

**Rosalyn Black**

**Beyond** *the*  
**classroom**

Building  
new  
school  
networks

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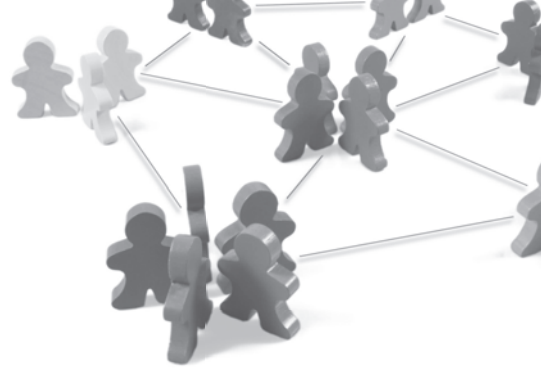
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# 1



## Networks in place

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Australian schools have a history of partnership with their local communities to improve outcomes for children and young people, but it is an uneven history. Existing partnerships could provide a platform for more sustainable networks that link local schools, their communities and the agencies that work for the good of those communities. These networks should respond to the particular circumstances of each school and the community it serves but they should also meet universal high standards, expectations and accountabilities.

*Schools need to be successful with their communities, not in spite of them.*

(West-Burnham, Farrar & Otero, 2007)

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## Partnership plus

The local community provides the most immediate opportunity for schools to work in partnership with other groups and individuals to improve children and young people's learning and wellbeing. These include parents, local business and industry, local government and community groups. These partnerships are particularly important for schools in disadvantaged areas. Internationally as well as in Australia, few schools combine high student poverty with high achievement. Those that do tend to have strong relationships with their community (Kannapel & Clements, 2005). School-community partnership can 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.

But how many partnerships are actually effective? Observations from the wider social sphere indicate that partnership for its own sake is no

guarantee of successful outcomes and that the performance of partnerships is patchy. As one United Kingdom report concludes: ‘Partnership working remains a good idea but is incredibly difficult in practice’ (Jupp, 2000). One of Australia’s most detailed studies of school–community partnership identifies 12 indicators of partnership maturity but suggests that very few partnerships meet these criteria (Johns et al., 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Kilpatrick et al., 2002; Kilpatrick, Johns & Mulford, 2003).

Perhaps the greatest weakness of most individual school–community partnerships is their lack of longevity. The Education Foundation’s experience of 19 years suggests that many schools may be able to build short-term relationships for a specific purpose but that many lack the capacity to set longer horizons. Interviews with school leaders as part of an earlier Education Foundation study (Black, 2004) indicate that this may partly be a natural outcome of a sector that characteristically operates within short timeframes like terms, semesters or single years and that it may reflect a need for observable outcomes in a field where teachers rarely see the products of their efforts. As one school principal noted:

*Schools do not necessarily think in terms of long term partnerships or even long term programs. They do not necessarily envisage a sustained partnership with other organizations, although government policy is nudging them in this direction.*

(Black, 2004)

This trend is exacerbated by the way in which opportunities for partnership are offered to schools. Not-for-profit, philanthropic, community and business organisations are increasingly targeting education as one of the most effective ways of addressing social and economic issues such as entrenched disadvantage or the skills shortage. This can represent a needed injection of private funds into the public education system, but it can also mean that schools—especially schools in disadvantaged areas—have to navigate a flood of uncoordinated offers that can lead to opportunity fatigue. Michael Fullan’s earlier analysis (2000) still holds true:

*Schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one.*

Effective schools have the ability to choose, leverage and integrate new opportunities that come their way, but this skill is not supported by the way in which other sectors operate. The strong tendency of government and philanthropy to use short term, pilot or seed funding to drive school–community alliances makes it extremely difficult for schools to set long-term horizons for these partnerships. The extensive study mentioned

earlier recommended a number of policy initiatives for the better support of school–community partnership in Australia. At the top of the list was a change to partnership funding arrangements:

