

# Crossing the Bridge

Overcoming entrenched disadvantage  
through student-centred learning

ROSALYN BLACK

**Education Foundation**



THE  
**R.E. ROSS**  
TRUST



One of the schools that participated in this study is located 20 kilometres from the heart of Melbourne's central business district. The city buildings are clearly in sight on the horizon. Not far from the school runs the nation's largest highway, crisscrossed by vehicle and pedestrian bridges, yet the principal says: "our students never cross the bridge out of this suburb".

A student-centred approach to teaching and learning:

- Is based on a challenging curriculum connected to students' lives
- Caters for individual differences in interest, achievement and learning styles
- Develops students' ability to take control over their own learning
- Uses authentic tasks that require complex thought and allow time for exploration
- Emphasises building meaning and understanding rather than completing tasks
- Involves cooperation, communication and negotiation
- Connects learning to the community.

# Foreword

Barry McGaw, Director, Melbourne Education Research Institute,  
The University of Melbourne and Former Director for Education, OECD

The OECD's surveys of the performance of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, science and problem solving show that Australian education is of high quality. Australia's weakness lies in the magnitude of the influence of social background on educational achievement. The influence is much smaller in countries such as Canada, Finland and the Republic of South Korea which can be characterised as high-quality and high-equity while Australia languishes with a high-quality, low-equity label.

That description of an unsatisfactory state of affairs in Australia does not carry with it any direct prescription of how Australia might do better beyond the obvious one of seeking to understand differences between Australian education policies and practices and those of the high-quality, high-equity countries. What we really need is good, on-the-ground work in Australia on how to make a difference.

What Education Foundation Australia offers is a passion to make a difference and a willingness and capacity to investigate seriously how to do so. It sponsors and supports significant innovation in some of the most educationally disadvantaged communities and it brings to this work a commitment to seeking evidence about what works.

This publication reports on important work that the Foundation has undertaken, with the assistance of The R E Ross Trust, to support innovations designed to increase student engagement in learning, to investigate the efficacy of the strategies and the factors that influence effective adoption, and to identify what might best be done to help other schools adopt the strategies.

The report puts no gloss on things. It acknowledges and describes well what is difficult to achieve and it emphasises that the road to success will be neither easy nor short. Yet it is optimistic and hopeful and, as a consequence, helpful. It concludes with five clear recommendations for agencies that support the work of schools in disadvantaged communities and three models that might yield deeper and more effective change in schools.

# Preface

Adam Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Education Foundation Australia

A captivated child engrossed in their own state of learning is one of the most powerful visions and rewards presented to educators across the world. Sometimes strategically catalysed, sometimes beautifully impromptu, the moment when a learner becomes truly engaged, the moment when the intellect and the soul are exploring together in unison, is nothing short of wonderful.

We know that students are at their finest when both the content and style of learning is aligned with individual preferences and when students see and feel meaning, connection and impact.

Each day in schools across Australia, we see students becoming excited and empowered by knowledge. We see students becoming aware of the vastness of possibility in the world around them, and we see students becoming responsible for making this world a better place. While the latter may be rather intrinsically focused, we have never been more convinced that it is the students who see themselves as active participants in their classroom, their community and their world, who become empowered, determined and successful learners.

Our single greatest collective challenge is to provide opportunities for every student to have the experience of creating, exploring and achieving despite the level of disadvantage they find themselves surrounded by. We know that many of our neighbourhoods with the lowest levels of social capital are pastures rich in opportunity to catalyse change and make an impact. We know that many schools in such communities are working tirelessly to engage and inspire students to become the agents for such change.

This report is intended to have many points of impact. However, perhaps the most significant may be as a catalyst for appreciation. Too often, achievement in some of our most disadvantaged communities is not acknowledged, celebrated or disseminated in a way that is both strategic and inspiring. Our tools for measuring success are often dangerously narrow and fail to take into account the true impact of the work of educators. This report seeks to highlight approaches and achievements which have impacted on students, schools and communities and become a powerful catalyst for such approaches to better inform policy and approaches to systemic change.

It is reasonable to highlight the need for Government to take up this challenge. However, this research continues to reinforce the concept of schools as core social centres, which has been promulgated by many stakeholders within the education community of late. This adds additional impetus to the philosophy that addressing disadvantage in schools is not the sole responsibility of Government. This research demonstrates that students will only succeed, and communities will only prosper, when ownership and responsibility is shared amongst core stakeholders, not least the students.

# Contents

Foreword	2
Preface	3
Acknowledgments	5
Introduction	6
<b>Disadvantage and disengagement</b>	<b>7</b>
Disadvantage in Australian schools	8
The impact of disengagement	10
<b>Disadvantage and learning</b>	<b>12</b>
Putting learners at the centre	13
Turning around disadvantage through learning	15
<b>The case study schools</b>	<b>16</b>
Disadvantage in the schools	17
The initiatives	19
<b>Learnings from the schools</b>	<b>23</b>
Finding and owning workable models	24
Building teacher practice	26
Building school structures and culture	29
Measuring outcomes	32
Engaging parents and the community and meeting wider student needs	34
<b>Recommendations and future thinking</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Appendix: method</b>	<b>43</b>

# Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the vital and generous assistance of school leaders and teachers from the following schools who gave their valuable time to participate in interviews: Christ the King Primary School, Debney Meadows Primary School, Debney Park Secondary College, Gilmore College for Girls, Laverton Secondary College, Our Lady's School (Sunshine), St John's Primary School (Footscray), St Monica's School (Footscray) and Taylors Lakes Secondary College.

I also wish to acknowledge the indispensable support of the Department of Education, in particular Brett New, Assistant Regional Director and Nellie Kostiw, Acting Manager of Teaching and Learning, at the Western Metropolitan Region office, and of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne, in particular John Mills, Manager of the Western Region office.

I would also like to thank all of my colleagues, the advisors to this study and members of the Reference Group who contributed their knowledge and expertise:

Dr Adrian Bertolini  
Gerard Broadfoot  
Jenny Brown  
Dr Brenda Cherednichenko  
Dr Amelia Church  
Peter Cole  
Dr Andrew Hollows  
Howard Kelly  
Ellen Koshland  
Heather Le Roy  
John McCarthy  
Catherine McGrath  
Tony Mackay  
Sandra Mahar  
Graham Marshall  
Brian Rogers  
Adam Smith  
Liz Suda  
Julian Waters-Lynch  
Michael White  
Vic Zbar.

This project has been generously funded by The R E Ross Trust. I would like to thank Sylvia Geddes and Rebekah Lautman for their unfailing support and wise guidance throughout the project.

# Introduction

“The number of children who currently miss out on an education that equips them for the twenty-first century is too high in a country that has the resources and capacity to ensure that all young people have a fair go and are able to contribute to the enrichment of all our futures”

Ellen Koshland, Founder and President,  
Education Foundation Australia

A quality school education is essential if young people are to have access to the greatest possible opportunities in life, but it is not a universal experience in Australia. Instead, too many young people are disengaged from school, especially during the middle years of schooling (Years 5 to 9). Disengagement and low achievement are strong predictors of lifelong socio-economic disadvantage. Worryingly, they are more prevalent amongst students growing up in poorer families and in schools with high concentrations of these students. As poverty indicators increase, disadvantage is more entrenched in specific areas and education is more strongly linked to life chances, poor educational outcomes for already disadvantaged young people are of enormous concern.

Research shows that pedagogy and curriculum – what is taught, how it is taught and how students learn – have a great influence on student engagement and achievement. It also shows that many schools that cater successfully for students, including socio-economically disadvantaged students, use a student-centred approach to learning.

Student-centred learning is widely accepted as a highly effective approach, although it goes by numerous names including personalised learning. It is a central plank in the education reform under way in Victoria. Despite this, its adoption is patchy. Changing classroom practice to create engaged and independent learners remains a challenge for schools, especially for those in high poverty areas. With funding from government and philanthropy, Education Foundation Australia is targeting support to these schools to help them build a more student-centred practice and stronger links with their communities.

Education Foundation Australia (formerly the Education Foundation) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that supports real-life learning and connections between schools and the community for the benefit of students in the compulsory years of schooling (Prep to Year 10), especially those facing disadvantage. It has seeded student-centred learning in Australian schools for 18 years.

What is missing in the education reform picture in Victoria and other states is a set of proven and transferable models of how schools in our most disadvantaged communities are turning around learning outcomes for middle years students through student-centred learning. The time is opportune to identify what works in such schools, what supports them in their work and how this success can be implemented more widely.

This research project was conducted by Education Foundation Australia with funding from The R E Ross Trust to document the experience of schools in a disadvantaged area of Melbourne that have implemented student-centred learning in the middle years. The project looks at outcomes for student learning and engagement, analyses what supports or hinders these schools in the development, implementation and maintenance of student-centred learning and identifies what can be done to enable other schools to implement a similar approach.



# Disadvantage and disengagement

Disadvantage amongst young people is both a strong predictor and a result of low engagement and achievement at school. It is increasingly a feature of specific postcode areas, creating communities where low educational attainment and poor life outcomes are becoming entrenched. The middle years of schooling are the years when disadvantaged young people are most at risk of disengagement and early leaving.

# Disadvantage in Australian schools

“It is mainly in the low income regions and localities that students face limited educational options and potential ghettoisation into schools with poor educational outcomes. It is these regions and localities that have high rates of early school leaving and poor transition rates to tertiary education and employment”

(Education Foundation, 2005)

“In both government and non government sectors, those schools where students face the greatest difficulties are the ones with the least social and cultural capital to support them”

(Koshland, 2006)

Disadvantage encompasses a range of economic, social, cultural and political exclusions that influence and are influenced by educational achievement. In Australia, disadvantage is on the rise as poverty rates increase, including those for school age children (Keating & Lamb, 2004), and as educational achievement becomes more strongly shaped by socio-economic factors. There is strong evidence that educational achievement in this country is significantly determined by individual socio-economic status or social background as measured by parents' occupation.

Australia shows a stronger relationship between social background and educational achievement than most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries: “70 per cent of the variation between-schools can be accounted for in terms of differences between schools in the social background of their students – 40 per cent individual social background and 30 per cent the average social background of students in the schools” (McGaw, 2006a). In the Third International Mathematics and Science Study in 1995 and 1999, Australia showed the 19th highest impact of family background on educational attainment out of 54 countries. The most affluent Australian students are on average three years of schooling ahead of the least affluent in reading literacy (McGaw, 2006a).

