

Insights to inform school practice

Education Improvement Branch
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School reviews in Queensland provide powerful insights into school practice. With every state school and centre reviewed by the Education Improvement Branch every four years, reviews are an opportunity to consider changes in practice over time and to identify areas for continuous improvement across the system.

Building pathways to success through powerful partnerships

The extraordinary challenges faced by schools in 2020 have highlighted the integral role that parents and families play in their child's education.

This year, reviews conducted in Queensland state schools have showcased ways that schools are building a wide range of partnerships, reaching beyond the boundaries of their school gates to connect with their local communities.

From school reviews conducted in Queensland state schools so far in 2020, this paper explores the ninth domain of the *National School Improvement Tool*: school–community partnerships. It highlights aspects of effective partnerships that can engage students in their learning and support them in transitioning to Prep, moving between primary and secondary school, and pursuing post-school pathways.

The improvement strategies recommended to schools indicate that the next steps are to review, evaluate and further leverage these partnerships to ensure they are making a real difference to student learning and wellbeing.

How does the *National School Improvement Tool* describe the process of building effective school–community partnerships?

'The school actively seeks ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by partnering with parents and families, other education and training institutions, local businesses and community organisations. Parents and families are recognised as integral members of the school community and partners in their children's education. Partnerships are strategically established to address identified student needs and operate by providing access to experiences, support and intellectual and/or physical resources not available within the school. All partners are committed to the common purposes and goals of partnership activities. Procedures are in place to ensure effective communications and to monitor and evaluate the intended impacts of the school's partnerships.'

(ACER 2012, p. 18)

School reviews, Terms 1 to 3, 2020 (total: 197)

School types			
P-6	Secondary	P-9/10/12	Other
144	31	7	15*

Review types		
Full school	Priority support	Self-determined
152	44	1

* Includes four outdoor and environmental education centres, seven special schools, two educational units, one school of distance education and one centre for continuing secondary education.

Key findings from school reviews

Queensland state schools are building partnerships with a wide range of community members and groups, agencies, local businesses, and educational partners. Comments like these are easy to find in review reports:

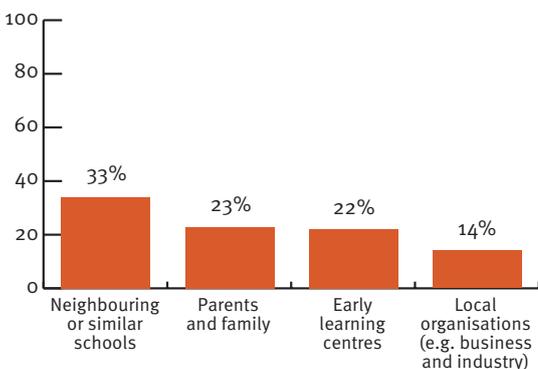
‘Parents and families are recognised as integral members of the school community and partners in the education of their child.’

‘The school actively seeks ways to enhance student learning and wellbeing by collaborating with parents, families, local cluster schools and a range of community groups.’

‘The school has a range of community involvement activities that are warmly appreciated by students, their parents and the local community members.’

The improvement strategies related to domain nine of the *National School Improvement Tool* suggest that the next steps for schools are to enhance various community partnerships.

Figure 1: Types of partnerships referred to in domain nine improvement strategies, 2020



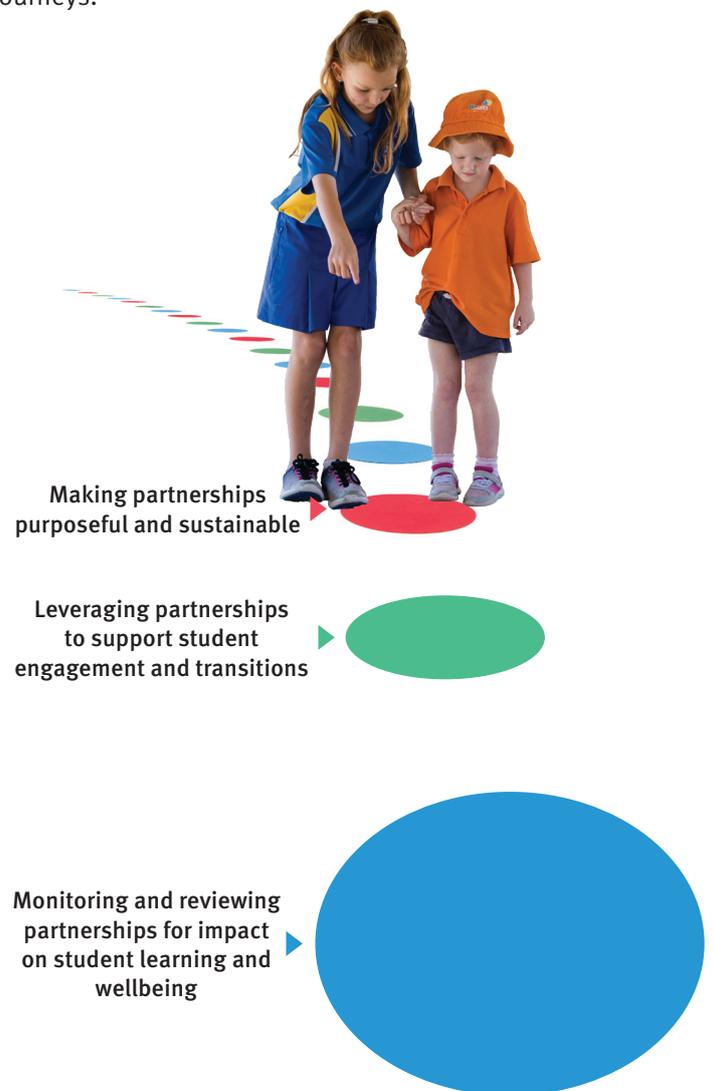
Note: N=167.

