6

Using this tool

1. Bring together staff, school council members, and parents (e.g. representatives from the Parent Association) to discuss opportunities to work with the community.

2. Identify the type and level of community involvement your school wishes to engage in.

3. Use this tool to identify who makes up your community and how you can create opportunities to work together with the local community.

Connecting with the community is about positioning schools as learning centres where teachers, students, and their families work in partnership with business, industry, and the wider community.

It is important to remember that your school makes up a significant part of your local community. Other community groups are often interested in working with you because schools provide a hub for further connections within the community.

This kit contains information on:

- the benefits of connecting with the community
- understanding your community
- ideas for working with your community
- developing your Annual Report to the School Community
- school leaders and representatives
- evaluating your community involvement.
The benefits of connecting with the community

You may ask yourself why you need to work with people outside your own school. One important reason is that collaboration with the community can improve learning outcomes for students, as they are exposed to a wider range of experiences and opportunities.

More specific reasons for working with your community are that it can:

- enhance the visibility and reputation of your school
- contribute to feelings of school pride
- offer the opportunity to run specialist programs, such as LOTE, Music and the Arts across schools
- encourage continuity of learning between the early, middle and later years
- create pathways for students to enter further education, training or employment
- enhance the provision of resources and facilities (e.g. sharing of the school hall, sports centres, information technology)
- foster a collaborative working environment
- encourage involvement in school events and activities
- build community partnerships
- assist with school fundraising
- develop students’ knowledge of their community and a sense of belonging to it.
Western Heights Secondary College recognises the opportunities associated with building good relationships with your community.

Together with schools in the northern Geelong cluster, the school coordinates the production of a newspaper, *College and Community News*, six times per year. Although the newspaper is compiled by a teacher at Western Heights Secondary College, the newspaper is a joint initiative between all schools in the cluster.

The newspaper has helped to form links with other secondary schools, feeder primary schools, local businesses and industry experts.

The *College and Community News* gives students and schools exposure to the wider community. It is distributed to feeder primary schools and promotes secondary school activities and programs.

All of the feeder primary schools are invited to participate in the publication. They are provided with a minimum of a quarter page space for articles and photographs of their choice.

The newspaper has also led to industry links with a commercial printer, PMP Print, and the *Geelong Advertiser*, which produces the negatives for printing and offers advice and training.

All of the publication costs are offset by paid advertisements from Western Heights Secondary College suppliers and local businesses. Students have been able to get involved by designing and publishing advertisements for some of these businesses, leading to greater contact between the school community and industry.

Other production elements are integrated into VCE Media Studies/VCE Visual Communication classes. This offers a platform for students to use and display their skills in a real-life project.

Articles from the Department of Education & Training are included in the newspaper in a simple and clear format.
Understanding your community

You can define your community as broadly or narrowly as you wish. At the broadest level, your community is everyone who has a shared interest in educating the young people of Victoria. At a more local level, it is the organisations, agencies, businesses and individuals with whom your school interacts.

Your school is best positioned to connect with your community if you have a solid understanding of it. This may include demographic information and knowledge of communication channels, the main community groups and influential leaders.

Demographic information to consider includes:

- level of education
- age
- main occupations and industries operating in the area
- ethnicity
- religion
- socioeconomic background (i.e. income levels).

You can access some of this information using the census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This is free and provides data on suburbs and regional areas. You can access these reports online at www.abs.gov.au. You may also find information from reports or studies on the local area from your local council or library.

Common ways to keep the community informed

Individuals and groups in your local community will find out about your school in a range of ways. The most common ways include:

- word-of-mouth
- face-to-face interactions (e.g. via a community leader or head of an organisation)
- newsletters
- Annual Report to the School Community
- local media outlets
- event listings (e.g. local newspapers or weekly magazine)
- posters
- community and public noticeboards (e.g. in shopping centres, libraries).