As a result of this relationship, Australia has a particularly large achievement gap between poorer and more affluent students and between schools with large proportions of poorer or more affluent students (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). By contrast, a number of other OECD countries manage to combine high educational achievement with small gaps between students and schools.

Finland, for example, manages to contain quality differences between schools to within 5% of the overall performance variation among students (Schleicher, 2006). In Australia, individual schools are closing the gap, but the challenge remains to do it to scale.

The negative impact of disadvantage on educational achievement and engagement is well documented. Compared to their more affluent peers, Australian students from low socio-economic backgrounds are:

- Less likely to have educationally supportive social and physical infrastructure at home
- Twice as likely to under-perform in literacy and numeracy
- More likely to have negative attitudes to school, truant, be suspended or expelled and leave school early
- More likely to struggle with the transition from school to work
- Less likely to enter university or to succeed in further and vocational education

(Keating & Lamb, 2004; Productivity Commission, 2005; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Thomson, 2002; Watson & Considine, 2003; Zappalà & Considine, 2001).

The growing concentration of educational failure in specific postcode areas exacerbates this situation. Educational disadvantage is increasingly linked to geographic disadvantage and, like it, may prove resistant to change (Vinson, 2004a). Poor Australian students are increasingly clustered in schools with poor educational outcomes located in economically depressed areas with low educational profiles (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2005; Keating & Lamb, 2004; Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Thomson, 2002). This creates a circular pattern of disadvantage. Within any given school, poorer students tend to show lower achievement and school completion than more affluent students. Students who attend schools with many poor students show lower achievement than students from schools with many more affluent students (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004; McGaw, 2006a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005; Rothman, 2003).

This means that schools with the weakest students and the greatest need for responsive approaches to support them have the least capacity to provide these. Australia has a concentration of poorer students in smaller government and Catholic schools. A number of these schools struggle to provide adequate learning environments, especially at the secondary level (Keating &

Lamb, 2004). Given the interaction of these factors, it is not surprising that student outcomes in some schools in the state's most disadvantaged communities remain poor despite years of additional funding and policy interventions.

# The impact of disengagement

“Students most acutely feel lack of a clear purpose or focus in the middle years of secondary schooling. It is also in the middle years of schooling that current schooling structures and classroom practices appear to be contributing to rather than ameliorating many students’ negative feelings about their own worthiness and about the value of their continued involvement in schooling”

(Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004)

“In Australia, the entire nation’s social, cultural, and economic well-being is in jeopardy when so many of our young people either leave school early, or complete their schooling with a narrow and unsatisfying education”

(Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996)

Educational engagement is an important schooling outcome in its own right. Students who are engaged feel that they belong at school. They participate in the activities of the school, value educational success and believe that education will benefit them. In nearly every OECD country, the prevalence of disengagement varies significantly from school to school. While it is affected by external factors such as social background and geographic location, it is strongly shaped by school factors including pedagogy and curriculum (Fullarton, 2002; Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier, 2004; Willms, 2003).

Most studies infer that disengagement from school causes poor achievement. Others suggest that low achievement causes students to withdraw from school or that engagement and achievement go hand-in-hand. Whatever its causative relationship, disengagement is particularly linked to lack of success in the crucial middle years, when the experience of adolescence can relate poorly to the experience of school (Cole, 2001). It generally begins in the last two years of primary school and is aggravated by the transition to secondary school, but in disadvantaged schools, it happens earlier and can be almost intractable by the time students reach Year 7 (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle & Seal, 2005). One study suggests that all middle years students are at risk of disengagement (Murray et al, 2004).

The growth of student literacy and numeracy flattens markedly between Years 5 to 8, engagement in learning declines between Years 5 to 9 and student satisfaction with learning

and schoolwork declines in Years 8 to 9 (Cole, 2006). Things frequently come to a head in Year 9 or 10, when many students experience what Cole calls a ‘mid-school crisis’, indicators of which include passivity or cessation of effort, underachievement or lowered achievement, disruptive behaviour, poor attendance or leaving (Cole, 2006; Murray et al, 2004). In some schools, 40 per cent of Year 9 students want to leave school as soon as they can. All of these effects tend to be more pronounced in schools with many disadvantaged students.

While early leaving is not always negative (Teese, 2006), it is one of the clearest and most accepted indicators of educational disengagement and one that has lasting effects. Almost 30 per cent of young Australians who leave school early have not taken up further qualifications a year later. These lower levels of education are associated with:

- Lower wages and greater financial insecurity: an early school leaver can expect to earn approximately \$500,000 less in the course of their working life than someone who completes Year 12
- Poorer mental and physical health: Victorians who do not complete secondary school are almost four times more likely to report poorer health
- A higher likelihood of child abuse and neglect when early leavers become parents
- Higher instances of homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse and criminal activity
- Mortality rates up to nine times higher than the general population

(Chapman, Weatherburn, Kapuscinski, Chilvers & Roussel, 2002; Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2005; Long, 2005; Vinson, 2004a).

This situation is also costly at the social, economic and political levels. Early school leaving and lower levels of education cost Australia an estimated \$2.6 billion a year in higher social welfare, health and crime prevention costs and lower tax revenue, productivity and Gross Domestic Product. Its social impact is felt in greater inter-generational problems of low education, unemployment and poverty, decreased participation in the political process and lower social cohesion and contribution to the community. For every dollar that government invests in retaining early school leavers, the expected return is as much as 3.2 times more (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2005; Muir, Maguire, Slack-Smith & Murray, 2003).

While slightly less than a third of early leavers attribute their leaving to not doing well at school, not liking school or not liking what was on offer at school (McMillan & Marks, 2003), far larger numbers of students feel this way without leaving early. Until this experience changes, disengagement, underachievement and negative early leaving will continue to be part of the schooling landscape, with grim implications for young people already facing disadvantage.

# Disadvantage and learning

Challenging, relevant and student-centred approaches to learning can improve young people's engagement and achievement at school and ameliorate the impact of disadvantage.

# Putting learners at the centre

“Giving every single child the chance to be the best they can be, whatever their talent or background, is not the betrayal of excellence, it is the fulfilment of it. Personalised learning means high quality teaching that is responsive to the different ways students achieve their best”

(Department for Education and Skills, 2004)

“Sound teaching and learning practices are fundamental to the success of any reform in schools that seeks to make a significant difference to student outcomes”

(Suda, 2006)

Although their specific impact has not been accurately measured, it is recognised that pedagogy and curriculum – what is taught, how it is taught and how students learn – have an important influence on student achievement and engagement. The extensive Victorian Middle Years Research and Development Project found that classroom teaching and learning practices are the most critical factor in the achievement and engagement of middle years students. One body of research suggests that up to 60 per cent of the variation in student learning outcomes is attributable to what takes place in the school or classroom (Cuttance, 2001; Hattie, 2003) and other research thought suggests that it is even greater than this (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe, 2003).

Increasingly, good teaching is being defined as student-centred teaching (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2006). Personalised learning underpins education reform in the United Kingdom, supporting high quality teaching tailored to individual student need (Bentley & Miller, 2004; Department for Education and Skills, 2004; Leadbeater, 2004). In the United States, The Big Picture Company creates student-centred high schools in which students design their own learning paths with the support of community advisors and mentors. The New Century High Schools Initiative transforms under-performing New York City high schools into community-based schools based on personalised learning. In Finland, schools design the learning environment and curriculum that best serves individual students (Schleicher, 2006).

The belief that “engaged learning occurs when the lives, knowledges, interests, bodies and energies of young people are at the centre of the classroom and school” (Thomson & Comber, 2003) has strong currency amongst Australian educationalists. Hill and Russell (1999) set down the challenge for middle years

education some years ago: “any serious reform of the middle years involves a more student-focused approach to teaching”. A key national policy recommends that teachers use “a flexible range of pedagogical and curriculum approaches which provide for the range of individual differences” (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996). Recent Victorian policy states that learning is best supported when there is “a curriculum that takes students’ backgrounds and interests into account, and when there are teaching and assessment practices that are flexible and responsive to student needs” (Department of Education & Training, 2005a).

Australian schools have trialled student-centred approaches to the middle years for around a decade. Cole (2001) categorises these approaches as follows:

- Brain-based teaching, problem-based learning or inquiry-based learning: based upon Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and the idea of the Thinking Curriculum, these approaches centre around deep and challenging learning, rich tasks, problem solving and decision making in authentic situations, high levels of student decision-making, a cooperative classroom culture, supportive relationships and assessment as an intrinsic part of the learning experience
- The Authentic Curriculum: exemplified by the Coalition of Essential Schools in the United States and the New Basics project in Queensland, this states that teaching and learning should be personalised to the greatest possible extent, with the teacher acting as a coach for the student’s active, self-directed learning
- Constructivism: this proposes that teachers tailor instruction to students’ needs and interests. It recognises that the more relevance students see in the curriculum and its learning tasks, the more their interest in learning grows. Like the other approaches, it assesses student learning in the context of daily classroom investigations and not through separate formal tests.

Other initiatives include community-based learning (Cumming, 1999), where meaningful learning takes place in the real-life context of the community and where the student is at the centre of the learning process. Whatever name it goes by, a student-centred approach to teaching and learning is one that:

- Is based on a challenging curriculum connected to students’ lives
- Caters for individual differences in interest, achievement and learning styles

- Develops students' ability to take control over their own learning
- Uses authentic tasks that require complex thought and allow time for exploration
- Emphasises building meaning and understanding rather than completing tasks
- Involves cooperation, communication and negotiation
- Connects learning to the community

(Centre for Applied Educational Research, 2002; Hopkins, 2006).

While student-centred learning under different names has been around for a number of years, earlier observations about its take-up still ring true and support the findings of the Middle Years Research and Development Project that classroom teaching and learning are the slowest aspects of a school to change:

“Some of these reform strategies are practices that have been around for a long time but have not been adopted in a sustained way, others are relatively new practices that are generating high levels of interest and others are ‘emerging big ideas’ that are still being investigated and refined”

(Cole, 2001)

“Many schools still have significantly more to learn in terms of establishing the pre-conditions for students to become literate, to become connected to school, to engage with learning and to become independent and thoughtful learners”

(Centre for Applied Educational Research, 2002).

