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THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Building Connections
Schools as Community Hubs

Schools as Community Hubs Development Framework
Workshop 1
Emerging themes & insights

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Partner Organisations

Queensland Government
Department of State Development, Manufacturing, Infrastructure and Planning

Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta

Government of South Australia
Department for Education

RMIT UNIVERSITY

Brand Architects

Clarke Hopkins Clarke

"Some older facilities do not support shared use due to the original design."

"It's a collective, but you still need somebody as the backbone."

"The hardest issue to overcome is mindset - old ways."

"Understanding what community wants and needs (is important)."

"Zoning needs to be carefully considered to avoid 'gated 'school communities."

"Policies that share and manage risk appropriately (are lacking)."

"Five or ten years later, the original objectives have shifted."

"You will need someone to drive the project in each school."

Building Connections
Schools as Community Hubs

Development Framework Workshop # 1

1. CHANGING ENTRENCHED ATTITUDES
2. THE NEED FOR EVALUATION
3. PROJECT TIMING & EVOLUTION
4. COLLABORATION & PARTNERSHIPS
5. VISION
6. SCHOOL PRINCIPAL
7. ADAPTING EXISTING SITES
8. SAFETY, SECURITY & ACCESS
9. RISK TOLERANCE
10. OPERATIONAL FUNDING MODELS
11. COMMUNITY NEEDS

Workshop overview

On 7 May 2020, the Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs ARC Linkage Project team facilitated an ambitious stakeholder workshop via Zoom.

This workshop was the first of six that will inform the proposed *Schools as Community Hubs Development Framework*. The framework will address the planning, design, governance, management and use of shared or co-located facilities on school sites, offering practical guidelines for navigating the 'obstacle course' that stakeholders commonly encounter when undertaking hub projects.

Participants

The virtual format enabled the participation of 33 well-informed stakeholders from around Australia. Participants included government representatives, school leaders, hub coordinators, planners, architects, health and human services providers, community groups, and a range of NGOs. The research team greatly appreciate their time and participation

Workshop discussions & survey

The interactive workshop shifted between whole group mode and small group discussions in six virtual breakout rooms.

Discussions were spread across two sessions. The first session saw participants discuss the contribution their organisation could make to a new school community hub project on a greenfield site on the urban fringe. Participants discussed how their organisation would contribute to the project's phases, and what would constitute success in such a project.

The second session saw participants discuss the barriers that their organisation would typically face in the redevelopment of a school site for shared use. Participants were asked to discuss what information would assist their organisation, and what lessons they had learned that would ease the path of others attempting similarly complex projects.

Participants were also asked to complete a survey before and after the workshop. Insights from those surveys are integrated into the following analysis of key themes.

Highlighted themes

The workshop discussions generated over 45,000 words of transcripts. Combined with the surveys and each facilitator's notes, this is a rich bank of narrative data. The data was examined closely by the research team to identify common themes. Over 40 themes were identified, and this document summarises a selection of themes that were mentioned most frequently by workshop participants.

Quotes have been lightly edited to enhance their readability.

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Highlighted themes

"The ability to demonstrate or quantify the benefits to a school is generally very limited. Evaluation is important."

1 Changing entrenched attitudes

Participants emphasised the importance of challenging entrenched attitudes about how schools are usually designed, planned and managed. Phrases like 'change the narrative', 'overcome the old mindset' and resist 'business as usual' were common:

> "A school is not always seen (from the perspective of a general community member) as having this strong interface with other forms of community support. This can evolve over time but may certainly need some specific promotion so people see it and value it as an important form of social infrastructure".

2 The need for evaluation

In order to promote the concept of schools as community hubs, participants felt they needed better evidence of this approach's benefits. While the benefits are widely accepted, participants felt there was little evaluation:

> "There is a lot of consensus on what the key issues are with developing schools as community hubs. Now the challenge is to build evidence to quantify their value and also help others to tread down this path."

> "Reporting on outcomes will need to be captured and done well."

> "The ability to demonstrate or quantify the benefits to a school is generally very limited. Evaluation is important."

3 Project timing & evolution

The impact of 'getting the timing right' was strongly emphasised, as was involving 'end operators' in project planning and design phases. This highlighted the need for improved continuity across the life of community hub projects: :

> "Having the governance nailed before you get too far into the design is useful and having a clear understanding of the sort of services and things that are going to be provided".

