*Building Community Resilience through Full Service Schools*

*Community resilience* and community *capacity building* are useful terms to describe approaches to engaging with communities to encourage the employment of perhaps previously underutilised assets and people resources which are believed to be present in all communities, no matter how disadvantaged structurally and economically they may be. But there are cautions too, as by merely taking the presence of assets as givens can lead to unintended consequences such as expectations of development when the size of the problem is too great for the resources which are present, and then leading to blaming the residents for their failure.

Previous programmes have been employed to engage the participation of community members in supporting their local areas, **Reconnect** used an Action Research approach to reengage disengaged youth, **Communities for Children** operates a capacity building approach to providing support for children in disadvantaged communities, and there are several examples of **neighbourhood renewal** programmes from the UK and US to revitalise local communities undergoing structural and economic change.

One of the relatively overlooked possibilities for community capacity building in Australia has been the opportunity to engage in a more concerted manner with schools and the potential they may hold for enhancing community resilience and helping to increase social participation, which in turn holds prospects for building more socially and economically stable and connected communities.

Schools as part of communities has been a focus for many studies in and outside Australia ([Clandfield, 2010](#_ENREF_2); [Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin, 2005](#_ENREF_4); [Dyson, 2008](#_ENREF_5); [Gardner & Jamieson, 2000](#_ENREF_6); [Peebles-Wilkins, 2004](#_ENREF_8); [Richardson, 2009](#_ENREF_9)). The purposes for such a focus has generally been on the specific needs of the children: increased attendance, better behaviour in the classroom, increased engagement with learning and aspiration, as well as encouraging parents to support their children’s educational attachment and progress. Programmes in the school therefore seek to meet these aims through breakfast clubs, counselling services, mentoring etc.

Some of the recognised challenges for encouraging parents, particularly those living in disadvantaged communities, involve the more immediate needs of parents and families, such as increased incomes, access to employment, transport, etc. as well as the likelihood that parents themselves may have had poor experiences of education and a low educational status and therefore need some assistance themselves if they are going to encourage their children. Schools, too, and the teachers may also need some encouragement to welcome and invite parents to participate in the schools in ways that they, the parents, feel comfortable to participate. These two areas of challenges need addressing in different ways: the nature of disadvantage in communities is largely a structural matter, as noted in the Productivity Commission’s report and the AHURI report (cited in the McClure Report, June 2014); while the matter of parent engagement is more localised and can be addressed by schools and within the local community.

Although Full Service Schools (FSS) have worked in important ways to address individual needs for capacity building, the Full Service School model also offers a way to work structurally in order to address disadvantage. FSS usually offer services or access to services (on or off the school site) for parents and children to address some of the circumstances they face – parenting classes for improved responses to children, play groups and 3 year old ‘kindy’ to prepare children for school, child health nurses, mental health services and so on. Some FSS focus on engaging parents as well as child-specific services, and so concentrate on such functional activities as skill development, job preparation through resume writing and computer skills, Certificate courses in bricklaying and other trades, micro business preparation such as bag and jewellery making, etc.; personal and social but purposeful activities such as exercise, cooking, sewing and art classes, etc.; service activities such as volunteering with school needs both in and out of the classroom, such as making materials for teachers, helping mentor children, staffing children activities such as the breakfast clubs, etc.

The FSS model is known by a range of other terms in the UK, Extended, Integrated or Community Schools; in the US as FSS as well as Community Schools, and while its presence is not so well established or widespread in Australia is also known as Full Service schooling and Extended School Hubs. Each FSS operates in slightly different ways, with different programmes and more focus on one area of need than another. For example the FSS model supported by the Federal Government in the early 2000s in Victoria had the main aim of improving school retention among high school students, while the Meadowbank Early Learning Centre in Victoria focussed on the early Years and preparation for schooling. Governments at both State and Federal levels have in the past seen the benefits of supporting these local programmes and especially in their National Partnerships programmes of providing funds directly to schools in disadvantaged areas.

Evaluations of the models vary also according to their purpose. While not specifically mentioning the evaluation framework used, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria contend that ‘best practice in Extended School Hubs:

* mobilises the community to collectively address the issues facing its children and young people in ways that are responsive to its locale
* builds the collective expertise of the school and community
* connects schools and other agencies in new and positive ways
* reframes the role and practice of schools and other agencies
* prompts new systemic ways of supporting and resourcing children and young people’s education and wellbeing. ([DEECD, ND](#_ENREF_3))

Black et al ([2010](#_ENREF_1)) and O’Donoghue & Davies ([c 2011](#_ENREF_7)) note the general inattention to monitoring and evaluating FSS programmes. Black et al (2010) report evidence that (among other more specific education related features) young people’s and family engagement and participation in school is increased, contributing to greater community capacity. O’Donoghue & Davies (c2011) note, that while still in their infancy in the area of study – Western Australia –Extended Service Schools are reported to have positive benefits for parental access to services and building their capacity as well as integrating the school more thoroughly into the local community thereby reinvigorating the neighbourhood. While more concerted evaluations over longer periods of time are needed, initial suggestions are that the FSS model, where it attends to parent and family engagement, can increase connections with others and with the local community, thus addressing one of the measures of community disadvantage, and add to individuals’ own capacity.

There are many possibilities for schools to interact in productive and developmental ways with members of the local community, local agencies and businesses, all of which can assist in strengthening the resilience of the community. While structural disadvantage will require external resources, developing internal resources and building on the assets which exist within each community in a necessary step for communities to be able to work in partnership with both government and business to address what is sometimes deep-seated disadvantage. Consideration could be given to funding programmes that seek to assist schools become community hubs through their extended services provisions.

Something similar to the **Communities for Children** model may be one option. Acknowledging that local communities are themselves most knowledgeable about their circumstances and needs, as well as also already possessing some of the assets and human resources to work towards meeting some of those needs, a model that sought to engage local schools, agencies and businesses in partnership to provide the extended services most useful for their circumstances could benefit the neighbourhoods. A mixture of job training, parent and children social, welfare and educational services, along with supports for social engagement could be coordinated to operate with the school as the community Hub for many of the activities both during the school day and after hours. O’Donoghue & Davies’ ([c 2011, p. 38](#_ENREF_7))) offer a summary of the range and scope of services and programmes to address children’s, parents and the community’s needs that could be incorporated into a FSS. They suggest that each school as centre of their community has connections into the families of those communities. Local agencies have services they provide or could extend to provide into or linked with the school. And local businesses have a natural connection as recipients of trained workers as well as opportunities to provide both sponsorship and advice as to their immediate, short term and longer term staffing needs.

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