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Community in the Classroom

Transforming Secondary Education Through the Power of Local Connections

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Foreword:

'It takes a village to raise a child' is a proverb ascribed to an African background. The intention is to remind society that a child has the best chance of being well-balanced and capable of responding to challenges and opportunities, if they have had the input of a broad range of people and experiences.

The purpose of this, our 10th Narrative, is to highlight the success of the work of Community Hubs Australia in primary schools and to consider whether the premise behind them could be applied in a secondary school context.

Part 1 introduces you to the work of Community Hubs Australia through the voices of the participants. Trialed in 2011 and commencing in full in 2014, there are now nearly 100 hub locations in primary schools, predominantly in areas with large populations of new and recent arrivals. They tailor their services to suit the needs of the parents, aiming to set their families up for success in their transition into Australian society. Programs include early childhood development, English classes, navigating government services and career guidance and support.

Part 2 takes this focus on community inclusion into the secondary school context. In a highly competitive environment, high schools tend to be, in many situations, quite separated from the broader community. There are occasional components of the curriculum that include some outreach such as visits to aged care homes or a research project but it is rare to find collaborative projects on local community issues, parent English classes, well being services, open libraries or career development programs for students and adults.

Our author, John Ross, has undertaken an extensive review of the Community Hubs Australia model and the status of community engagement along these lines in secondary schools. The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute hopes that you will find this a thought-provoking discussion and perhaps lead you to consider how we can improve the high school experience for our diverse population and our local communities. Revisiting our approach to education with a focus on creating well educated, well balanced and capable graduates who feel a part of their community is a very clear and logical approach to strengthening our social cohesion.

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Introduction

In early 2020, with COVID-19 about to invade the world, a two year-old Afghan boy showed up at Woodridge North State School in Brisbane's south. Aarash* arrived with his mother Medina* and older brother Babak*, who was enrolling as a prep student.

Woodridge North is a large school serving one of the most multicultural, fast-growing and socioeconomically mixed regions of Australia. Many of the children do not speak English at home, and quite a few are refugees or children of refugees. The school is a microcosm of their adopted land: a place with plenty of space. Playing fields that seem as big as a golf course sweep downslope from the classrooms and curve around to nudge the school's community hub, where locals young and old come to laugh and learn.

The community hub's leader, Silja McIvor, invited Medina to join the hub's English classes and to bring Aarash to its playgroup. "She arrived at the hub that first time very shy, hardly making eye contact," McIvor says. "Aarash was quite hostile and didn't want to connect with anybody."

Aarash's life to that point had been spent in isolation. He had been born in Brisbane to a housebound mother who spoke almost no English, and a father who spoke little more. They had met in the mountain village where Medina had grown up and completed the equivalent of primary school. The pair had spent only a brief time together as newlyweds before the father returned to Australia, which had granted him asylum some time earlier, to apply for a spouse's visa. Several years later Medina, with little Babak in tow, had made the journey to the strange city of Kabul and onwards to the even stranger country of Australia.

After a few visits to the hub, Medina's sense of seclusion started to dissolve. She attended every playgroup and every English class. "She was feeling more confident and her toddler was starting to enjoy connecting with other people," says McIvor. Even when Covid forced the English classes online and the playgroup into a local park, the pair never missed a session.

"Her improving ability and courage to speak English was quite astounding."

Early 2021 saw the birth of another son, Farzaad*. A few weeks later the family was back at the hub, devouring every program on offer. The baby engaged happily with the other hub participants. Born into a more gregarious household than his older brother, he quickly became everyone's favourite.

But when Medina decided to join a swimming program for parents, depositing the children in a childcare facility at the pool, Aarash didn't take it well. "He had a very strong emotional response to separation from his mother," McIvor explains.

"He went from fright to fight to freeze, becoming physically aggressive and putting himself and others at risk before finally falling asleep."

Medina had to abandon the swimming lessons.

Something similar happened in 2022, when Aarash enrolled in the school's kindergarten. Unable to placate the child, and unable to contact his mother, the kindy director called the hub. "Thankfully, Aarash calmed down in my presence," says McIvor, who accompanied Aarash to kindy every morning for the next few weeks to help him settle. He now feels comfortable there, she says.
Aarash has joined the hub's "prep transition program" as he gears up to begin school in 2024.

"He will probably need some extra support as he will most likely have a trauma-triggered response to the latest change in his life," says McIvor. But notified in advance, his teachers will be ready to ensure he gets the support he needs. In the meantime, "he loves attending kindy and has made some good friends".

Older brother Babak was initially flagged as needing the support of a speech therapist. That is no longer necessary. Babak is a regular at the "learning club"; an initiative run by the hub for school-aged children after school. McIvor says, "he's making great progress with his English", as is his mother, who still attends the hub whenever she can and is quick to share her opinions and a joke. "She tells us about her life in Afghanistan, using the English she has learned since the beginning of 2020," says McIvor.

And little Farzaad? He's the "darling" of the hub that took him into its embrace when he was a few weeks old. "A very happy, chatty toddler who is meeting all his developmental milestones with no trouble," is McIvor's assessment. When he reaches school age, he'll be ready.

* Not their real names

PART I: Community hubs today

"They come in owning the place," says Wollongong Public School Principal Harold Cosier, who established a community hub four years ago. "Pre-schoolers from the hub arrive full of confidence when they start kindergarten. They know the place because our hub's right in the middle of the school.

They've already been in here. They've seen the teachers walking past. They know Evoon [Yacoub], the hub leader. They know me. Compare that to six or seven years ago, when they came in kicking and screaming to this strange place."

Cosier says "runners" – five-year old escapees, a reasonably familiar phenomenon at schools – are now rare at Wollongong. "We'd have to lock gates, monitor the kinders all day. They were so upset and stressed. They wanted to go home."

Deputy Principal, Samantha Neaves, says Wollongong's "Beginning School Well" program was established to address these sorts of issues.

"Non-English-speaking families from our local preschools and within our community bring their four-year-olds who are transitioning into kindergarten the following year. It's a five-week program. Mums come along with the children. The children play, and they learn a little bit about what school life might look like.

"My belief is when kids feel safe here and they feel happy here, learning happens after that."

Neaves says a program of this type wouldn't work in the school's regular teaching and meeting places. "It has to happen in the hub. The mums stay, with Evoon and myself and a couple of kindergarten teachers. They learn how to pack a lunch box; they learn how to make a healthy sandwich; they learn how to make play dough for their kids. And they build connections with one another.

"Those mums have five weeks together. The following week, we go into our kindergarten orientation. Without those five weeks of building connection and relationships and trust, I suspect that those mums would not feel comfortable enough to come to kindergarten orientation. And it's vital for those families to come and learn about school, because when they went to school it was very different to what school looks like now."

Neaves says the hub has become "bolted into" the process of enrolling new children into a school where only about 40 per cent of students are native English-speakers, with the rest sharing some 50 languages. "It's the essential part of the process," she says.

Many families come from overseas for work or to attend the nearby University of Wollongong and show up at the school within days. "Yesterday, I had a Mongolian family who had arrived two days prior, at our front gate wanting to enrol their children," Neaves says. As part of the "enrolment meeting process", she took the family to the hub.

"They've immediately got a connection with the school. They're building connections with the community as well. Some of the new families that I've met over the past couple of weeks are already there, in that hub, meeting the other women and building relationships.

"Something I get really excited about, when I visit the hub, is to see those new families. They're absolutely beaming. I walk through the door and straight away they're saying, 'thank you so much. This is a fabulous place for me to be. I'm making new friends. I'm connecting with the community. My child is safe.' Beautiful."

Birth of the model

Dr Sonja Hood, a social policy expert who also happens to be president of the North Melbourne Football Club, gave a potted history of the community hubs program during a Brisbane celebration to welcome four new schools to the network.

Sonja Hood

While the term "hub" is widely used, the concept supported by Community Hubs Australia – where Hood is CEO – emerged 15 years ago in the northern Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows. "School principals were really concerned about the phenomenon of non-English speaking kids turning up for their first day of school having had no contact with anything," she explained. "They hadn't been to kinder. They hadn't been to playgroup; hadn't been to maternal child health. No speech checks; no hearing checks. Put two of those in a class and it's disruptive; when it's half a class, that's the year gone. The principals knew they had to intervene earlier to fix the problem."

The principals overlooked Victorian jurisdictional protocol of the time, which was that early childhood education was not schools' business, and established playgroups on school sites. "They worked out really quickly that they weren't dealing with a problem of isolated children," Hood said. "They were dealing with a problem of isolated women. And it didn't really matter what their visa category was. It didn't really matter how they'd come here. They were, for one reason or another, isolated.

"They weren't isolated in the way that we might traditionally have understood it, in that they probably connected quite well with people from their own culture. They often had really strong connections back home. Internet lets you do that. But they were really isolated within our community and really isolated from our services. And so the hub model was born."

Peter Shergold, NSW's coordinator general for refugee resettlement, says newly arrived women can face a particularly tough time.

"If there's one group that I worry about amongst recent non-English speaking migrants or refugees, it's mums," says Shergold, a former public service chief who has headed reams of inquiries into school and post-school education since his retirement from government.

