## community engagement in learning RESEARCH evidence base

There is a growing research evidence base supporting the link between school partnerships and networks and enhanced student outcomes. The contemporary literature recognises that collaboration beyond the school, including with parents/carers/kin, services, industry and networks, is a critical driver of school improvement.

**Building communities**

Engaging the community through developing and maintaining relationships with a broad range of stakeholders is recognised as a driver for enhancing teaching and non-teaching capacity within schools. Relationships between teachers and with the broader community strengthen the professional capital of those working within a school and of the community as a whole. The work of building communities is complex and multifaceted. The Measure of School, Family, and Community Partnerships developed by Johns Hopkins University is an instrument designed to measure how schools engage with parents, community members and students, and includes six types of involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community (Salinas, et al., 2019).

Effective schools build positive ways to communicate with students and the community to develop a shared vision of the school ethos and learning environment, with a strong focus on pedagogy and problem-solving. Shared decision-making and consultation with families and the wider community are vital in planning and designing supports for students, as this ensures supports are tailored based on all available information from teachers and parents/carers/kin (Attree, 2011). Collaborative partnerships between parents, communities and schools are particularly important for driving improvement in culturally diverse schools and can significantly improve students’ health and wellbeing outcomes. Strong communication of values and expectations for students across all levels of the school community is critical in building a culture of high expectations (Bradford & Clarke, 2015; Sheridan, et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016).

**Parents and carers as partners**

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach for engaging parents/carers/kin in student learning, there is strong consensus in contemporary literature that the development of partnerships with parents/carers/kin is a critical driver of school improvement. Effective partnerships include participation in school culture and opportunities for parents/carers/kin to be active in decision-making. The involvement of parents/carers/kin fosters student engagement through intrinsic motivation, increased confidence, a sense of control over academic performance and more positive associations with education (Barker & Harris, 2020; Clark, 2017; Liu, 2017 and Okilwa & Barnett, 2017).

Contemporary research consistently finds a strong and positive correlation between parents actively supporting their child’s learning and student achievement (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018; Barker & Harris, 2020). Effective teachers take deliberate steps to increase discussions with parents/carers/kin about student learning and progress, which increases families’ confidence in the school environment and can transform parents into advocates for the school. Sharing individual student performance data with families, as well as drawing information from families about students’ interests, behaviours, and challenges, can deepen the conversation on a students’ progress (Weiss & Lopez, 2011).

To be impactful, communication and partnerships must be tailored to the context of students’ backgrounds, family/carer/kin characteristics and the needs of their communities. For example, culture and language may be barriers to some families engaging in their child’s learning, including a lack of translated information and resources about what their child is learning (Sheridan, et al., 2019). Informing parents/carers/kin of how they can best help students meet learning standards and ensuring that there are ongoing conversations between teachers and parents/carers/kin about their roles and expectations in supporting student learning have a positive influence on learning outcomes (Jeynes, 2012; Redding et al, 2004). Checking of homework and reading with students are effective home learning practices. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children found that children who are read to 6-7 times per week are more than twice as likely to record the highest reading test score than children read to 0-2 times per week, and 16 to18 per cent less likely to record the lowest score. This is a similar effect to an additional year of learning (Kalb & van Ours, 2013).

**Global citizenship**

Intercultural interactions have become a part of everyday life in our increasingly multicultural and globalised world, where schools play a vital role in developing students’ intercultural knowledge, skills and understandings. Contemporary research shows that drawing on real life intercultural experiences and supporting students to learn about cultural diversity reduces prejudice and that positive interracial contact between school-aged young people can encourage positive intercultural attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; White et al, 2009). Community learning opportunities are integral to supporting students’ progress through schooling, as it provides them with engaging learning and personal development experiences. Participation in social activities, including community-oriented volunteering also have positive impacts on academic achievement, positive self-identity and self-esteem related student outcomes (The Department of Education and Training, 2018; Lewis, 2005).

A report documenting the benefits of sister school relationships in Victoria found that such programs can have positive effects on student global awareness, attitudes and responses. These benefits are of greatest significance during the third year, once relationships had been well established and embedded within the school, nonetheless, short-term benefits are also evident (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013).

**Networks with schools, services and agencies**

Schools that are successfully implementing and sustaining strategies for improving student achievement may have a range of community partnerships that provide additional support for student health and wellbeing, social support, transport, learning opportunities and expertise. While community partnerships are generally a feature in small-scale school initiatives and supported by community organisations, international partnerships can be similarly effective in engaging staff and students (Mayer et al., 2015; Sahlin & Styf, 2019).

Recent research identifies a range of impactful network types. Networks with general and oral health services can help achieve strong health outcomes for students (Moore et al, 2013). University and school partnerships can provide learning opportunities in leadership and research collaboration that focus on school improvement. External partnerships also advocate for schools and provide protection from outside inhibitors (Sanders, 2016; Tarpey & Poultney, 2015). Co-located and shared facilities improve access to services for youth and families, youth connection to school, and can increase attendance and achievement (Sanjeevan et al, 2012). Community hubs may benefit parents/carers/kin in improving their understanding of the school and school culture (Press et al, 2015).

Formal and informal professional networks for school staff are a prerequisite for successful and sustained school improvement, which builds the internal capacity of schools. Connections between teachers and with the broader community strengthen the professional capital of those working within a school and of the organisation (Sahlin, 2019). This can include the broadening of professional learning communities to support teachers and school leaders to collaborate with colleagues from other schools (Mujis, 2015) and external organisations (Ainscow et al., 2016).

**Community engagement case studies**

* [Canterbury Primary School](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Resource/LandingPage?ObjectId=49625460-96e0-4b5d-a6df-c575048571e7&SearchScope=Teacher): Taking student learning beyond classroom walls to a local radio station, where students participated in a workshop with a local radio host
* [Eastbourne Primary School](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Resource/LandingPage?ObjectId=c5c29a97-ee32-44b7-99af-700fc35820f9): Collaborating with local early learning providers to ensure all students make greater than expected progress through personalised learning
* [Bendigo Senior Secondary College](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Resource/LandingPage?ObjectId=bbecda77-6ec5-4070-bf1f-556ea7abbb50): Organising student-led community events in the lead up to the 2016 election to inform others about national and global issues
* [Timboon P-12 School:](https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Resource/LandingPage?ObjectId=5db26238-357c-4524-ac10-bdccc103c6e2) Working with businesses and community members to integrate agriculture and food technology into the curriculum as part of the Timboon Agriculture Project (TAP).

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