of intended purposes including:

- enabling shared professional learning for teachers
- supporting collective strategies between local schools to meet local needs
- supporting student progress through key transition points such as the transition from early childhood education to primary school and from primary school to secondary school
- maximising the contributions of the community, business and philanthropic sectors to the work of improving outcomes for children and young people.

The research and consultation also identified a number of factors that make greater collaboration across Victorian schools and between schools and other agencies both increasingly necessary and increasingly possible. These are described in this report. They include:

- a growing agenda for a joined-up response to social issues including educational inequity
- a greater awareness of the potential to reframe schools as centres of their communities
- the need to broaden the curriculum to respond to an increasingly diverse student cohort, to personalise learning and to give students a genuine role and voice
- fresh attention to the impact of quality teaching and a search for ways to maximise teacher capacity
- the rapid growth of electronic networking tools
- the need to better engage parents in their children's learning, especially where disadvantage is an issue
- a growing desire by other sectors to support the work of schools.

The research identified an international policy trend towards formal networks that have the capability to bring additional resources into schools, including schools serving disadvantaged areas, and to

target significant and sustainable support to improve outcomes for young people who are most in need of such support. In response to this finding, this project focuses primarily on networks for deep reform that improve student outcomes by building the capacity of schools and communities and by addressing some of the systemic and structural barriers to success for children and young people facing disadvantage.

Research and consultation found that a number of barriers exist to the growth of such networks in Victoria including school capacity, especially in disadvantaged contexts, and the overlap or replication of responsibilities between education and other sectors. It also identified some of the preconditions for the successful operation of networks including adequate resources, effective leadership, a focus on student outcomes and the ability to combine responsiveness to local circumstances with high standards and accountabilities.

1. Networks for success

What is a network?

The most prevalent form of collaboration between Victorian schools and other agencies is a partnership between the school and its local community. The local community provides the most immediate opportunity for schools to work with groups and individuals who can support young people's learning including parents, local business, local government and community groups. These partnerships are particularly important for schools in disadvantaged areas, where the school's relationships with the local community can improve its cohesiveness and boost the opportunities it can provide for its young people (Spierings 2001; Thomson 2000, 2002). Internationally, the comparatively few schools that break the nexus between poverty and educational achievement have strong relationships with their local community that deliver many benefits: better engagement and learning outcomes for students, greater dynamism and capacity for the school and new solutions and resources for the community (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk & Mulford 2000a, 2000b; Johns, Kilpatrick, Mulford & Falk 2000; Jordan, Orozco & Averett 2001; Kannapel & Clements 2005; Kilpatrick, Johns & Mulford 2003; Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk & Prescott 2002).

There is a global trend to extend, consolidate and systemise the impact of such individual partnerships through more extensive and formal networks, which have the potential to engage a larger number of players and harness more significant resources for the work of schools. The trend towards school education networks emerges from a wider movement by governments to improve policy development and service provision in areas including education by moving away from centralised delivery and towards an approach that encourages such practices as collaboration, disciplined innovation and personalisation. This has given rise to a number of widely adopted policy strategies including joined-up government, place-based policymaking and support for local partnerships and networks (Considine 2005; Parker & Gallagher 2007; Robinson & Keating 2005a).

Within education, networks are seen as one of the most promising levers for large-scale and systemic reform. They have been associated with a number of potential and proven improvements including better achievement for a large number of students, greater school capacity for innovation, improved provision and services and a broader role for schools in their communities (Cole 2001b; Hadfield, Jopling, Noden, O'Leary & Stott 2005; Hargreaves 2003a, 2003b; Hopkins 2000, 2006; Istance 2006; Jackson 2006; Leadbeater 2005). As Chapman and Aspin explain, networks are different to most of the structures that traditionally drive educational delivery because they create a commonality of purpose and commitment amongst people and institutions:

If networks are successful they hold the possibility of changing the environment in which policy makers operate. They provide the opportunity for the environment and the system to become recultured in ways that are more cooperative, interconnected and multi-agency. They have a capacity for evolutionary transformation and renewal in changing aspirations, ways of working together and provision of learning opportunities (Chapman & Aspin 2005).

Network is one of a number of terms including partnership, cluster, alliance, collaboration, collective and joined-up approach that describe groups of organisations and sectors working together. This language is often used interchangeably – and confusingly – to describe what is actually a multitude of

different connections (Department for Victorian Communities 2007; Edwards, Goodwin, Pemberton & Woods 2000). For example, the Partnerships Analysis Tool created by VicHealth (McLeod n.d.) identifies a continuum of partnerships in health promotion that ranges from networking through to collaboration, where networking is limited to the exchange of information but collaboration includes the undertaking of activities for a common purpose and enhancing the capacity of the other partner for mutual benefit.

Partnerships amongst schools or between schools and other agencies can have a range of purposes, some of which are described earlier. This is equally true of education networks, but these more frequently extend to ambitious or large-scale purposes such as meeting the educational needs of all young people in an area or working for the transformation of an entire education system. Networks can also take many forms, from informal, idiosyncratic and short-term arrangements between small groups of teachers to formal, permanent and widespread alliances that go beyond the education sector. They can be formal or informal, fixed or fluid, extensive or intimate, short-term or long-term. They can have broad or narrow agendas. They can be expert or representative, centralised or decentralised, open or closed, local or cosmopolitan, geographical or virtual (Beare 2006; Cole 2007; Hannon 2005; Robinson & Keating 2005a; West-Burnham, Farrar & Otero 2007).

Jackson and Burns (2005) provide one typology of school education networks that includes:

- informal, idiosyncratic and casual networks created for mutual support or knowledge-sharing between individuals
- specialist teacher networks to advance a common professional interest. These may be permanent, but membership may change
- strategic, temporary networks of schools that come together for an agreed period of time for a specific purpose
- geographically based, relatively permanent networks of schools that work together for the long term to share responsibility for young people in their area.

Hopkins (2000) provides another typology that includes even more ambitious purposes:

1. At its most basic level a network could be regarded as simply groups of teachers joining together for a common curriculum purpose and for the sharing of good practice.
2. At a more ambitious level networks could involve groups of teachers and schools joining together for the purposes of school improvement with the explicit aim of not just sharing practice but of enhancing teaching and learning throughout a school or groups of schools.
3. Over and above this, networks could also not just serve the purpose of knowledge transfer and school improvement, but also involve groups of stakeholders joining together for the implementation of specific policies locally and possibly nationally.
4. A further extension of this way of working is found when groups of networks (within and outside education) link together for system improvement in terms of social justice and inclusion.
5. Finally, there is the possibility of groups of networks working together not just on a social justice agenda, but also to act explicitly as an agency for system renewal and transformation.

The clear implication of the literature is that the greatest opportunities for change lie at the most ambitious ends of these spectra, with formal, stable and structured networks able to attract significant and sustained commitment from many players with the common purpose of improving educational outcomes in specific districts or local areas (Chapman & Aspin 2005; Robinson & Keating 2005a).

While there is no single blueprint for education networks, there is consistent agreement within the research literature that an effective network:

- focuses on enhancing student outcomes and sets achievable goals in which students' best interests are paramount
- has a shared language and agreed values, aspirations and expected outcomes
- fosters relationships of trust and respect based on democratic principles, mutuality, equity, shared ownership and common purpose
- has the active involvement and advocacy of school leadership
- has the capacity to respond to local circumstances and to move from soft collaboration to rigorous work
- promotes innovative or 'next' practice
- is well organised, with clear operating procedures and mechanisms for ensuring maximum participation between its members
- has adequate resources to fulfil its purposes, particularly in terms of time, finance and human capital (Cole 2001b; Hopkins 2000; Jackson & Burns 2005; Lasater 2007).