> "That was a very successful project because we had that history of actually being involved from the service delivery side before we started even thinking about the architecture".

It was suggested that the objectives of community hubs will also develop as local demographics and contexts change over time:

> "Five or 10 years later, the original objectives have shifted".

> "If you want to build to meet a population's needs at a particular point in time, it doesn't mean that in five years' time that's still what's needed".

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Highlighted themes

"Operational issues – from the milk usage to the cleaning – can be managed once a shared vision for the site is agreed. Everything is 'figure-out-able'."

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Collaboration & partnerships

Collaborative approaches were regarded as vital for the successful establishment of a community hub project. Participants frequently used phrases such as 'relationships', 'robust and enduring partnerships', 'commitment', 'facilitation and communication', 'common ground':

> "You need sign off from the very top to the very bottom to enable something like this to actually be pulled off".

> "The ongoing management of the Hubs is also crucial - it takes a partnership approach."

5

Vision

Successful community hubs were said to be underpinned by 'shared vision', 'clarity of purpose', 'shared dreams, passions and ideas'. These common ideals were considered especially important when complications arose throughout the project phases:

> "You're trying to shift decision making away from an ego-centric model to one that's really about children, families and the greater community. Trying to dissolve the barriers that people perceive between government departments. Using the power of narrative to establish a sense of working towards the same outcome".

> "The process has been torturous at times because it has gone on and on … but it is working because of good will and passion for the outcomes".

> "Operational issues – from the milk usage to the cleaning – can be managed once a shared vision for the site is agreed. Everything is 'figure-out-able'".

Vision was sometimes seen to be championed by an individual person within a broader project:

> "It is collective, but you're still going to have somebody as the backbone".

> "You will need someone to drive the project in each school".

Alternatively, other participants felt that it was important that vision did not fall to an individual person and that plans needed to be in place to safeguard the vision if key people left the project:

> "Ongoing commitment [is required] beyond the current people involved. These projects need a long-term commitment from the school and/or its governing body. It can't rest on the goodwill and foresight of others who will inevitably move on – it needs to be more than a "champion" model".

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Highlighted themes

"The next principal comes in who as not been in a school with shared facilities: 'Who are these people wanting to use my oval on Tuesday nights?'"

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School principal

The attitude of the school principal was identified as an important factor in a hub's success. The ideal principal was described as someone with 'buy-in' who would act as a 'project champion':

> "The appointment of a principal who connects and supports the vision is critical. The best plans, design, construction, programming can come undone if the school culture doesn't support the Community Hub".

A change in principal could mean a disruption in the management or governance of a successful community hub:

> "Access to [shared facilities that our council has invested in] declines over time unless the principal wants to actually continue it".

> "The next principal comes in who has not been in a school with shared facilities: 'Who are these people wanting to use my oval on Tuesday nights?'"

The workshop included an ex-principal, who articulated how running a school as community hub can place additional demands on a Principal:

> "As an ex-principal, it's a really difficult job. Really, really big job. You know, running a school of two thousand kids. But there's a fine line about when you start getting to other issues around what my role is. I went to university to became a teacher. I'm a principal. I engage with my community. But am I also responsible for drug rehabilitation programs on my school? Am I responsible for domestic violence counselling? When does that stop . . . what does that actually mean from an industrial point of view about what my role is?"

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Adapting existing sites

Adapting existing school sites for broader community use was identified as posing unique challenges, when compared to greenfield site projects, with respect to both cultures of practice and facilities:

> "A key challenge with re-using existing facilities is the perception that someone might need to 'let something go' or 'give up' ownership of something to make it happen – as opposed to a new facility where the idea of sharing is more ingrained. The key issues around use and operation remain, but existing community mindsets are potentially more challenging to change".

> "The designs of some older facilities do not support shared use".

> "It would be difficult to retrofit the safety, security and control mechanisms required for co-sharing of facilities within existing structures".

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Highlighted themes

"From an architectural perspective, designing for safety is probably the key element really early in the discussions."

