

International Schooling for Tomorrow Forum Forum international L'école de demain

June 6–8th, 2004

Toronto, Canada

6 au 8 juin 2004

ADDITIONAL COUNTRY PAPERS:
VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

Catholic Education Office



Supported by the Ontario Ministry of Education
Avec la participation du ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario



2nd OECD Forum on 'Schooling for Tomorrow' 2004

Toronto Forum
Metro Toronto Convention Centre

Briefing Paper

'Schools as Core Social Centre' Project

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June 2004
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Overview of Catholic Education in Victoria

The Catholic education system in Victoria is the largest Catholic education system in Australia. It is the fifth largest system overall (after the government systems in Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland) with a total of approximately 483 schools (381 Primary and 95 Secondary as well as 7 Special Schools). Catholic schools in Australia receive funding from both the Federal and State Governments and other sources of funding are obtained through fees and fundraising activities. Like government schools Catholic schools are community based, comprehensive and inclusive. Catholic schools in Victoria educate more than one in five students. Catholic schools are authentic faith communities which demonstrate genuine inclusion through appropriate policies, structures and processes. With the establishment of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) at the end of 2002, all teachers across Victoria are now registered with the same professional body.

The Catholic Education Office, Melbourne (CEOM) leads and supports schools to offer an outstanding education in faith and knowledge as schools of first choice for Catholic parents. Staff at the CEOM both support and lead archdiocesan schools in their shared mission and account authentically to diocesan authorities and governments on their operations and outcomes.

'Schools as Core Social Centres' project

Overview

The Schools as Core Social Centre project is a CEOM project funded by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth). The project is designed to assist leaders to address school wellbeing in a sustained way, with an emphasis on prevention and community partnerships fostering the development of social capital. It is understood that there are clear links between the promotion of wellbeing and learning and teaching.

In 2002 the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne (CEOM) in partnership with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), established the 'Schools as Core Social Centres' project. In the initial stages the CEOM appointed a Project Officer to work across three inner city Catholic primary schools in Melbourne. In June 2003 VicHealth refunded the project for a further two years and the project will now continue through 2004 – 2005.

The project has been extended to incorporate a range of schools and the development of a Research Circle. The project is developing a model to inform the development of collaborative school community partnerships to facilitate the promotion of Wellbeing and the development of social capital. Importantly the project acknowledges the links between the promotion of wellbeing, inclusivity and learning outcomes and effectively explores the interface between health and education practice.

The CEOM has a key role in supporting schools in the implementation of policy and program initiatives in the area of whole school approaches to Student Wellbeing. The building of inclusive Catholic school communities to improve educational outcomes for all young people is facilitated through this process. The 'Schools as Core Social Centres' project initiative and the development of the partnership with VicHealth is part of this overall strategy.

Background

The reference to 'Schools as Core Social Centres' first appeared in an OECD Report titled *Schooling for Tomorrow: What Schools for the Future?* (2001) that explores the scenarios devised by the Education Division of the OECD. Two scenarios refer to the status quo, two to re-schooling and two to de-schooling. The CEOM project is grounded in 're-schooling' scenario three, 'Schools as Core Social Centres'. This scenario is concerned with three major aspects of schooling: public trust and funding, schools as centres of the community and social capital formation and social equity. It describes a school institution strengthened by the links between the school and the local community. The project represents a practical implementation of this scenario and seeks to develop a systemic based 'tool kit' which can be used to support school leadership in the implementation of the model.

The project builds upon the Youth Services Strategy of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) through which over 700 teachers from middle and senior management have been sponsored to complete the Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Studies (Student Welfare) at the University of Melbourne. The initiative formed part of the CECV's response to the 1997 Victorian Government Suicide Prevention Taskforce and sought to systemically develop the confidence and competency of teachers to develop a range of strategies spanning the continuum of prevention to intervention at a whole school level. Teachers are skilled to work at the level of the individual as well as designing whole school approaches to promote wellbeing.

The context

Significant views of educational principles provide a context for and underpin the 'Schools as Core Social Centres' (SACSC) project. Schools are recognised as key sites in the community and play a critical role in the promotion of wellbeing with a focus on prevention and early intervention. This view also acknowledges the key link between social-emotional learning (SEL) and student learning outcomes. A whole school approach to Student Wellbeing with its emphasis on prevention and early intervention provides an appropriate model for achieving the wellbeing of students.

The project examines literature and research related to Student Wellbeing in the context of current international, national and local policy and program initiatives in the area of whole school approaches to student wellbeing. The project evaluation contributes to the growing body of literature and research related to the

implementation of whole school approaches in schools with an emphasis on school/community partnerships and associated links to enhancing learning and teaching. The project is informed by the link between wellbeing, social capital and learning and teaching.

The Project

The Catholic Education Commission, Victoria (CECV) Pastoral Care Policy (1994) in describing and articulating the role and purpose of Catholic schools highlights the relationship between the academic achievements of students in Catholic schools and the promotion of wellbeing. This incorporates the mental, physical, social emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the student underpinned by the acquisition of moral values. It is within this context that the 'Schools as Core Social Centres' project initiative has been developed and piloted.

A recent study sponsored by the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria titled *The Welfare Needs of Victorian Catholic Schools*, highlights the nature, range and impact of welfare needs in schools (Cahill, Wyn and Smith, 2004). A broad definition of *welfare* is used in the study to encompass the physical, social, emotional, financial, mental, physical, health and spiritual needs of young people. It is the first Australian study to document the impact of social change on the work of schools and highlights that schools are the point of care for the local community. The study identifies five key areas: learning, student mental health, support for families, social health and staff wellbeing. Importantly the study highlights the challenges and calls for funding arrangements, innovative approaches and partnership arrangements to support the work of schools in this area.