One of the most complete descriptions of this kind of collaboration comes from the *World Declaration on Education for All*, which states that to serve the learning needs of all children:

New and revitalized partnerships at all levels will be necessary: partnerships among all sub-sectors and forms of education (...); partnerships between education and other government departments, including planning, finance, labour, communications, and other social sectors; partnerships between government and non-governmental organizations, the private sector, local communities, religious groups, and families (UNESCO 1990).

Joined up government for education

As discussed earlier, the education network movement is part of a wider movement towards cross-government and cross-sectoral collaboration in order to address 'complex issues with complex causation when knowledge and resources are required from across many sectors' (Blacher & Adams, in Parker & Gallagher 2007). Disadvantage certainly qualifies as one of these issues. There is a consensus that its multiple and inter-related causes and effects can only be addressed through a joined-up approach that engages the various arms and levels of government (Rogan 2002; Vinson 2007). Because of the strong interconnection between disadvantage and education, education is often a central focus of cross-government initiatives.

Internationally, for example, the United Kingdom established a Social Exclusion Unit almost a decade ago to tackle disadvantage using multiple, coordinated policy levers with a priority given to education. There is now a push for the introduction of a similar policy approach in the United States (Boushey, Branosky, Fremstad, Gragg & Waller 2007). Within Victoria, the Government's ten year *Growing Victoria Together* strategy represents a commitment to overcoming disadvantage through a coordinated approach that includes government, non-government agencies and local communities (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005). Its *A Fairer Victoria* strategy represents a whole of government policy action plan to address disadvantage – including educational inequity - through

collaboration with non-government and local community agencies (Department of Planning and Community Development 2008).

This whole of government approach is reflected in the structures of the Victorian Government. The Office for Children was established in 2005 to lead joined-up action to improve outcomes for all Victorian children, particularly those facing disadvantage. Its 2007 restructure as the Office for Children and Early Childhood Development within the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development opened up new scope for this action more strongly linked to education. The Neighbourhood Renewal cross-government initiative was launched in 2001 to narrow the gap between disadvantaged communities and the rest of the state including improved educational outcomes for children and young people in the state's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Department of Human Services 2007). The recently reformed Department of Planning and Community Development coordinates a large number of government functions to build active and inclusive communities and maintains a strong focus on improved educational outcomes (DPCD 2008).

The Australian Government's appointment of the first Minister for Social Inclusion can be expected to strengthen this joined-up approach at the national level. The Council for the Australian Federation and the National Reform Agenda are already seeding greater cooperation between states and territories to redress inequity (Dawkins 2007) and the Australian Social Inclusion Board, which met for the first time at time of writing, aims to drive 'new ways of governing' and 'rethink how policy and programs across portfolios and levels of government can work together to combat economic and social disadvantage' (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008).

This approach is strongly advocated by Australian educationalists like Thomson, who argues that education policy cannot be separated from other public policy and that all policy areas affect schools (Thomson 2000, 2002), and by international commentators such as Bentley (2006):

Schooling systems will not overcome growing patterns of exclusion and marginalisation by incrementally improving their attainment scores. Teaching, resourcing, leadership all matter, but they cannot work in isolation from the wider context.

Support for this approach has come from local government, which has a potentially central role in improving educational provision and outcomes in disadvantaged communities. The Victorian Local Governance Association called some years ago for linking structures that enable local government to more fully participate in education and align networks of public schools to local government areas (Snelling 2003). Some of this work has since been done and the Victorian Government now recognises that 'local councils have a major role in community development and can become key partners with schools' (Department of Education and Training, 2005c).

Strong support has also been forthcoming from other agencies and sectors. The Centre for Strategic Education has identified joint approaches to building social capital through education as one of the most ambitious and timely agendas for Victoria (Redman 2007). The recently concluded Agora Think Tank (2007) prompted cross-sectoral partnerships to support educational participation by disadvantaged young Victorians. The Victorian Health Inequalities Network (2007) proposes an integrated education policy framework based on inter-departmental and inter-agency collaboration to improve equity of access to learning.

Networks for the compulsory years

This report focuses primarily on networks for the compulsory years of schooling (Prep to Year 10). Notable Victorian networks have been most prevalent at the post-compulsory end of schooling (Years 11 and 12), driven by the need to achieve better education and training and employment outcomes for young people (Robinson & Keating 2005a). Some of these are legislated by government while others are the result of cross-sectoral cooperation.

The Local Learning and Employment Networks are their most noteworthy example. They are ‘a concrete experiment in joined up government’ (Robinson & Keating 2005b) that bring together education providers, industry, community organisations, government organisations and individuals to improve outcomes for young people in communities across the state. They have arguably had more success than any other existing network in creating a culture of collective responsibility for young people’s education, although they still face barriers to cooperation and cross-sector operation (Robinson & Keating 2005b).

The Schools for Innovation and Excellence clusters, have been the most prevalent formal school networks for these years, involving all Victorian primary and secondary government schools in cooperative efforts to enhance teaching and learning, bring about school reform and create partnerships with their local communities. The clusters have shown improved student engagement and better teacher ability to provide learning opportunities for students (Department of Education and Training 2005a).

The Leading Schools Fund, a key initiative of the *Blueprint for Government Schools* (DE&T 2003), has been another important vehicle for groups of proximate government schools. It provides funding for approved secondary schools to develop innovative solutions to improve student learning outcomes. Participating schools are expected to think beyond traditional practices and structures, share effective practice and develop partnerships between other schools in their geographic area.

Other important Victorian networks include the 64 school leadership networks and the regional principal reference groups that act as vehicles for collaboration and shared action between local schools. These networks operate across Victoria, managing student services and technical support for schools in all areas of the state. The networks are recognised consultative bodies for the Office of Government School Education and undertake a range of initiatives at the discretion of the local membership. Particular areas of focus for the networks include joint strategies to improve student learning, transitions, engagement and well being as well as teacher practice and strategies to share existing or engage additional resources. These may include community or local government partnerships. Network membership is generally made up of school leaders (including assistant principals) with standing invitations extended to the relevant Regional Director and Senior Education Officers.

The Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2008) provides the framework for the creation of a more integrated learning and development system. The strategy for system improvement involves a stronger systemic approach to school improvement in government schools based upon driving improvement through the role of regional networks.

In support of this improvement effort, the employment of new regional network leaders will significantly expand the role of school networks. Under a new network strategic plan, networks will collectively support all schools to improve and achieve better outcomes for the students in a network.

A review of governance in government schools will examine new models of governance, including greater community and business involvement, alternative processes for appointing school council members and the role of school networks.

2. Networks in place

Networks for social capital

The idea of cross-sectoral networks to achieve key social purposes is not a new one. It is at least a decade since a serious discourse began in Australia about boundary- or sector-crossing collaborations that combine the energies of the public, private and philanthropic sectors in new approaches to build social capital and alleviate entrenched social problems including educational inequity (Edgar, 2001; Marginson 2001; Raysmith 2001; Trewin 2001). Education and social capital are frequently twinned in this discourse and the policy agendas that have emerged from it, but their actual relationship is complex and still being explored (Burnheim 2004; Field 2006).

On one side of this relationship, social capital is a precondition for educational participation and alleviates the effect of disadvantage on educational achievement (Putnam, in Bentley, Kaye, MacLeod, O'Leary & Parker 2004; Vinson 2004). On the other side, education is instrumental in redressing exclusion and building the social capital that can protect against it (McClure 2000; Putnam 2004; Sparkes 1999; Vinson, 2004, 2007). Building social capital is one of the accepted public purposes of Australian schooling (Mulford, Cranston, Keating & Reid 2007). As one United Kingdom paper observes:

Investing in school improvement without seeking to harness the forces of social capital and social geography is, in the medium term, self defeating. (...) The links between resilient communities and successful learners is there to be built on; the most dynamic educational interventions of the next generation will address both dimensions together (Bentley, Kaye, MacLeod, O'Leary & Parker 2004).