Education Foundation Australia conducts two programs – ruMAD? (Are You Making A Difference?) and The City

Centre – that help schools implement a student-centred approach to learning in the middle years and Year 10. In 2005, despite specific targeting by the Foundation, schools in the most disadvantaged areas of Victoria remained underrepresented in both programs. With philanthropic, corporate and government support, the Foundation is increasing both the extent and the quality of participation of such schools in its programs, but its experience illustrates the fact that schools in the poorest areas have the least capacity to adopt the practices that may bring about the greatest improvement in student outcomes.

One encouraging development in the Victorian school landscape is that student-centred or personalised learning strongly informs the Department of Education's statewide strategy, the Blueprint for Government Schools (Department of Education & Training, 2003) and the new directions now emerging from it. The Blueprint aims to improve student learning, opportunities and outcomes in all Victorian schools by placing students at the centre of a new approach to curriculum, standards and assessment. Schools are expected to redesign their curriculum, teaching approaches and organisational arrangements to challenge, engage and cater for all students. One Blueprint Strategy, the Leading Schools Fund, provides a model for innovative whole secondary school improvement to motivate students to learn and stay at school. Participating schools are expected to think beyond traditional practices and structures, share effective practice and develop partnerships between other schools in their geographic area.

This table shows the close parallels between the United Kingdom personalised learning model and the Blueprint's Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12. Despite the different language employed, these strategies are based on similar principles, which this study summarises under the term ‘student-centred learning’.

	Assessment	Students at the centre	School culture	Community connection	School organisation
UK	Assessment for learning and the use of evidence and dialogue to identify every pupil's learning needs and the steps they need to take	Curriculum entitlement and choice that allows for breadth of study, personal relevance and flexible curriculum pathways  Teaching and learning strategies that actively engage and challenge learners and develop their ability to focus on their learning skills and their capability to take ownership of their own progress		Strong partnerships beyond the classroom, both to enrich learning and support care of pupils in the wider sense through, for example, home-school links, inter-agency work, or community partnerships	Creative approaches to school organisation, to enable a student-centred approach which integrates performance with wellbeing and inclusive approaches with attainment
VIC	Assessment practices are an integral part of teaching and learning	The learning environment promotes independence, interdependence and self motivation	The learning environment is supportive and productive  Students are challenged and supported to develop deep levels of thinking and application	Learning connects strongly with communities and practice beyond the classroom	



# Turning around disadvantage through learning

“Few things are as strongly connected with social disadvantage and poverty as limited or deficient schooling”  
(Vinson, 2004b)

“Real innovation would be about breaking the link between social position and learning outcomes so clearly evident in the map of achievement. It would be about depth of learning, about intrinsic learning satisfaction, about interactive teaching styles that fully engage learners, about transparency of learning objectives, evaluation of programs from a pedagogical perspective, about freedom of choice based on interest and enjoyment of learning”  
(Teese, 2006)

Recent education policy in Australia is strongly informed by the finding that good teaching practice and greater student engagement with school can reduce the impact of disadvantage. It is also informed by the recognition that without attention, curriculum and pedagogy can exacerbate or perpetuate inequity and that the low performance of poor students can be compounded by the low expectations of their schools and families (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982; Grant, Badger, Wilkinson, Rogers & Munt, 2003; Haberman, 1991; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001; Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Thomson, 2002; Zappalà & Considine, 2001).

There is a clear and established view that student-centred learning can provide part of the solution to disadvantage. It was proposed 25 years ago that the learning needs of poorer students would be better met if learning began with their own experience (Connell et al, 1982). Haberman's (1991) prescription for good teaching for disadvantaged students is clearly a student-centred approach: good teaching happens “whenever students are actively involved, (...) whenever students are directly involved in a real-life experience, (...) whenever students are involved in planning what they will be doing, (...) and whenever students are involved in reflecting on their own lives”. This view is explicit in current Victorian and related international policy. The Blueprint for Government Schools sets out to reduce disparities in student outcomes that arise from differences in socio-economic background. The United Kingdom's personalised learning policy aims to overcome the effect of student disadvantage on educational achievement (Bentley & Miller, 2004).

Internationally, the comparatively few schools that combine high student poverty with high achievement have similar characteristics. They tailor learning and assessment to individual student needs. They have a challenging curriculum that is connected to students' lives and that emphasises depth of understanding and control over one's learning. They also:

- Attain their good results through a deliberate process of school improvement and an integrated approach to change that includes teaching, curriculum, assessment, school organisation and school culture
- Feature effective and supportive school leadership, collaborative decision-making between leadership and staff and a cooperative culture amongst teachers
- Set high expectations of students accompanied by respectful and caring relationships amongst students and between teachers and students
- Have high teacher quality and policies, structures and resources that support continued teacher development
- Build relationships with parents and the wider community that support families and enrich learning

(Cole, 2001; Elmore, 2006b; Hill & Russell, 1999; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Murray et al, 2004; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995, in Fullan, 2000).

With a few variations, these also describe the characteristics of schools that perform better than comparable schools (Hill, 2001). While this project is not an investigation of what constitutes an effective school, its findings bear a strong relation to those of the school effectiveness field.

# The case study schools

# Disadvantage in the schools

“Real innovation is not going to come from the high end of schooling. (...) We have to look elsewhere for innovation – for system-wide change in the fundamental qualities of teaching and learning. And our most likely candidates are going to be the schools where everything depends on relationships between individuals. These are the disadvantaged schools. It is in these schools that the fundamental question of a child’s relationship to learning in a social environment is posed in its most acute form. It is in these schools where nothing can be taken for granted regarding a child’s readiness for school, his or her language skills, attitude to work in a classroom, respect for others, comprehension of the ‘craft’ of being a pupil”

(Teese, 2006)

Most of the case study schools for this project are located in the City of Maribyrnong in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne, which includes some of the most disadvantaged suburbs in Victoria. In the 2001 Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas measure of relative disadvantage, Maribyrnong had the second lowest socio-economic score in Victoria and one of its suburbs, Braybrook, was the most disadvantaged suburb in the state. At the start of 2006, the region had the highest proportion of government schools in Victoria with a significant number of students from low socio-economic backgrounds or for whom English is not a first language. A new study (Lamb, 2007) shows that an affluent student from an eastern Melbourne government school has seven times the chance of getting into a medical course than a poorer student from a western Melbourne government school and that an affluent student from an eastern suburbs independent school has almost 16 times the chance of getting into the same course than a poorer student from a government school in the west.

The nine case study schools are all situated within 20 kilometres from the heart of the Melbourne central business district, with enrolments varying from around 100 to over 1,000 students. They have amongst the highest proportions in the state of enrolled students who receive government support through the Education Maintenance Allowance or Youth Allowance and/or who have a language background other than

English. They also tend to have larger than average numbers of students with disabilities.

Many of the students at these schools live in a single parent family, have at least one parent who has been unemployed for the past twelve months and at least one parent whose level of education is at Year 9 or below. Many are new arrivals who have experienced serious disruption to their schooling and still show the effects of trauma. In two of the schools, the majority of students live in the nearby public housing high-rise estate. Others are transient, enrolling in the school for a short period of time before moving on. At Debney Park Secondary College, for example, more than 30 per cent of students in the school in February 2004 were new to the school once Year 7 enrolments were excluded (Boston Consulting Group, 2006).

The impact of family and community disadvantage in these schools echoes the research findings outlined earlier. It shows up in students’ lack of home access to fundamental learning tools like computers and in what the schools see as students’ limited life experience within the context of Melbourne’s social and cultural offerings. Students rarely leave the suburb in which they live. Their daily experience is severely limited by poverty and long parental working hours. Leisure activity is focused around television and, for older students, the local mall.

Disadvantage also manifests in more fundamental and disturbing ways – hunger, malnutrition and the trauma of family breakdown:

*“My performance suffers if I’ve had a late night or a hard time outside work. The experiences that some of these kids face before the school day would make my toenails curl”*

(principal).

One secondary college runs a breakfast program and teachers frequently carry around packets of biscuits for students who have not eaten before school. Many students show low levels of social skills, which mean that the schools spend a lot of time managing student behaviour. In the primary schools in particular, the middle years programs include a strong focus on social and behavioural skills.

As in other disadvantaged schools, low literacy is one of the biggest barriers to boosting student achievement. Levels of literacy and numeracy by the age of 14 are strong indicators

of future educational success (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2005). While many middle years students struggle with the literacy demands of the curriculum, the struggle is greatly amplified in these schools:

*“They can’t do anything else if they can’t read and write”*  
(principal).

Many of the schools have linked student-centred learning to new literacy programs drawing on the work of Dr Carol Christensen at the University of Queensland and Dr David Rose at the University of Sydney. These programs change classroom practice to enable success for all learners and are associated with improved student motivation and achievement.

# The initiatives

## The Government Schools

### Debney Meadows Primary School

The school is at the extreme end of the spectrum for levels of socio-economic disadvantage and the proportion of students with a language background other than English even when compared to like schools. It is one of five schools in the Schools for Innovation and Excellence cluster that includes Debney Park Secondary College. Like the other schools in the cluster, it is using the School Community Regional Arts for Youth Program (SCRAYP) to provide creative learning experiences to boost student engagement and achievement. SCRAYP runs arts based programs in a number of western region schools, using community arts mentors trained to work with young people in developing performances related to themselves and their community. Its partnership with the cluster began in 2003 when the participating schools began a strategy to enhance middle years student engagement and learning through the arts informed by Middle Years Research and Development Project research and the experience of other schools: SCRAYP had been successfully trialled at another local school.

Middle years teaching at the school is strongly centred around the social and behavioural context for learning and classes are kept small to support closer relationships between teachers and students. The school has engaged educational consultant Kathy Walker to help develop models of teacher pedagogy and professional learning teams. Formal and informal feedback indicates that there have been significant improvements in student self confidence, group dynamics, language skill development and student engagement since the introduction of the SCRAYP program.

### Debney Park Secondary College

The College has a long history of catering for disadvantaged students, but when refugees from the Horn of Africa began entering the school four years ago, the level of educational challenge reached a new high. The learning needs of these students, who now make up a large proportion of the school's population, were clearly not going to be met by the teaching and learning approaches previously in place for Years 7 and 8. Although these had been effective, the low levels of literacy and numeracy and poor attitudes to school of this new wave required more support for individual learning needs. This in turn indicated new organisational structures and better teacher-student relationships to support learning.