"Dads tend to go out and do things, hopefully finding some sort of work. Mums are at home, and they can become very isolated. It is very difficult for them to be integrated. They only meet people in their own community."

Hubs entice these women into society "by stealth", Shergold says. "They're coming along to bring their children. But that's your opportunity to get them in conversational English, or to tell them about vaccination, or how to get a driving licence or get through to Centrelink – all those sorts of things. And they get to meet mums of different backgrounds; not just their own. It is wonderful for the children, but in my view – and this is my personal view – community hubs are particularly valuable for the mums of those children."

Mums' testimonies

Shergold would have found little argument among the mums attending the Brisbane celebration for new community hubs. "I feel like I'm living now," said Udeni, a participant in the hub at Grand Avenue State School in the city's south-western suburb of Forest Lake. "I started living now because of the hub."

Udeni, who had moved to Australia from Sri Lanka a decade earlier, said she spent too much time cooking at home and "shouting and yelling at the kids. When they go to school, I feel very bad about myself – a little bit guilty. And now I've got some mothers to share my experience. They're telling me this and that, and it's really helpful. I started to gain confidence, having friends around."

Rewathy Pathmanathan, who also attends the Grand Avenue State School hub, arrived in Australia in 2016. "I was staying at home with my two kids," she told the launch, fighting back tears. "I was experiencing depression. I went to the hub and I met different types of people. It's helped me really a lot. We're helping each other with learning."

Mari, a Venezuelan who's been in Australia since 2014, told the launch that she had only recently started attending the hub at Watson Road State School in nearby Acacia Ridge. "We've been so grateful to have that place where you can go and meet people from all over the world with so many different circumstances," she said.

"It's been lovely to feel that you can help each other – even if it is just sharing a smile or having a nice conversation. I know what it is like to come to a country not knowing the language, and how hard it can be."

Fellow Watson Road participant Libby, who had been attending the hub for about a year, was unable to attend the Brisbane launch in person. Her written testimonial was read to the audience by Watson Road's community hub leader, Louise Armstrong.

"I found new friends from different cultures and backgrounds, a wonderful mentor in Louise, and a purpose in my life. We are so grateful to have this incredible place in our community where we feel safe, valued and respected, and can find the help we need."

Before she became a regular at the community hub at Zillmere State School in northern Brisbane, mother of 12 Eryn thought she had "learnt all the cooking I could possibly know". Cooking classes are just one of the many activities that lure the Torres Strait Islander to the school.

Until she joined the hub, Eryn told the launch, her main reason for visiting Zillmere had been that "someone's been naughty". Now there are many reasons, and many points of contact.

"Families and children that I wouldn't necessarily have known; I would have gone past them day-to-day and wouldn't even have noticed. Now, through our hub, it's like 'hey, there's Lillian. There's Mrs so-and-so.' There's that connection that when I was a child, we absolutely lived with, but somewhere along the lines it's disconnected. It's wonderful to have that connection back."

Four pillars

The underlying model of community hubs involves four key areas of activity, Hood told the launch. The first is engagement, which can take many forms from mum's clubs and coffee'n'cake mornings to mural painting, Zumba sessions and cooking classes. Newcomers to the hubs are asked things many have "never been asked before", Hood added. This can make hardship less of a solitary experience.

"Earlier this year, we heard about a mum in one of the Brisbane hubs who had gone into hospital. Mums in the hub made food for her when she was recuperating. She'd done three births with no help. She knew no-one. All of a sudden, she's got a community around her."

Early childhood is the second key facet of the hub model. "Playgroup's our bread and butter," Hood told the launch. "Getting kids into that pathway is absolutely critical." Third comes literacy. "For women, that is unashamedly English," Hood said. "You can make a fantastic contribution in Australia with your first language but you're vulnerable if you're not able to understand the language of the country that we live in.

"For children it's literacy in their first language. If mum's teaching you in your first language, your schoolteacher can help you master English. But if you hit school with no literacy at all in your first language, it's really hard to become literate in your second."

The last pillar is pathways. "It's job and skill opportunities," Hood said. "It's volunteering. It's becoming part of a community. It's giving you a reason to turn off the internet, stop watching TV, stop being at home, come out of the house and connect."

Every hub addresses this mix of activities in its own way. "Go into any hub, and you know it's a hub. But you also know the one down the road will look completely different. We were absolutely determined not to be the McDonald's of community delivery and I think we've achieved that."

It's for the community

Adelaide native Chris Riemann has run several Christian schools in his home state of South Australia. He headed the primary section of a non-denominational school for students from early childhood to senior secondary school, and an international school in Switzerland catering to a similar age range.

Riemann deferred retirement to be principal of Playford College, an Islamic school in Adelaide's northern suburb of Elizabeth. He says his friends' eyes light up when he tells them what his community hub – based in a converted house adjoining the five year-old school, acquired by the college in 2020 – does for local mothers.

"Some have lived in the community now for four or five years, and reluctantly go to the shops. Why would you go to the shops if Australians treat you poorly? Or look at you in that way of saying, you don't belong here? There's an element of that in Australian society, as we all know. I think that's part of the story. It's also to know that we're helping mums transition by giving them English. Some of them have limited knowledge about computers apart from playing with their kids on iPads. To teach them to do things like filling out forms; to link them with community facilities – Zeenat [Charoliya], our hub leader, brings Anglicare and UnitingCare into the life of the school and of the hub. All these community groups coming in help mums to consider getting into the workforce. It's raising the expectations and life intentions for our refugee mums in particular. I think that's a beautiful thing.

When I talk to my friends, that's when they get really excited: that the school is doing more than teaching maths and English to primary and secondary kids. It's reaching out, it's making a difference to the lives – one at a time – of these mums."

Riemann is adamant: the hub exists for the welfare of the community, not the school. While the hub might be "an enrolment enticement", Playford has no problem attracting students. Their numbers have increased more than sixfold since the college launched for foundation and primary years in 2017, and started admitting secondary school cohorts two years later.

Nevertheless, the hub playgroup provides a "huge benefit" by making children "more school-ready", Riemann concedes.

"They are socialising; they're spending less time on screens as pre-schoolers. All those social skills of learning to share as three year-olds and four year-olds; to sit and listen as someone reads to them."

Crucially, the children – who all come from "second-language" families – are absorbing these skills in an English-speaking environment. Riemann says that while rudimentary literacy and numeracy skills at such a young age are "not the highest priority in the life of the child", confidence in English can make all the difference.

The hub's services also include a parenting class, run on Thursdays by the college's Farsi-speaking school counsellor. "It's all about mums trying to work out the best way of raising children in Australia," Riemann says.

"They're finding that very helpful. They can just be blatantly honest with each other about their struggles, and get feedback from other mums and the school counsellor. Whether it's around how to put children to bed at night; how to get them up in the morning. What's appropriate food for four year-olds? How do you get kids off screens? They're talking about all these things. Of course, that's going to affect families. It affects us too. It's helping mums do things differently. That's going to help our students in classroom life."

The hub also strengthens and accelerates families' connections to the college. "The mums are now more familiar with the school," Riemann explains. The hub helps alleviate their reluctance to engage because of doubts about their own language skills. It also eases cultural barriers for parents who had "tough" experiences during their own schooling in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, or Pakistan.

"They have this transition through the community hub into school life, and an understanding that the Australian way of doing school is different. They become much more comfortable to come through the door and be involved in the life of the school."

It's for learning, too

Five kilometres from Playford College, the enrolment statistics at Elizabeth Vale Primary School illustrate the challenges in a district rated among the state's most disadvantaged, and where around two-thirds of households speak languages other than English.

Some 30 per cent of the school's 500-odd students are refugees. Sixteen per cent have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, and 3 per cent are under formal care orders. Nine in 10 have undergone at least one "adverse childhood experience" during their short lives, with three-quarters suffering at least three such episodes and one-quarter at least six. Childhood trauma can have lifelong impacts on the brain, as instinctive survival responses override the cognitive functions needed to process information, reflect, understand and learn.

Elizabeth Vale Principal Julie Murphy has a graduate certificate in neuroscience and won a 2020 national teaching fellowship to deepen her understanding of the links between brain physiology and learning. She has reoriented her school around "trauma-informed" practices, introducing tailored learning plans and implementing strategies at the individual, class and whole school level.

While there is dedicated space for Elizabeth Vale's community hub, there are no hard borders between the hub and the school. Hub participants are just as likely to be found pottering in the school's community garden or tinkering shed, loitering on its STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) "veranda" – where some participants teach on a voluntary basis – or contributing to a mosaicking project overseen by a local Aboriginal elder in the school grounds.

Murphy says her hub is a deliberately "fluid" space where school facilities are shared with hub participants, and vice-versa. "We use the gym for yoga; we use the oval for gardening; we use the kitchen for parental cooking classes; we use the STEM veranda for arts and crafts; we use the tinkering shed for woodwork. There are lots of different journeys to engagement. This hub is about diversity, so you have to be diverse in how you do it."

