



Purpose

School community partnerships are central to learning and school improvement. Governments, systems, schools, communities, organisations and individuals can significantly influence the factors that promote the development of strong communities to enhance learning, achievement and life chances for all.

Context

The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium (1997) states 'Parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children's education belongs..... It is necessary to foster initiatives which encourage commitment, but which provide at the same time the right sort of concrete support which the family needs and which involve it in the Catholic school's educational project. The constant aim of the school therefore, should be contact and dialogue with the pupils' families,... in order to clarify with their indispensable collaboration that personalised approach which is needed for an educational project to be efficacious'.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008), commits Australian governments 'to working with all school sectors to ensure that schools engage young Australians, parents, carers, families, other education and training providers, business and the broader community to support students' progress through schooling, and to provide them with rich learning, personal development and citizenship opportunities' and

states that partnerships between these stakeholders 'bring mutual benefits and maximise student engagement and achievement.'

The **Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) 2011 – 2015 Directions for Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne**, identifies *Partnerships* as one of the five key action areas with the following objectives: increase the active engagement of parents in their child's learning; develop Catholic schools as core community centres; promote and develop collaborative networks of learning.

The **Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) Parents as Partners in Catholic Education** policy states 'Parent participation in a diversity of roles affirms the important role of parents as partners with the Church through the school and with the broader community in supporting the learning and development of their children'.

- The Charter **asserts** the importance of school community partnerships in contributing to successful learning experiences for all children and young people.
- The Charter **affirms** that partnerships engender support for the development and wellbeing of young people and their families and serve to maximise student engagement and achievement.
- The Charter **recognises** that parents are the primary educators of their children and that the partnership of principals, staff and parents working together with the wider community is central to the development of the whole child.

Concepts

Learning

Learning occurs, formally and informally, in school, home and community environments where children, young people and adults feel comfortable, accepted, motivated and challenged.

Educators can increase academic achievement of students from diverse groups if they make use of, and celebrate, the knowledge, skills and languages these students acquire in the informal learning environments of their homes and communities (Moll & Gonzales, 2004).

Outward facing schools

The term 'outward facing school' invites school communities to 'look out' beyond the school gate and recognise their larger role in the community. Through engagement in authentic partnerships with families and the community, the outward facing school can explore learning in all its possibilities and make a contribution to the entire community's capacity to learn (Goodfellow, 2008; Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010).

Parent engagement

'Parent engagement is concerned with the beliefs, attitudes and activities of parents and other family members to support children's learning at home and at school' (Cronin, 2010). Engagement implies 'enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning, with teachers' knowledge' (Pushor, 2007).

Three useful ways for schools to think about parent engagement:

- **for learning** occurs when schools take specific steps to connect parents to in-school learning, such as open classrooms, online support or curriculum nights;
- **through learning** involves inquiry-based learning opportunities for parents, such as parent education classes, workshops or study groups; and
- **about learning** is where parents actively engage with teachers and students to understand more about the process of learning, how teachers teach and what parents can do at home to support learning. (Harris, Andrew-Power & Goodall, 2009).

Social capital

Social capital is essentially about trust, engagement, communication, shared values, aspirations, networks and interconnectedness (Otero & West-Burnham, 2007). Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. It is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together (World Bank, 2011).

By valuing diversity and fostering relationships, schools build social capital and make a significant contribution to the development of the entire community's capacity to learn, including those for whom they have strong statutory responsibility.

School community partnerships

'A school community partnership is a collaborative relationship among the family, school and community designed primarily to produce positive educational and social outcomes for children and youth, while being mutually beneficial to all parties involved' (Ellis & Hughes, 2002).

Principles of an outward facing school

When schools and communities work together using an 'outward facing' approach they:

- foster engagement in learning and build ownership, whereby students, teachers, families, schools and communities work in partnership to develop ideas and make them happen.
- extend beyond the margins of formal schooling and as such can be owned collectively; they share resources, accountability and responsibility.
- build social capital and connect young people and their families within the community, so everyone experiences a sense of belonging and hope for the future.
- enhance the confidence and capacity of the community to engage in learning and promote wellbeing and achievement for all young people.

Adapted from: West-Burnham, J., Farrar, M., & Otero, G. (2007). *School Communities: Working together to transform children's lives*. Network Continuum Education, London.

Leading to action

The Charter calls on education systems, school communities and the community sector to acknowledge the essential role of families and community in enhancing wellbeing and learning outcomes for all children and young people by:

- building greater understandings and a shared language around school community partnerships for learning;
- taking responsibility for ensuring that those factors that influence student learning are seen as core to school improvement;
- investing in the understandings of personnel (including pre-service teachers) through professional learning opportunities and resource provision;
- ensuring that policy and frameworks are informed by an evidence base and adequately funded;
- facilitating partnerships within systems and across sectors that impact on the wellbeing and learning outcomes of students and families;
- engaging, partnering and building alliances with public, non-government, community organisations, industry and business to create sustainable school community partnerships;
- harnessing and engaging people with experience in strategically developing strong links with the community and partnerships to promote learning; and
- empowering and transforming community and systems by supporting them to shape and initiate their own actions to promote the development of outward facing school communities.

Each stakeholder group is invited to develop an action plan in response to the Charter.

The Charter for promoting Outward Facing School Communities was initiated by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne in the lead up to the Look Out : Partnerships for Learning conference in 2011. The Charter reflects the input and support of the listed organisations. The Charter provides a framework for schools and organisations to progress the work in their own contexts whilst acknowledging the content of the document and contributing organisations.