The College set up a staged whole school reform process from the start, piloting a new Year 7 and 8 model before extending it to Year 9 and later, the Years 10 to 12 program. The school has now been restructured into a Middle School (Years 7 - 9) and Senior School (Years 10 - 12). The middle years program, Towards Equity and Excellence – Every Child Matters, replaces traditional year levels with small classes to which students are allocated according to their personal learning needs and preferred learning styles. Each group is taught by a team of just four teachers. This team approach enables close attention to student welfare and attendance as well as to learning. Individual learning plans are developed for each student within a restructured curriculum built around four integrated Learning Areas: Communication, Investigation, Recreation and Design Briefs. Rich tasks integrated across these Learning Areas promote student interest and deep understanding.

As well as a restructured curriculum and teacher allocation, the program features two innovative community learning resources: SCRAYP and soundhouse@debney. The four components working together are seen as indispensable to its success. SoundHouse is a not-for-profit project of the Music Alliance and the Department of Education now based on the school campus in a new purpose-built multimedia centre enabled by the Leading Schools Fund. Its engagement, leadership and hands-on learning principles fit well with the middle years approach. Extensive interviews with students indicate improvements in self confidence, engagement and spoken language skills since its introduction.

The school's ability to diagnose student need and develop an extensive response has its roots in its history as a middle years reform leader. The College participated in both the Middle Years Research and Development Project and the Department of Education's Access to Excellence initiative. The principal at the time dedicated the school to a solid year of research before the implementation of the new program, drawing on models developed by the Middle Years Research and Development Project and, later, through the Local Learning and Employment Network. Interestingly, one of these models was Gilmore College for Girls. Learning from observation of other schools continues as the program develops.

### Gilmore College for Girls

Gilmore College for Girls began its middle years reform seven years ago spurred by a number of needs: to turn around low Year 7 enrolments and a significant leakage of students at

other year levels, to enable deeper learning and meet individual learning needs, to build better teacher-student relationships and to improve the school's connection with its community. It also wanted to re-energise a staff disillusioned and somewhat demoralised by student demographic changes, political pressure and falling enrolments.

The school had previously poured time and money into teacher professional development and curriculum development but this was not being reflected in real change in the classroom. Deeper structures needed to be addressed. The middle years research that was beginning to filter through to schools consistently showed that sustainable middle years reform includes structural change. The College realised that its existing structures were blocking its attempts to integrate and streamline curriculum, help students feel more connected to school and build stronger relationships between teachers and students.

The formal starting point for reform was the Middle Years Conference program run by the Department of Education & Training in 1999 and 2000. For the first time, the curriculum leadership team saw a simple and practical model that could shift the standard curriculum and meet student learning needs. Following the first conference, the school elected to host and participate in a short professional development program run by Deakin University that combined middle years research and theory with practical tools for implementation. The College then became a pilot school in the Middle Years Literacy Project run with the University. Synchronistically, one of the three school curriculum leaders was undertaking Masters study with Peter Hill, a leader in middle years research and reform.

In 2000, the school implemented 72 minute periods and a four period day across the school, led by the middle years, to overcome the fractured experience for both teachers and students of dealing with six different classes, subjects or year levels each day. The longer periods support changes in teaching styles and practices and provide opportunities for a range of teaching and learning activities within that time frame. They give students more time to explore issues in depth and encourage a calmer, more focused school experience.

With this structural change came a streamlining of the curriculum. Like many secondary schools, the College previously had a fractured, unbalanced curriculum that had evolved slowly over time. In its place, it introduced a remodelled curriculum, with at least one major integrated curriculum project at each year level. These have led to a more holistic, big picture view of the curriculum at each year level and a culture where teachers see opportunities for shared assessment tasks or linking of skills across learning areas. The College believes that all of this is leading to the development of a relevant and responsive curriculum that more effectively addresses the needs of middle years students by encouraging independent and deeper learning

and enabling students to analyse and synthesise knowledge across curriculum areas.

The College also introduced an extensive team teaching model across Years 7 - 9. Most teachers now work in team teaching structures for almost half of their allotment. The timetable has been restructured to allow two key teachers to teach a home group for at least two subjects each, one for Maths/Science and the other for English/Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). This means that each Year 7 - 9 group has two key teachers for 12 out of 20 periods or at least 60 per cent of their week. Teachers spend more time with students, getting to know them better and becoming better able to assess and cater for their needs. Students spend significant time in a more secure structure that encourages risk taking and independent learning.

Each home group team of two teachers works closely together on both curriculum and welfare issues for the students in their care including monitoring of attendance, lateness, classroom management, academic achievement and parent contact. This promotes a more holistic view of student need and greater support between teachers. For Year 7 students, it also provides a more comfortable transition from primary school, which uses a similar structure. A year level team brings together all home group teams to address issues facing that year level. Finally, the three year level teams work together on overall middle school issues to form common approaches to welfare or curriculum issues.

The College cites a range of anecdotal benefits for students since the introduction of new middle years practice. Students feel that the school is more student-oriented; that they are known as individuals and have people who are responsible for them and who care about all aspects of their schooling; and that they have much more self-directed work and greater opportunities to negotiate and choose what and how they learn.

### Laverton Secondary College

The College's middle years reforms have been strongly informed by models developed by other schools. After visits to Brooks High School in Tasmania and Belga College in Western Australia, the whole staff was in-serviced on their approaches. Both schools have been successful in turning around student learning outcomes in low socio-economic areas. The College also received in-servicing from Fitzroy Secondary College, which has been restructured around student learning needs.

The College's reforms, supported by the Leading Schools Fund, aim to create a student centred culture to cater for individual needs and differences. It has revised the middle years timetable to create a new pastoral care model, smaller class sizes and a new teaching and learning team structure to drive change in teacher practice. This includes Pedagogy Teams and a Teaching and Learning Leader to manage the teams, coordinate the



development and implementation of a student centred learning culture and work towards meeting literacy, numeracy and engagement targets.

The school has researched and begun the implementation of new learner centred pedagogies that personalise the educational experience. Teachers have undergone professional development to better understand how students learn and how to cater for different learning styles. Individual learning plans are being developed for all students to reflect their skills and learning styles.

The middle years curriculum has been redeveloped as a series of integrated units of study that build on and challenge students' prior knowledge and perceptions. This allows students to see real purposes in their learning, experience a sense of achievement and use thinking tools to solve problems. The curriculum has a focus on inquiry based, experiential and purposeful learning based on topics chosen in response to student interest. These topics are intended as vehicles to help students work towards an understanding of 'big ideas' as well as specific learning outcomes. With Leading Schools Fund support, the College has also refurbished an area of the school as an eLearning centre for the sole use of Year 7 and 8 students to better support their new learning activities.

Despite the program's short duration to date, teachers have observed significant improvement in student-teacher and student-student communication. Discipline problems have declined, with significant drops in previously high levels of student detention and suspension. Teachers also claim marked literacy improvements in the pilot group Years 7 and 8 compared to non-participating groups such as Year 9. It is difficult to assess the impact of the teaching and learning approach in isolation, however, as the new middle years program is strongly linked to a new restorative justice strategy, combining new pedagogy and curriculum with new student support mechanisms. The 2006 AIM test will provide the first quantitative evidence of its impact.

The College has a history of using local resources to support student learning. It nurtures partnerships with locally based industry, business, philanthropy and community organisations that have brought significant funding and opportunities into the school. Despite this entrepreneurial activity, the full potential of the middle years program is still hampered by limited financial resources that preclude the kind of community-based learning experiences intrinsic to it.

### **Taylors Lakes Secondary College**

The College began its middle years reform in 2001, making a financial commitment to this area of the school, establishing professional learning teams, working to create shared beliefs about learning amongst teachers and trialling a Year 9

community project, Reach Your Potential. A turning point in the reform process came in 2002 when a group of eight principal class and leading teacher staff attended the Beyond the Middle Conference in Queensland. This required a significant and unprecedented allocation of teacher resources.

Leading Schools Fund support later allowed the leadership team and teachers to attend more middle years conferences, visit Victorian and interstate schools within the independent, government and independent systems to observe successful practice and draw on Education Foundation Australia's City Centre program. The College developed a close mentoring relationship with Essendon North Primary School, which had already developed a thinking curriculum program, and employed consultant Lyn Davie as a critical friend on an ongoing basis. The school's involvement in the Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development Project also provided essential access to research. Together with a review of Years 7 to 9, this paved the way for the full implementation in 2004 of a new model of learning for Year 9.

By the end of 2004, the new model had already seen improved student engagement and lower truancy, suspension and failure rates. It also brought about some improvement in teacher practice, but this needed to be formalised and expanded more widely across the middle years. In 2005, the College began the development of a new whole school strategic plan to boost student learning, especially in literacy and numeracy, enhance student engagement and improve post-school transitions to further education or sustainable employment. As part of this strategy, the Year 9 model was expanded to Years 7 and 8. The timetable was restructured to allow all Year 7 and 8 English and Maths classes to be held at the same time and to allow common teacher planning time, supported by literacy and numeracy support staff and the teacher coaches who work with other teachers to improve classroom practice. The school has begun the development of individual learning plans and assessment approaches more directly linked to student learning.

In 2006, with Leading Schools Fund support, the College has opened a new middle years learning centre, the SPACE (Sharing, Pedagogy, Achieving, Community, Excellence). SPACE is a purpose-designed building with a range of learning settings and rich information and communications technology resources. It complements the school's existing middle years reform and provides a centre of professional development for teachers in the school and the local Innovation and Excellence Cluster. It is supported by the equivalent of three specialist teacher coaches, each with a dedicated allotment of 13 periods a week (more than half their weekly timetable) to develop the centre as a focus of professional development and work as mentors for teachers in planning and delivering a thinking curriculum.

## The Catholic Schools

The four Catholic system schools are all implementing a student-centred, inquiry-based learning approach as part of their response to the Middle Years Literacy Project, which aims to improve literacy teaching and learning in the middle years. The Project includes a professional development program that supports schools in developing teaching approaches to engage all students. Its key intervention is the Learning to Read, Reading to Learn program, which is one strand of the sector-wide Literacy Advance Strategy begun in 1998 to improve literacy teaching and student achievement in Catholic schools. The link between literacy improvement and student engagement has prompted the schools to develop approaches that ensure that learning is purposeful, relevant and authentic.

