

# A SCHOOL BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT! TOWARDS SCHOOLS FOR NETWORKED COMMUNITIES

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## Abstract

School facilities are some of the most underutilised public assets in Australia. Yet, opportunities to better utilise and enhance school facilities through offering a range of services to growing communities are increasingly being recognised. Across the country, state governments are endorsing the development of *schools as community hubs*, based on indications from overseas of better education, health and well-being outcomes for students, as well as benefits to their families and the public.

How best to proceed with the development of community oriented schools in Australia however, remains an open question due to a lack of knowledge about; a) what types of services – beyond the academic – should be delivered from school sites; b) how best to utilize existing facilities and deliver new infrastructure that may be required for ‘non-traditional’ service provision; and c) what government funding should be directed to such services and facilities, and from which departments.

Curtailing the development of community oriented schools are embedded state government policies and practices that tend to dislocate and dissociate the processes of procuring, designing, governing and using/managing school infrastructure. If the concept of *schools as community hubs* is to be realised, the policy environment through which such provision must be achieved needs to be scrutinised and updated.

The provision of school facilities that can support enhanced social capital, education, health and well-being outcomes for Australian communities requires improved co-ordination between multiple levels of government, as well as non-government agencies, schools and community groups. A means of productively navigating and negotiating these multifaceted relationships is needed i.e. a coherent framework that links research, policy and practice associated with the planning and management of service delivery and associated infrastructure on school sites.

This paper explores how such a framework may be developed for the purpose of helping state governments, local councils, schools and community stakeholders overcome the current ‘obstacle course’ that is limiting attempts to maximise school facilities for broader community benefit.

## Introduction

### Schools as community hubs: the education, health and well-being imperative

The benefits of partnerships between schools, families, and communities have been promoted for decades by educational researchers, particularly as a means for promoting student achievement (Hands, 2010). Yet, while international jurisdictions, such as Ontario, Canada, have well-developed policies linking the planning and management of school facilities for the delivery of education, health and well-being services to school students and members of the broader community (Flessa & Gregoire, 2011), similar policy integration and practice guidance in the Australian context is lacking. This lack of coherent policy and practice guidance presents an ‘obstacle course’ to those wishing to provide facilities suited to the delivery of a range of services beyond those associated with the academic education of primary and secondary school students.

In the public health sector, the idea of providing integrated service delivery from school sites is gaining attention. Trepanier et al. (2008) defined school integrated services as “the process by which educational, social, and health services are coordinated in a concerted way and offered to students and their families in order to address their needs” (p. 109). Based on research conducted in Canada, Trepanier et al. identified that such services can be delivered from school buildings (school-based services), or from facilities located near-by (school-linked services) or in the community (community-based services). They suggested that “whether based within the school building or not, school integrated services are a key to ensure and facilitate coherence among interventions” (p. 109).

Moves towards integrated service delivery are also being explored and pursued by governments in other western countries, where they are looking to ensure better access to and delivery of services to families – particularly those that are more marginalised or underprivileged. For example, the Head Start preschool program in the United States has provided integrated education, health, social services, and parent education for low-income families for more than a decade, and a range of programs have been supported in the United Kingdom, where significant government funding has been dedicated to developing linkages between early childhood centres and social services, child care and health services, early education and community agencies (Tayler, Farrell & Tennent, 2002).

Amidst the discourse surrounding school-community partnerships a variety of different stakeholder objectives can be found, including those of multiple levels of government, educators, and health service providers. Collectively, the objectives of these groups often focus on:

- 1) Improving the range and quality of support services to students and families;
- 2) Strengthening relationships between school administrations, community partners and the general public;
- 3) Providing a platform for improved service delivery to communities;
- 4) Maximizing the use of public infrastructure through increased flexibility and utilization; and
- 5) Reducing the costs of operating facilities for schools and government.

In practice, integrated service delivery may involve collaborations between schools, kindergartens and childcare services, along with parenting support services associated with child health, preschool readiness, family mental health, special needs services, recreation, family literacy, and other programs (Pelletier & Corter, 2005).

In Australia, despite a growing body of research attesting to the benefits of effective integrated early care and education services for children and families, as well as longer-term societal and economic benefits, “a history of single focus, separate, specialised, and competing services has led to widespread dissatisfaction with service provision, which is viewed by many to be inflexible, inaccessible or out-of-touch with the needs of contemporary families” (Tayler, Farrell & Tennent, 2002, p. 1-2). This historical – and still current – context provides the backdrop to this paper, which outlines an approach to developing the policy and practice questions necessary to realising *schools as community hubs* in an effective way.

The outcomes of the research are anticipated to significantly advance knowledge in the interdisciplinary field of learning environments research and provide new knowledge to the architecture, education, and public health research communities.