She says every child is part of a family, and every family has a narrative. "Every story has a right to be heard, but it can take time to hear the stories, particularly when they contain stuff that's not easy to talk about. But the more we understand the family, the more we support our mums and our dads, the better our kids will learn."

Murphy says UK research has found that mothers' education is the greatest predictor of the literacy of their 15 year-old children.

"If our mums haven't had access to education due to complex traumas in their past, then part of our job is educating mums, because educating mums actually improves their kids' academic scores. For me, for our school, that is core business."

Murphy is not only concerned about the traumas of the past. Traumas have a habit of replicating. And if parents have no support networks, "problem gets bigger".

"Children can't learn because they're stressed, because their parents are stressed," Murphy explains. "Their house is being sold, or horrible things are happening in the neighbourhood, or their neighbours rang the police on them because of something ridiculous, or there's fighting across the road and the parents are too scared to let their kids go outside. Or they're sick and the hospital sent them home because the emergency department was overflowing, and they don't yet have a connection with a doctor or know how to ring for a locum.

The more we do to support parents through these sorts of issues, the more self-determining they become, and the more successful the kids are. It's not rocket science."

Murphy says her staff regularly visit local parents to listen and learn.

"When I understand child-rearing practices, then I understand the differences that we need to unpack at school. There's lots of children here – more of them than us – so we need to work as a team."

The hub has provided methodologies to ramp up this engagement and financial capacity to employ people to do work that schools aren't funded for. "The hub gives us physical and human resources and a network of support and advice to do it better. It also boosts our authority to do it, because it's part of a national program that's been ratified systematically," says Murphy.

It also provides the settings and the time often needed for meaningful engagement. "We get our parents – particularly our mums – together way more often than we ever did before," Murphy says.

"The stories unpack, and we learn more and more about them. They share something about their homes, or they invite me over to teach me how to cook. Those authentic opportunities to hear stories are so much greater than the times when we used to pop into people's homes because we'd heard that things weren't great."

Connecting

Hub participants share their stories with each other, too, as they meet for craft classes or "coffee and chat" sessions. "They're connecting with different cultures and different people, but they're finding similarities all the time," says Dannielle Tomlinson, community hub leader at St Albans Heights Primary School in north-western Melbourne. "They compare photos. They talk about their cultures; things they miss from their countries, like cultural dress.

"The hub is a safe place to ask questions, including things that might not be politically correct to ask. They've become friends, so they can ask those things. They're happy; their children are at school, and they can come in and learn things themselves. It's not just the children who are learning and growing. Some of our parents didn't get an education as children, so accessing all those classes – you can tell it means something to them."

Murray Branch, principal of Watson Road State School, says he established a hub largely to encourage communication between the different groups in his very diverse Brisbane neighbourhood.

"People who come here tend to stay and communicate with their own communities. They rarely step outside their bubbles, for lack of a better word. The hope when I started a community hub was that those bubbles would be popped. We wanted to support the families. They wouldn't lose their own cultures, their own identities, but they'd be able to integrate successfully into the Australian ways of doing things."

"Community hubs are a very good opportunity for us to strengthen our sense of community and build an inclusive society," says occupational therapist Lauren Gill. As a wellbeing therapist with non-profit organisation Access Community Services, Gill works with community hubs in five schools across the city of Logan between Brisbane and the Gold Coast. "Contemporary Australia is very young," she says. "We have many different cultures, but not a huge sense of collective community. Hubs can be a really nice way to strengthen our social fabric and provide a sense of community where a lot of people are quite isolated."

That includes people leading solitary lives from the Anglo-Australian community. Local mum Celia Thomson was volunteering in the classroom at St Albans Heights and saw a flyer for the playgroup at the school's community hub but was unsure she would "fit in" with the largely Vietnamese clientele. She was invited along anyway by a mother she encountered at another playgroup. "You meet people that are so friendly," Thomson says. "Once you're in, there's all these other things you can try." She joined the Zumba sessions and cooking classes. Then the hub landed funding to employ a casual childminder to look after clients' pre-schoolers during English language lessons, and offered Thomson the role. "I want to get back into work," she says. "This is fantastic." School Principal Effie Sultana says the Zumba and cooking classes are open to everyone. "Community members who have no association with the school whatsoever come and take part in those activities, which is great."

Dannielle Tomlinson

Kristy Edmonds, community hub leader at Wollongong West Public School in NSW, says she used to see a lot of Australian-born mums when she worked at a hub in a socioeconomically disadvantaged region of Victoria. The women had lived hard lives. Some had partners in a nearby prison. "We had a coffee club for them and we just put all the toys out," Edmonds says. "They didn't want to play with their kids; they weren't interested. But they did want to talk about their problems. It was a place where they could vent."

The women were "very poor" and often distrustful of each other, Edmonds says. "It took a lot of work to get the Aussie ladies into the hub."

Once there, they opened up about social issues or problems with alcohol or drugs. Some confided to Edmonds about domestic violence.

The hub also attracted refugees, particularly women from the oppressed Karen ethnic minority group in Myanmar. The Australian women were "quite wary" of outsiders, Edmonds says. "They thought that the other cultures were taking their resources away. Housing was a big issue. We had to dispel a lot of myths about refugees and asylum seekers. Those circles were a bit of consciousness raising; understanding the other culture and why they're here. It was good for everyone." While friendships never formed between members of the two groups, there was a "growing sense of respect and a better understanding of the other" explained Edmonds.

Hubs also help boost foreigners' understanding of the role and behaviour of Australian institutions. "We don't want to generalise, but I'd have to say people from linguistically diverse communities are more likely not to have had positive experience with law enforcement or government agencies," says Georgina Zaineddine, a multicultural community liaison officer with Bankstown Police Area Command in south-western Sydney. "This is commonly due to language, lack of knowledge of our law and experiences they bring from their homeland."

"It's not what you know, it's who you know, and how much dosh you have to bribe them. People are wary of implicating themselves if they speak to someone in authority, even at school. Is community services going to get involved? Are they going to disenroll my kids? There's always that fear."

Zaineddine, an extrovert with an Arabic headscarf and a broad Australian accent, is a familiar sight at the community hub at Chester Hill Public School. The hub allows for the type of engagement that could never happen at a police station – places people usually visit to report a crime or misfortune. "You can't be afforded that opportunity to spend an hour and a half with them," she explains. But the hub humanises the police.

"We come in dressed like anybody else, and they identify with us. They see us at the shopping centre. A number of times I've had people visit me at the station and say: 'you don't remember me, Georgina, but I met you at Chester Hill community hub. I just want to ask you something. Can I come in?' It's a conduit. It's a win-win for everybody involved. It gets our messaging out as an organisation; what the police stand for. And it helps the school build rapport as not just a place that looks after the kids – it looks after the family."

Westmead Public School Principal David Jenkins says officers once turned up with a toddler in tow, half an hour or so after school had finished for the day. A local had found the child on a street corner and phoned the police, who were trying to establish his identity. He had Indian background and spoke almost no English. By this stage, normally, the police would have been called by a panicking parent.

A Westmead staffer found the name of a six year-old child on the school database, phoned his mother and asked if she was missing a younger sibling. It turned out

that the toddler had woken after the mother had left the apartment to collect his older brother and wandered off in the "general direction" of the school. Phoning the police had been "nowhere on the mother's radar", Jenkins says. She lacked that "simple view that the police are there to help you".

Community hubs have a role to play in remoulding such perceptions, says Jenkins, whose predecessor established one at his school in 2014.

"The hub can have police come in for a bit of a sit and chat, to try and break down some of those cultural barriers."

Hubs can break down all sorts of barriers. Silja McIvor, community hub leader at Woodridge North State School in Logan, tells a story of a hub participant – a single mother with a boy – who was affected by domestic violence. The police relocated her to northern Brisbane for her safety.

"Unbeknownst to me, she wanted to come back. She was living in an empty unit with her little boy. She had a bedsheet, a fridge, a stove and a couple of cups. When I went to visit her I found out about that. I sent an email to our staff: have you got things at home that might help this lady? Within two days, we had furnished her whole place. Not just with furniture, but with love."

Safe spaces

Schools have natural advantages as venues for community engagement and intervention. They are places that parents visit routinely. They tend to be within easy reach. They are relaxed spaces which can facilitate relatively informal approaches to things like English classes for adults, allowing time for conversation and relationship-building.

They thrive on face-to-face engagement. They are comparatively unthreatening for people whose backgrounds make them instinctively distrustful of government services. They are "safe spaces" to broach difficult issues like domestic violence. They are culturally acceptable places for domineering spouses who want to keep their partners on tight leashes.

Community hubs help their adult participants – not just mums; also fathers, grandparents and locals with no connection to the host schools – in a myriad of ways. They help clients fill out baffling bureaucratic forms. They link clients to health and social services. They help clients access health care card subsidies. They explain clients' rights as refugees. They demystify features of Australian life that locals treat as assumed knowledge, like public transport smartcards.

They boost the language skills of clients, from refugees with barely a word of English to South Asian professionals who want to be able to talk like the locals. They arrange training and provide clients with job referrals. Not infrequently, they facilitate employment in their host schools or within the hubs themselves.