- *Seeding grants for the development of large-scale school–community partnerships should have a five-year lifecycle, in keeping with commercial business practice.*
- *Current levels of funding for the development, maintenance and sustainability of large-scale school–community partnerships should be reviewed, and increased levels of funding allocated (or redistributed from the ‘start-up’ stages) to allow for the maintenance and sustainability of school–community partnerships.*

(Kilpatrick, Johns & Mulford, 2003)

A second common failing of school–community partnerships is their lack of effective leadership. Successful partnerships require a shared, enabling or distributed leadership that encourages the participation of all players and builds collective responsibility across the school and community (Kilpatrick, Johns & Mulford, 2003). Many partnerships fail the maturity test on this basis. One reason may be the cultural tendency of schools to see themselves as the expert and the lead agency in any partnership with outside organisations. Shifting this perception may not be easy, but a more reciprocal partnership model would draw on knowledge and expertise from both within and outside the school:

*If our goal is to reduce gaps in outcomes among students due to the accidents of their birth, we need a broader frame than one that starts and ends with the idea that schools are the key point of leverage.*

(Levin, 2006)

Broadening this point of leverage would also overcome a third limitation of many school–community partnerships. Partnerships can be powerful tools for improving learning outcomes for a specific cohort of students, but most have limited impact beyond this cohort because they do not alter the school’s intrinsic operations, structures or culture. They rarely feature in the school’s central organisational vision, future planning, budget or staffing arrangements (Spierings, 2001). They do not and cannot tackle the bigger forces that shape educational outcomes for students (Mulford et al., 2007). As I observed some years ago:

*The landscape of school–community partnership is littered with discontinued or underutilised programs that leave little legacy except in the experience of individual students.*

(Black, 2004)

It is hard to say how much this picture is changing. Certainly, building partnerships remains a challenge for schools in high poverty areas, which have large numbers of students who require support in multiple ways (Bishop, 2004). These schools need the help of other public services such as health and welfare but find it difficult to create or maintain the necessary connections (Mulford et al., 2007). In the more recent words of another 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.*

(Black, 2007)

## Leveraging partnership

Shifting the focus of partnership from the individual school to a network of local schools could leverage the benefits of partnership for a larger number of schools and make a difference to a larger number of young people. Instead of depending on their own overdrawn resources, schools could work together to jointly identify, engage, manage and measure those partnerships that offer the greatest collective benefit for their students and communities. If these networks harnessed the efforts and resources of the government, independent and Catholic systems, they would open the door to truly creative solutions for all young people in the area.

Local school networks could be funded by government in partnership with business or philanthropy to engage a partnership broker or manager who would help them establish the conditions for partnership success: a shared vision, collaborative working relationships, access to a model of good practice and a way of bridging the cultures of different sectors. A new initiative by the Tasmanian Government (Department of Education Tasmania, 2006) is trialling one version of this model by introducing school–community partnership officers who work with school leaders, businesses, parents and community organisations to develop partnerships that improve student outcomes.

As discussed elsewhere in this book, there is a growing number of brokers and intermediary organisations that work with schools to create meaningful partnerships with other agencies and the community. Without an overarching framework of local networks supported by central policy structures, however, this work will never have the systemic impact that it could have. As I noted some years ago:

*An independent organisation such as the (Education) Foundation has a powerful role to play in supporting school–community partnership. It models and brokers good partnerships, helps schools build the skills for partnership,*

*creates a platform for young people's involvement, researches the benefits of effective partnership and works with key players across sectors to generate new approaches and thinking. However, this role does not obviate the need for clear policy leadership that removes the structural and cultural barriers that prevent partnership becoming central practice for schools and their communities.*

(Black, 2004)

Partnerships and networks can be powerful mechanisms for improving outcomes for children and young people, but they are not in themselves a panacea. For some schools operating in challenging circumstances, the task of engaging in a simple partnership with another school or with a local organisation requires skills and resources that may be in short supply as the school struggles to meet the more immediate needs of its students. It is essential 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.