## Towards schools for networked communities

### The research imperative

Historically, state-owned school facilities have been some of the most underutilised public assets in Australia, with most used sparingly outside of school hours, on weekends, or during school holiday periods (Cleveland & Woodman, 2009). However, state government and community aspirations for school sites are changing. School sites are no longer being envisaged as 9:00am-3:30pm settings for the exclusive purpose of schooling, but as valuable assets also able to support a range of services to individuals and community groups – especially to rapidly growing communities in outer suburban and inner urban areas of Australia’s major cities.

The desire to share school facilities with the broader community is becoming increasingly evident, with more stakeholders (state governments, local councils, service providers and community groups) wishing to expand opportunities for classrooms, gymnasiums and libraries to be used by multiple groups, as well as for additional facilities to be co-located on school sites for the provision of early years education and a range of family and health services i.e. integrated service delivery (Cleveland & Woodman, 2009; Salagaras, 2009). The notion of the *school as community hub* is gathering momentum, yet fulfilling these emerging aspirations remains a difficult task due to embedded state government policies and practices that tend to dislocate and dissociate the processes of procuring, designing, governing and using/managing school infrastructure.

If the concept of the *school as community hub* is to be realised, the policy environment through which such provision must be achieved needs to be scrutinised and updated. The provision of school facilities for the purpose of enhancing the social capital, education, health and well-being of Australian communities requires improved co-ordination between multiple levels of government, as well as non-government agencies, schools and community groups. A means of productively navigating and negotiating these multifaceted relationships is needed i.e. a coherent framework that links research, policy and practice associated with the planning and management of service delivery and associated infrastructure on school sites.

Building new amenity throughout Australian cities is at the crux of this issue: amenity and allied service provision from school sites – perhaps the most geographically well-distributed government land assets. Changing demographics and the intensification of Australia cities is changing the ways individuals and communities live. With all major Australian cities adopting strategies to intensify development in activity centres and along transit lines (Woodcock et al., 2010), the urban fabric of Australia is being reshaped and methods of movement and access to facilities and the services required by the public are being altered. As Woodcock et al. indicated, concepts of resilience, sustainability and assemblage are all being brought to bear on current debates about urban design. Schools must not be dissociated from such discourses.

In this context, McShane (2006) observed that there is an increasing focus on policy outputs, particularly at the local government level, framed around community strengthening. This he identified as the community turn in public policy. Adding complexity to this issue, he also identified that the “financing, planning and management of community facilities has emerged as a major public policy issue in Australia in recent years as assets acquired in the post-World War II years of growth and decentralisation age, service needs widen, and local governments experience fiscal stress” (McShane, 2006, p. 269).

Across Australia there is limited knowledge about how best to develop policy and practice around issues including:

- a) What types of services should be delivered from school sites;
- b) How best to utilize existing facilities and deliver new infrastructure that may be required for 'non-traditional' service provision;
- c) What government funding should be directed to such services and facilities, and from which departments; and ultimately
- d) How best to leverage infrastructure funding for the purpose of building resilient and sustainable community infrastructure and communities.

While it is acknowledged that there is ongoing debate about how available school facilities should be to the wider community during school hours, as well as the effectiveness of shared-use agreements (McShane, 2012), there is significant support at state government level across the country to develop shared community infrastructure on school sites. The research project outlined below is expected to produce findings that will significantly forward this agenda through analysing existing policies and practices across Australia and internationally for the purpose of developing a robust and coherent framework that links research, policy and practice associated with the processes of procuring, designing, governing and using/managing school infrastructure for broader community benefit. The resultant framework is anticipated to help state governments, local councils, schools and community stakeholders overcome the current 'obstacle course' that is limiting attempts to maximise school facilities for broader community benefit.

## **Linking research, policy and practice associated with procuring, designing, governing and using/managing school infrastructure**

### The research project

The objective of the forthcoming research project is to examine national and international policy environments (Coleman & Perl, 1999; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) and practices associated with the provision and management of school infrastructure and to develop a coherent framework linking research (new knowledge), policy and practice across the fields of architecture, education, and public health towards maximising facilities for broader community benefit. The aims of the project are:

1. To identify the specific objectives of state governments, local councils, schools and community stakeholders with respect to the provision of school infrastructure, and benchmark these objectives internationally;
2. To examine national and international policy environments and practices associated with the planning and management of school infrastructure to identify world-best practices and opportunities for improvement; and
3. To provide a robust and coherent framework linking research, policy and practice associated with the procurement, design, governance and use/management of school infrastructure to meet the emerging needs of Australian communities.

Through a review of the literature, policy analysis (as documented and enacted), and facility design and management case studies, the project will bring together policy makers and practitioners to share knowledge and analyse emerging requirements for school facility design and management in Australia. Adopting an international outlook, the project will have a direct impact on current theoretical and policy debates about the role of school facilities in Australia and drive dialogue about how such infrastructure can best be delivered and managed, while also bringing environmental and

economic benefits to the nation through attention to urban design and fiscal contexts.

