Everyone benefits from positive connections

*(Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011)*

**Benefits to school staff**
- School staff are more aware of the community resources available to support children with a diverse background and their families.
- School staff are better supported to provide culturally-sensitive information and support to students and their families.
- School staff have more capacity to be interculturally-responsive (e.g., due to formal and informal professional development opportunities).

**Benefits to students**
- Children learn more about their own community.
- Children become known in the community by business owners, residents, and others as individuals (reducing the stereotypes related to cultural background that can occur).
- Through participation in the community, children feel their cultural background is valued and accepted (increasing their sense of acceptance, belonging, and social and emotional wellbeing).

**Benefits to families**
- Families find it easier to develop new connections and build new support networks.
- Families learn more about their local community and find it easier to access services and support as needed.
- Families can use the school as a place to come together and connect with other families and their local community.

**Benefits to communities**
- Schools can become central locations where people come together to share skills, experience, and information.
- School facilities can be used as meeting spaces, community conference centres, and sites for community events.
- Students can volunteer in community-based organisations and businesses (further strengthening links with the local community).

**Why are school and community connections important?**

Strong relationships between school staff and people in the local community can help schools to be interculturally-responsive. When schools work closely with community organisations (such as neighbourhood centres and religious groups), and with community services (for instance, allied health, employment, and multicultural services), children and their families benefit from the best support possible. For instance, schools and the local community can pool their valuable skills, knowledge, experience and resources, making it easier for all members to access culturally-sensitive assistance as needed. A rich collection of resources can be used to strengthen the social and economic fabric of the entire community. In addition, collaborative working relationships enable both groups to recognise and support one another’s roles and responsibilities, as well as set shared goals to create the best outcomes for children and families.

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Introduction and scoping

- Identify current school connections with the local community.
- Invite families and staff to share their connections within the local community.
- Identify key local community members and leaders who support students and families with diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Identify organisations, services and local leaders that might support goals identified in the school plan.

Planning

This will involve developing goals and strategies that are part of your whole-school plan aimed at building community connections. For example:

- **Goal** – Develop shared values of the importance of community connections.  
  **Strategy** – Involve all school staff and families in discussions about developing and strengthening relationships with community organisations that support children and families with diverse cultural backgrounds.

- **Goal** – Build intercultural responsiveness at school.  
  **Strategy** – Prioritise time to meet to develop relationships with organisations that can help to build intercultural responsiveness.

- **Goal** – Create links with language and bicultural services.  
  **Strategy** – Meet with identified services to discuss your need and their capacity.

- **Goal** – Support school staff to develop cultural knowledge.  
  **Strategy** – Allocate time during the year for school staff to attend professional development (ideally, provided by local services to increase connections).

Implementing

- Develop a shared value for the importance of community connections (eg through translated newsletters, open forums, professional development for teachers).
- Raise awareness of the benefits to children, their families and teachers for connections with the community.
- Continually revisit and review action plan goals.

For more information on brainstorming and generating strategies, see the KidsMatter eLearning package, Connecting with families: Conversations that make a difference:

Leadership

A strong leadership team and people who agree to drive the process is an important factor in the sustainability of school-community partnerships. In many cases, the Principal will be a key member of the leadership team due to their managerial role in the school. However, shared leadership across a team is important, as no single person will have all of the knowledge or ideas - increased capacity, productivity and creativity comes from collaboration. The team then takes responsibility for: communicating the vision and the goals of the partnership; for connecting with children, families and the community about the partnership; and for organising the school's approach to the partnership.

Capacity-building:

Sustainable school community partnerships also depend on all parties having the resources, processes, skills and knowledge required to bring the relationship to life. This will often involve professional development for all involved. Additionally, it helps if professional development is ongoing due to the fluid nature of cultural change.

Maintaining and sustaining school community partnerships

Part of developing relationships with organisations in your local community involves thinking about how they will be maintained and sustained. There are several factors that increase the likelihood that school and community partnerships will last over time, including:

- agreeing on and developing clear goals for the relationship
- developing clear statements of roles and responsibilities
- having authentic two-way conversations about the relationship, supported by well-designed processes
- positive relationships among schools, principals, families, community, teachers and students.

A relationship between a school and community organisation or service is more likely to be successful and maintained over time, when each of the above is in place.

Sustaining a school community partnership also relies on a variety of other factors at the school, community and system levels.

Accountability

Accountability is essential for sustaining a school community partnership. Accountability isn’t about blaming people when partnerships don’t quite work as planned; it’s about having a process to help monitor the progress of the partnership and make adjustments as required. As there is shared leadership, there is also shared responsibility. Two types of accountability that may help sustain a school community partnership are:

- Accountability to the community, where schools and community organisations develop processes together to evaluate how well the partnership is working.
- Internal accountability, where schools develop processes to assess how well the partnership is working in and for the school.

Induction

A solid and clear induction process for new school staff is also critical to the sustainability of school community partnerships. Support for children and their families is maximised when staff are aware of established partnerships.

Succession planning

Succession planning is essential for partnerships to continue as staff and volunteers change. Often this can be as simple as having a planning process in place that is activated prior to a departure to ensure the knowledge and roles of the person leaving are shared with a new member of the team.

How are you connecting with your local community?

Connecting with community organisations, services and leaders may seem overwhelming if you are in an area with many services, or if you are in a rural town and it feels like there is little available. The diagram on the following page provides some ideas for connections you might make in your area. The table on the last page of this document provides a template for you to use in identifying your current community connections, and those you would like to build to meet the goals of your whole-school plan.

References

Community resources mapping tool (a)

Professionals
People like psychologists or speech pathologists.

Festivals and events
Community activities.

Spaces and facilities
Places and facilities where people can come together.

Staff expertise
Skills, knowledge and experiences of school staff regarding supporting cultural diversity.

Family expertise
Skills, knowledge and experiences of families at the school regarding cultural diversity.

Community organisations
Such as Neighbourhood houses and community centres.
### Community resources mapping tool (b)

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<th>Prospective connections</th>
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For further resources on building relationships with the local community, see the KidsMatter website for health and community professionals: [www.kidsmatter.edu.au/health-and-community](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/health-and-community).