Bentley concludes that 'social capital is somehow both cause and effect' in improving education systems:

The key issue is how a school, or a group of schools, or a school system, might be both equipped to draw upon, and then to contribute to and enrich, the endowment of social capital that surrounds the immediate organisation and population of the school (in Redman 2007).

Social capital is frequently broken down into three categories, each with its own distinct type of network:

- Bonding social capital strengthens ties between similar groups in ways that benefit their members.
- Bridging social capital builds ties between dissimilar groups in ways that have wider social benefits
- Linking social capital builds connections between groups with different levels of power in society in ways that build social cohesion (Putnam 2000, 2004).

Bonding social capital has important benefits for schooling: cooperation amongst teachers and school leaders builds bonding capital within the school which strengthens its capacity to respond creatively and collectively to the needs of its students (Hargreaves 2001). It also has beneficial outcomes for students: their relationships with their teachers and their sense of belonging to the school can have a positive effect on their engagement, participation and achievement (Mulford 2008).

On the other hand, many schools create bonding social capital amongst their own school communities because they bring people together on the basis of shared geography, religion, socioeconomic status or gender, but do not contribute to bridging or linking social capital (McGaw 2006). The greatest potential comes from models of schooling that build bridging social capital by connecting schools to one another through cooperative networks (Mulford 2008), that build linking social capital by connecting schools and their communities (West-Burnham, Farrar & Otero 2007) or that engage a wide range of players in the enterprise of schooling:

Cross-sector partnerships are more likely to generate bridging, linking and bonding social capital while at the same time producing innovative outcomes that build stronger, more robust communities able to participate in the new economy (Loza & Ogilvie 2005).

The power of the local

There is an international trend for governments to achieve their policy goals by devolving power to local agencies and communities. The local community is increasingly recognised as the place where cross-sectoral partnerships and networks can be most successful in tailoring solutions to needs (Agora Think Tank 2007). This is not new knowledge. The education and youth policy communities have argued for years that collective local solutions must be found for local problems, that the future of young people is the shared responsibility of the whole community and that education systems should be built around cooperative, place-based networks of schools and other local organisations that work together for the benefit of all young people in the area (Cole 2001b; Hargreaves 2003a; Hopkins 2006; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001).

These calls recognise the strong two-way relationship between schools and their neighbourhoods, one that is especially pertinent for schools in communities where educational and social disadvantage are strongly linked. Other research (Thomson 2000, 2002) argues that strategies to improve educational outcomes in these communities must be informed by their 'thisness' – the qualities of schools and their communities that are specific to their locale – and that schools will not make the needed difference to student learning unless education policy recognises the impact of these various 'thisnesses'. In his earlier work on school networks for Victoria, Cole highlighted the potential for this:

Educational opportunities for all students will be enhanced by a network of schools working together to improve local schooling and support service arrangements. (...) A network is a place to make sense of a local context and to collectively share ideas and action on common problems or challenges (2001b).

Qualitative data gathered from the forums conducted for this project suggests that the knowledge of the local government and not-for-profit sectors about what works in place-based practice should be shared with school education systems to find the best approach to the specific local needs of children and young people. This echoes an observation by a school principal at an earlier forum conducted by the Education Foundation:

The challenge is to make the future better for the young people we are working with in the particular context we operate in.

In creating a more locally responsive and place-based school system, research highlights one danger to be avoided: the loss or dilution of high universal expectations, standards and accountabilities. For example, Haberman (1991) warns against the 'pedagogy of poverty' that reflects and sets low educational expectations for young people in impoverished communities.

In California, the City Heights K-16 Educational Collaborative brings together the Price Charities philanthropic foundation, the San Diego State University School of Education, the San Diego Unified School District, the San Diego Education Association and three schools to improve student achievement in a disadvantaged community characterised by low academic achievement, inadequate resources, student transience and high teacher turnover. It also aims to enhance the provision and capacity of the local schools, better prepare educators and other professionals to serve inner-city students and families and build a stronger future for the community. The Collaborative is one aspect of the bigger City Heights Initiative, which is working to revitalise this economically challenged community.

Price Charities launched the Collaborative in 1998 after identifying quality education as a key ingredient in creating a liveable City Heights community. The basis of the Collaborative is shared responsibility amongst the three schools - Rosa Parks Elementary School, Monroe Clark Middle School and Hoover High School - for the provision of K-16 education for more than 5,000 local students. The schools work together to identify and address the challenges of improving student learning in the area. As a result, the Collaborative has seen a marked improvement in student attendance and teacher retention and strong involvement of parents compared to similar schools. As well this, each of the schools acts a wider resource for the community, providing comprehensive health and social services to students and their families. Each school has on-site nurses and social workers. Parent Centres at each school conduct workshops on topics ranging from nutrition and anger management to getting into college.

The Collaborative also uses the community's cultural resources to enrich educational opportunities for students. Its School in the Park program takes third, fourth and fifth grade students out of their inner city classrooms for nine weeks of the year and relocates them to San Diego's famous Balboa Park, where they participate in educational programs at ten key cultural institutions including the Museum of Art, the San Diego Historical Society and the San Diego Zoo.

The San Diego State University is a central partner in this cross-sectoral network. It takes administrative and operational responsibility for the three Collaborative schools, contributing its resources and expertise to support student learning. Each year, university students devote more than 150,000 hours of course work, fieldwork and research to Collaborative-related projects. More than 100 students serve as tutors or do their teacher training placements at the schools. University staff also participate in Collaborative programs and contribute to curriculum and program design, implementation, teaching and direct support for the network.

The school as hub

The integration of early childhood services and schools that is a cornerstone of the *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2008) opens up new opportunities for structural collaboration to improve outcomes for children and young people. For example, the recently opened Pakenham Springs Primary School is co-located with a kindergarten, maternal and child health centre and occasional childcare centre to provide what its principal calls a 'one-stop-shop' community resource for parents with young children. The co-location is the result of collaboration between the school, local government and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Arrangements like this one and the other examples described elsewhere in this report have a positive impact on student and parent engagement as well as the school's ability to respond to student and family needs (Department of Education and Training 2006b).

Co-locations of this kind go a long way to implementing the call for schools to be reconfigured as 'focal points of community development' (Feeney, Feeney, Norton, Simons, Wyatt & Zappala 2002), but there are also more integrated models such as that represented by the United Kingdom's full-service Extended Schools program. This puts the school at the centre of a hub or precinct that offers

multiple services for the whole community and is a more advanced version of the Full Service Schools model developed in Australia and represented in Victoria by the School Focused Youth Service. Some United Kingdom schools now offer community childcare, parental and family support, referral to specialist support services, access to information and communications technology, sports and arts facilities and lifelong learning opportunities for the whole community (Coleman 2006). It is the government's intention that all schools will offer such extended services by 2010.

Examples of this more extensive provision are also emerging in Victoria. To cite just one instance, a new learning and community facility in the Neighbourhood Renewal area of Wendouree West is dedicated to life-long learning for all residents in the area. Yuille Park Community College is part of a community hub that houses learning, health care, childcare, employment and recreation facilities for the local area. The hub includes a Children's Services Centre housing a kindergarten, childcare and maternal and child health services and a Community House that offers adult and community learning programs as well as facilities that can be used by the whole community.

An even more ambitious model would see schools forming a central part of a networked learning system guided by a shared mandate to provide interlinked educational and other services for the entire community and for every stage of life. Bentley provides one map of what this provision could look like.

	Family and individual	Core learning institution	Related services	Informal communities
Early years	Early play, music, emotional support	Nursery	Primary health, libraries	Parenting networks
5-14	Family learning, out-of school activities	Extended primary school	Parks and neighbourhoods	Friendship groups
14-19	Personal adviser	School Federations	Learning for work, mentoring	Peer networks, interests
Lifelong learning	Work-life integration	Employer, university	Online providers, career support	Personal learning networks

(Table reproduced from Bentley 2006)

3. Networks for students

Learning and wellbeing

The Victorian Government's earlier Blueprint for Government Schools aimed to improve three key outcomes of schooling: learning, pathways and transitions and engagement and wellbeing (Department of Education and Training 2005b, 2006a). One of the greatest barriers to improving these outcomes for all young Victorians is their complex relationship to disadvantage (see Fraillon 2004). Disadvantage has a strong negative impact on both wellbeing and engagement and, through them, on achievement (Fullarton 2002; Taylor & Nelms 2006). The nature of these relationships means that no single agency can hope to deliver improved student outcomes alone. The new *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2008) recognises that its aims can only be achieved through collaboration between sectors.

