

Belinda Ryan (Our Lady of Rosary, Kyneton)

We had a school review in 2005 and that identified that the community connection was an area of need across the 5 learning spheres. So I guess that was the beginning in 2005 when we started to look at where we were in terms of connection with the community.

We then looked at it as part of the whole student wellbeing CEO plan, where it fitted within our school, and I guess we were very mindful that we didn't want to take on board this new initiative, this new program without thoroughly researching whether it fitted into what our school needed and the direction our school was headed.

The SACSC audit we felt was an opportunity to assist staff identify what's working well but also areas that needed strengthening and how we can set some goals.

So what do we hope to get out of being involved in the project? There are 5 key points:-

- increased school connectedness with a great number of families
- closer links with community organisations
- improved learning outcomes, and I'm excited to hear something of what's been happening here over your time in SACSC
- increased staff awareness of the importance of bringing in community connections as an integral part of the curriculum
- establish some clear goals and strategies for the future

Helen Smith (St Michael's School, North Melbourne)

We set school goals each year for staff, and there are personal goals on community and partnership. One of my personal goals was to know the names of the parents when they come to our school, so we weren't calling them Mihn's mum or Tran's dad. We actually knew the parents and called them by name and went out into the yard to speak to them and welcome them into our community so that they were developing a positive relationship with us and we weren't just going up to meet them with "I want to see you" and they think their child's in trouble or "we want you to come on an excursion". We were only speaking to them when we needed them as opposed to actually building on positive relationships.

Angela De Francesco (St Brendan's School, Flemington)

We're not re-inventing the wheel, we're not starting from scratch; we're working with what you're already doing. And without that broad aim I don't think this project would have gone half as well as it has. It's only because we've been able to enhance what we've already got in place that it's pretty much taken on full-speed.

Di Taranto (St Mary's School, Dandenong)

All four schools have their own individual goals and a lot of those are very similar. Melva's school and my school both established a multicultural garden in the last year, so we've been able to share experiences with that.

We had found that a lot of our kids were coming to school with no kindergarten or experience of playgroup. Now I have the names of every playgroup, every director of every kindergarten and playgroup in the area and I can physically take families to them or give them phone numbers.

Anthony Drill (St Thomas Aquinas School, Norlane)

A lot of money and a lot of effort is being pumped into Norlane and Corio through state government, through *Neighbourhood Renewal*, through local government; they've devoted a lot of time of time and energy to the northern part of Geelong and that's where we sit, just to try and build community again within the local area. They have a lot of festivals that they run, they involve a lot of community groups coming out of the neighbourhood houses in those areas.

So the goals that we've set; we've worked together but we've worked fairly separately I suppose in what we're doing. But one of our goals was very much building connectedness of families with the school for both of us and connecting us with community groups.

First thing was to really try and establish what community groups were out there that were going to be able to help us. The first year I spent a lot of time just checking in with different people around and the six months that I spent talking to people really has paid off in the next couple of years because we've been able to join with a lot of groups that are out there doing similar things in our community.

Paul Mulins (St Peter's School, Clayton)

I suppose the goals really came from the aim, as Nigel said, to really build partnership with our families because they do struggle to really become involved or are reluctant to be a part of the school; even to come into the school is an effort for a lot of our families. Obviously for our students to vary their curriculum experiences or hands-on experiences, as Nigel was saying. That whole notion of sustainability has become such a big thing now with the awareness of drought and how vulnerable we are in Australia, and I suppose from that a sense of stewardship. A lot of our kids had no idea where their food came from; it comes from the supermarket or out of a packet I suppose, so that's developed their awareness there.

We've been able to establish a parent vegetable garden where parents can come in over the weekend and tinker and play around. It started off slowly but we've got probably 3 or 4 families at the moment and we're hoping to get more. So that's a big thing for them to even do that. Another big thing is empowering the students. That's been really important, and not only with their knowledge base but we've started up an environmental group that was purely voluntary and we've got 16 kids involved in that and they do things from welcoming visitors... we're starting to get quite a few people coming in who are interested in the project. So those kids now are the best ambassadors for the whole thing, for the school, for the program and so on.