At Christ the King Primary School, for example, a reformed Year 5 and 6 program is built around a curriculum that meets students' individual needs and enables them to be active learners. Units of work are organized around the four pillars of education proposed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation: Learning to Know, Learning to Be, Learning to Do and Learning to Live Together. Learning experiences are organised using an inquiry approach developed by consultant Kath Murdoch that begins with students' prior knowledge and experience and moves through a process to extend, challenge and refine that knowledge. This approach starts from the idea that students are actively involved in learning and continually reconstruct their understanding as a result of their experience. It encourages students to participate in active investigation and to move from the acquisition of facts to the development of deep understanding. The school believes that this approach motivates students and caters for different abilities and learning styles.

At St Monica's Primary School, the middle years initiative is in its third year. Its implementation was sparked by negative assessments of the Year 5 and 6 students' reading and writing capabilities. Three years in, school based assessments and state-wide testing show a steady improvement in achievement. Teacher learning has been central to these achievements. The school has made a clear commitment to its long term sustainability that is strongly supported by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne. There is a good prognosis for this sustainability because the program is primarily dependent on an allocation of teacher time that does not require additional resources or put great pressure on other areas of the school. This does not mean, of course, that extra teacher resources are not needed.

At St John's Primary School, Footscray, the middle years strategy comprises a variety of group work experiences that enable students to feel that they can work within their comfort zone in a group context that suits their immediate needs. Teaching and learning activities are determined by students' real life experiences and interests and new experiences, both within and

outside of the school, open up further learning. The school uses a scaffold approach to teaching and learning, where new learning builds on the foundation of what is already known and can be done. It aims to create a learning environment that promotes independence, communicates the belief that learning matters, sets high expectations for all students and encourages them to become independent and self-motivated.

Our Lady's School builds its Year 5 and 6 program on the same set of assumptions about student learning that underpin the rest of the school: that each child is capable of learning, that students learn at different rates and in different ways and that students learn through demonstration, hands-on experience and practice. The school's middle years approach aims to provide learning experiences that are relevant to all students and relate to their lives, match their learning style and pace and enable students to apply their knowledge and skills in practical situations. It involves students as active participants in the planning and organisation of their studies and in the evaluation of their learning. In the first years of the Middle Years Literacy Project implementation, the Catholic Education Office Melbourne provided a great deal of professional development to participating schools. The school attributes its positive student outcomes in part to the strong professional development support it has received through this project. Like the other Catholic schools interviewed, the school now purchases its own professional development or provides it through peer-peer learning.



# Learnings from the schools

Despite differences in school sector, size and student profile, the commitment of the case study schools to meeting student need and the factors that have supported and challenged this commitment are remarkably similar.

# Finding and owning workable models

“Most schools probably still exist as isolated islands of practice”

(Elmore, 2006a)

“Under-performing schools grab at any offer of support. It is those schools that are not aware that they are doing this that are struggling the hardest”

Jenny Brown, Education Foundation Australia

Effective leaders in disadvantaged schools make use of external opportunities to generate improvement (Harris & Chapman, 2002). The case study schools are all strongly involved in the educational reform agenda in train in Victoria and their own reforms operate in the context of systemic initiatives that they describe as highly supportive. The Catholic system schools benefit from the strong policy mesh between their practice and the Catholic Education Office Melbourne’s Middle Years Literacy Project. The government secondary schools see the Department of Education Leading Schools Fund as an important imprimatur for their reforms. All view the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) as a key systemic development that supports their attempts to improve student learning:

*“VELS is one of the best curriculum documents I’ve ever seen”*

(principal)

*“It has given us a licence to be flexible in meeting students’ needs, not only in terms of philosophy but also by giving us a prescribed document that gives authority to our strategy”*

(principal).

It is characteristic of these schools that they willingly participate in systemic reforms: most have taken a lead role in a number of initiatives over the years. Both the Middle Years Literacy Project and the Leading Schools Fund are elective: schools must apply to participate and, in the case of the Fund, strongly compete for participation. The fact that all of the eligible case study schools have gained this funding is notable. It is also notable that in most cases, the schools did not wait for systemic initiatives to prompt their reforms but independently prioritised student-centred learning for the middle years in response to escalating student need or falling literacy and numeracy levels. Nevertheless, the resources provided by systemic reforms are key capacity builders for the schools and all agree that change would have taken much longer without them:

*“The student need was irrefutable: we would have prioritised it in some way, but the Leading Schools Fund has pushed things on a lot”*

(principal)

*“We were doing things like this before the Leading Schools Fund, but on a shoestring and not to the same degree of development”*

(principal)

*“It was a lucky coincidence that the middle years focus came up at a time when we needed to change. We would have done it anyway, but we would have stumbled around a lot longer”*

(teacher)

*“All of our reform has been begun without additional resources. The Leading Schools Fund will now allow us to continue our work with far better physical resources”*

(teacher).

Education Foundation Australia’s experience shows that schools trying to meet the needs of disadvantaged students often equate improvement with new programs, seizing new offerings without the ability to integrate them into existing commitments or sustain them. Ultimately, this drains their already fragile capacity. By contrast, the case study schools filter new opportunities through their own values and priorities and only select those that will build their internal capacity. They have a clear view of the kind of external support they need:

*“We used to seek grants quite often, but they were tied in to things that didn’t fit our own plans. We came to a decision a year ago that we would do less of this so that we wouldn’t be forced to develop things just to get our hands on some money”*

(principal)

*“There are too many organisations providing money for projects. This encourages many schools to adopt any number of short-term programs just to get their hands on some money. Consolidation of funds into long-term projects that support effective teacher development through access to excellent pedagogy and mentoring*

*“would have more long-term benefits for teachers and therefore for students”*

(principal).

The opportunities that the schools do take up include those offered by business and philanthropy. The government system schools have all implemented Education Foundation Australia’s programs at various times, using ruMAD?, the City Centre and the now concluded Green Seed program to build their student-centred practice and participating in Back To School Day to provide positive role models for students.

Ironically, despite the plethora of programs on offer to schools, one of the biggest challenges to school innovation is finding proven models. It is widely accepted that schools and school systems need to operate as professional learning communities that share effective practice (Elmore, 2006a; Fullan, 2000 and 2006; Hargreaves, 1998, 2003a and 2003b; Hill & Russell, 1999; Hopkins, 2004 and 2006; Istance, 2006), but an unpublished study conducted by the Victorian Schools Innovation Commission in partnership with Education Foundation Australia and ANZ Trustees shows that school innovation is often hampered by lack of knowledge about what has worked elsewhere. While the four Catholic schools were given a model for their practice through the Middle Years Literacy Project, all of the government schools developed their student-centred learning approaches by drawing on research and the successful experience of other schools that have turned around student outcomes in similarly low socio-economic communities. This is part of an ongoing process to inform their practice as it develops:

*“It is no good trying to reinvent the wheel. You need to learn from what has already been done with success”*

(principal)

*“We’re trying to cover all bases, to see what works best for the kids”*

(principal).

The schools believe that their own models of practice are highly transferable. Many share their findings within their system through conference presentations and other means: as recipients of Leading Schools Fund support, the four secondary colleges are in fact obliged to share their learnings with other schools. Local school clusters including the Schools for Innovation and Excellence clusters offer an avenue for shared learning but their impact is sometimes limited. One cluster to which some of the case study schools belong is troubled by a lack of clear direction not helped by staff changes within participating schools. In another, the needs of participating schools are too diverse for the cluster to provide much support. Competition between schools can also get in the way of a true collegiate relationship:

*“Even within the Catholic system, schools are competitive for students. It means we’re selective about how we work together”*

(principal)

*“Schools are still competitive for enrolments and there are few formal ways of sharing your learnings”*

(teacher).

# Building teacher practice

“Innovation in itself should not be a valued school behaviour any longer. Instead, schools should be able to be innovative in how they reflect on and improve their practice”

Graham Marshall, The University of Melbourne

“There is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms and classrooms of other teachers in other schools confronting similar problems”

(Elmore, 2004, in Fullan, 2006)

Ongoing teacher learning is an essential feature of an effective school (Department of Education & Training, 2005a & 2005b; Elmore, 2004, in Fullan, 2006; Elmore, 2006a & 2006b; Johnson, 2003). It is particularly important in sustaining improved student learning in disadvantaged schools (Grant et al, 2003). Teachers don't need to be convinced of this: they are demanding their own learning. In Victoria University's long-term work with western Melbourne schools, the greatest stated need of teachers is more time to develop and share their practice. In a recent review of one state public education system, teachers consistently requested more funding for teacher exchanges and expert support from consultants, mentors and other schools (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2005).

The case study schools are working to create lasting structures to develop teachers' professional knowledge and skills and spread consistent practice across the school. All have placed teacher learning at the centre of their middle years reform and all have developed some form of professional learning team, often using the Professional Action-Inquiry Team model developed by Dr Neville Johnson at The University of Melbourne, which encourages teachers to regularly and formally share their experience and insights. As Johnson (2003) points out, schools have many staff groups, committees and teams, but these tend to be for administrative purposes. The professional learning team is specifically dedicated to improving classroom practice. In various iterations, it is strongly advocated by education reformers internationally: “if there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: the right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the

quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting” (Schmoker, 2004).

In most of the schools, middle years professional learning teams operate within a whole school context where all teachers come together in regular professional learning forums, often for one timetabled period a week. Some of the middle years reforms began with shared professional learning: at one school, after four teachers undertook training to meet the needs of challenging students, professional development was organised for the whole staff. This seeded the approach now enshrined within the middle years program. At some of the schools, teachers are timetabled together so that they can meet for up to 90 minutes a week to share ideas and act as informal coaches for one another. Some have also introduced peer-to-peer learning where experienced teachers help others develop their understanding of student-centred learning and establish it in their own classrooms.

A number of the schools have ongoing and highly valued relationships with academics and consultants who act as critical friends or mentors for their work:

*“There is a lot of knowledge in schools, but change needs specific expertise. Schools must have outside expertise and mentors coming in on a regular basis and helping to build protocols and processes for teacher learning”*

(principal).

Some have created specialist roles such as a Middle Years Literacy Coordinator or Teacher Coach to support teacher learning:

*“To embed new practice, you need someone who can model your new teaching strategy for other teachers in the classroom and give ongoing support in planning curriculum and assessment”*

(principal).