Collaborative networks are most likely to be effective if better student learning is their primary purpose (Earl, Katz, Elgie, Ben Jaafar & Foster 2006; Hadfield, Jopling, Noden, O'Leary & Stott 2005; Lasater 2007). In a number of leading initiatives both within and outside Victoria, better student learning is being sought through the introduction of personalised learning in schools. Personalised learning is one of the strongest recent attempts to improve educational outcomes and ameliorate the impact of disadvantage. It is a characteristic of schools that combine high student poverty with high achievement (Black 2007; Kannapel & Clements 2005). It offers a challenging curriculum connected to students' lives and to the community, tailors learning and assessment to individual needs and develops students' ability to take control over their own learning (Centre for Applied Educational Research 2002; Hopkins 2006). It is also heavily predicated on collaboration both within and outside the school and provides a strong vehicle for engaging the community in young people's learning.

The combination of these elements can be seen in the national rollout of the United Kingdom's personalised learning policy, which prioritises support for student wellbeing through pastoral care, guidance, support and community partnerships (Keamy, Nicholas, Mahar & Herrick 2007). Personalised learning and collaboration are also beginning to emerge together in Australian policy papers. *The Future of Schooling in Australia* (Dawkins 2007) represents a commitment by all states and territories to ensuring that schools 'have the capacity to tailor an education for the individual child' and to building greater connections between schools and their communities. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has released a report to encourage a better understanding of personalised learning amongst Victorian schools (Keamy, Nicholas, Mahar & Herrick 2007) and its Next Practice: Design Teams Pilot Project supports its systemic introduction in pilot schools. As one project forum agreed, the development of further field trials for Victoria would help to establish models of personalised learning engaged with the community that can be shared across the system.

The Derwent District of Tasmania is an area of high educational need. Real Learnings - Real Futures began in 2002 as a commitment by all ten secondary school principals in the District to work together to improve student participation, attendance and retention and to provide learning opportunities that would be impossible for the individual schools to generate alone. The network involves Bothwell District High School, Bridgewater High School, Claremont High School, Cosgrove High School, Derwent Support Services, Glenora District School, New

Norfolk High School, Oatlands District High School, Ouse District High, Rosetta High School and the Derwent District of the Tasmanian Department of Education.

The network aims to extend the range of curriculum offerings and learning experiences available to all students in the area. One of its key strategies is the development of student-centred learning across the network schools to make the curriculum more relevant and engaging for Year 9 and 10 students. Student-centred learning projects are based both in the schools and in the community. They include boat-building, emergency services training, school farm programs, aquaculture, marine adventure courses, multimedia, robotics and natural therapies. Most projects involve students from a number of the participating schools rather than single-school groups.

Provision of this range of learning experiences is financially feasible only because of cooperation between the schools. The network also maximises the use of limited school and District resources to meet the learning needs of students at risk of disengagement, building partnerships with other agencies and services to provide 'an effective, seamless student support network' (Holdsworth 2003) and provide professional learning for teachers to support at-risk students.

A 2003 evaluation shows that the network builds on the strength of each participating school and enhances each school's capacity to support its own students. It concludes that the network provides a strong model for a group of schools cooperating together, with a shared vision and trust: 'all schools contribute to and gain from the Program. They share a common approach, adopt a cooperative framework and gain benefits greater than they would from their separate contributions' (Holdsworth 2003). The network is also having a positive effect on student engagement and learning. Students and teachers testify to increased student commitment, better relationships between students and the development of new and valuable student skills.

The evaluation highlights the need for ongoing resourcing for this approach: 'cooperation and collaboration is not a matter of cost-saving' (Holdsworth 2003). It highlights the role of the District, which has been instrumental in convening and coordinating the network, contributing new resources for its implementation and providing a District Youth Learning Officer who provides executive support for the network.

The early years

One of the most critical phases in the education of children and young people is the transition to primary school (OECD 2006). An extensive review by the Centre for Community Child Health explains that a significant proportion of Australian children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, begin school without being ready to learn. Participation in high quality early years services as kindergarten, child care and child health deliver many benefits, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, yet these children are the least likely to participate in such services (Centre for Community Child Health 2006).

This has a wide range of negative ongoing effects including poor educational achievement. There is a strong consensus that the early years represent a critical opportunity to establish wellbeing and educational readiness as well as the most effective opportunity for detection, prevention and early intervention where children are at risk (Centre for Community Child Health 2006):

The strongest indicator for later success is whether a student begins school in a deficit position (Bentley, Kaye, MacLeod, O'Leary & Parker 2004).

The review concludes that strategies for the early years are only effective when they ensure that all children begin school ready to learn and that all schools are ready to support children when they first attend. This requires 'new ways of working and greater partnerships and collaboration between schools and early years services' (Centre for Community Child Health 2006). According to the review, these partnerships should engage with families in the years before children start school. They should be based on the belief that schools can offer the community more than their traditional education

services. They should promote positive relationships among services, families, communities and schools. They should also be informed by local knowledge and responsive to local needs.

The School of the 21st Century program incorporates childcare and family support services into schools to promote children's development from birth. Based at Yale University with support from the George Lucas Educational Foundation, the program links communities, families and schools in over 1,300 schools across the United States. The program creates a structured and potentially stable, long-term network between schools, early years and family support services based on the idea of a school that:

- helps prepare children for school through full-day, year-round early care and education programs and partnerships with local child care providers. Schools of the 21st century provide child care services for pre-school children at the school or at a school-linked site
- offers safe and stimulating environments for school-age children when school is not in session. Schools of the 21st century provide before-school, after-school and vacation programs
- provides parents with information and support regarding a range of issues such as child development, homework, sibling rivalry and self-esteem. Schools of the 21st century offer home visits, playgroups and workshops to parents of young children to educate them about cognitive, social, linguistic and motor development. They also provide information and referral services for families in collaboration with community agencies
- promotes children's wellbeing through preventive medical and dental services, mental health services, and improved nutrition and fitness. In collaboration with community-based health care providers, Schools of the 21st century offer a range of services including physical health services, care for children with special needs, developmental assessments, dental assessments and mental health services. They also provide networks and training for childcare providers.

Evaluation of the program shows a range of beneficial outcomes. Students are more prepared for kindergarten, show higher literacy and numeracy results and receive better diagnosis of special educational needs than students at other schools. The schools report less vandalism, increased parental involvement and a better community image. Parents also report less stress, fewer missed workdays and a more positive relationship with the school.

This work was given strong impetus in Victoria by the 2007 restructure of the previous Department of Education to include early childhood provision. The *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2008) proposes a high quality, coordinated early childhood service system with children from birth to eight years of age at its centre. To achieve this, the Victorian Government will work to strengthen existing partnerships with local government and communities, to forge closer partnerships across state government departments and to seek a greater alignment of policy and funding with the Commonwealth Government.

The middle years

The other critical phase in the education of young people facing disadvantage is the transition from primary to secondary school. The middle years of schooling (Years 5-9) are clustered around this transition and have a long history as a context for efforts to improve student outcomes (Russell, Mackay & Jane 2003; Quinn, Prosser & Hattam 2007). For many students, these years are characterised by a decline in satisfaction with learning, passivity or cessation of effort, underachievement or lowered achievement, disruptive behaviour, poor attendance or leaving (Cole 2006; Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier 2004).