Hubs provide practical emergency support for clients in distress, such as food boxes or school uniforms for the children. They offer safety education, like first aid and swimming courses.

They orchestrate any number of social, cultural or fitness activities – all, essentially, opportunities for connection.

Louise Armstrong

"I'm a connector," says Louise Armstrong, community hub leader at Watson Road State School in Brisbane.

The future of healthcare?

Health and social services are often based in formal government buildings which can be daunting or difficult for some people to access. In the city of Logan south of Brisbane, service providers come to the community.

Under a "health impact project" run by Access Community Services, with special funding from the Queensland state government, the hubs in five Logan schools function as venues for services including oral health, clinical psychology, music therapy and paediatric care.

Lauren Gill, an occupational therapist who works across the five hubs, says many local families have children with developmental delays, health needs, trauma and other "parenting concerns". But many do not receive support because of "language barriers, transport barriers, financial barriers, stigma around disability and fear or mistrust of services based on prior experiences". Cultural barriers can be the biggest hurdle.

"We frequently get feedback from health services that they just don't see people from the multicultural community in their clinics, and they're quite confused why that is. There are many reasons why families don't engage with that service. We have families who've said they would never go to hospital in their countries of origin for fear of being poisoned by the government. They give birth and take care of all their health issues at home, because they're afraid of the health system."

Another problem is that clients sometimes feel their concerns have been overlooked in mainstream health systems. Gill cites a mother of a child with autism who had knocked himself unconscious by hitting his head on the wall. After a lengthy spell on a waiting list, she managed to secure an appointment with a publicly funded paediatric team, which wanted to focus on developing the child's play skills. "The family and support team's priorities were completely at odds," Gill says.

"She was very afraid for his safety, and she didn't feel she was getting help. She was engaged with me, because I was trying to support her with the issues at hand. Ultimately my role ended up being to support her to re-engage with the service and communicate her primary concerns so they could work together."

Gill says some families can be "quite reserved". They might not open up about parenting or child health issues until they have been visiting the hub for a year or so.

"Getting the child health nurses to come into this space helps families get to know them and build trusting relationships. Then it can be a very gentle warm handover into the service, to go and get a more comprehensive check."

Community hubs could also be a natural setting for these more comprehensive paediatric services, Gill argues. "We have a speech therapist, nurses and an occupational therapist here in the community who already know these families really well," she says.

"Mainstream services could do assessments a lot more effectively, and have better outcomes, if they came out into the community and did it. This could be the future of healthcare."

The future of education?

It could be the future of education, too. Gill tells of a newly arrived family from a war zone. The four year-old child, who spoke no English, was "very angry" following his traumatic upheaval. "His mother said: 'he hates everyone. He hates me. He can't share. He doesn't have any friends.' Gill urged the pair to join the hub's playgroup and arranged for him to attend the school's kindergarten, with support. "We get a lot of separation anxiety from kids who've been through trauma," she explains.

Gill also suggested that the boy repeat kindergarten to allow more time to "get on top" of his emotional turmoil in a play-based environment. "By the time he starts school in 2024, he'll be much better positioned for success. He may have had access to play therapy; speech therapy; an occupational therapist; the National Disability Insurance Scheme if he needs it. We want to support the transition into school so that it's a positive experience."

The children of another family behaved "like a whirlwind" at the hub. "They were fighting, climbing on the tables, just doing whatever they wanted."

Other families had stopped attending, and Gill braced for a "difficult conversation" with the mother. "I had to say, 'we really love having your kids here. We want you and your family to feel safe to come here. But we really need to make sure that everyone in this space feels safe and comfortable. So we're going to have to work together to make that the case.' I was very impressed with her, because that's a difficult thing to hear. But she kept coming, and it didn't take very long after that conversation to get some basic rules established and put consequences in place if the kids weren't listening."

"Had those children turned up at school like that, they would have been at risk of suspensions and exclusion. I see a lot of kids who, for whatever reason, are coming to school very dysregulated and being in lots of trouble. That's not a good way to start school. It's not nice for the parents; it's not nice for the kids. It's not nice for the school. By the time these kids started school – little angels."

Checking in

Sharon Ramunno, community hub coordinator at Sunbury Heights Primary School in Melbourne's northern outskirts, says she visits the families of each transitioning child.

"It gives me an opportunity to meet families out of school, in their own environment – to see if they're struggling and find out what they want to tell you. It means things can be put in place before the child starts. You can have a uniform ready for them, instead of them worrying about how the child's going to look at school. You can have them linked in to CareWorks, which provides food hampers for the families."

Ramunno, who has lived in Sunbury for decades, saw another side to the suburb after joining the hub.

"I realised that so many families were really struggling, whether it was financially or because of drugs or alcohol. It was a real eye-opener for me to see that within our community. Even now, some parents will say, 'we're doing okay'. Sometimes I like to dig a bit deeper."

The transition to school program at Wollongong West Public School's community hub provides an opportunity for a child psychologist to identify "challenges" in the following year's cohort of students. "A professional like this can offer some really solid referrals and advice," says hub leader Kristy Edmonds.

"Some children appear to be suffering some sort of trauma. They're acting out; they don't know how to ask for things. They get very frustrated. They go from zero to high as a kite, running around. And they're going to struggle at school unless they get some early intervention, which can make the biggest difference."

Building capacity

Hubs directly build the capacity of their host schools. They foster multicultural diversity which families often find attractive. This boosts enrolments and brings in more funding. Hubs help smooth families' connections with individual school staff, both teaching and administration. Hubs also offer extra teaching facilities and spaces for meetings or special needs interventions. They can provide schools with additional multilingual staff members.

"Homework clubs" at hubs help students reinforce their learnings from school. Parenting classes often cover similar subject matter, reinforcing concepts that may be distant memories so that parents can help more effectively with homework. English classes likewise boost parent's abilities to help their children with their schoolwork. The benefits can flow both ways.

At St Dominic's Catholic Primary School in Broadmeadows, adult and children's English classes sometimes come together. "Student will read to the parent and parent will read to the student," says community hub coordinator Caroline Menassa.

"It's good practice for the students to be able to read to someone other than their teacher or parent, and also to have adult students able to read to students that are not their children."

Hubs can encourage family support and cooperation with administrative changes. St Albans Heights Primary School relied on the hub when it switched to a paperless school management platform. "It was a huge initiative for the school," says Principal Effie Sultana.

"It means we don't have to print out hundreds of sheets of paper and chase them all up. If there's an excursion, for example, parents no longer have pieces of paper to sign. It's done online instead. Using the hub, we were able to provide information sessions on the new system, and workshops for parents. It's taken a lot of hard work. But for the last excursion, we got a 99 per cent return rate. Initiatives like that would be much more difficult without the support of the hub and the relationship it gives us with parents."

Hubs can also help migrant parents understand aspects of Australian life that may initially seem strange. Menassa says some parents are not accustomed to seeing young children spend nights away from home, so Australian traditions like sleepovers and excursions can make them uncomfortable. But from an Australian perspective, these activities are often about building a sense of independence and sociability in young children. Hubs can help ease migrants' qualms about such practices. "We want our families to be more sociable with other parents and to get to know one another," Menassa observes.

Hubs help overcome other barriers. Some cultures' strict, regimented, even authoritarian conceptualisation of education can sit awkwardly with Australia's more interactive approach. Children from such backgrounds are often anxious about their schoolwork and grades, according to Kimberley Massey, community hub leader at Westmead Public School. "Some children can be quite stressed," she says. But playgroups at the hub give parents a glimpse of a different way.

"They see how important it is for their children to socialise. It really helps having the parents come through the hub before their children start school."

Community hubs also help reinforce the pedagogical importance of things like play and sleep. "In some cultures, including Anglo culture, we can all get a bit lax with our kids and technology," says Kristy Edmonds at Wollongong West Public School.

"We're trying to work on the idea that

sleep is the bedrock of learning and being socially capable. If you've got to pick one thing, you need your sleep. We're kind of banging on about that, and the ladies are listening."

Hubs also reinforce the educational benefits of play among cultures where parents seldom sit down and play with their children, she adds.

But hubs also provide a feedback mechanism explaining why students might be short on sleep. "It could be something as simple as a festival the night before – Eid or something like that," says Dannielle Tomlinson at St Albans Heights Primary School.

"If you don't have that connection to community culture, you can be making all sorts of different assumptions about what's happening with families and children. It is important to know; to be connected. You want to be involved; to share that celebration with them and show you're interested. I think that's very important."

Murray Branch, principal of Watson Rd State School in South Brisbane, says his hub has helped boost participation in parent-teacher interviews from "very minimal" levels to better than one in two. Silja McIvor at nearby Woodridge North State School, who is often asked by parents to translate notes brought home by children, helps make the appointments for parent-teacher interviews. "It means that when they turn up for the interviews, they have an interpreter because they might need it."

Hubs also give parents an opportunity to model education for their children. The hub at Sunbury Heights Primary School arranges adult education classes, such as vocational certificates in education support, for mothers who often find work with their newfound qualifications. "The children see the adults coming in with their textbooks and their pens," says hub coordinator Sharon Ramunno.
"They love that their mum or dad's here, doing a class. I think it makes them feel like they can achieve more."