Next steps for building school–community partnerships

Across the various improvement strategies on school–community partnerships, there are three common themes:

- making partnerships purposeful and sustainable
- leveraging partnerships to support student engagement and transitions
- monitoring and reviewing partnerships for impact on student learning and wellbeing.

Together, these processes provide the ‘stepping stones’ schools can use to connect with their partners and create pathways for their students. In 2020, the majority of recommendations relate to steps two and three, suggesting where many schools are in their partnership journeys.



Making partnerships purposeful and sustainable

For approximately one-fifth of schools, the next step was to strengthen partnerships through more formalised planning processes around a clear and shared purpose. The most common recommendation was for schools to collaboratively develop a parent and community engagement framework. Schools with a framework already in place were recommended to regularly review and update it to include all relevant partnerships, and processes to evaluate their impact and sustainability. Other recommendations for managing partnerships were to:

- collaborate with partners to develop a shared purpose, goals, expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities
- formalise or document partnership agreements
- develop strategies and processes for sustaining effective partnerships (e.g. beyond staff changes) and promoting future ones.

Leveraging partnerships to support student engagement and transitions

Another key step was for schools to use their partnerships strategically to enhance student engagement and transitions. This theme was evident across different types of partnerships, ranging from families to organisations in the wider community.

▶ Parents and family

Reviews identified opportunities for schools to strengthen their engagement with students and their families to:

- understand potential challenges and vulnerabilities, and support children starting school
- enable parents to engage in and contribute to their child's transition between programs and year levels throughout school
- help students transition from primary to secondary school.

▶ Early learning centres

Schools were encouraged to further connect with their local early learning centres to:

- develop a greater understanding of student interests, strengths and capabilities, and engage with children before they start school

- reduce the vulnerability of children and increase school readiness
- build on transition processes and programs
- facilitate opportunities for professional collaboration.

▶ Neighbouring or similar schools

To support successful transitions from primary to high school, reviews identified opportunities to partner with schools in the local area, or schools on similar education journeys. This was presented as an opportunity to:

- enable continuity of learning
- build on transition programs
- promote professional learning networks.

▶ Local industry and organisations

While fewer references to transition were made in relation to local organisations, most of these review recommendations referred to engaging with agencies, businesses or industry to support post-school pathways, such as VET.

Monitoring and reviewing partnerships for impact on student learning and wellbeing

The most common step was to monitor or review partnerships to evaluate and maximise their impact. Generally, this included recommendations for schools to develop regular and systematic processes to:

- ensure that partnerships remain relevant and sustainable
- identify and strengthen partnerships that benefit student learning and wellbeing
- monitor the partnership's responsiveness to student and partner needs
- evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships in achieving agreed outcomes
- determine opportunities for further partnerships.

“Because school–community collaboration is a process and not an event, it is important that partners take the time to reflect on and evaluate the quality of their interactions and the implementation of their partnership activities.”

Joyce Epstein et al, 2018, p. 39

To generate discussion ...

- How do we actively recognise and engage parents and families as integral partners in their children's education?
- Who are our key partners – including other schools, early learning and/or higher education and training providers, local businesses and community organisations – and how do we work together to support students' transitions, opportunities and outcomes?
- How do all members within our partnerships work together towards a shared purpose?
- What are the processes for joint decision making, implementation of agreed actions, and monitoring of progress in each of our partnership arrangements?
- How do we evaluate the impact and ensure sustainability of arrangements – such as clusters, local networks and community alliances? What are the tangible student learning outcomes?