One of the chief risk factors for students during these years is disengagement from school. It has been suggested that all middle years students are at risk of disengagement (Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier 2004), but it seems clear from the research that disadvantaged young people are most at risk: disengagement happens earlier for these students than for their more affluent counterparts and can become almost intractable by the time they start secondary school and the effects of disengagement are more pronounced in schools with many disadvantaged students (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle & Seal 2005; Cole 2001a, 2006).

The strong research and policy response to the needs of middle years students since the early 1990s has seen the development of classroom-based interventions that are now commonly accepted as good educational practice. This includes student-centred or personalised learning, an integrated curriculum and collaborative teaching. It also includes engagement with the world outside the classroom as a resource for students' learning:

School structures need to (...) foster the formation of learning partnerships and of links to the family, the local community and the wider world; and to turn the school into a community-oriented learning hub (Pendergast, Flanagan, Land, Bahr, Mitchell, Weir, Noblett, Cain, Misich, Carrington & Smith 2005).

In schools serving high poverty communities, this engagement has to extend beyond the curriculum to issues of student wellbeing and welfare. Schools in impoverished Victorian communities are attempting to work with welfare, community and local government organisations to support middle years students and their parents, but this can be difficult. Many of these arrangements depend on short-term funding. Principals interviewed for a previous Education Foundation study (Black 2007) expressed these concerns:

There are organisations that support student welfare. It would be really great if I could have better access to these. We do get funding for a trained student welfare officer from amongst the staff, but that's my assistant principal. When she is wearing her welfare hat, I lose her support in running the school

We work with local health organisations to support student nutrition and health. The problem is, we don't have the staffing capacity to coordinate these links or keep them going. The responsibility falls back on over-loaded teachers.

Doing It Differently: Improving Young People's Engagement with School is a collaborative project of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Anglicare and the Centre for Adolescent Health at the Royal Children's Hospital. It works with seven schools - two secondary and five primary – in a disadvantaged community in outer-metropolitan Melbourne to improve students' connectedness to school during the transition from primary to secondary school.

The project focuses on communities of greatest need, where student disengagement from school can often be exacerbated by lack of opportunity for community involvement, family poverty and low parental engagement with education. It recognises that disengagement is influenced by interaction between a young person, his or her parents/carers, teachers, and the school and community contexts in which he or she lives. It also recognises that disengagement is best addressed by 'multiple, integrated strategies involving students, schools, families, and other organizations within the community' (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle & Seal 2005). One of its priorities is to assist families in the development of active partnerships between home and school to improve student engagement, learning, health and wellbeing, and to explore ways in which community organisations can support these partnerships.

Doing It Differently is not designed to create a universal solution but to help communities draw on what is already known to construct strategies that work for them. It starts with the recognition by research that disengagement from school is not just about school but responds to a complex range of factors both within and outside the school environment including personal and family issues, drug and alcohol issues and mental health issues. The

project recognises that strategies to deal with such broad ranging issues require interconnected school-community planning and action.

As an early statement from the program explains: 'such approaches steer us away from looking for the "magic bullet" program and towards recognising the importance of paying attention to the conditions and contexts for successful reform, such as responding to local needs and demands for change, ensuring local advocates for as well as widespread ownership of the reform, adequate resources and ongoing support' (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle & Seal 2005). For this reason, the project creates connections at several levels: with the local cluster of schools (through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's previous Innovations and Excellence Program), with teams of students, parents and staff in each school, and with community agencies.

The project also recognises that creating sustainable, positive change in the face of disadvantage takes time. For this reason, Doing It Differently is a three year project and focuses on strengthening sustainable connections between schools, families and community organisations. None of the participating schools have previously worked together, but all share common challenges that affect their ability to meet students' educational needs.

The network includes formal partnerships with other organisations working to improve student and community outcomes. These include local government, the Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development and Human Services, the School Focused Youth Service and the Red Cross. Initiatives developed for students to date include breakfast clubs in some schools and vegetable and herb gardens in each school, with links to various curriculum areas. Doing It Differently aims to create a support model that can be applied in other communities as well.

4. Connecting the sectors

The community sector

The role of the community sector in Victorian school education is both long standing and growing rapidly. The sector collectively provides a range of services for children and young people that naturally bring its work into the sphere of schools. These include childcare, health and welfare services as well as a plethora of preventative and early intervention strategies for young people that are delivered through schools and community sites. New thinking within the Victorian community sector clearly sees schools as key partners in meeting the sector's social agenda:

Schools are ideally positioned to be central facilitators and partners in community building and engagement. Multiple types of community engagement and different collaborative arrangements with community organisations need to be encouraged to ensure that schools can respond to wider community needs and can partner in the delivery of specialist services such as child and family care and support services. Additional responsibilities need to be matched with adequate resources and capacity from Government (Victorian Health Inequalities Network 2007).

For these reasons, the community sector is both currently and potentially the most engaged in the work of schools. The consensus from the project forums is that it is also the place where the overlap, replication and gaps in provision between education and other services is most evident. There are a host of programs and interventions run in or with Victorian schools by not-for-profit and community organisations committed to improving opportunities for children and young people facing disadvantage or in other ways at risk. The landscape also includes a number of state government initiatives like the School Focused Youth Service, the Child FIRST (Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Teams) and Primary Care Partnerships as well as Australian Government initiatives like the Local Community Partnerships program.

Some of these programs are conducted through joined-up arrangements between various government departments. All bring together a wide range of government, community and education sector agencies in the pursuit of better outcomes for young people in challenging circumstances. Collectively, they also represent a model of provision that is bewildering in its complexity, with replicated resources and expenditure. The strong consensus emerging from the project forums is that the division of overlapping responsibilities between key government departments – education on the one hand and health and welfare on the other – means that support services for children and young people that are logically linked to education and should be offered through schools are instead located in the community with limited or no links to the schools that are struggling to support these same young people.

Collaboration between schools and community sector agencies is perhaps the single most important cross-sectoral relationship in improving outcomes for children and young people, yet it is fraught with cultural challenges. Qualitative data collected through the project forums suggests that the training received by teachers is so different to that of community sector professionals that they can struggle to understand one another's basic priorities, let alone agree on how to work together. The forums agreed that when collaboration does happen, it tends to be driven by individual relationships between committed staff rather than by structural agreements.

A consensus also emerged from the forums that the community sector, along with local government, has an unmatched understanding of how to create effective partnerships and place-based solutions to young people's needs that should be better utilised by the school education sector. Not-for-profit and community organisations often work as partnership brokers between schools and other organisations, helping them to navigate the cultural and structural differences that would otherwise present an obstacle to collaboration (Lasater 2007).

Linking to Learn & Learning to Link is a collaboration between the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance at Griffith University and Mission Australia with the support of the Queensland Government. The project aims to create an integrated system of comprehensive support for children in Inala, an outer-fringe suburb that has been identified as the poorest urban area in Queensland. It is being conducted in six schools over a period of five years.

The project creates a culture of collaboration between schools and welfare agencies, which work together and with families to improve outcomes for children. This strategy is based on the recognition that children's home and school lives cannot be separated. Its first main strand is a school-based family support service. Family support workers from Mission Australia work with classroom teachers to meet and engage with parents. A family centre has also been created within each of the project schools to serve as a base from which workers can meet with parents, run parent groups and provide access to specific programs such as counselling and advocacy.

The project's second main strand is professional development and support for teachers to engage parents as partners in enriching children's education and to cater more effectively to the individual needs of children. Its beacon program, Circles of Care, puts the individual child at the centre of a network of educators, family support staff, family and community members who commit to work together in their support.

The role of philanthropy

There are an estimated 5000 philanthropic trusts and foundations in Australia that give up to an estimated \$1 billion per annum for a range of social purposes including school education. Over the past decade, this sector has witnessed a significant rethinking of its role and a move away from the old style charitable good works that were once its primary activity. The focus on partnership and place-based solutions that has begun to change the way that government does business has also informed a more strategic philanthropy that strengthens structures at the community level to build capacity and bring about lasting change. This has seen philanthropy working in partnership with government, the corporate sector and local changemakers or social entrepreneurs.