Hub-based parenting classes have clear spinoffs for schools, according to Georgina Zaineddine, multicultural community liaison officer with Bankstown Police Area Command.

"When you're supporting your children's mental health and wellbeing, and you're parenting the right way, that's going to reflect on them in the classroom. It's going to reflect on how seriously they take their education. It's a domino effect. Equipping the mums with the skills to raise their kids in a more positive manner is definitely going to reflect in the classroom."

Hubs also help give mothers the confidence and wherewithal to "advocate on behalf of their children and themselves", says Edmonds. "Otherwise, they could be lost in the system." She says some cultures are not inclined to question authority, including educational authority. But this allows students to "fall under the radar", socially, emotionally and educationally. If parents cannot advocate for their children and themselves, schools risk not fulfilling their core business, which is to educate and help prepare future adults.

Alternative Parents and Citizens (P&C) association

Social work student Kimberley Massey did not know what to expect when she arrived at Westmead Public School on a university placement.

“I thought I’d be working with children. I didn’t expect to be working with families and the community. I never would have thought that this scenario would be effective for the community or for the school. It makes a difference, such a big difference.”

Now the hub’s full-time coordinator, Massey says community hubs function as parents and citizens associations “for people who don’t understand what the P&C is for”. The P&C model of structured, hierarchical engagement in schools is unfamiliar to many overseas-born parents, who instead seek involvement in the hub.

Kristy Edmonds at Wollongong West says hub participants are often keen to play a role in P&C fundraisers. “They’re happy to help,” she says. “They just don’t want to be on the committee. The P&C doesn’t translate to many cultures. The whole idea of it is fairly alien.”

As school communities grow increasingly diverse, and as Australia’s census reveals a steady decline in volunteering, community hubs offer a means of revitalising community involvement in schooling. “As a point of contact in getting engagement, there was more traction for us in the hub model than the old-fashioned P&C model,” says Westmead principal David Jenkins. He cites the school’s engagement with Sydney Metro, which is building a railway station near the school.

“It’s going to be a hole in the ground for the next three to five years. There’s a whole range of pedestrian safety issues. When Metro comes to the school to talk to me, I bring [hub coordinator] Kimberley to the meeting. She can get a message out to the community that this road’s going to be closed, or you need to be walking this way. She can give a feel for the needs of the community. Meanwhile, Metro is trying to increase the number of women working in construction. That’s a message that Kimberley can take back to the hub.”

Wollongong principal Harold Cosier says his P&C association has “dwindled over the years” as people shoulder more paid work responsibilities. He is consciously bringing the P&C and community hub groups together, but with a “different focus. It’s not about fundraising for the school, although that could remain a side option. It’s about enabling parents to be part of the school. I find that a very big difference.”

Cosier observes a growing mutual awareness between the two groups. During fundraising discussions at a recent P&C meeting, someone raised the idea of a trivia night. “We’ve held them here in the past,” he says. “I said, ‘you do realise that trivia nights are very much a white Anglo concept? If English is your second language, you’re not going to get any enjoyment out of a trivia night because you’re not going to be able to answer much.’ They said, ‘oh yeah – let’s cross that off’.”

Building a village

Cosier says his hub was a “godsend” in a neighbourhood where about three out of five households have home languages that are not English.

“The reality for me was that I couldn’t talk to over half of my school community. I had a significant number of fringe dwellers who I would see in the afternoon at the school gate, and the whole conversation would be hello, smile, nod. That’s not how we want our school to operate. Our hub has given a voice to those 60 per cent of voiceless families. I’m in and out of there as often as I possibly can be.”

The hub helps remove the air of authoritarian aura from the “man in the suit”, Cosier says. “Where I have to have difficult conversations with parents, we’ve already got the relationship. It’s not like it’s the first time they’ve met the principal.

“Our philosophy is that we are building a village. Everyone is welcome in that village. Everyone contributes to that village. And we certainly believe that it takes a village to raise a child. We tell families: we need your input because you know your children better than we do. And we value that knowledge. We will take that into account because that informs us, so that we can make the absolute best decisions that we can, and help your child to thrive and learn.”

PART II: Where to now?

There are close to 100 community hubs across Australia. They are funded by the federal Department of Social Services, state and local governments, the Scanlon Foundation and Community Hubs Australia (CHA).

CHA was established by Scanlon Foundation in 2010 to help Hume City Council expand its nascent hub program for vulnerable migrant women and their children.

Within a year there were nine trial hubs – a number that grew to around 75 on the eve of the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 did not dampen enthusiasm for community hubs, with 94 schools embracing the concept by the end of 2021.

This figure represents about 1 per cent of the almost 10,000 schools across Australia. Most of the hubs are in schools catering only to primary students, and all are in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. To Scanlon CEO Anthea Hancocks, the program's steady growth demonstrates that the hubs fill a need. And it is a need that exists, presumably, in at least some of the 99 per cent of schools that currently lack community hubs.

"The government decided there needed to be more hubs," Hancocks says.

"The fact that there are now nearly 100 of them across Australia shows that they have real value. They help overcome newly arrived people's isolation from a system that is absolutely vital to their sense of belonging and their ability to participate – and their children, and their children's children. That gap doesn't exist only in those schools that have chosen to engage with community hubs; it exists more broadly. How could that gap be filled? What are the social and educational implications of the work that's been done in places such as the hubs?"

The implications ring most loudly, perhaps, for secondary schools. They have been relatively untouched by the program so far. Could community hubs, or a version of them, have a place in high schools?

Hubs in high schools

While most of the facilities supported by Community Hubs Australia are in primary schools, eight are in colleges with secondary school programmes, including six that cater all the way up to year 12.

Different models of community hubs are also reaching into high school. Doveton College in Melbourne's south-east, which caters for students from prep to year 9, has a community hub backed financially by the Colman Education Foundation. The school boasts an early learning centre and offers adult learning programs in English and vocational areas like hospitality, food preparation and classroom support.

The school also has an adult drop-in centre, a "community team" to engage with visitors, a maternal and child health service and consulting suites for visiting clinicians like paediatricians, physiotherapists, counsellors and speech therapists.

"They don't pay us anything," says Doveton Principal Debra Gibson. "We don't pay them anything. But they have a constant stream of clients, which we organise for them. Their day's booked; there are very few no-shows."

Those clients include Doveton school students, who can visit the health services and return to class without any need to leave the school site or take half a day off.

The college also offers free daily after-school activities like robotics, floristry, African drumming, leadership and sports clinics for the soccer-mad students who "don't have enough money to do club sports".

Doveton sometimes runs a "baby college" for expectant mothers, and the adult education classes for those who already have children take place during school hours. "The kids visit mum and their little brothers and sisters when they're at recess and lunch," Gibson says. "And the kids come and see mum and dad graduate. That is a beautiful integration of adult learning and school learning. I don't know how you measure the impact of this, but it's so valuable.

"Our moral purpose is not just for the children; it's for the children and families of Doveton. You cannot do your best work unless you know about every child. And if you want to know every child, and give every child what they need, you have to know their family. The family has to be part of it. You can't just do it with 25 kids sitting in front of you. It's got to be about their families and their lives."

Doveton has become the prototype school for Colman's Our Place initiative – a "holistic place-based approach to supporting the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities by utilising the universal platform of a school," according to the foundation. The model is being rolled out at nine other schools in Melbourne and regional Victoria, including three which teach from foundation to year 12 level.

Where's the evidence?

But Australia is yet to produce a community hub catering exclusively to secondary school students. Could such an approach work? What does the evidence say?

These questions loom large to Professor Janet Clinton, deputy dean of the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education. Clinton is one of the chief investigators on "Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs", a three-year project funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Her team is investigating how to plan, design, govern and manage facilities and infrastructure to enable schools to operate successfully as "more than a school" and foster the development of "resilient and connected communities", the ARC website explains.

Addressing a Melbourne seminar held as part of the project, Clinton said it felt "intuitively sensible" to turn schools into community hubs. "But what does the evidence tell us about the impact? What does it tell us about the merit and worth of such an activity?

"What I know as a researcher in this space is there are some amazing examples of schools as community hubs. We see individuals, teachers, students, communities having an impact. But it's all in pockets. The evidence is quite scattered. Why are we doing this? What's the return on investment for our communities? What's the return on investment for our schools, our teachers and – most importantly – our kids?"

What does the literature say?

Broadly, there is strong evidence of a return on investment from community and parental engagement in schooling, with decades of overseas research identifying positive academic effects. A 1996 study of almost 25,000 US eighth-graders found that students in schools with a high level of parental involvement tended to exhibit better reading achievement, irrespective of whether their own parents' interacted with the schools.

A 1998 analysis of US longitudinal data found that parents' social networks with other parents positively affected their children's mathematics and reading achievement And a 2006 study by Harvard University educational researcher Jennifer Adams found that Chinese children in villages where parents tended to know each other had higher maths scores, on average, than their peers in less connected communities.