Practical considerations for building school–community partnerships

Nurture partnerships that are authentic, purposeful and sustainable

- Build a culture of collaboration that values parents and families as integral partners in learning.
- Considering the diversity across your school community, find innovative ways to engage and regularly communicate, provide feedback and actively involve parents and families in their children's learning and school life.
- Establish targeted networks for your school community's context – identify the key education partners to support every child's successful transition at each stage through their education journey.
- Consider your school's approach to parent and community engagement holistically and plan ways for other education providers, local community organisations and businesses to enhance students' learning opportunities and outcomes.

Leverage partnerships to support students' opportunities and outcomes

- Work strategically to identify community partners who can actively contribute to enhancing students' opportunities and outcomes in your school community.
- Foster professional relationships and collaborate with partners to develop a shared purpose, goals, expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities.
- Formalise partnership arrangements and develop a clear plan.
- Document the agreed mutual goals for the partnership, actions and timelines, and responsibilities by all members that will be undertaken.
- Establish good governance and regular meeting arrangements with representatives of the partnership to monitor progress and keep each other accountable.

Monitor, review and grow existing partnerships to maximise their impact

- Develop proactive strategies and processes for sustaining effective partnerships and promoting future ones, beyond the individuals that are currently involved.
- Put in place a cycle for rigorous review of progress and impact against the intended goals of the partnership – consider to what extent it is making a difference for students, staff or the school community.
- Be ambitious about the work of established or long-standing partnerships – consider ways they can mature and grow to make a greater impact.
- Celebrate the collective work and successes of the partnership among the school community.
- Show your school's appreciation for the generosity of time, resources and contributions of others.
- Reinforce the role of community partners in creating a sense of belonging for all students, staff and parents.

School snapshot

Case study: Connecting beyond the school fence – building trust and visibility in early childhood transition and learning

A primary school in the western suburbs of Brisbane has developed a network of partnerships to support children in their early years and set them up for success at school.

The school's approach was largely driven by a need to improve early years literacy. Partnerships help the school to know their students right from the start. With this knowledge, the school is able to engage parents, intervene early through oral language and phonetic awareness, reduce vulnerability and draw in resources from external agencies to address student and family needs. Early childhood was typically not seen as the school's business. These days, it is considered a gateway to children's success.

The school has partnerships with eight local early childhood providers. Staff visit the providers regularly, sharing practice and building capability to develop children's readiness. Transition statements are used as starting points for strength-based conversations about individual children. These early childhood partnerships, the school's playgroup, the KindyLinQ program and the school's pre-Prep Croclings program all create a familiar and welcoming place for prospective parents. They ensure families feel safe and comfortable, so that children's transition to school is natural, engaging and productive. The Croclings program enables children to connect with the school 16 times before a parent interview.



Partnerships with parents begin with transition statements, and continue with the school helping families to connect with external services, providing play-based tools parents can use for early literacy and numeracy development at home (provided in a special bag given to all Croclings), and keeping families informed of what happens at school and in the classroom. This year has also provided an enormous opportunity to engage parents in the curriculum and cement their involvement in their children's education journey.

The school's partnerships extend to relationships with six other schools in the western corridor. The region's efforts in developing a community of practice for collegial professional development and alignment of practice among like-schools enables principals to work together, share what works and develop solutions to the challenges they face. The partnerships with external agencies include engagement with family-support community groups, health and emergency services, and speech and occupational therapy.

The school's approach to partnerships has been to focus on one thing at a time. Getting small chunks of work done right and then moving on to other elements has made for success and satisfaction. The school has built from the bottom up, consulted authentically and acted decisively through their strategic plan. Sustainability of the school's practices is built on documenting processes, distributing leadership and building staff capability.

Through its partnerships and its Croclings program, the school has gained recognition within the community that the school not only cares about their children's early start, but is invested in their children's future. Historically, enrolments were late; the school now has ongoing enrolment growth. The next steps are to reach out to those families 'hidden' in the community – those who only become known to the school when their child starts day one in Prep – to give their children the support they need to transition successfully into school life.



For further details about this case study, email the Education Improvement Branch at eibmb@qed.qld.gov.au.

School snapshot

Case study: Building purposeful partnerships for a successful life after school

A high school south-west of Brisbane is forging a wide range of partnerships to engage with students in their learning, and give them the skills they need for the rest of their life.

The school is driven by the moral imperative to do the right thing by their students. As a secondary school, this means setting students up for a productive and worthwhile post-school life. The school acts early to identify every student's passion to keep them engaged, ensure their retention at school, and increase their employability. Located in an area with some of the highest levels of unemployment in the state, the school endeavours to direct their students into key local industries, and create opportunities for further study.

Significant partnerships have been established to support the school's trade training centre. Here, senior students can complete various certificate-level training courses – including construction, engineering and horticulture – and begin the pathways to apprenticeship and trade qualifications. Partners provide the centre with equipment and training services. More recently, the school has worked with partners to establish a commercial salon within the trade training centre, following a period of leasing commercial premises in the local CBD. This supports the school's hair and beauty program that offers certificate qualifications in hairdressing, retail cosmetics, beauty services and nail technology. These partnerships have evolved, with businesses extending their support beyond donations and offering professional development opportunities, and support for students entering the workplace.