This work is driven by a recognition that philanthropy has an unparalleled ability to create networks and coalitions across society in the name of the public good. A growing trend within the sector may see the development of more philanthropic foundations that place their emphasis on fostering relationships, partnerships and networks to bring together new thinking and practice, facilitate new approaches, cross established boundaries and combine otherwise separate worlds (Anheier & Leat 2006a, 2006b):

At their best, foundations are risk-taking, innovative funders of causes that others either neglect or are unable to address (Anheier & Leat 2006a).

Senior executives of one philanthropic organisation who participated in interviews for this project expressed a view that philanthropy is a good vehicle for collaboration because of its neutrality and its ability to identify the barriers to change, be a spearhead for innovation and provide a space in which unusual alliances can form to generate new solutions. It can also address needs that government

cannot, although government must be 'at the table from day one'. In another interview, it was observed that:

Philanthropy can be a free agent in a way that other sectors cannot aspire to. It has great freedom because it stands between government and the market place. Because of this, it can be a lubricant for unusual collaboration.

One example of the role of philanthropy in driving new collaboration for school education comes from an ambitious six-year project that has begun to link schools and early years services in three disadvantaged Victorian communities. The project creates two new levels of collaboration: lateral, cross-sectoral cooperation to create and manage the project and joined-up services on the ground.

The Linking Schools and Early Years Project is a collaborative cross-sectoral venture funded by a philanthropic trust, The RE Ross Trust, and run by the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital in Victoria. It brings together the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Victorian Departments of Education and Early Childhood Development and Human Services, the Catholic Education Office Melbourne, the Universities of Melbourne and New South Wales and the Education Foundation to bridge the gap between early years services and primary schooling and meet the needs of children entering school in communities where the need is greatest.

The project began in 2007. It aims to ensure that children and families make a smooth transition from early years services to school, that early years services and schools actively connect with families and that schools respond to the individual learning needs of all children. In particular, it helps schools engage with families that have not participated in formal early years services to overcome the barriers faced by vulnerable children when starting school. It takes note of the findings of previous research that overcoming barriers to learning and development is a complex task and that any solutions need to recognise the multiple sources of these barriers.

The project is being conducted in Footscray, Hastings and Corio Norlane. Its first round will be implemented in local early years services and in two or three schools in each area. These will form a local community partnership group to guide the project and help create a local action plan. In this way, the project builds on the existing expertise and resources of both early years services and primary schools. The community partnership groups will also be encouraged to connect to existing partnerships within the community. To this end, the project will map all existing services and service providers in each of the sites.

The specific strategy at each site will be informed by this mapping as well as by consultation with key local stakeholders and an analysis of the particular demographics of each area. At Corio Norlane, for example, the program will link schools with early years services and parents before the start of the school year to develop tailored learning solutions that address the diversity in children's experiences, backgrounds and learning styles. It will also build links between school staff and other specialist support services.

The role of business

The scope and commitment of corporate social responsibility in Australia is growing, with local community initiatives now attracting more corporate support than any other social investment vehicle (Centre for Corporate Public Affairs 2007). This means that companies are increasingly driving the social agenda, both at the wider society and local community level (Loza & Ogilvie 2005).

Increasingly, this agenda focuses on education:

There is a strong business case for corporate support of education. While there are many ways for companies to display their corporate social responsibility commitments, school-business partnerships that aim to support education can generate the most social capital and strengthen communities. In turn, this aids Australia as a nation to compete in the new knowledge economy (Social Compass 2007).

One in five Chief Executive Officers of leading Australian corporations identify the quality of education as a high priority for action by the Federal Government (Business Council of Australia 2004). A key driver for this new level of business involvement in the work and outcomes of schools is concern about Australia's skills future:

Schools of the future will need to be better connected with their local communities, more flexible and more responsive to local needs. Partnerships between schools (both government and non-government) and between schools and local businesses and community organisations will be keys to greater local responsiveness, alternative sources of funding, and greater sharing and more efficient use of human resources and physical facilities (Business Council of Australia 2007).

Another driver is the search for corporate social responsibility vehicles that work. Employee voluntarism is the most rapidly growing trend in corporate social responsibility (Centre for Corporate Public Affairs 2007), attractive to companies because of its capacity to improve organisational effectiveness, provide a positive workplace culture, engage and retain quality employees and create a reputation as a good corporate citizen. Until recently, corporate social responsibility activity did not frequently extend to partnerships with public education (Black 2004).

This landscape is clearly changing, due in part to the recent advent of initiatives like Melbourne Cares, a business-led network that connects companies, not-for-profit organisations and all levels of government in new collaborations that include schools in Victoria's most disadvantaged communities, and the Australian Business and Community Network, a network of national business leaders that works with schools that have areas of need.

Business Working with Education is an initiative of Melbourne Cares and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Based on the United Kingdom program Business in the Community, it creates an informal business-education network by brokering partnerships between Australian or Australian-based companies and schools in disadvantaged areas. These partnerships are designed to achieve outcomes through collaboration that could not be achieved by government or individual companies acting alone. These include building the capacity of school leadership, improving schools' relationship with their local communities and creating new learning opportunities for students.

The companies that participate in Business Working with Education gave a strong interest in the role that business can play in public education. They share the belief of Australia Cares that a robust public education system is the most important vehicle for tackling disadvantage. Participating schools are identified by Regional Directors of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. They are invited to join the program and matched with a business supporter.

Partners in Leadership is one of four programs currently operated by Business Working with Education. It connects senior business leaders with school principals to share leadership challenges and work together on school issues. An example of the program in action comes from the partnership between Cadbury Schweppes and Newport Lakes Primary School in a disadvantaged area of western metropolitan Melbourne.

Melbourne Cares facilitated the first meeting between the Finance Director from Cadbury Schweppes and the Principal of the school. This was a chance for them to build rapport and discuss their expectations and roles within the partnership. Stuart subsequently attended a number of school council meetings to gain a better appreciation of the school's culture and governance as well as its strengths and challenges. These include low enrolments, low student literacy, students entering with low school readiness and the limited experiences of many students beyond the home.

By the fourth meeting, the parties agreed to use the partnership to promote the school to its local community to build its profile and increase enrolments. A team of marketing and promotions staff from the company worked with students and staff to develop a communications plan centred around an information night for the local parent community. Working together, the company and the school produced a School Promotion Kit including a DVD

and brochure. This was used at the information night and distributed to local kindergartens. The school subsequently received 40 new enrolments for the following year's intake of Prep students and has significantly raised its community profile. The school and company have continued their partnership and are planning future joint projects.

5. Making it work

Leading the networked school

The literature suggests that success of any network, like any individual school, is dependent on a genuinely shared or distributed leadership that generates real cooperation, trust, a common vision and deep participation by all players in the network as well as an invitational leadership that aims to empower other people (see Bennett, Wise, Woods & Harvey, 2003, for an extensive review of this literature). This kind of leadership is particularly important for schools and networks operating in impoverished areas (Ansell 2004; Coulton 2006; Fye n.d.; Harris & Chapman 2002; Keys, Sharp, Greene & Grayson 2003).

Effective leaders in schools facing challenging circumstances need to be able to create 'coherent communities within their schools as well as a sense of a responsible community beyond and around the school' (Harris & Chapman 2002). They need to establish a collaborative culture within the school and create 'communities of professional learners' (Mulford 2008). They also need to be able to establish collaboration between the school and its community. The consensus of the project forums is that a moated or walled culture persists within some Victorian schools, creating a perception that they are aloof from their communities or that they see themselves as the keeper of special knowledge that other agencies or sectors lack. The suggestion from the research literature is that this needs to change:

The adoption of a more networked way of working by school leaders can help put schools at the heart of the local community to effect positive change for people in the locality (Michalak & Jones 2008)

The resources and organisational structures of schools compared to parents and communities will ensure that schools remain the drivers of school community links. The challenges for schools are to identify and reach diverse communities; to embrace cultural difference; recognise the views, concerns and interests of various stakeholders; support a broad understanding of learning; and recognise the opportunities for learning beyond the school fence (Hayes & Chodkiewicz 2003).