Research indicates that the most challenging area for schools (including school leadership) in the development of whole-school approaches is in the area of school/community partnerships (Mitchell 2001). Moreover much current work in the area of school/community partnerships is located at the interventionist end through schools referring and working with agencies when seeking support in the management of young people and the provision of support to families. The inclusion of a broad representation of parents is at the core of school/community partnerships and requires a commitment to the development of a specific strategy for implementation if it is to be fully realised

By positioning schools as core social centres with the strong development of school/community partnerships schools are actively contributing to the development of social capital. At the same time the development of collaborative working partnerships means that schools have another mechanism for the provision of a range of services and activities which span the prevention to intervention spectrum.

The project recognises and builds upon the work of other initiatives and research which indicates that positive outcomes in the area of wellbeing have a significant impact on learning outcomes. Schools need a web of support in the wider community, and so the concept of social capital is relevant (Caldwell, 2004).

The project is guided by a foundation principle, which positions schools as key sites for the promotion of wellbeing and the development of social capital. The project facilitates the development of strategic linkages between the promotion of wellbeing, social capital and improved learning outcomes.

Key principles of the project

- Communities, families and schools play an important role as environments that can support and promote the development of the wellbeing of young people;
- Positive and strong connections between young people and their families, schools and communities not only act to build social capital but ensure that young people have a framework in which they can seek various forms of support; and
- Prevention and early intervention strategies are the most effective approaches to the promotion of protective factors and in the prevention of risk factors, in a young person's life.

Key aims of the project:

- Promote a whole school approach to the promotion of wellbeing including the establishment of partnerships with community agencies;
- Develop and establish a model that supports primary schools (in the first phase) as core social centres within the community;
- Promote the development of a cultural shift in schools from individuals having responsibility for student welfare to a whole school approach to Student Wellbeing; and
- Increase the capacity of schools and communities to develop the Education/Health interface through suitable structures and processes at the school level.

Project objectives

- To provide an implementation framework that supports the model of 'Schools as Core Social Centres';
- To investigate the appropriateness of a pilot model in relation to a whole school approach to the promotion of Student Wellbeing in primary schools;
- To trial and evaluate this approach in a small inner city cluster of Catholic primary schools;
- To implement innovative structural and staffing arrangements in schools which encourage a whole school approach towards the promotion of Student Wellbeing;
- To gather data from the participating pilot schools regarding responses to a whole school approach towards the promotion of Student Wellbeing;
- To document and disseminate the most promising practices/key learnings from the project to allow generalisation of these initiatives to other schools;
- To establish a model (including a Tool Kit) which can be replicated in other primary school clusters in Victoria.

The Interim Evaluation

A qualitative project evaluation was undertaken in three inner-city Catholic primary schools in Melbourne participating in the project. The case study approach was used to map the schools' participation in the "Schools as Core Social Centres" project, including progress of the implementation of a whole-school approach to student wellbeing.

The evaluation of the "Schools as Core Social Centres" project aims to investigate a whole school approach to student wellbeing and to monitor school improvement and

school culture change in relation to student wellbeing issues across the school community.

The project evaluator in collaboration with the project management team has explored the processes developed and the strategies implemented, including the effectiveness of the development of partnerships between agencies and schools in addressing the wellbeing of the participating school communities through a whole-school approach.

The interim project evaluation consisted of:

- interviews conducted with key staff in each school at the beginning of the project and at the end of the first twelve month's of the project;
- audit and survey instruments administered, designed to demonstrate baseline data in relation to current practice regarding the participating schools processes and structures against the backdrop of the Health Promoting Schools model and the Framework for Student Support Services;
- interviews conducted with CEO/VicHealth project managers and the project officer;
- review of literature and research;
- review and analysis of policy and program content (school documentation); and
- informal consultation with schools and key stakeholders.

Evaluation Objectives:

- To establish a framework for implementation of a model for a whole-school approach to the promotion of student wellbeing which can be replicated in other school settings in Victoria;
- To identify key elements which are important to the successful development of "Schools as Core Social Centres";
- To identify whole-school structures and strategies which enhance the promotion of student wellbeing; and
- To document and disseminate the most promising practices/key learnings from the project.

The project evaluation examines the implementation of a whole-school approach in three schools. It provides an in-depth investigation and in doing so encourages self-reflection and self-evaluation by the schools. It may also inform the work of other schools so that:

- other schools choosing to adopt this approach may learn from the identification of factors which enable or constrain the implementation of a whole-school approach and the experiences of the project.

Progress to Date

- Regular meetings of Project Management Team;
- Project worker is now located at the CEOM central office to integrate and sustain the work of the project as well as working with project schools;

- Interim Evaluation Report completed;
- Research Circle established to disseminate research findings, promote a learning community in the field and to share good practice related to the model;
- Further school clusters established developing the model of 'Schools as Core Social Centres' and trialling the draft project tools; and
- Draft tool kit being developed containing a variety of audit and implementation materials.

Ongoing work in 2004

- CEOM Victorian conference planned for October 2004 related to the project and school/community partnerships;
- Developing links between the School as Core Social Centre project and the Youth Services Strategy through the establishment of networks of graduates to trial tools and to participate in the Research Circle;
- Discussions with the University of Melbourne to develop links between the project and course material;
- Project activities to be added to CEOM website to promote the project; and
- Establishing further clusters of schools to extend the project.

Transformation in schools occurs when there is significant, systematic and sustained change that leads to dramatic improvement in learning for all students in all settings (Caldwell, 2004). The Catholic Education Office, Melbourne is committed to developing a range of initiatives which explore the Health/Education interface and community capacity building so that educational outcomes for all young people continue to improve.

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