There is also the question of whether people can be over-networked: the demands of participation in a network can overwhelm teachers and other professionals who are already juggling their time and energy. Any new network policy has to build in a response to these risk factors. As a participant in one Education Foundation forum has noted:

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

## The school as hub

Collaboration among schools or between schools and other groups in the community can be prompted by the sharing, co-locating or joint use of physical facilities. Recent years have seen a number of policy initiatives that encourage this more concrete collaboration.

In Victoria, for example, policy support for shared infrastructure between schools and partners such as local government, community organisations and other education and training providers can mean that school information technology centres are opened up for community use or that libraries, sports and performing arts facilities are built as shared resources for the school and the community (Department of Education and Training, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b). These arrangements may now be extended to shared infrastructure between government and non-government schools and could see the education sector working with local government to develop local planning frameworks that include schools, kindergartens, sports facilities and libraries. At the national level, the Australian Government's *Local Schools: Working Together* program will fund the construction of

shared facilities such as classrooms, sporting fields and libraries between government and non-government schools in new growth areas.

These arrangements provide higher quality resources, financial savings and stronger links for both schools and their communities. They also go some way to changing the old paradigm of the moated school that is physically walled off from the community that surrounds it (Black, 2004).

Other paradigm-breaking examples include the co-location of schools with community and children's services. For example, the recently opened Pakenham Springs Primary School in Victoria is co-located with a kindergarten, maternal and child health centre and occasional childcare centre to provide what its principal calls a 'one-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 other examples described elsewhere in this book can 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, 2006a).

A more ambitious model would put the school at the centre of a hub or precinct that offers multiple services for the whole community, the kind of model represented by the United Kingdom's full-service Extended Schools program. This is a more advanced version of the Full Service Schools model developed in Australia. 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 United Kingdom government's intention that all schools will offer such extended services by 2010.

Examples of this kind of provision are beginning to emerge in Australia. In Victoria, for example, a new learning and community facility in the disadvantaged Neighbourhood Renewal area of Wendouree West is dedicated to life-long learning for all residents. Yuille Park Community College is part of a community hub that houses learning, health care, child care, employment and recreation facilities for the entire local area. The hub includes a Children's Services Centre housing a kindergarten, child care 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.

Initiatives like this go a long way to implementing the call for schools to be reconfigured as 'focal points of community development' (Feeney et al., 2002), but they could go even further. As one policymaker observed at an Education Foundation forum:

*We are not yet holistic enough in our thinking about networks for education.*

The most holistic vision would see schools operating as 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. Tom Bentley provides one map of what this provision could look like.

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

*(Table reproduced from Bentley, 2006)*

## Networks for social capital

The idea of cross-sectoral networks is not new. 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 (see Edgar, 2001 and Marginson, 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 et al., 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 et al., 2007). As a paper prepared for the Education Foundation has observed:

*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 et al., 2004)

Tom 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.*

(Bentley, 2007, 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 among 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 among 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, 2006b). 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. As Jehan Loza and Sarah Ogilvie (2005) have argued:

*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.*

Simon Marginson observed in 2001 that:

*Education is one of the principal social sites—perhaps the broadest of all social sites—where people meet each other and form new communities of interest, develop knowledge and skills together, and develop the skills of being and working together.*

However, the potential of school education to function in this way will only be realised if the necessary structures are in place.

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 1300 schools across the United States.

The program creates a structured and potentially stable, long-term network between schools, early years and family support services. It is 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 childcare providers. Schools of the 21st Century provide childcare 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. Participating 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.

## 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 some time 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).