TIP

If your school features in publications, such as The Good Schools Guide or the Choosing a School (Secondary) Guide, ensure that you contact the publisher to provide accurate contact details and information.
Case study

Tapping into a wealth of knowledge: Brimbank Secondary College

Brimbank Secondary College partners with local schools and parent committees to share information and ideas on programs and policies. This regional working party also helps the school develop a clearer picture of what goes on in the community and how this impacts on the school and its students.

Established three years ago, the group meets twice a year. It has collaborated on many projects including the development of a parents’ code of conduct, which schools then adapted to meet their individual needs. The group is currently looking at how different schools in the cluster work with refugees.

This forum is also used to identify deficiencies in the local community that impact on students. For instance, the group plans to work on addressing the low levels of internet access at home in their region.

The group’s overriding outcome is a stronger community network where schools work together. There is a strong relationship between the secondary schools that has led to some major projects taking place. For instance, a Secondary Quality Education Board for Brimbank City Council has been established and four of the local schools worked together on a Leading Schools Fund application.

The school’s communication with its community and parents has improved by having a real, effective forum to share and understand different views and information. It has also helped improve its fundraising opportunities and put more projects into action. These connections also provide the added benefit of helping a school manage any rumours that may be damaging to its reputation.

Brimbank Secondary College principal, Allen McAuliffe, believes the working party has taught him ‘plenty about smaller community groups’. Building relationships with these smaller groups has also improved the use of resources and facilities all-round. For example, the school helps smaller sporting clubs by providing photocopying facilities, event sponsorship and the use of facilities. It also has an arrangement with the local scout group to share their trailer. These relatively small initiatives have lead to significant long-term benefits.
Community groups to consider

Your school community can include:

### Educational institutions
- other schools in close proximity
- schools with a similar special interest
- local kindergartens or secondary colleges (for primary level)
- local primary schools (for secondary or kindergarten level)
- universities and TAFE institutes
- registered training organisations (private)

### Local/state government
- Department of Education & Training
- local mayor
- local councillors

### Local emergency services
- Ambulance Service
- State Emergency Service
- Police
- Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Country Fire Authority

### Community organisations
- sporting groups
- libraries
- Chamber of Commerce
- church groups

### Volunteer organisations
- Rotary, Lions and Apex Clubs
- Red Cross

### Individuals
- alumni (past and present students)
- local business owners
- local residents

### Media
- local newspapers
- community radio stations
- weekly magazines

### Employment agencies
- Centrelink
- Salvation Army Employment Plus
- recruitment agencies

### Health agencies
- health providers
- hospitals
- child/youth service providers
Idea for working with your community

Some ideas to consider:

• Hold school open days.
• Present school work and projects in a public place (e.g. art shows in library or cafes).
• Showcase school performances at a local public space (e.g. a Rock Eisteddfod performance at the local shopping centre).
• Conduct combined school activities (e.g. sports days with local schools).
• Participate in Duke of Edinburgh’s Award (international ‘leadership in action’ program www.dukeofed.org.au).
• Participate in community service initiative project (e.g. visiting nursing homes, tree-planting scheme, community mural contribution).
• Conduct local talks/seminars:
  – professional experts such as nutritionists, mental health practitioners and social workers
  – education-related sessions such as ‘good study habits’ or ‘reading with your child’
  – general information such as ‘party safely’ or ‘car maintenance’
  – VCE tip nights (e.g. the local medical centre can offer information on staying healthy throughout the year or during exam time)
  – vocational pathways discussions to open students and parents up to the range of opportunities available.
• Offer short courses (e.g. setting up a budget, understanding the Internet).
• Host debates involving students and local groups or individuals.
• Open your school assembly to the community.
• Invite a community leader to speak at your assembly.
• Organise school excursions to community attractions.
• Use the school grounds to host markets, fetes or car-boot sales.
• Undertake work-study programs (e.g. work experience).
• Invite your local secondary school’s band to play at your primary school.
• Hold reunions.
• Run a ‘learning to drive’ workshop and team up with local driving instructors.
• Set up a careers fair or trade show.
Case study

Living and Learning Centre: Monbulk Primary School

Understanding local needs and forging strong community ties helped Monbulk Primary School’s Library and Internet project grow into a $5 million Living and Learning Centre development that continues to draw local interest, ideas, and support.