## Research focus and questions

In keeping with the specific aims of the project (above), the project will address three core questions:

- A. Within Australia, what specific objectives are being pursued by state governments, local councils, schools and community stakeholders with respect to the provision of school infrastructure for broader community benefit? How do these objectives compare internationally?
- B. What can be learned from national and international policy environments and practices about the planning and management of school infrastructure for broader community benefit, and how can this be done better?
- C. How can research, policy and practice be coherently linked to effectively inform the procurement, design, governance and use/management of school infrastructure to meet the emerging needs of Australian communities?

The project will pursue in-depth analysis of existing policies and practices, as influenced by multiple levels of government, non-government policy organisations and on-the-ground practitioners (e.g. educational leaders, architects, public health practitioners), to develop the afore mentioned framework, which will link research, policy and practice associated with the design and management of school infrastructure for the delivery of multiple services to Australian communities.

The project's conceptual framework, research design, methods and approaches to analysis are outlined below.

## Conceptual framework

The project will adopt an interdisciplinary approach to exploring how school facilities can be delivered/maximised to enhance the social capital, education, health and well-being of Australian communities. The project's significance lies in the objective to integrate knowledge derived from the domains of architectural, education and public health and to develop a unifying framework linking previously dislocated and dissociated policies and practices – and bodies of knowledge.

The project will adopt a unifying approach to framework formation by exploring opportunities to link the varying objectives of policy makers (e.g. elected officials, government bureaucrats) and practitioners (e.g. architects, educators, and public health agencies), while being cognisant of the epistemologies that tend to be favoured by these different disciplines. Figure 1 (below), illustrates the project's areas of enquiry, including its well-defined focus on four areas of policy and practice: (1) school facility procurement, (2) school facility design, (3) school facility governance, and (4) school facility shared-use/management.

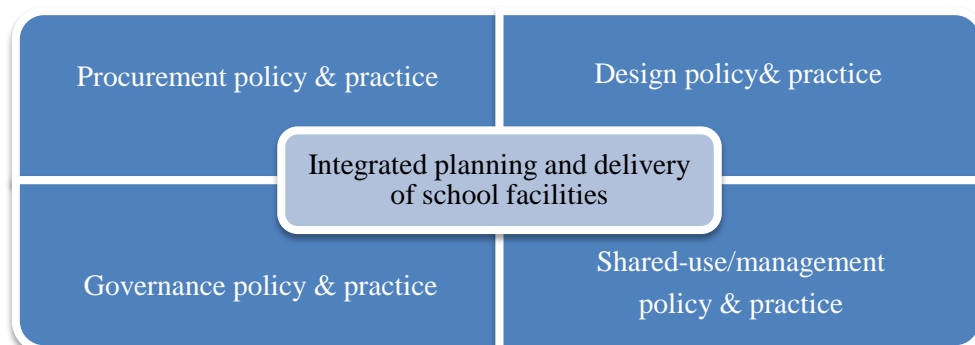


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

## Theoretical orientation

The project will balance a *performative and enactment* perspective on policy, that views any changes that might be attributed to policy as emergent “through the effects of relational interactions” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011 p. 712), with a *techno-rational* approach to policy, that is based on replicable methods intended to problematize and solve education problems (Webb & Gulson, 2015). A performative or enactment perspective lends itself to developing understandings of policy as it is enacted by diverse social actors and material mediators, not just as it is documented in text. This approach to theorizing policy represents an emerging shift in policy research (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Mulcahy, 2014) and is expected to support the production of research outcomes that will be applicable in the field.

## Research design, methods and analysis

The project will adopt a *qualitative approach* and utilise *three research methods*:

- a) Literature review;
- b) Policy analysis (including case studies of policy environments as both documented and enacted); and
- c) Facility design and management case studies.

With its focus on integrated service delivery and facilities, the project will involve connecting and analysing data/knowledge derived from the disciplines of design/architecture, education and public health. The social research methods chosen for the project, outlined below, will enable a unified approach to problem identification, research design, and data analysis.

A *literature review, including theoretical analysis*, will be conducted to commence the study. This will involve the analysis of research and theory to inform data collection and analysis, and generate theoretical insights. This phase of the project will precede the case studies of the policy environments found in six Australian states (see policy analysis below). The literature review will directly address the three research questions, to; (1) investigate the specific objectives of state governments, local councils, schools and community stakeholders with respect to the provision of school infrastructure for broader community benefit; (2) examine national and international policy environments and practices associated with the planning and management of school infrastructure; and (3) shape the development of a coherent framework for procuring, designing, governing and using/managing school infrastructure to meet the emerging needs of Australian communities. This analysis will deepen understanding of the research and theory underpinning the project. Following this initial intensive literature review phase, further literature will be analysed across the duration of the project. This will be synthesised with fieldwork findings to produce further outputs.