As Eric Sidoti states elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 6), schools are an integral part of their community. His argument, as well as those described above, 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 inextricably linked in the lives of children and young people. They also recognise that many schools in such neighbourhoods serve a purpose not met by any other agency. As a number of educationalists have noted:

*In many communities, especially in rural locations, religious, banking, sporting and other institutions have disappeared often leaving the school as the last remaining institution for the development of community social capital.*

(Mulford et al., 2007)

*Schools in high poverty communities must work far more closely with parents and the broader community, not only on academic issues but on social and economic questions as well.*

(Levin & Riffel, 2000)

*School education may be, in fact, one of the few ways a society has available to do something about improving the situation of people living in areas of growing poverty.*

(Mulford et al., 2007)

*In many communities, schools, particularly primary schools, are among the few regular meeting places for parents and families. This gives an opportunity for a school to act increasingly as a focus for the community, supporting the development of a symbiotic and mutually dependent relationship between the school and the people it serves.*

(Coleman, 2006)

Strategies to improve educational outcomes in these communities must be informed by what Pat Thomson (2000, 2002) calls ‘thisness’: the qualities of schools and their communities that are specific to their locale. She argues 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, Peter Cole (2001b) 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.*

The local government and not-for-profit sectors have a lot of knowledge about effective place-based solutions and practice. Many schools arguably know less. A lot would be gained if the knowledge of these other sectors were shared with school education systems to find the best approach to the specific local needs of young people. As one school principal observed at an Education Foundation forum:

*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, the one danger that must be avoided is the loss or dilution of high universal expectations, standards and accountabilities. It is noted elsewhere in this

book that in disadvantaged contexts, welfare can take precedence over the provision of quality learning opportunities. Martin Haberman (1991) warns against the ‘pedagogy of poverty’ that reflects and sets low educational expectations for young people in impoverished communities. The provision of opportunities for young people is already strongly determined by the variable resources available to particular communities. It is essential that any new networks for Australian schools obviate this inequity instead of replicating it.

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 among 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 5000 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 as this, each of the schools acts as 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.

## *Viewpoint*

*Liz Suda*

The concept of 'old school ties' evokes community, networks, connectedness, support and the old cliché 'it's not what you know but who you know'. It is often used to describe the power, privilege and social capital by-products that accompany a non-public school education. It is not a concept which is generally associated with government schools and particularly not government schools in socially and economically disadvantaged areas. The concept of 'new school ties' opens the door to conversations about the relationship between social capital and success at school, and hopefully about how to redress the imbalance that exists between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' with respect to the acquisition of social capital.

During my three years with the Education Foundation, I helped it explore ways to overcome some of the challenges that schools face in taking learning beyond the classroom and into the community. Armed with a host of theoretical understandings about the concept of learning communities and the benefits of building school-community partnerships, I went into some of the most disadvantaged communities in the metropolitan area to support schools in making these connections. The irony of the preceding statement is intended as a note of caution and acknowledgement that schools have not really been set up or resourced to do this kind of work. There are significant challenges to address on a practical level and schools cannot do it without significant support.

The first real challenge facing schools is their isolation from the community, physically, socially and culturally. Schools are curious places in many respects, charged with educating the younger members of the community and keeping them safe, which has often meant 'and out of the community'. Any interaction between the school and community requires a great deal of goodwill and flexibility on both parts. On the school's part, it involves overcoming the tyranny of the timetable, the prescribed curriculum and duty of care issues. On the community's part, it involves gaining some insight into the way schools operate and the culture of learning that underpins the school's function. Generally, the wider community does not play a role in what happens in schools. Changing that culture requires a complex and sensitive process.

The second challenge for schools is the task of developing a curriculum that embeds the notion of community, partnerships and collaboration as a means to building powerful knowledge and skills for the future. Whatever schools do, it has to be a two-way process with community input. External input into the school curriculum is, however, a problematic concept and would require significant policy development to ensure quality educational provision.

There is a critical question to ask: is it the teacher's role to take on this mammoth task? Teachers clearly need to be involved in the development of curriculum and processes but they do not have adequate time to develop and maintain community relationships alone. If schools are to make new ties with their community, they need to be adequately resourced and trained to do so. A dedicated person in the school or a cluster of schools, who works with teachers and builds connections within the community, is essential for any progress to be made. Changing a culture that has evolved since the advent of mass compulsory schooling requires a willingness to devote significant input of time and resources. Such an investment would be very effective in creating social capital.

*Liz Suda is now Program Coordinator at the Melbourne Museum*