A 2012 OECD report cites numerous studies showing that parental engagement in early childhood education and care services enhances their offspring's achievements. They include a 35 year-old longitudinal study in Chicago [https://innovation.umn.edu/cls/] which suggests that parental participation has a "major impact on children's academic success and social development" and is "an effective strategy for reducing the dropout rate".

A 2005 analysis of the Chicago program found that every year of parental involvement increased the chances of children completing high school by 16 per cent. Eighty per cent of students whose parents were involved in the project ended up graduating from high school, compared to 38 per cent of students whose parents did not participate. "The earlier the role of the community in the lives of young children is recognised, the better the chances children have of achieving at school and in life in general," the OECD report notes.

Positive associations between parental involvement and academic achievement have been demonstrated repeatedly in the research literature, although not universally, with some studies finding no significant association and a few even detecting negative effects. A 2010 study by University of Pittsburgh academics found that high parental involvement in elementary school correlated with enhanced social functioning and fewer behavioural problems, but the researchers found little evidence of impacts on academic achievement. Even so, they concluded that "parents continue to wield considerable influence on children's development as children progress through school".

Dr Deborah McKoy, an educational policy specialist at the University of California, Berkeley, says there is overwhelming evidence that parental engagement in schooling is beneficial. She says there is no reason to assume that these effects wane when children reach secondary school, although the nature of parental engagement changes by necessity, as high schools strive to cultivate independence in their students.

But what about hubs?

On the relatively recent phenomenon of community hubs, the evidence base is less solid. A 2021 analysis of the Community Hubs Program, conducted by consultants Deloitte Access Economics, found that the scheme had boosted educational outcomes for children through their participation in playgroups and by fostering parental engagement in early education. Community hubs had also saved principals money by reducing the need for intensive educational support once children reached school age.

But while some schools with community hubs report improvements in their academic indicators, they cannot necessarily credit the hubs, which have often coincided with other reforms. Lachlan Yeates, principal of Cranbourne Primary School in south-eastern Melbourne, has seen no shortage of "positive impacts" since his hub began operating in 2021. The school's year 5 results in NAPLAN, the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy, are at their highest in a decade.

Yeates says prep students are now reading more effectively after one term than the previous cohort was after an entire year. "Anecdotally, our parents, staff and students are more positive about the school than they were previously. And our enrolments have picked up for the first time in six years."

But he says it is difficult to say how much of these benefits can be attributed to the community hub, whose introduction coincided with a multitude of "improvement measures" including a new instructional model, positive behaviour and student leadership programs, a strategy to bolster attendance and new approaches to curriculum planning. "The hub is really important to our school, but it is only one part of our school improvement journey," Yeates observes.

America's community schools

However, the overseas evidence base for community hub-style approaches is ballooning. The US in particular has ramped up its embrace of "community schools" – a widely applied term for schools that function as both educational institutions and centres of community life. These schools serve the students, and often also their families and surrounding communities, by providing access to healthcare, mentoring, expanded learning programs and adult education.

Community schools come in many shapes, sizes and forms, spanning all levels of US schooling from elementary to high school. A 2015 study found around 5,000 such schools in more than 150 US communities serving some 2 million students. While some schools have unilaterally transformed themselves into community schools, increasingly entire school districts are adopting the model.

The largest to date is New York City. Soon after Bill de Blasio became mayor in 2014, $52 million was earmarked to transform 40 "high needs" schools into community schools offering services including mental health support, homework help and family counselling.

New York's community schools also provide assistance for parents on-site or nearby, with the services at each school tailored to local needs. But they have common characteristics, integrating youth development across their academic programs and providing additional mental health, medical and social services. Expanded learning time, family and community engagement and collaborative leadership are also common features.

By 2020, there were 267 community schools across New York City's five boroughs. An evaluation report released that year by the Rand Corporation think tank, covering the 2017–18 school year, gave community schools the thumbs up on most metrics. We did see a tremendous amount of promise for the program, particularly in the younger grades," lead author William Johnston told The Washington Post.

The results for older students were encouraging too, with the study finding a positive impact on credit accumulation for high school students across all three years of the study. It also found a positive impact on timely grade progression in all three years of the study, and on high school graduation rates for two of those three years. Student attendance improved for students in all grades across all three years.

"The jury is in – community schools work," de Blasio said.

"We have been on a mission to no longer let zip code determine academic success, and community schools are one way we are delivering on that promise. From supporting students with in-school mental health services, to homework help and dental check-ups, these schools improve academic outcomes and cater to the unique needs of every student."

The analysis found that community schools had produced only marginal improvements in average test scores, and only at elementary and middle school level. And while the program was credited with reducing disciplinary incidents, this also applied only to elementary and middle school students. With these results stemming from a program that was just three years old at the time of the analysis, observers are hungry for more data.

And they will get it, after California committed US$4.1 billion to convert hundreds of schools in impoverished neighbourhoods into community schools sharing many of the features of their New York counterparts.

"This is a pivotal moment for California education," a Learning Policy Institute brief noted. "The California Community

Schools Partnership Program funding, along with additional federal and state investments, has the capacity to transform schools into student and family-centred community hubs that provide a whole child education."

The evidence is coming

Deborah McKoy at UC Berkeley says US research into community-oriented schooling is "starting to catch up" with policymakers' appetite for it. "I have been doing work at the intersection of schools and communities for nearly two decades and can confidently say the winds seem to be changing," says McKoy, founding executive director of the Center for Cities and Schools at UC Berkeley's Institute of Urban and Regional Development.

She says California's "enormous investment" in community schools has focussed researchers' attention on a topic that has been hamstrung by a lack of longitudinal studies. The multibillion-dollar funding injection is generating both a solid base of activity to analyse and a need for accountability. "Researchers are getting more consistent with what they're looking at, in terms of longer-term outcomes."

Research is important, McKoy says, to track whether the money plunged into community school partnerships leads to permanent change. The US$4.1 billion committed in 2021 and 2022, drawn from COVID-19 recovery funding, is flowing over a seven-year timeframe. "It's a unique moment in time, which will not last forever."

She says the surprise generated by the scale of the investment is "almost painful" to observe. "It's the art of common sense, making sure that kids have the quality-of-life services they need to succeed in school. The community school movement has been very focused on augmenting what happens in classrooms, around mental health or eyeglasses or dental support or workforce counselling. Those things are essential. We can't pretend they're on a level playing field if they don't have the health or social resources that they need."

Missing a beat

Nevertheless, McKoy fears that many community schools are not living up to their full promise by failing to recognise community as “a powerful context for learning, and not just service delivery”. Young people can be “active agents and problem solvers within the community”, she explains. This helps to foster critical thinking and “make learning meaningful and relevant”.

And while community schools are framed as a response to poverty, McKoy believes they have an important role to play in more affluent neighbourhoods. Students in these areas may have less need for health or social services, but community schools’ contributions “on the learning side” can be just as “powerful” – especially in helping them develop empathy and compassion.

That view is shared by Justine Mackie, who began developing something akin to a community hub in one of Melbourne’s leafiest and most affluent suburbs. As principal of Ivanhoe East Public School, Mackie saw a need to overhaul the nature of engagement with local parents after discovering that the school’s vibrant weekend “community buzz” was in fact limited to a select handful.

“There were people everywhere. There were people using the sporting facilities, there were families congregating, there were people connecting. But I quickly discovered that what I thought was a space owned by the whole community was actually owned by a few. If you were a member of the basketball club, it was your place. If you were a part of one of those social groups, it was your space. But what if you didn’t fit into either of those groups?

“We do school really well, but do we do community as well? The tribes that I’m talking about, which clique you were in, had an impact on learning. There was exclusion. There were values that didn’t necessarily correlate with what, as a school, we were talking about. They weren’t the actions and behaviours that we expected.”

That culture is now changing, Mackie says. “When we’re talking about our community it is our community, and it doesn’t have to look one particular way. It is a welcoming place that acknowledges difference, where before it assumed that everybody was the same.” The change extended to students in the classroom, she adds. “Rather than only connecting with the people they played sport with on the weekend, they were making connections with children that they hadn’t spoken to before.

“What we’re talking about is that relationships matter, and you can’t do the rest of it without them. The relationships that happen in the classroom between teachers and their students, the relationships between students, between families – it is everything. With the relationship comes the learning.”

Reciprocal engagement

McKoy cautions against a reactive approach to schools' engagement with community, particularly at secondary school level. While schools must be prepared to welcome community into their bosom, they must be equally prepared to go out and engage.

Her centre at Berkeley has two decades' experience in facilitating schools' outreach into their communities. Under its "Y-PLAN" initiative, groups of students from secondary and even elementary schools develop concrete proposals to make their towns and cities "more just and joyful".

In what McKoy describes as a pedagogy rather than a program, students have researched and refined strategies for things like supporting homeless youth, boosting public transport patronage, redesigning major roadways, preventing pedestrian fatalities and reducing incarceration rates. McKoy says there is no significant difference between community coming into schools and schools going out into the community. "I would see it as reciprocal," she says.