John Faulkner (St Timothy's School, Vermont)

Our brief today was to talk about sustainability, because we've been doing many of the things that we've heard about today which are fantastic; we've actually done those sorts of things and I suppose the challenge for us now is how do you keep that initial enthusiasm going.

I think when you're in a cluster, and that's why I have great respect for the schools that are going alone; it's much harder to sustain it when you're on your own. Having the three schools together, we sort of keep one another enthused, keep one another honest.

We think that's been one of the strengths of the SACSC program; that the clusters keep you going and that they're not too big. Three is a really good number because it's easy to get together. If your clusters were bigger you'd never get everybody together, you're always losing one for whatever reason.

One of the other things is also that because we're three schools under 200 that some of the activities we've discussed or we've taken on board have been more cost-effective when you're dealing with three schools.

In our little cluster we choose what's important to us and we do it the way that we want to do it. We're only answerable to ourselves. So that's one of the great strengths of it also, that there are no expectations.

Of course the commitment by school leaders as in ourselves is really essential because the program won't work if you've got a staff member or a group of staff who think this is really important if the school leadership doesn't.

Noela Hyams (St Augustine's School, Frankston)

One of the big learnings we had is the way that we got to our families was through the kids, and it was most important that... we could put on the best thing for parents, put food on, put wine on... they didn't come. An invitation to the parents individually, not in the newsletter because they don't read the newsletter, providing babysitting if they need it. We always have raffle prizes, door prizes, incentives for the kids, involve their kids in some ways, whether it's the kids putting on a performance or showing some work, but getting them in.

Christine Bellert (St Anne's School, Seaford)

... because student wellbeing and connectedness with your parents is so broad and so deep that you need to not be operating on one level but on multitudes of levels, and SACSC has really produced almost like an ongoing ripple effect of what can we do now. We've had two main focuses in that we've tried to build connectedness of families in order to help kids' learning, but also to develop the children's physical good health with a health lifestyle and develop an umbrella of healthy minds healthy bodies.

... because they see the difference it's making to the parents coming into their classroom and wanting to talk to them about anything now, not just about their child but about anything. They see the fact that we now have dads in the school that were never there before. This year we have three dads, two new parents on our advisory board and that's really working well. That's also a forum for us to have conversations about healthy eating, healthy lifestyle etc. But they feel that they're owning their part of the school and we never had that before. So if we put on events it's a lot easier to have them come.

Trish Taylor (St Joseph's School, Collingwood)

At the cluster level our very first initiative was to look at connecting families with community, and we formed a partnership with the City of Yarra at that time with Lesley's help. We actually had a community liaison officer from the City of Yarra who worked with our schools, with our parents and introduced our parents to a range of services that were available and introduced school staff to the range of services available. From that we have really focussed as individual schools but also as a cluster on the development of strategic community partnerships because there are so many issues that impact on our schools, staff cannot be expected to have the expertise to deal with the range of issue that come about. But we need to know who can help.

If you're setting up partnerships and setting up links you really need to nurture them. You need to spend a lot of time and probably the people in here are the coordinators of what we're talking about. You need to spend the time nurturing the relationship and I think that is really the key to a lot of the sustainability with this SACSC project and its relationship not only with outside agencies and groups but also with your parents, your staff, with everybody. I think 'relationship' is a key word there.

Grace Garreffa (St Brigid's School, Fitzroy North)

As John had said previously, the importance of the commitment of leadership is great and also the commitment of the whole staff to the belief and understandings behind the premise of Schools as Core Social Centres. So that's really really important. Incorporating the planning for wellbeing from prevention to intervention, not just looking at activities to promote wellbeing but what are we doing, what are we trying to prevent, what do we do when that hasn't worked and we have to intervene.

.. but also the collegial support outside of the school; the benefits for principal wellbeing... the three principals meet often to talk about what we're doing as a cluster...

We are Schools as Core Social Centres. It is totally embedded in our practice after five years. It is just what we do. Using the School Improvement Framework... definitely Student Wellbeing and School Community are the two areas that are most obvious, but there are elements of wellbeing that are in all of the spheres. And of course using

the goal setting targets and defining strategies in order to meet those goals are all part of what we're doing anyway, so it all fits into the School Improvement Framework.