The school has partnered with its city council, receiving equipment and materials for community projects – from building paths to landscaping parks. Students have also completed construction work around garden beds at a local primary school, also showing younger students how to grow and care for plants. Activities like this have the added benefit of familiarising primary school children with the senior students, which increases their readiness to transition to high school.

The school's partnerships are also directed at addressing some of the community needs that have an impact on school life. To engage with the area's increasing number of migrant families, the school has partnered with an African-based organisation and funded a liaison officer. Partnerships have been established to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through mentoring and tutoring on site and at university campuses. This makes for a school culture that cares.

Most students at the school graduate with a certificate qualification. The school has cemented itself as an institution in the local community; its work, reputation and value are widely recognised. The school is a place people come back to, either by re-enrolling to complete their education or giving back to the next generation as teachers. As the majority of students will likely live and work within a 40 kilometre radius of the school, producing job-ready graduates makes a difference to the entire community.



Students practising their skills at the school's commercial salon



For further details about this case study, email the Education Improvement Branch at eibmb@qed.qld.gov.au.

References and further reading

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- National Curriculum Services 2013, *Sustainable school and community partnerships: a research study*, www.whatworks.edu.au/upload/1363254474573_file_WWPartnershipsReport.pdf.

State Schools Division

Resources that support domain nine of the *National School Improvement Tool* are available from the department's [Parent and community engagement webpage](#).

This includes the [Advancing partnerships – parent and community engagement framework](#), which outlines five key elements of parent and community engagement: [communication](#), [partnerships with parents](#), [community collaboration](#), [decision-making](#), and [school culture](#), and includes 'ideas for improvement' for each of these elements.

The [Every student with disability succeeding: parent and community engagement fact sheet](#) builds on the framework's five key elements, with a specific focus on students with disability. An [Every student with disability succeeding – consulting with parents poster](#) is also available.

The [Intentional collaboration website](#) supports groups to work, learn and improve together within and across educational settings.

Other useful materials are available on the [Resources for schools](#) page, including:

- an [actionable playbook](#) that provides practical guidance to schools on how to improve their engagement strategies
- [case studies](#) of a variety of Queensland state schools
- a range of fact sheets about [Ways for schools and teachers to support parents to engage in their child's learning](#) and [Parent engagement in learning](#)
- links to research such as:
 - the [Parent engagement in schools](#) webpage, and findings from the Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland
 - a series of articles by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (Canberra), for example, Sealey, T 2016, [Towards a shared understanding of parent engagement](#)
- links to information about parent and family engagement in other states and territories, including the [Australian Capital Territory](#), [South Australia](#), [Tasmania](#) and [Victoria](#).

An [inquiry guide](#) and [decision-making tool](#) are also available to support successful transitions into schooling.

The Department of Education [STEM Industry Partnerships Forum initiative](#) provides opportunities for the department to collaborate with industry representatives and employers to:

- develop a shared vision for STEM education in Queensland
- raise awareness of contemporary industry and career profiles
- ensure Queensland students build the skills they need for their future.

The forum explores a range of issues, including opportunities to better evaluate the impact of school–industry engagement, and maintains a map of the ways schools can engage and partner with industry.

Regional STEM Champions play a key role in facilitating networks, clusters and partnerships with industry and community organisations. They help to establish sustainable and targeted collaboration that support schools' specific STEM improvement agendas.

Resources to support STEM partnerships include:

- Education Council 2015, [National STEM school education strategy: a comprehensive plan for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education in Australia](#)
- Department of Education, Skills and Employment, [STEM education resources toolkit](#) – The toolkit aims to support schools and industry to establish new STEM initiatives, form school–industry partnerships, and evaluate existing and future STEM initiatives
- Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), [STEM Professionals in Schools](#) – STEM Professionals in Schools is a national volunteer program that facilitates partnerships between schools and industry.



Professional learning

Authentic partnerships with families and the local community are a powerful determinant of student wellbeing, attendance, engagement and learning, and require emotionally intelligent leadership. Emotional intelligence is a key indicator of successful leadership and an essential driver in the ability to engage all stakeholders in the vision, values and purpose of the school. The World Economic Forum has identified the top 10 skills we will need to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Next to people management, emotional intelligence is the second social skill on the list: www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-10-skills-you-need-to-thrive-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/

The good news is that, unlike intelligence and personality, which are considered fairly stable over our lives, emotional intelligence is a set of behaviours we can continue to grow.

QELi supports leaders in the continuous development of their emotional intelligence through our Emotional Intelligence Program for Leaders. More information can be found here: qeli.qld.edu.au/leading-with-emotional-intelligence/

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