The centre will house a number of projects, activities, and groups involving music, university projects, adult education, seniors, welfare, and health.

The project started small. The school realised Monbulk students and citizens needed the Living and Learning Centre and a local library. Access to good Internet facilities was also a priority as only 45 per cent of the community is connected to the Internet at home. So the school applied for, and received, a State Government Community Facilities Grant to do just that.

Through word-of-mouth and various school community networks, local involvement in the project ballooned. It is now a two-year project run by a planning committee that includes school representatives. Swinburne University, University of the 3rd Age (U3A), sports groups, maternal health service providers, kindergartens and senior groups are some of the other groups involved. Support also comes from local businesses and politicians at the local, state and federal levels.

Research was pivotal in getting the local council on board. The school argued its case for improved facilities using statistics. For instance, despite only having access to a mobile library, book-borrowing was 50 per cent higher for Monbulk residents than in settlement areas with a permanent library. The council undertook a $30,000 study on the project and the school looked at case studies in other centres in Victoria.

Funding has been central in getting the project to where it is today. The grant was initially matched dollar-for-dollar by floating a co-op that involved a 15-year loan of $200,000. The bulk of the money comes from local groups and organisations, philanthropic trusts and government bodies, including the local council.

The project’s success is reflected in its growth – from the number of groups involved through to the many facilities and services the centre will now offer beyond a library facility. Different pockets of the community continually learn about the project and actively seek involvement. Monbulk Primary School principal, Ray Yates, notes that each month their horizons expand as more networks bring more resources to the table.

The school community will benefit in the long term as the centre reinforces Monbulk Primary School’s place in the community. Importantly, it gives students better access to their community and has led to improved links with the local secondary school.

Mr Yates also believes the project is fast becoming a ‘trend-setter’ with enquiries and interest shown from other Victorian and interstate communities. It has even been approached by the city council in Christchurch, New Zealand.
Developing your Annual Report to the School Community

Your Annual Report to the School Community is a key school accountability document and a trusted source of information about your school. Although it is written mainly with parents in mind, annual reports are often read by other family members, teachers, students, members of the local community, local businesses and the local media. Annual reports may also be sent to local Members of Parliament to keep them informed.

The Annual Report to the School Community is an important tool for effective school governance and is a legislative requirement of all schools.

In 2006, a new annual reporting process has been introduced for reporting on the 2005 school year. The new Annual Report to the School Community replaces the old annual report format, and is best described as a concise 6–8-page brochure-style report, written in plain English that is designed to enhance communication with your school community. The annual report outlines your school’s achievements and progress towards improving student learning, engagement, well-being, transitions and pathways.

What makes a good Annual Report to the School Community?

Schools will have different approaches to producing an annual report. There is, of course, no ‘right’ way but there are things that can help provide clearer and more relevant information to readers.

Structure and layout

Layout can have a big impact on how well your annual report reads. Some points to consider include:

- effective use of white space, including the use of columns, as it encourages readers to focus on the text and guides their attention
- using meaningful titles or headlines and captions to convey your main messages
- breaking up large amounts of text with related images or graphics
- using a readable-size font, keeping in mind some of your audience may be sight-impaired.

Section length

Each section in your annual report should be as brief and direct as possible, stating the key messages early in the piece.

The annual report designer templates (see page 6.10) suggest appropriate word lengths for each section.
**Graphics and images**
Incorporating images and graphics in your school’s annual report should give the readers a visual sense of school life and actively encourage the school community to read the report. Graphics and images may include:

- photos representing typical school life
- simple graphs and charts depicting school performance outcomes
- text headings that draw attention to the different sections contained in the annual report.

**Making your Annual Report to the School Community easy to read**
The annual report is designed to enhance communication with the school community and should be written in language that is clear, simple and easy to understand.