*Policy analysis* will involve the investigation of (1) *policy as documented* and (2) *policy as enacted* (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). The study of *policy as documented* will involve the analysis of policy documents from six Australian states (e.g. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2010; Department for Communities, 2011; Department of Education and Communities, 2011; Department of Education and Training, 2011; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012; Department for Education and Child Development, 2013) as well as a sample of international jurisdictions, including but not limited to selected provinces/states/local council districts of Canada, USA, The Netherlands, and the UK. Such analysis will commence early in the first year of the project to (a) provide insight into the policy environments that exist in these jurisdictions and (b) to support the formation of questions for *case study interviews* (see below). Emerging insights will be developed through a process of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003). The analysis of *policy as enacted* will involve case studies of the policy environments and practices found in six Australian

states: VIC, QLD, NSW, SA, WA and TAS. Data for each case study (Bryman, 2004; Yin, 2003) will be collected in the form of interviews with senior policy makers in government and non-government policy organisations, as well as on-the-ground practitioners (architects, educational leaders, public health practitioners) to gain insight into current policies and practices associated with the delivery and management of school facilities – with a particular focus on those intended to provide broader community benefits. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis using NVivo. Both forms of policy analysis will be concentrated in the first two years of the project and will culminate early in the third year with a *two-day round table/workshop* that will see 20 experts (identified during the course of the project) reflect on the project's initial findings and discuss the development of a workable policy framework for procuring, designing, governing and using/managing school infrastructure to meet the emerging needs of Australian communities. As for the interviews, the discussions held at the round table/workshop will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis using NVivo. Ongoing analysis over the first two years of the project will lead to the submission of papers to a number of local and international academic conferences. The dual focus on *policy as documented* and *policy as enacted* will support the development of a holistic understanding of policy, not only as it is documented in text, but also as it is enacted by diverse social actors and material mediators (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Mulcahy, 2014).

*Facility design and management case studies* will embed the project in architecture and architectural theory, and provide touchstones for analysing the influence of policy on school facility design. Secondary data will be sourced to conduct the case studies, including from a range of resources such as books, journal articles, government reports, and websites. In addition, range of materials (such as architectural drawings) will be requested from architects and state government departments. The purpose of the case studies will be to (a) illuminate connections between policy environments and the resultant designs of school facilities, and (b) investigate methods of procurement, governance and management. It is envisaged that up to 20 case studies will be produced across the three years of the study, with most drawn together over the first two years. These will be developed in the form of short four-page case study documents that will communicate emerging insights into the connections between policy environments and school facility design and management. They will be published on the project's website to draw interest and comment from research participants and a range of additional stakeholders involved in school facility procurement, design, governance and use/management. In part, these case studies will draw on the spatial mapping technique used by Dovey and Fisher (2014) to analyse the relationships between spaces in schools, only in this project such analysis will explore spatial relationships in the context of the community use of facilities, as opposed to developing a pedagogical analysis.

## Conclusion

### Feasibility and benefit

This project is timely. High-impact research and policy knowledge is desperately needed at a time when Australian federal, state and local governments must rethink approaches to school facility design amidst population growth, changing urban demographics/development, and the emergence of shifting community requirements in terms of access to education, health and well-being services. The project aligns productively with the Australian Government's Science and Research Priorities, specifically that of 'Health: Better models of health care and services that improve outcomes, reduce disparities for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, increase efficiency and provide greater value for a given expenditure', as well as the three Grand Challenges identified by the University of Melbourne for the next century: 'Understanding our place and purpose; Fostering health and wellbeing; Supporting sustainability and resilience'.

The project's design is expected to generate powerful opportunities for policy learning and reform



across Australia by bringing together policy makers and enactors to share knowledge and analyse emerging requirements for school facilities. The project's design will not only provide an effective research methodology, but an embedded process of carrying the research issues and findings to those most able to influence policy reforms across the country. Such policy learning and knowledge production has the potential to impact directly upon state-level and local council policy responses and reforms. The theoretical and policy knowledge the project will produce may also have broader relevance to debates about school facility procurement, design, governance and use/management in countries such as Canada, the USA, The Netherlands, and the UK.

The desired framework – linking research, policy and practice associated with the processes of procuring, designing, governing and using/managing school infrastructure for broader community benefit – is anticipated to help state governments, local councils, schools and community stakeholders overcome the current 'obstacle course' that is limiting attempts to maximise school facilities for broader community benefit.

Furthermore, the outcomes of the research are anticipated to significantly advance knowledge in the interdisciplinary field of learning environments research and provide new knowledge to the architecture, education, and public health research communities.

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