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Safety, security & access

Safety, security and access were major themes in the discussions. A recurrent theme was how design can facilitate (or hinder) the way communities can access a school site and the services within it

> "[A key issue] is opening up school sites for child, family and community members (beyond just the student) and managing shared use by schools, partner agencies and the broader community level access. [Also important is] linking spaces together to be welcoming and accessible."
>
> "Challenges with incorporating best practice design to support soft entry approaches [are common]."
>
> "Zoning needs to be carefully considered to avoid 'gated 'school communities'. Schools should have zones that are accessible outside of school hours."

While always a consideration for school projects, safety was cited as of heightened importance when community hub projects may see children 'mixing with grown-ups'. Participants emphasised that safety is best discussed early in design processes:

> "From an architectural perspective, design of safety is probably the key element really early in the discussions".
>
> "Anything that has to be made safe, the earlier you can get to it the better".

Safety, security and access challenges were regarded as surmountable, provided there was willingness – and funding – to work collaboratively towards solutions.

> "There are some very practical issues (security, gates, keys) that make sharing facilities difficult. These are the easiest things to overcome if you have dollars".

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Highlighted themes

"Continued support for schools in terms of funding and operating community hubs is vital, so that the ongoing operation is not seen as a burden..."

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Risk tolerance

Participants felt that various types of risks were sometimes a barrier to schools operating as community hubs. These could be financial risks, perceived risks to student safety or the risk of collaborating in novel ways:

"Policies that share and manage risk appropriately (are lacking)."

"Changes in school principals can bring different priorities and risk tolerances."

"Working with various levels of government is the area where I think a really solid framework will help. Governments are extremely risk averse, and local government most of all. This has been a block to other organisations who may have been unable to make things happen, or feel blocked by bureaucracy."

10

Operational funding models

Adapting existing school sites for broader community use was identified as Workshop participants felt that there is little clarity around operational funding models, and identified this as an area where more support or information could be useful:

"Continued support for schools in terms of funding and operating community hubs is vital, so that the ongoing operation is not seen as a burden over time."

"[There are] no directives from government or guidelines for shared operational funding models."

11

Community needs

Every school will respond to their unique socioeconomic context differently and participants felt that a sensitive 'needs analysis' must be conducted with the community before facilities or services are planned:

"Understanding what community wants and needs (is important)."

"There have to be some specific or compelling reasons why you thought of co-locating the services."

"Not replicating [...] what's already in the community."

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Development Framework
Workshop # 1

Research dissemination

The themes emerging from the workshop will be explored in forthcoming conference papers, academic journal articles and book chapters.

If you would like to discuss a workshop theme in more detail, please contact Dr Philippa Chandler, Research Fellow.

Upcoming workshops

This stakeholder workshop was the first of six that will inform the proposed Schools as Community Hubs Development Framework. Two further workshops are planned for this year.

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Building Connections

Schools as Community Hubs

ARC LINKAGE PROJECT
2019 – 2022

Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs is a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage Project investigating how best to plan, design, govern and manage schools to operate successfully as 'more than a school', encouraging the development of resilient and connected communities.

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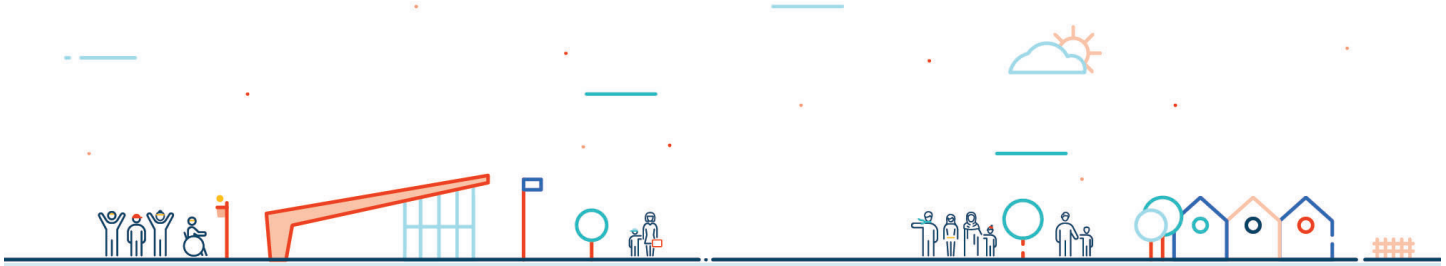
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