At one school, three Year 7 coordinators are each allocated three periods a week to work in other teachers' classrooms to support struggling students and give indirect support to staff. While this not a formal teacher learning process, it leads to a sharing of teaching approaches:

*“Less confident teachers are learning from other teachers”*

(teacher).

Many of the teachers also use informal action research to assess the impact of their new practice:

*“It’s learning on the job. We’re learning all the time, we’re constantly testing what works and we’re adjusting”*

(teacher).

As one school says, working cooperatively changes the daily practice of teachers. The schools all view these learning structures as indispensable:

*“If you don’t invest in the teacher, you can forget the whole thing. You need to support the teacher in the classroom, in their teaching practice, in teams, across the school”*

(principal)

*“Being able to work with more experienced teachers is invaluable. There is a very rich exchange of ideas that wouldn’t happen otherwise”*

(teacher)

*“To meet the needs of individual students, you can’t just rely on what you used to know. Teachers need to be equipped to take risks in the classroom and to help the kids do the same”*

(principal)

*“Some teachers will get together to share learning regardless of formal structures, but the professional learning team is integral to our strategy”*

(teacher)

*“It is no longer alright to shut yourself away in your own isolated classroom. It has become important to work together, sharing expertise and having a professional dialogue”*

(principal).

Hill and Russell observed in 1999 that most middle years strategies were short-lived. The schools’ professional learning strategies are an attempt to build practice in a way that counteracts this trend, but sufficient and sustainable funding remains a challenge. Most of the schools prioritise professional learning within their budgets, but this happens at the cost of other needs:

*“The school spends an extraordinary amount of money on professional development and teacher learning”*

(principal)

*“We spend an enormous amount of our budget on teacher learning, yet staff are still identifying it as a need. It is in our action plan, but the biggest issue is resourcing it”*

(principal).

The development of good student-centred teaching practice takes effort and experimentation. Lack of funded time is a barrier to exporting this practice across the schools:

*“It is very hard for the middle years teachers to share what we’ve learned with other staff: there are too many other priorities and time pressures”*

(teacher).

It is also a source of frustration for dedicated staff who want to see progress quickly:

*“You know that changing your practice as a teacher will change outcomes for the kids, so you want it to all happen at once”*

(principal)

*“This approach to teaching needs real planning and preparation”*

(teacher)

*“To turn around disadvantage, we need time: to learn, to share ideas, to observe other teachers”*

(teacher).

The secondary schools have a commitment to ensure lasting change after their Leading Schools Fund grants expire, but none underestimate the difficulty in this:

*“There is pressure from the Department to meet the Leading Schools Fund goals within three years and then make it sustainable. In reality, teachers need a year of planning to get used to the new idea, work out the strategy, build a team over a period of time and understand why they’re doing what they’ve been asked to do. Staff need a push and student needs have become urgent over the last years, but the timelines are still very fast for most staff – it’s a lot happening all at once”*

(teacher).



One strong message from the schools is that teacher learning has to happen in the school. This echoes the views of commentators like Elmore (2004, in Fullan, 2006) that “improvement is more a function of learning to do the right things in the settings where you work”. Teacher professional leave programs run by the Department of Education and Catholic Education Office Melbourne aim to build a professional learning culture, but they mainly provide funds to replace staff who attend off-site professional development or observe practice in other schools. The schools appreciate the value of these offerings but point to an important shortcoming in their delivery:

*“Teacher Professional Leave is very valuable, but it takes teachers out of the classroom”*

(principal).

Ironically, this means that teacher learning happens outside its central context. It can also mean that while teachers are undertaking professional learning, casual replacement staff run their classes in a way that contradicts the new practice, disrupting the classroom climate and taking time to reverse. The principals are unanimous in preferring an increase in their core staffing or discretionary, untagged funding that they could allocate to additional staffing:

*“Every time you take teachers out of their classroom, the ramifications are enormous. The Catholic Education Office mainly funds external professional development, but this doesn’t give schools the capacity to fund in-school learning, where teachers can observe each other and get together to share ideas. Small amounts of money for learning through the clusters don’t allow the systematic development of teacher learning”*

*“Time release for teachers is still the biggest barrier to learning, especially when it comes to watching other schools at work. CRT (classroom release time) is not the answer”*

*“We need to think about how to do it differently. What we need is an increase in core staff instead of CRT to allow a more feasible way of freeing teachers up for learning. These core staff would carry the school practice into the classroom. CRT teachers can’t do this”*

*“The Leading Schools Fund is on the right track: three additional core staff per year. Schools need continued additional funding for teacher learning”*

*“In a school like this, there is an argument for having a teacher and a half for each class. This would give us the timetable flexibility we need for teacher learning”*

*“Untagged funding is essential. Otherwise, schools have to fit someone else’s agenda to get the money. Extended Leading Schools Fund funding would be the biggest enabler”*

*“If I could have one more teacher in my core allocation, I’d be happy: an extra person to release teachers for learning”.*

The Blueprint for Government Schools outlines an agenda for shared teacher learning and good practice, but the challenge for schools is to develop the internal capacity to apply this agenda in a genuine and sustainable way. The experience of the case study schools provides a strong argument for a new organisational model that:

- Provides adequate time within the regular school day for teachers to share learning, observe other teachers and be observed in turn
- Provides time and resources for teachers to find and learn from practice both outside their subject area and outside the school
- Provides substantial time for professional development that is “instructionally focused and designed to enhance student learning” (Elmore, in Farrace, 2002)
- Provides time and resources for teachers to find, engage and work with mentors, coaches and critical friends
- Encourages evidence-based practice including the better use of research in informing teacher practice
- Encourages and supports the transmission of good practice between schools

(Elmore, 2006a).

# Building school structures and culture

“Changing school culture is increasingly recognised as a critical element in schools improving the learning of their students”

(Johnson, 2003)

“Professional learning communities are in fact about establishing new collaborative cultures. Collaborative cultures, ones that focus on building the capacity for continuous improvement, are meant to be a new way of working and learning. They are meant, so to speak, to be enduring capacities, not just another program innovation”

(Fullan, 2006)

Educational change often requires both the restructuring and reculturing of schools. Collaborative school cultures and deep organisational restructuring driven by a commitment to sustained enhanced learning can have a powerful impact on student outcomes (Gray, 1999, in Grant et al, 2003; Oerlemans, 2001).

All of the case study schools are trying to change their structures to meet student need and improve teacher practice. One of their most significant actions is the reorganisation of the timetable to allow block release for professional learning teams. Some schools have sacrificed the flexibility of the general timetable to support this. A number have reorganised the timetable to allow smaller staff-student ratios. Most have also reorganised the crowded middle years curriculum into integrated units with a priority focus on literacy and numeracy and restructured their pastoral care program so that it is better linked to learning.

Around half of the schools are working towards whole school change but are implementing this in stages, piloting student-centred learning in the middle years to observe outcomes, test processes and gather the necessary resources before making a wider commitment. In others, whole school change is happening informally as teachers observe the success of the middle years approach and adopt its elements for their own practice. Two of the secondary schools are not planning an extension of the middle years approach into the later years, but hope that students moving up into these years will carry with them a more engaged attitude and better skill set for learning.

One of the strongest findings of the middle years research is that reforms not integrated into the school culture will eventually

fail. Most of the case study school principals are keenly aware of this –

*“all children can learn given sufficient time and support, but if you don’t transport this belief fully into the school, it doesn’t work”*

(principal)

– and are attempting to build a lasting culture of improvement. In this, they are heeding the warnings of Fullan (2006) and Johnson (2003) about the ineffectiveness of using professional learning as a superficial or transient innovation instead of as a means of creating a collaborative school culture. The government secondary schools are supported in their efforts by the Leading Schools Fund’s Performance and Development Culture process that aims to build a culture of continuous development across government schools by 2008 and at least two of the schools are applying for accreditation under this process.

Some of the schools describe positive cultural change since their introduction of student-centred learning:

*“It is like a new school, because the culture now supports learning in a wider sense”*

(principal)

*“It is no longer OK to work in a deficit model: we must respond to the needs of individual students”*

(principal)

*“We work from kids’ prior knowledge now instead of from textbooks. We are also trying to alter the language of our teaching practice”*

(teacher)

*“Our middle years work is now about supporting individual kids’ specific needs. Ten years ago this didn’t happen”*

(principal).

In others, student-centred learning has arisen out of an existing culture that includes:

- a) responsiveness to student needs: at least five of the schools have a long history of using student-centred strategies to achieve better outcomes and overcome the impact of disadvantage:

*“This school is very ready to put up its hand for new curriculum and learning opportunities to find the best practice for the kids”*

(principal)

*“It is part of the school ethos that the student body has particular learning needs that must be supported: staff understand this strongly”*

(principal)

*“We change to fit the kids; we don’t change the kids to fit us”*

(principal).

- b) knowledgeable and supportive leadership: effective leaders in disadvantaged schools invest in teacher learning and build coherent communities in their schools (Harris & Chapman, 2002). They see it as their role to “support teachers to support students to learn” (Grant et al, 2003). The case study schools all have leaders with a strong, knowledge-based vision for the school or the willingness to support their staff in developing one. Teachers are given a licence to experiment and a high degree of autonomy. They are actively encouraged to try new approaches and strongly supported when they do so:

*“The Principal will give you anything that he can”*

(teacher).

- c) cooperation between staff: effective schools have strong teacher collegiality and cooperation (Cresswell, 2004). While some of the schools are still working to establish this, most believe that it is a feature of their culture:

*“Staff here really do have a common vision for how to support students. They extend the same kind of support to one another”*

(teacher).

- d) resilience and a positive climate: some of the schools have a history of attracting engaged students:

*“Even though we are a Like School Group 9 school, this has never been a sad place. We have always performed above other Group 9 schools”*

(teacher).

Even where recent enrolments have brought significant numbers of needy students, these schools have responded to the challenge rather than being overwhelmed by it. A number face dropping enrolments and the threat of closure, but their culture of purpose and improvement seems to prevent the lowered morale and capacity that usually accompany this situation.