In the United Kingdom, the Innovation Unit and the National College for School Leadership have been exploring models of system leadership that open up community-wide approaches to learning. Originally called Leading Beyond a Single Institution, the Next Practice in System Leadership initiative has been running since 2005. It includes:

- leadership of institutions which deliver or provide access to multiple services
- leadership of programs which enable personalised and extended opportunities for students in the middle and later years of schooling
- leadership of 'chains', 'franchises', developed federations or formal networks of schools
- leadership of learning which takes place outside formal institutions.

17 field trials of the system leadership model are now under way. In Knowsley, a metropolitan district with a low socioeconomic profile and poor educational standards, every school principal has agreed to work in a co-leadership role with the local authority under a partnership framework. All major decisions are now taken collectively, based on the best outcome for all children in the borough. In

Winsford, all seventeen schools have come together to develop a town-wide plan for a 0–19 centre of education that will see the whole town acting like a single school. Staff will be employed and deployed centrally and schools will follow a common curriculum and timetable. In another challenging urban area, Yewlands Family of Schools includes one secondary, one special and five primary schools working as an advanced collaborative with shared staffing, joint leadership appointments and cross-curriculum projects (Innovation Unit n.d.).

There are also strong Australian examples of collaboration between local school leaders that offer possible models for future action in Victoria.

The Northern Adelaide State Secondary Schools Alliance (NASSSA) is a formal network of 11 government secondary schools created to improve educational outcomes for young people in high-poverty northern Adelaide. Its strategies include the implementation of innovative middle school pedagogies, provision of relevant and engaging senior school curriculum, seamless transition to further study or employment and strengthened community partnerships. It is made up of three groups:

- The Northern Adelaide Secondary Schools Principals' Network. This sets the vision and strategies of the alliance
- The NASSSA Board, which advocates for the Alliance and for public education, informs the strategic directions of the Alliance and supports its key partnerships
- The NASSSA schools: Smithfield Plains High School, Gawler High School, Craigmore High School, Salisbury High School, Fremont-Elizabeth City High School, Kurna Aboriginal School, Paralowie R-12 School, Salisbury East High School, Para West High School, Para Hills High School and Parafield Gardens High School.

The network operates through multiple points of collaboration. Instead of competing with one another, schools aggregate their resources to offer a wide range of curriculum offerings to all students across the schools. They also operate a series of learning consortia based on broad industry-related themes. Each of the schools will eventually host a learning consortium or a key aspect of one. Together, these consortia represent a learning space that students from all 11 schools are able to draw on. Each consortium includes business, industry, community groups and higher or further education partners whose work is thematically linked to the consortium and who provide rich learning resources and expertise for the Alliance.

The NASSSA schools are also establishing a community of professional dialogue within which teachers collaboratively develop and implement authentic learning environments for students. Teachers from across the 11 schools have the opportunity to share their learning and practice with a wide range of colleagues. This provides an unprecedented level of professional support in schools where the challenge of engaging students in learning is high and where teachers struggle to set and sustain high expectations for learning in the face of students' own low expectations.

NASSSA hopes that its schools will be seen as exemplars of innovation for the whole school system rather than as sites that are simply addressing student disadvantage. The Principals' Network which forms the backbone of the Alliance has a strong focus on research into innovative ways of improving student outcomes. One of its key research initiatives is Redesigning Pedagogy in the North, an innovative project with the University of South Australia, the Australian Education Union, the South Australian Government Social Inclusion Unit and the South Australian Department of Education & Children's Services that supports the schools in developing a personalised or student-centred approach that puts young people's lives at the heart of the learning context.

Engaging parents in the networked school

The discourse about school education networks often overlooks a number of important groups. Parental engagement in the school is associated with better student achievement, engagement,

retention and greater take-up of further and higher education (Harris & Goodall 2007; Macgregor n.d.). Its effect is particularly strong in disadvantaged communities. Engaging parents in these contexts has 'a disproportionately positive effect' on student learning and achievement, greater than that of engaging any other group (Harris & Goodall 2007).

Forming links with parents remains difficult for many schools in such communities where parents' engagement with the school is influenced by their socioeconomic status and their own experience of education (Black 2007; Harris & Goodall 2007; Hayes & Chodkiewicz 2003), but as a participant at an earlier Education Foundation forum made clear, it is important that these difficulties are overcome:

We can do all we can to improve the quality of schooling, but if disadvantaged families are disengaged from their kids' education, it all will come to naught. Until we can empower parents to fulfil their parenting role, we won't get very far in addressing educational disadvantage.

One of the limitations of this area may be that parental engagement is too often equated with parental involvement, but engagement implies a much higher level of relationship with the school and the schooling process. It implies that 'parents are an essential part of the learning process, an extended part of the pedagogic process' (Harris & Goodall 2007). The clear message of the research is that any network of schools should provide opportunities for parents to be learners themselves and engaging their vision for the school and for schooling:

Schools need to place parental engagement at the centre rather than the periphery of all that they do. Parental engagement in children's learning makes a difference - it is the most powerful school improvement lever that we have (Harris & Goodall 2007).

One network of 15 primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom conducted a four-year project, *Effective Partnerships with Parents*, in which parents across the schools formed their own networks to investigate and implement solutions to local community and student learning needs. Parents led the networks in partnership with school staff, school governance and members of the local community. The project's philosophy was that parent-to-parent recruitment would be less daunting and encourage wider participation in the network. The project is claimed to have achieved greater parental support and involvement across the schools, which included schools in communities facing difficult socioeconomic circumstances as well as schools in rural, urban and inner-city locations (Bond & Farrar n.d.).

Young people leading networks

The other group often overlooked by the discourse about school education networks is the children and young people whose interests they are designed to serve. The most neglected stakeholder group in the development of school partnerships and networks is the young people for whose benefit they are created, yet with the right support, young people can create networks of common purpose within their schools and communities (Holdsworth 2001; Jackson 2005; Johnson 2004; Mitra 2001). Student-led partnerships and networks created in Victoria under the Education Foundation's ruMAD? (are you Making A Difference?) program provide some examples of this leadership in practice (Manefield, Collins, Moore, Mahar & Warne 2007; Zyngier & Brunner 2002).

The ruMAD? curriculum framework leads students through three phases. Initially, students examine their own values, interests and vision for the community in which they would like to live. They analyse the needs of the community and develop a project to address a particular area of concern or create a new possibility. The second phase involves moving through a project management methodology to

develop practical skills and harness resources to put the idea into practice. The final phase involves reflecting on what was learned from the experience, celebrating the achievements and sharing the outcomes with other schools and communities.

Many of the projects created through ruMAD? emerge from areas of disadvantage. They transform the traditional, classroom-centred model of schooling into a networked model of learning where young people learn through experience and reflection:

An ongoing challenge (...) is how to put young people at the centre of these new partnerships in a way that goes beyond tokenism. Genuine models of youth participation and changemaking are emerging from the wider youth welfare and philanthropic sectors. To be effective, (they) will need to also effect a cultural shift where youth voice becomes a recognised and integral part of education decision-making, not just at the local school level but at the systemic level as well (Black 2004).

Whitfield District Primary School serves an agricultural township in the King River Valley northeast of Melbourne. Jessie's Creek, which runs through the town and alongside the school, had become an eyesore. It was overgrown with exotic weeds and used as a dump for rubbish. The community had abandoned attempts to regenerate it.