**Tone and language**
It is important to keep the language simple and free of jargon. School documents containing education specific language are often difficult for parents and the community to understand, particularly in communities where there are a high proportion of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

It is useful to maintain a friendly conversational tone using inclusive words such as ‘us’, ‘we’ and ‘our’. This helps to create a sense of belonging to the school community. It is particularly important that you use concise and clear language when analysing and discussing the school’s performance data.

**Producing your Annual Report to the School Community**
To help you prepare the *Annual Report to the School Community* in the new format a series of designer templates have been developed. The templates are intended as an additional resource to assist with design and layout. Schools may find it easier to finalise the content of their annual report before placing it into the appropriate template.

The templates for preparing the *Annual Report to the School Community* have been developed for the following school types in two formats (with columns and without columns):

- P–12 school
- secondary school
- primary school
- specialist school.

These templates can be accessed via the Accountability and Improvement website at www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/standards/account/annual.htm.
Obtaining feedback on your *Annual Report to the School Community*

The *Annual Report to the School Community* is a key communication document between the school and its community. Once you have developed your annual report and distributed it to your school community, you may find it useful to obtain feedback to ensure the annual report remains an engaging and informative document.

One way of doing this involves conducting a brief survey that is distributed with the annual report. An example has been provided below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The annual report provided me with an understanding of what the school achieved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The annual report was clear and easy to understand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The annual report provided a fair and balanced view of our school (it discussed both positive and negative aspects of our school's performance)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The annual report was a suitable length</td>
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<tr>
<td>The annual report discussed the main things I want to know about our school's performance</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The annual report used too many technical terms and jargon that was hard to understand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look forward to receiving an annual report each year to better understand what is happening at my school</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other comments**

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Tool 6: Connecting with your local community
School leaders and representatives

Making contact and liaising with the community outside your school is an important responsibility. To make the most of these opportunities, relationships need to be managed well. Try to nominate someone who is a good communicator. The person selected for this position should be approachable and reliable, speak clearly, network effectively, manage difficult situations and delegate responsibilities.

Principal as leader

Principals are a good starting point. As the head of the school, they are in a prime position to act as spokesperson for your school and play a main role in the local community. They are often the main connection between your school and other local leaders.

The principal also has the opportunity to communicate messages through the school newsletter (e.g. principal’s report). Consider that the newsletter is read by members of the wider community and it can be used to build relationships and encourage community participation.

A report from the principal that provides a summary of the key decisions, events and achievements of your school to the wider school community may also be included in the Annual Report to the School Community.

Remember that your principal’s endorsement of a school or community event can attract a wider audience. Similarly, their signature on written communications can help open doors in your community.

Making use of the potential in others

There may be a number of key people in your school that are willing to share the responsibility of being a school/community leader. This way, your school can cover more ‘community ground’ and build a broader network of contacts more quickly. Some people you may consider include the assistant principal, a parent club president, or a teacher. Make sure whoever you choose is given the authority to act in the role as this helps build their credibility with the community.

You may like to think about opportunities for senior school representatives to speak at local community meetings (e.g. a Rotary event, local council committees).
Evaluating your community involvement

It is important to review and evaluate your community project after the event. Below are some ways you can start evaluating the success of your efforts to connect with the local community:

- Get a group of people together over coffee to talk about their experiences and how they feel the project went.
- Conduct one-on-one interviews.
- Carry out surveys with students or participants.
- Conduct random phone surveys in the local community to gauge awareness of school-community activities.

You can go one step further and invite community feedback. Having an option on your website for people to provide anonymous feedback is one way you can do this. Another way is to set up a comments box in the local library or community hall.

Be proud of your achievements. You might look at ways of gaining public recognition for your collaboration efforts. This may be in the form of:

- awards
- competitions
- media coverage
- sponsorship.

Tip: It’s never too early to get feedback. You can ask people for input or opinions at any stage. This way, you can stay on track and you can benefit from managing any ideas or concerns early on.