Learnings from Education Foundation Australia’s William Buckland Outreach project show that replicating these cultural factors is difficult: “where schools have not got a history of cultural readiness to innovate to meet the needs of kids and the local community, it takes a lot to establish it” (Liz Suda, Education Foundation Australia). It also supports the finding of the Middle Years Research and Development Project that school reform takes three to five years. In some of the case study schools, cultural change is clearly taking time. A number of the secondary schools in particular are hampered by varying degrees of teacher readiness to take on the new practice:

*“Some teachers thrive in a team and cross-curricular setting. Others find it challenging”*

(teacher)

*“You’d like to see change move more quickly: it comes back to staff willingness to move with you”*

(principal)

*“These kids are hard. Many teachers have been at the school for a long time and are deeply exhausted. Some block new initiatives because they are tired”*

(teacher)

*“The biggest challenge is the teacher challenge”*

(teacher).

Part of the challenge lies in the shared teaching approach that has accompanied the introduction of student-centred learning. Some teachers have welcomed an end to their isolated, teacher-centred classroom. For others, the transition is more painful. One Teacher Coach estimates that half of the staff is struggling with the new approach:

*“I work adventurously with teachers who are already on board. With others, changes are slow. It’s one step forward, two steps back”.*

The school’s principal describes the reforms as happening “*through evolution rather than revolution*”. Another school leader says:

*“We make slow progress, slow steps towards change”.*

This is despite the fact that most of the teachers acknowledge the benefits of student-centred learning for students:

*“Teacher resistance was never on the basis of the core principles of the middle years. Nobody ever challenged the benefits for the kids. All the objections were teacher-centred – they were about teachers’ fears about changing their practice”*

(teacher).



Overcoming these fears is essential. When asked what single factor would make the biggest difference to student outcomes, two principals said:

*“More teachers who consciously think about their pedagogy, who are active learners and conversant with the most current and powerful models for learning, who feel they can take professional risks with kids and work together as a team”*

*“To have all staff on board. Everything else would follow. It all comes down to good teachers”.*

# Measuring outcomes

“To do the ordinary in disadvantaged schools, you have to do extraordinarily well”

Gerard Broadfoot, Education Foundation Australia

“Although there is much talk of values in education, it is unfortunate that what is apparently valued tends to be what can be easily measured. And, what is easily measured is not necessarily what should be measured”

Simon Gipson, St Michael's Grammar School

According to a recent study (Cobbold, 2005), there is little Australian evidence that middle school reform has a conclusive effect on student achievement, although studies do show improvements in student engagement that are mostly attributed to smaller teacher-student ratios and closer teacher-student relationships. The case study schools believe that student-centred learning will build skills in a way that previous approaches have not, but most do not yet have measurement processes in place to show this. What they do cite are marked improvements in student engagement, citing greater confidence and self-esteem, more on-task learning behaviours in the classroom, improved group dynamics – students mixing more widely and being more inclusive of each other – and a greater ability to respond to a more challenging curriculum.

Other anecdotal effects include higher teacher expectations of students and stronger relationships between students and teachers. The schools attribute these changes to a more student-centred classroom, more focused teacher-student relationships, more explicit messages about learning from teachers and greater consistency in approach from class to class and subject to subject. While some of the schools stress that

*“for students at this level of need, change is gradual – it won't happen overnight”*

(teacher),

others describe an almost instant improvement in learning behaviours:

*“Kids are really seeing their own learning develop and improve”*

(teacher)

*“Our kids used to be very passive in the classroom. They are far more active now, more demanding, and have far higher expectations of the learning experience and of their teachers”*

(teacher)

*“Students' conversation with teachers is really different: they are involved and their discussion with their teachers is about the learning task”*

(teacher)

*“The kids are engaged in their learning now: I don't have to work too hard”*

(teacher).

The issue of student achievement is a troubled one for these schools. They are concerned that under current measurement regimes, they may always show comparatively low student achievement despite the worthiness of their practice and their ability to lift student performance from a very low base. While some of the secondary colleges have poor Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) results in comparison to the state average, they have higher rates of Year 12 completion and take-up of further study or employment than would be expected given the barriers faced by their students. The schools all believe that formal measurement of student outcomes needs to be more linked to the student-centred learning happening in the classroom and should show how the school adds value to students' performance and supports individual student progress:

*“We're trying to implement a curriculum that is very child-centred and a teacher learning model that supports this, but we're still measuring ourselves against standard measures. We need a measure of actual improvement in student learning. We want to know what difference we are making, in social competencies as well as formal learning. The real question is what difference are we making to the students and how could we do better”*

(principal)

*“Standardised data collection will never reflect the uniqueness of individual school settings”*

(principal)

*“On the Reading Recovery scale, our kids begin at 0. Eastern suburbs kids begin at 15. Yet our kids move from 0 to 8. It is a huge achievement, but the system doesn’t recognise it. We still get lots of red flags on our system reports”*

(principal) (red flags denote underperformance on statewide measures)

*“VCE results are a blunt tool and don’t show what the school really does for its students. Every measure the government uses is a measure of economic advantage, not of achievement”*

(principal)

*“If you just looked at the current data on this school, you’d want to close us down. There has to be a way of measuring the growth in student learning, let alone in their personal and social development”*

(principal).

Value-added measurement measures how students progress and how much of this progress can be attributed to the school or teacher after contextual factors like socio-economic background are accounted for. The schools agree with other commentators that its introduction in Victoria would allow schools to identify teaching practices that work. It would recognise the achievements of schools in disadvantaged areas and reward teachers making a significant difference to the lowest performing students (Stewart, 2006). It could also “re-describe what it is we now recognise as a ‘successful school’ ie one that adds most to the educational and social development of its pupils” (Australian Secondary Principals’ Association, 1999).

# Engaging parents and the community and meeting wider student needs

“Schools need the outside to get the job done. These external forces, however, do not come in helpful packages; they are an amalgam of complex and uncoordinated phenomena. The work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with them a productive one”

(Fullan, 2000)

“There is broad agreement that educating low income or special education students costs more than educating the average pupil. The research evidence shows that provided the services rendered are of good quality, the extra investment will pay off”

(Vinson, 2005)

Research emphasises the importance of close links between parents and schools to support student learning. Parental involvement is associated with better student achievement, engagement, retention and take-up of further and higher education. It is particularly important for students in disadvantaged areas. Education Foundation Australia is working with 11 schools in one Neighbourhood Renewal area of Victoria trying to improve student outcomes by engaging parents: “all of these schools agree that the attitudes and experiences of their parent community have a direct impact on student engagement and achievement and all have identified greater parental involvement as a key tool for improvement” (Jenny Brown, Education Foundation Australia). At a recent Education Foundation Australia symposium, Tony Nicholson of the Brotherhood of St Laurence made it clear that engaging parents is essential: “we can do all we can to improve the quality of schooling, but if disadvantaged families are disengaged from their kids’ education, it all will come to naught. Until we can empower parents to fulfil their parenting role, we won’t get very far in addressing educational disadvantage”.

This view is shared by the principals of the case study schools:

*“We could educate the children in so many different things if we had access to more resources that could compensate for the disadvantage these children face and that could engage and support their parents”*

*“Our core business is teaching and learning, but if we’re going to do this successfully, we have to have parents who are engaged and informed”*

*“We need these children’s families to have access to the same opportunities that families in more affluent suburbs have. Without this, we are fighting a losing battle”.*

Yet forming links with parents remains difficult for the schools. Some of the schools are experiencing a decline in parental involvement as the socio-economic profile of the neighbourhood drops. Some have high numbers of first or second generation immigrant parents who are strongly aspirational for their children and dedicate what resources they can to their children’s learning but who come from cultural settings where active involvement in the school is unfamiliar:

*“They expect to leave the business of teaching to us. They wouldn’t feel comfortable being involved”*

(principal).

Some parents are too overwhelmed by the impact of family breakdown, long working hours and poverty to participate in the work of the school. Others with low educational levels or a negative school experience during their own childhood find the school too intimidating to approach.

The schools have tried various strategies to involve parents, but with little success:

*“Our middle years reform has not yet filtered through to the parents. Their main concern is that their children are at school and without major problems: they are not concerned with what the school is actually doing”*

(principal)

*“The Catholic Education Office Melbourne has established a new parent body. We haven’t been able to provide one parent to participate in this”*

(principal)

*“We recently held focus groups to ascertain parents’ needs and priorities. No-one RSVP’d. Two parents turned up on the day but they needed an interpreter, who hadn’t been booked because we didn’t know they were coming”*

(principal)

*“Because of the nature of the parent community, the process of engaging these parents takes a long time. Like student improvement, results are not necessarily observable for the first 12 months”*

(principal)

*“We’ve tried many different things in the past and we’ll continue to do everything possible, but we don’t have much success getting parents involved”*

(principal).

There is a trend for parents at these schools to expect that their children will eventually enter university. These expectations are not always borne out by student achievement and the schools struggle to make parents aware of the value of other post-school pathways. Some also experience tension between their student-centred approach and parents’ more traditional expectations of curriculum and pedagogy. This does not necessarily manifest in parental opposition to the school’s practice but it does mean that different cultural assumptions are operating at home than at school.

Some of the schools work with welfare, community and local government organisations to run parental support and engagement programs, but these rely on short-term funding. One school has had three years of pilot funding for a Pupil Welfare Officer whose role includes liaison with parents to support student wellbeing but does not know whether further funding will be available:

*“It will be very difficult if the funding is not there”*

(principal).

Student-centred learning should be meaningfully linked to local community contexts and provide rich, real life learning experiences for students, but family factors and limited capacity also make this difficult for the schools to implement. In high social capital schools, access to enriching learning experiences can be facilitated by parents with connections to business, industry and cultural organisations. The case study schools lack this support almost entirely:

*“Without that parental capacity, it all falls back on the teachers”*

(principal).

Their attempts to broaden student learning are often hampered by parental anxiety about children travelling outside the school and by lack of means:

*“We’re on the back foot in providing enriching learning experiences. We don’t have these opportunities on our doorstep: we would have to fund the kids to get there by bus, but the cost of this is prohibitive. Instead we bring people into the school, but it means we get someone to run a puppet show instead of going to the Arts Centre”*

(principal).