In 2002, using the ruMAD? framework, students at the school took up the challenge. They started by trying to clear and revegetate the creek, but soon recognized that the task was too big to tackle alone and began to raise community awareness about the issue. After carrying out a biodiversity study to analyse the environmental values of the creek, students surveyed community attitudes and produced a brochure promoting the challenges and future potential of the site. They issued a press release, shared their findings with the Wilderness Society, Greening Australia and the local government council and made presentations to groups like the King Basin Landcare group and the North East Catchment Management Authority. The Authority responded by conducting a comprehensive assessment of the work required to bring about change. With the assistance of the Authority and its Water Watch program, students helped to trial the effects of regeneration activities including extensive replanting.

The students' campaign attracted funding of \$26,000 from the Commonwealth Environmental Fund and Australian Geographic that has been used to transform the creek. It also attracted the interest of the Governor of Victoria at the time. As he said after his visit, 'while the results speak for themselves, the intangible benefits from such a project are equally valuable. In particular, the sense of pride and ownership which the students now feel towards the area – their local environment – will ensure that the creek environment is valued for years to come'.

After a number of other local organisations came on board, what began as a small, student endeavour became the focus of a large, formal and sustainable community collaboration. Work is ongoing and the students have continued to be key partners in a project that delivers rich learning as well as community and environmental outcomes. Students participate in the project steering group, contribute to community newsletters and have a continuing role in the maintenance of the creek. As one student said, 'you have to believe in what you are doing and make a fuss to get things moving. People were surprised that kids could do this stuff'. The project won the 2005 Westpac Landcare Education Award and was nominated for the 2006 Award.

Electronic networks

Electronic communications – especially since the advent of Web 2.0 – create the possibility of virtual networks for learning and collaboration. Education systems are working to make use of this possibility. Australian schools use information and communications technology for a number of linking purposes including teachers collaborating to improve their practice, students collaborating on educational projects and communication between students and the outside community (Ainley & Searle 2005).

Electronic means are also being used to link schools. In Queensland, the Suncoast CyberSchools are creating a networked learning community in a fast growing area of the Sunshine Coast hinterland. In Victoria, the Learning for Leading network provides a virtual network for geographically isolated Gippsland schools. Also in Victoria, the Yarra Valley eLearning Community is a cluster of seven secondary schools that are create a technology-rich learning environment for all young people in the Yarra Valley region. Supported by Victorian Government initiatives including the Leading Schools Fund and Broadband Innovation Fund, an electronic network links all seven schools to allow students and teachers to share learning and resources.

This raises the issue of what electronic networks that stand outside the formal education system could do to change models of schooling within the system. In the United Kingdom, for example, Stephen Hepple and the Inclusion Trust run Notschool.net, a national virtual online learning community offering an alternative to traditional education for young people who have been excluded or disengaged from the formal school system. Not School provides personalised learning and a community of learners that includes rather than excludes.

It also raises the question of how formal networks should encompass the many informal ones that electronic communications are constantly creating. Qualitative data gathered through the project forums suggests that these informal networks play an important role in the practice of Victorian teachers. One forum heard an anecdote about a Victorian Government initiative which supports teacher-led innovation in schools. The project created a well-resourced formal networking site for participating teachers only to find that they preferred to use Facebook to communicate with each other instead.

6. Conclusion

Building capacity for collaboration

There is a strong consensus within both the Australian and international research literature that schools cannot do the work of improving student outcomes alone and that this is particularly true in schools serving communities characterised by socioeconomic disadvantage. The literature illustrates the benefits of formal networks that provide a framework for a committed and sustainable collaboration amongst schools, between schools and other agencies, between areas of government and between education systems and sectors outside education to improve the engagement, wellbeing and educational outcomes of children and young people. This report offers a number of examples of such networks.

The message that emerges from both the literature and the consultation undertaken for this project is that such networks should be encouraged and propagated. What also emerges, however, is a warning that, like partnerships, networks are not in themselves a panacea and that there is a need to recognise the challenges that come with collaborative practice. Observations from the wider policy sphere indicate that collaboration for its own sake is no guarantee of successful outcomes:

Partnership working remains a good idea but is incredibly difficult in practice (Jupp 2000).

A similar caveat comes from the education research literature:

Although networking schools can create the conditions for influencing how teachers and leaders think and act, it is not guaranteed (Earl & Katz 2006).

This view is borne out by a participant in one of the forums conducted for this project, who warned that:

The shift from competition to collaboration is difficult.

The Victorian Government through its *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* acknowledges that continuous improvement in education requires ongoing reform in the areas of system development, workforce reform and partnerships with families, community, business and other education providers. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development will support the implementation of reforms in relation to partnerships by strengthening the capacity for early childhood services, schools, the broader community and business to come together in supporting parents and families as valued partners in their children's learning and development.

With this new policy support, it can be expected that the quality and spread of collaborative practice will become stronger in Victorian school education, but it remains important that schools are supported in the development of the complex skills that are required to work collaboratively before they are expected to engage in either partnership or wider network activity. The consensus of the project forums is that for some schools operating in challenging circumstances, the task of engaging in a simple partnership with another school or with a local organisation – let alone a more complex network with multiple partners - requires skills and resources that may be in short supply as the school struggles to meet the more immediate needs of its students. Schools in these circumstances face a number of barriers to collaboration including competing priorities within the school and lack of time and capacity (Coulton 2006). In the words of one school principal:

Partnerships with community are outside our experience and expertise. They take a lot of energy and there is no-one to do it all the time (in Black 2007).

Another forum participant warned that 'people can be over-networked'. The message emerged clearly from the project forums that the demands of participation in a network can overwhelm teachers and other professionals who are already juggling immense demands on their time and energy and that schools need to be supported in the development of the complex skills that are required to work collaboratively. As noted in a forum:

There can be negative experiences for people in having networks thrust upon them.

This raises the question of how brokers and intermediary organisations can work with schools to build their capacity to create and maintain meaningful partnerships and networks. As discussed elsewhere in this report, there are a growing number of these intermediary organisations operating in Victoria. There may also be scope for new intermediary roles such as partnership brokers or network coaches. For example, an initiative of the Tasmanian Government (Department of Education Tasmania 2006) is introducing school-community partnership officers who work with school leaders, businesses, parent and community organisations to develop partnerships that improve student outcomes.

It also raises the question of what further frameworks could be developed within which school education networks could flourish and receive the support they require. The shared view of the project forums is that 'a statement plus strong, targeted actions is required' if Victoria is to develop a more collaborative approach to school education. The consensus of the forums was that the existing Education and Training Reform Act and the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act would provide a strong basis for any new legislative framework to support a more networked school system for the state.

A diversity of networks

One of the strongest messages emerging from the literature and consultation undertaken by this project is that networks do and should take many forms. On the one hand, this makes it difficult to identify the specific models of practice that could be transferred more widely across the Victorian school education system. On the other hand, it highlights a key characteristic of effective networks: the capacity to be responsive to specific local needs.

In recognition of the messages emerging from the research, this report has focused primarily on formal, structured networks. However, it does not overlook the need for flexible and informal networks that are able to respond to changing needs and circumstances. One United Kingdom study mounted an argument for 'weak school ties' in the development and transfer of effective practice between schools. It suggested that:

(Weak school ties) can happen over a much wider geographical area than would be possible for a strong tie relationship. Weak tie relationships allow schools to select partnerships on the basis of potential benefit rather than geographical convenience. They can therefore help schools break out of the potentially inward-looking agenda of a local area (Lawrence 2007).

At their most productive, such loose or informal networks are conducted in a stable climate of collaboration but without necessarily being controlled by the formal system (Kanter, 1994, in Mulford, 2007). It is important to note that collaboration can actually be held back by formal structures and accountabilities 'that encourage schools to think of themselves as autonomous, stand alone units' (Leadbeater 2005, in Mulford 2007). As Cole notes:

A large part of a network is invisible. It exists in the relationships and interactions between the participants. (...) The network concept is an enabling mechanism, not a means for constraining schools (2001b).

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