"There's no greater connector to schools than young people being engaged in their community. Very often, the first time parents even come to school is to watch the kids get engaged in that way. Seeing engagement from a student's perspective can really increase parental engagement. I've observed that a lot over the 20 years of the scheme."

Just as Australia's community hubs were developed primarily to help migrant families, McKoy says migrants often gain the most from Y-PLAN.

"They're given this chance to engage in deep thinking about the communities that they came from and where they are now. It takes them from a deficit model of what they don't know to an asset-driven model of all the things they can contribute." The initiative "flips a switch" for migrant parents who tend to come to school because "the kids aren't doing well" or they don't understand how the system works. "All of a sudden they're assets and there's good things happening. It's very hard to be always asking for help. Imagine the change when all of a sudden your sixth grader is being asked to come and help solve problems.

"A lot of newcomers don't feel connection to a place. But when they engage in problem solving about their community, they see themselves as powerful learners – capable of doing research, being active, strong in writing. If you get a sense of purpose, it's just transformative. Our schools don't do that enough – especially with populations that are told that maybe they don't belong."

But is it core business?

Critics say ideas like these are diverting schools from their core business. NSW One Nation MP Mark Latham, a former federal Labor leader, blames “new-age ideological frolics” for the state’s declining performance in the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests.

Visiting schools in his capacity as chair of the NSW Legislative Council’s education committee, Latham was struck by the “wide variation in institutional purpose”.

In a 2020 report he acknowledged that schools differed as widely as the communities they served. “But the fluctuations across the system are now huge. Some schools are more like community health clinics or social work laboratories. Others resemble pastoral care centres, with a greater emphasis on ‘wellbeing’ than academic achievement.

“As schools have been expected to do more in non-scholarly areas of responsibility, their institutional focus has scattered. High-performing schools still tightly concentrate on exam results but this is no longer a given across the system.”

Latham says he ended some visits wondering to himself: “can we still call this a school?”. With little public comment or debate, he says, the core purpose of “large parts” of the school system has been transformed.

“Not surprisingly, over the past 20 years, this trend has coincided with the deterioration in NSW education results. If students spend less time developing basic skills and deep subject knowledge, how can they be expected to compete with Asian nations that emphasise nothing else?”

Tensions

Associate Professor Ian McShane, a senior research fellow at RMIT University's Centre for Urban Research, agrees that such trends should be debated. "Is this really schools' core business?" asks McShane, who with Janet Clinton is a chief investigator on the Building Connections research project. "Isn't the business of schools to be educating children?

"We have an existing shortage of teachers globally. In Australia, teachers have legitimate complaints about administrative burden, extra demands, crowded curriculum. They've been the subject of educational cultural wars."

Whether they should add to all this by taking on the responsibilities associated with community hubs is an "entirely legitimate set of questions that I think should be asked and answered", McShane says.

Problems also emerge when schools are transformed into community facilities by, for example, opening up their libraries for general public use. "Adults who have had a poor school experience might say, 'why should I have to go back to school to go to the public library?'," McShane observes.

Such arrangements introduce conflicts between the "open ethos" of public community facilities and the "more secure environment" of schools which carry responsibility for children's safety and welfare.

McShane cites the story of a student, an avid reader, who had been suspended from his school over a behavioural incident and decided to spend time in the library that the school shared with its local community. "The principal came in and said, 'you're suspended, you're out'. In that instance, is the child a citizen or a school student subject to the jurisdiction of the principle? That might be an extreme example, but it does illustrate the potential tensions."

Practitioners' doubts

What do community hub practitioners think of a broadening out of their program, particularly into high schools? Some are sceptical. "This model works really well in primary schools because a lot of the mums are at home with their little ones," says Silja McIvor, community hub leader at Woodridge North State School.

"They're isolated and they need somewhere to go. Coming to the playgroup is such an easy step. They drop off their kids in prep, or in grade one or two, and then they come here. I think you wouldn't get the same engagement at high school. As a parent myself, when my kids went to primary school, I was ready to help out in the school and do whatever. But when children reach high school age, a lot of parents take the opportunity to go out and get some paid work."

Caroline Menassa, community hub coordinator at St Dominic's Catholic Primary School in Broadmeadows, points out that secondary schools are often located further away from where families live. She says some participants already travel quite a distance to attend her hub. Would they go the extra mile to visit a hub in high school? "I'm not sure."

Former chief public servant Peter Shergold says that by the time most students reach secondary age, they're making their own way to school. "The advantage of primary schools is that parents nearly always take them." This creates an opportunity to engage the parents, Shergold notes.

"'Just stay on for half an hour, or arrive half an hour early when you come here to collect your children.' It's much easier to build in."

And then there is the embarrassment factor. The last thing most high school students want is to be seen with their parents. "They're worried about what their friends are going to say," observes Sharon Ramunno, community hub coordinator at Sunbury Heights Primary School. Wollongong Public School Principal Harold Cosier says that when he was a high school student, his father was P&C president. "It was cool for about 10 minutes," Cosier reflects. "Every week, someone would come up and say, 'your dad's in the office'."

The reverse can also apply, Elizabeth Vale Primary School principal Julie Murphy suggests.

"I don't know that families would feel as comfortable walking around hundreds of teenagers."

She says that high schools tend to have fewer parents and community members on site than primary schools, largely because students come by themselves.

"And secondary schools always tend to be bigger than primary schools, which means that you don't get that same level of nurturing connection, because there are just so many relationships to have. There are reasons about how we structure high schools that make it a very different relationship."

Filling a need

Nevertheless, Murphy says the absence of community hubs in high schools may be a lost opportunity. While it is important for children to "grow up and start being more independent", hubs could help secondary school staff understand "why a child's behaving in a certain way. Sometimes we find that the kids are late or aren't coming to school because mum or dad's got a disability. They don't know they can get support from other people, so they rely on their children. In high school, sometimes there's a missed opportunity to get to know the narrative of a family."

Menassa says migrant parents of high school students have the same basic needs as migrants with younger children, such as help with filling out forms for Centrelink and Medicare.

"If we have those kinds of services in a high school setting, parents will start coming. It's going to take time to build that trust, but perhaps if you link the primary hub with the high school hub, they'll see the connection and say: 'May-be we can still go to the high school and learn English. Maybe we can do computer classes or digital technology or a cooking class'."

She says the mental health needs of secondary school families are greater in some ways, with the elevated homework demands putting pressure not only on students but also their parents – particularly those with limited English.

"The parents often can't help their children because they don't understand the work. Having homework clubs at high schools could make a lot of difference. "I see a lot of families who can't communicate together anymore, because the child loses their cultural language and the parents still don't know how to speak English. That's really sad – especially when grandparents are involved."

Community hubs can also bolster schools' ranks of interpreters, which can be helpful when it comes to parent-teacher interviews. Schools usually have access to translators, but – particularly at high school – families often rely on their children to translate. And the children do not necessarily translate everything. Having extra language skills on tap can help ensure that parents do not receive selective versions of the teachers' feedback.

Sultana says communication and language barriers become "more complicated" at secondary school, leaving parents increasingly isolated.

"With high school students, you've got to rely on your kids for information."

She says that as the places where most families have their first contact with the Australian education system, primary schools "make sense" as community hub hosts. But the need does not suddenly end once a student progresses to high school, she argues.

"To have the hubs as an established idea, with processes and procedures in place, rather than reinventing something else – that would be really supportive."

Dannielle Tomlinson, community hub leader at St Albans Heights Primary Schools says some parents still come to her hub despite the children no longer attending the school, and many say 'we're going to miss you guys'.

Ramunno says school students are largely left to their own devices once they reach their teens.

"The way the world's going, there's a need to have support for these kids. We do the foundation part at our community hub, but what happens when they get to high school? You have welfare officers, but to have a space where you can connect the families too so they feel included – it would take a while, perhaps, because of the ages of the children. But I think the families would be eager to come in."

Kimberley Massey, community hub leader at Westmead Public School, says parents have greater scope for employment as their offspring reach high school age and require less care. “The children are old enough to come home from school and look after themselves,” she says.

Kimberley Massey

“So the parents are no longer restricted to working during school hours. It’s so hard to find work within those hours.” Westmead principal David Jenkins agrees that employment would be a natural focus for high school-based community hubs. He says it can take some time for migrant parents with young children to secure jobs worthy of their skills, particularly if they have had to retrain because their overseas-acquired qualifications are not recognised in Australia.

“The idea is to help them get work that suits their skill sets, possibly at a significantly lower level than they have had in the past, but allowing them to climb the ladder reasonably rapidly because they already have those skills. That would work in a secondary school environment.

“So would simple empowering things, such as the swimming lessons our hub ran a few years ago. Some of our parents had never learned to swim. I think if it’s in the right setting with the right people, it’s a bloody brilliant idea.”

It's all about connection

Practitioners say high schools themselves, as well as local families, would reap benefits from hosting community hubs.

"We know that parents' interaction with school wanes as the kids get older," says Sultana.

"As a parent of high school kids myself, I know less and less about what's happening as they move up through school. The kids certainly don't tell you. For families from migrant backgrounds, it would be considerably harder. Having that connection so that they know what's going on, and can support their children at home, would be amazing."

