

Building a Stronger School Community

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The Building a Stronger School Community Program aims to assist teachers, parents and students in enhancing the function of their school as a community. A more effective school-based community can:

- Contribute to educational outcomes,
- Create potential for savings and improved efficiency,
- Foster morale, enthusiasm and networks.

The program involves a long term process of fostering a cohesive school community including explanation of the concept of school communities, “diagnostic” assessment, self examination, workshop sessions, troubleshooting and evaluation. This occurs in four stages of activities:

Stage 1. Introduction and Scoping

Stage 2. Assessing the Current Situation and Potential Options

Stage 3. Planning and Action

Stage 4. Evaluation

Stage 1. Introduction and Scoping

This involves initial explanations and engagement of parents, teachers and students in considering the school as a community. This includes:

- Introductory information about the concept of a school community, potential benefits of improving the school community, and responding to interest shown by members of the school community.
- Initial discussions including
 - initial personal discussions with the Principal, key teachers, parents and students,
 - a brief written description in school information, such as the school newsletter,
 - an explanation of the approach and an invitation for involvement at staff meetings, P and C and other school briefings.
- Identification of a relatively small group of key stakeholders in the school – administrators, teachers, parents, students and community members.

- A scoping meeting with these key school stakeholders to discuss the approach and plan activities to engage the wider school community. This group is invited to become an informal management group for the process.
- Ongoing feedback to the school community.

Stage 2. Assessing the Current Situation and Potential Options

The next stage involves engaging parents, teachers and students in assessing the current condition of the school community and options for improvement. The aim is to:

- Gain broad input into consideration of the school community,
- Recognise what is currently good about the school community,
- Understand how different elements (eg parents, teachers) of the school community perceive the school community,
- Identify opportunities to improve the school as a community.

There are several methods to choose from to do this:

1. Survey

The survey instrument below can be used as a traditional survey sent to people to fill in, or in conjunction with personal discussions.

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The school is a cohesive community of parents, teachers and students.					
<i>Networks:</i> Parents, teachers and students know each other well.					
<i>Participation:</i> The school encourages parents, teachers and students to participate in the school.					
<i>Inclusion:</i> I feel included and “inside” the school rather than outside it.					
<i>Identity:</i> There is a sense of pride and commitment to the school					
<i>Collaboration:</i> People involved in the school work well together or can when they need to.					
<i>Breadth of Involvement:</i> The workload involved in supporting then school is shared across a broad range of people.					
<i>Ease of Involvement:</i> I find it easy to have a say in the school and able to contribute to it.					
<i>Differences:</i> Differences in opinion and ideas are dealt with well.					
<i>Functional organisations:</i> The established methods of involvement in the school (such as the P and C, School Council etc.) are effective.					

The survey would also ask for specific suggestions to improve the school as a community.

2. School Community Appraisal

Students, parents and teachers would be invited to have a brief one on one discussion with 2-3 of their acquaintances in the school based on approximately four common prompt questions. The ideal outcome would be parents talking with students, students talking with teachers etc. Discussions would be about 15 minutes long and would require some brief anonymous comments to be noted.

This appraisal could be done as a class project and feedback would be provided to the school community as a prompt for further planning and discussion.

3. Community “Conversations”

This involves informal facilitated small group discussions using the same prompt questions as above.

People contacted during the “Assessing the situation and options” stage will be asked to self nominate into one of several categories such as parent, teacher, administrator or student. This provides an understanding of what parts of the school have contributed comments.

Regardless of which method is used to gain input, the information would be collated, summarised and fed back to the school community via the newsletter, P and C meetings, staff meetings etc.

The next stage is planning action based on the ideas and opportunities arising from the feedback.

Stage 3. Planning and Action

This stage involves exploring opportunities and conducting practical activities to foster the school community. This involves a workshop of parents, teachers, students and community members; followed by specific achievable activities including options such as training and “troubleshooting”.

Workshop

The workshop would last about two to four hours. It will give people an opportunity to:

- Consider the feedback from members of the school community,
- Agree on specific opportunities,
- Plan activities and have people express interest in contributing to activities.

The workshop could also other aspects such as:

- A vision for the school community describing how people want their school community to be,
- Describing the assets of the school community - focusing people on assets rather than deficiencies, and on what is unique about their school community,
- Identifying what initiates, mediates and inhibits the capacity of the school community,
- Community mapping – an exercise that identifies the various components of the school community and how they participate with each other.

Actions

Actions would be conducted based on the planning above. Some examples could be:

- Parents being more involved in featuring their work or experience in classes,
- The school more overtly celebrating volunteering in the school,
- Past students being more actively invited to be part of the school community,
- Students discussing community issues and expressing community in art and other activities,
- More integrated groups of parents, teachers and students in organising school events,
- Arrangements for temporary involvement of parents in the school as a way of gaining stronger involvement.

Activities would be small achievable actions that don't take a lot of resources. These would be conducted by people who express some interest and motivation for the activity.

Training

Some specific training and support may be required, such as giving people skills to manage conflict, information on funding options, how to encourage participation etc.

Troubleshooting

A facilitator would work with schools through this community building process and be available to provide support and options as difficulties arise.

Stage 4. Evaluation

Changes in the capacity of the school community can be measured using indicators such as;

- Changes in participation in the school,
- The function of organisations such as the P and C,
- The extent of networks and relationships within the school.

A potential action is the development of a simple framework to measure these changes and provide evidence of improved school function.

Support for the Process

The process involves small working groups of parents, teachers and students conducting the three stages of development as well as ongoing activities. Jim Cavaye from Cavaye Community Development can facilitate the process and provide ongoing support. The process involves a minimum of two visits to the school by the facilitator together with ongoing contact. The timeframe for the process is as follows:

Activity	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6
Stage 1. Introduction and Scoping						
Introductory information	Visit by Facilitator					
Initial discussions						
Identification of key members of the school community						
Scoping/planning meeting						
Stage 2. Assessing the Current Situation and Potential Options						
Survey, appraisal or other activities						
Collation of feedback						
Stage 3. Planning and Action						
Planning workshop - school and community representatives			Visit by Facilitator			
Formation of working groups						
Specific actions						
Stage 4. Evaluation						

Facilitation Costs

The following is a break down of the facilitation costs for the program.

		\$ (including GST)
Stage 1: Introduction and Scoping		
School Visit	1.5 days	1250 plus actual travel costs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial liaison with the school • Prepare introductory information • Conduct initial discussions • Facilitate Scoping/ Planning Meeting 		
Stage 2. Assessing the Current Situation and Potential Options		
Providing phone and e mail support with engagement activities	8 hours	1250
Stage 3. Planning and Action		
School Visit	1.5 days	1250 plus actual travel costs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate planning workshop • Facilitate formation of working groups 		
Providing phone and e mail support with specific activities	10 hours	1250
Stage 4. Evaluation		
Total		\$ 5000