Murphy says community hubs at high schools could help foster parental engagement from the outset, by putting a more positive spin on the initial interactions.

"The moment you walk into a school, how you're greeted at the front desk determines how you feel about your own sense of belonging and welcomeness. And if the first interaction you have with school is a negative one – perhaps because your kid's sick or injured – it sort of sets the scene."

She says that with so many students, secondary schools spend much of their time putting out fires. Hubs have the freedom to engineer more positive interactions.

Menassa says secondary schools struggle to achieve parental involvement, and hubs could help particularly by engaging with first-time parents of high schoolers. The mothers and fathers of year 7 students could, in time, become "parent coaches" who foster other parents' involvement.

"There's a ripple effect," Menassa says. "Parents who have been visiting the hub and engaging with the school for six years or so end up leaving. But they've already befriended newcomers and welcomed them to the hub."

Wollongong Public School Principal Harold Cosier believes some of his secondary school counterparts would "jump" at the opportunity to host community hubs.

"How do we maintain this connection we have with our group of parents? I think there's a need for that communication to continue. They're very much part of our community and they identify as being part of Wollongong Public. I know my secondary school colleagues would really value it if they could carry that sense of connection over."

Cycle of superfluity

RMIT University's Ian McShane says community hubs can advance the core business of any school. They promote a "much more satisfactory form of engagement" than the "formal governance role" assumed by parents and citizens associations. Hubs foster an urban and social environment that can facilitate "active transport", such as students walking to school in groups, with all the attendant health benefits.

McShane says there is also considerable anecdotal evidence that community presence in schools helps prevent vandalism and arson because the "sense of community ownership" is a more effective shield than any fence. Community hubs can also insulate schools from demographic troughs by arming them with multiple purposes.

McShane says that when local populations of children decline, education departments often come under pressure to sell off school sites and "consolidate elsewhere".

Victoria's Kennett government closed over 350 schools in the 1990s, many of them in inner city areas that have since clamoured for new schools to be built as parents embraced urban lifestyles.

McShane says the presence of community hubs or shared community facilities would have made it harder for the government to jettison the schools, ultimately saving it and the community considerable heartache.

"We think too much about schools as being for the compulsory years of schooling," he says.

"We should think about schools as part of lifelong learning institutions in neighbourhoods, so that they can cope better with demographic shift. There may not be a lot of kids in a school, but there might be other educational or community service needs. Those school facilities, if they're adaptable enough, may be able to be mobilised rather than just sell them off and go through this cycle."

McShane says authorities should pay more attention to the "educational cycle in neighbourhoods" rather than instinctively closing schools and disposing of public land.

"I don't think we've had that conversation anywhere near to the depth that we should."

Conclusion

Reinventing education

Schools – and community hubs in particular – came to the fore at the height of the pandemic, becoming vital hubs for disseminating important information about the virus and associated risks.

"Covid-19 has put education in a challenging place," Columbia University educational economist Radhika Iyengar wrote in the journal Prospects, "Education needs to reinvent itself. Schools should build on the momentum [and become] more community resourced."

Clinton says schooling is at a crossroads.

"Particularly in relation to Covid, schools have been at the front of communities. Does that continue? Or do we go back to the norm?"

McShane wants to break away from the norm of jurisdictional silos. "Why have a school empty on weekends and during term holidays?" he asks. "And why have a council duplicate facilities that, if they were combined, might be better used?"

Libraries are an obvious example of these "natural synergies", McShane argues, particularly in regional centres whose cash-strapped local governments "would never have been able to afford the library facility that they have been able to provide through a partnership with the school".

He says space is at a premium in areas like inner-city Melbourne, where the government has been planning, building or upgrading 10 schools to compensate for the Kennett-era selloffs. They are logical places to host new recreational and community service facilities, giving locals access to services they may otherwise lack.

"That arrangement, when it works well, tends to break down a real jurisdictional barrier between state provision of education and local government provision of community services," McShane says. This jurisdictional tussle is a longstanding problem in Australia, pitting a "relatively weak, fiscally limited" local government sector against a state educational sector that focuses exclusively on schooling – oblivious to the wider community's needs.

"There needs to be much closer nexus between urban planning and educational planning focused on schooling and wellbeing of the child. That goes to things such as walkability, liveability, student safety, student agency. Building less car-dependent cities; enabling affordable housing so that teachers don't live an hour away from the school, particularly if schools are going to operate in a more extended hour setting. Urban planning and educational planning have largely been separate enterprises. I just don't think we can afford to continue that.

"Such considerations are taking on new urgency as bushfires and floods saddle schools with disaster refuge and response roles that most have neither planned nor prepared for", McShane says.

Schools have become vital resources for communities confronting ever more frightening disruptions. "We have to think about the challenges in front of us in the 21st century," McShane says.

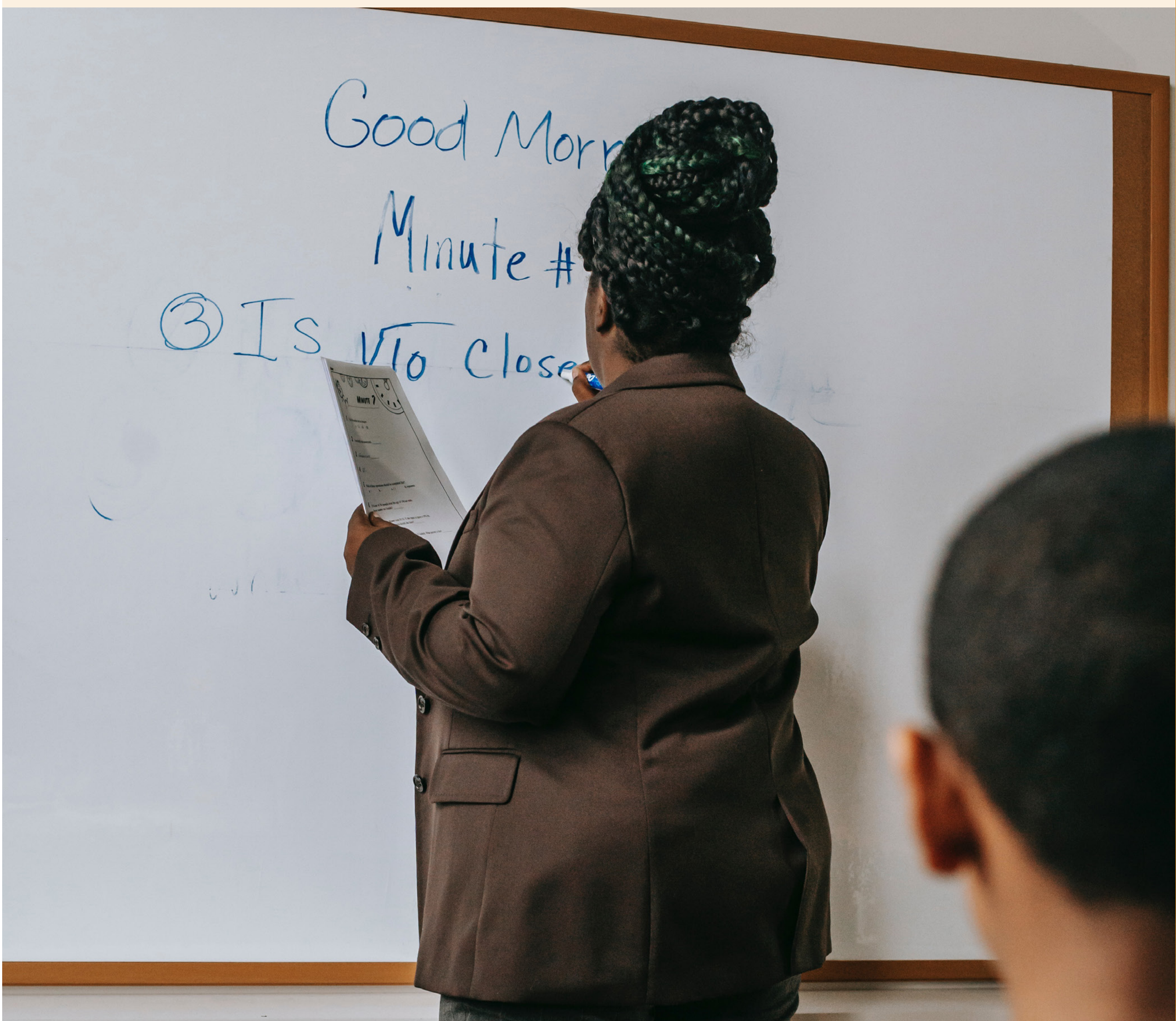
"Having two levels of government that just do their own thing in the one urban setting – those days should be gone."

Recommendations

1. Undertake a formal assessment of community hubs and similar facilities that exist in secondary schools.

2. Recognise that community hubs in secondary schools have a community development focus which in turn will strengthen academic outcomes – and they should be resourced, funded and evaluated accordingly.

3. Draw on learnings from the community hubs model to expand the thinking of the role of schools in creating stronger communities, and in turn of communities in creating stronger schools.



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