Building workable community and corporate partnerships is a challenge for most schools: for schools already struggling to meet high student needs, it can be overwhelmingly difficult (Black, 2004). Some of the schools do better than others in sourcing beneficial partnerships to support their work, but all have tried to do so. Debney Park Secondary College, for example, has formed a unique partnership with the Boston Consulting Group, a global consulting company whose Melbourne office is on Collins Street. Boston Consulting Group staff give their time free of charge, providing advice and assistance in areas including parental and community engagement, the development of a future vision for the school and fostering other community partnerships including neighbouring secondary schools, tertiary education providers and the local football club.

A strong message from the schools is that parental engagement and links with the wider community require resources and skills that are in short supply:

*“At the end of the day, we’re teachers, not social facilitators. We need a parent liaison officer”*

(principal)

*“We need in-depth, long term partnerships and connections. Our current focus is a bit opportunistic and patchy because we can only get small, short-term grants”*

(principal)

*“Partnerships with community are outside our experience and expertise. They take a lot of energy and there is no-one to do it all the time”*

(principal)

*“We need a directed strategy with stable funding so that our community links are not driven by small project thinking”*

(principal)

*“Working with parents and the community takes time and money. The school needs a fundraiser to find these opportunities for us. You can’t do it on your own”*

(principal).

Another challenge faced by case study schools is meeting the full range of student needs. It is essential work, but none of the schools believe that they have the resources to do it. They stress the importance of having more specialist teachers to meet specific student learning needs:

*“I’d like a team of staff to improve literacy development across the school. If we could get all the kids to a better base literacy level, the sky would be the limit”*

(principal)

*“We need a full-time aide in each class”*

(principal)

*“We need specialist teachers to work with these kids”*

(principal)

*“I need a literacy person in each class every day”*

(principal)

*“We need bilingual and integration aides in every classroom all of the time”*

(principal).

They also stress the need for more specialist support to meet non-learning needs:

*“If governments were serious about this, every school would have a dedicated welfare coordinator”*

(principal)

*“We could have a three day a week counsellor in here and still not meet all of our students’ needs”*

(principal)

*“There are organisations that support student welfare. It would be really great if I could have better access to these. We do get funding for a trained student welfare officer from amongst the staff, but that’s my assistant principal. When she is wearing her welfare hat, I lose her support in running the school”*

(principal)

*“The Catholic Education Office does give funding for existing teachers to train and have teacher release time as student wellbeing staff, but this is predicated on withdrawing teachers from their classes. Instead, we need to access trained social workers or youth workers that can provide real services in the school, link it to the community and support parents”*

(principal)

*“We work with local health organisations to support student nutrition and health. The problem is, we don’t have the staffing capacity to coordinate these links or keep them going. The responsibility falls back on over-loaded teachers”*

(principal).



# Recommendations and future thinking

This research project found strong anecdotal evidence that student-centred learning improves achievement and engagement for middle years students. It found that schools developing student-centred learning approaches are benefiting from the initiatives of the Victorian Government's Blueprint for Government Schools and the initiatives of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne.

It also found that schools in disadvantaged areas continue to face multiple barriers to their efforts to improve student outcomes. These include:

- Lack of access to proven models of practice
- The challenge of building teacher knowledge and expertise
- The challenge of restructuring and reculturing the school to support student need and teacher practice
- A poor fit between new practice and existing measures of student achievement
- Insufficient recognition of the value they add to student outcomes
- Lack of capacity to engage parents and form supportive partnerships with the community
- A high level of student need
- Insufficient resources including specialist staff support.

Multiple barriers require multiple solutions. This project makes five recommendations for the Victorian school system and the sectors that support the work of schools in disadvantaged communities. These recommendations have been developed in consultation with the case study school principals and the project Reference Group.

**1** Highly effective leadership is the most fundamental precondition for effective teaching and good student outcomes in schools in disadvantaged communities. Schools in our most disadvantaged areas need the best leaders. Incentives and ongoing support must be provided to encourage the most effective leaders to apply for positions in these schools. New models of collaborative school leadership should also be considered for implementation in Victoria to build the capacity of current leaders and ensure that the best leadership knowledge is available where it is most needed.

**2** Genuine improvement in student outcomes requires good teacher practice, not short-term programs. A new funding formula should increase the core staffing of schools in disadvantaged communities to provide the flexibility and structures for in-school teacher learning on a long term and

sustainable basis. Ongoing work is also needed to build a learning system that supports informed innovation, spreads knowledge, scales up good practice and benefits from the learnings of other sectors.

**3** Schools and teachers in disadvantaged communities need models of proven practice and the tools to implement them in their own local context in a sustainable way. For student-centred learning to flourish in more schools in disadvantaged communities, it needs to be better understood as a rigorous practice. Work is needed to develop sharper definitions of what student-centred learning constitutes, collate the evidence of its positive impact on student outcomes and disseminate workable models and supportive tools to schools.

**4** Schools in disadvantaged communities need support to address the wider needs of students and their families beyond the way schools are currently resourced. Without this, these schools risk becoming welfare instead of learning organisations. New funding partnerships between areas of government responsible for community strengthening as well as business, philanthropy and community organisations could meet the non-learning needs of students in disadvantaged areas and engage and support their families.

**5** The community needs a broader set of measures of student achievement. Wider definitions and new certifications of educational success need to be developed and school systems need to better recognise the work of schools that add value to student achievement in the face of disadvantage. There is a role for independent organisations to generate more discussion of this issue across the school system and within the wider community.

Many educationalists point out that the raft of innovations in schools over the years have not changed their basic nature as institutions or altered the fundamental model of schooling onto which schools graft their new practice. This project proposes three models for deeper change.

**1** Student-centred schools. The implementation of student-centred learning in the classroom begs the question of what it would take to create student-centred schools. Students are the most neglected players in the work of school improvement and learning reform, yet with the right skills and sense of purpose, they can transform their schools and build capacity in their communities.

2 Schools as community centres. Schools are powerful platforms for developing knowledge for young people and their communities and for building the social capital of those communities, but they cannot do this work alone. There are numerous models for reconfiguring schools as community learning hubs that offer education and other services for the entire community. There are also models of new partnerships between government, business, community organisations and philanthropy to support these arrangements.

3 Shared responsibility for young people. The case study schools are trying to build collective responsibility for student outcomes within their own walls. How much more could be gained if they worked together at a local or district level under a new definition of publicly funded education to share scarce resources, meet the needs of all students and build value for their communities? Keating (2006) and McGaw (2006b) point to numerous examples of collaborative arrangements between government and non-government schools including co-location, integrated senior secondary programs, joint facilities, the exchange of personnel and shared student support services. These examples need to be developed as formal practice across school sectors so that, in the words of one school principal at a recent Education Foundation Australia forum, the school system can “build community capacity to take responsibility for all young people in the area”.



# Glossary

## **Access to Excellence Program**

This earlier initiative of the Victorian Department of Education aimed to improve the quality of learning opportunities for underachieving young adolescents by providing extra teachers to assist schools in implementing action plans focused on literacy, numeracy attendance and retention.

## **Leading Schools Fund**

The Fund is a key initiative of the Victorian Government's Blueprint for Government Schools. It provides funding for approved secondary schools for whole school improvement, supporting the development of innovative solutions at the local level and collaboration and cooperation between schools.

## **Like School Groups**

Victorian government schools are divided into nine groups based on the demographic background of their students. The groups are identified by the proportion of students for whom the main language spoken at home is not English and the proportion who receive the Education Maintenance Allowance or Commonwealth Youth Allowance. Like School Group 9 indicates the highest proportion of these students.

## **Local Learning and Employment Network**

Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) are a Victorian Government initiative. They bring together education providers, industry, community organisations, individuals and government organisations to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people in communities across Victoria.

## **Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project**

This project ran from 1998 to 2001 and developed a whole-school approach to bring about significant improvements in the achievement and attitudes of middle years students. It was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and undertaken by the Centre for Applied Educational Research at The University of Melbourne. Over 36,000 students, 250 schools and 2,100 teachers participated in the project.

## **Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development (MYPRAD) Project**

This strategy of the Victorian Department of Education continues the work of the MYRAD project in supporting pedagogical change in the middle years. It provides a means by which schools and clusters can examine their teaching practices and identify key areas for improvement, develop a plan to initiate improvement and monitor change. MYPRAD is available for use by all Schools for Innovation and Excellence clusters.

## **Neighbourhood Renewal**

Neighbourhood Renewal is an initiative of the Victorian Department of Human Services as part of the Government's Growing Victoria Together agenda to build more cohesive communities and reduce inequalities. 19 disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Victoria are the focus of a range of strategies including lifting employment, training and education opportunities.

## **Schools for Innovation and Excellence**

The Schools for Innovation and Excellence is a Victorian Department of Education initiative that supports primary and secondary schools to work closely together in clusters over three years to deliver innovation and excellence in Victorian education. Clusters receive funding to develop strategically effective education programs to advance student learning. In 2006, every Victorian government school was in a cluster.

## **Victorian Essential Learning Standards**

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards have been developed as part of the Blueprint for Government Schools. They describe what students should know and be able to do at different stages of learning from Prep to Year 10 and provide a basis for reporting to parents and for planning programs. Their implementation commenced at the beginning of 2006.

# References

- Australian Curriculum Studies Association 1996. Policy on Social Justice, Curriculum and Pedagogy. Curriculum Perspectives Volume 15, Number 4, November 1996
- Australian Council for Educational Research 2004. PISA in Brief: from Australia's perspective. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research
- Australian Secondary Principals' Association 1999. Policy Paper: Adding Value to Australian Secondary Schools
- Bentley, T. & Miller, R. 2004. Personalised learning: Creating the ingredients for systemic and society wide change. Occasional Paper Number 87. Melbourne: Incorporated Association of Registered Teachers of Victoria
- Black, R. 2004. 'Thinking Community as a Social Investment in Australia' in Worldwide Partnerships for Schools with Voluntary Organizations, Foundations, Universities, Companies and Community Councils. Ed. Mitchell, S., Klinck, P. & Burger, J. Canada: Mellen Press
- Boston Consulting Group 2006. Boston Consulting Group/Debnay Park Secondary College Partnership. Internal document
- Butler, H., Bond, L., Drew, S., Krelle, A. & Seal, I. 2005. Doing It Differently: Improving Young People's Engagement with School. Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Centre for Applied Educational Research 2002. Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project Executive Summary February – December 2001. A Report to the Learning & Teaching Innovation Division, Department of Education & Training. Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne
- Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 2006. Personalising Education. Paris: OECD
- Chapman, B., Weatherburn, D., Kapuscinski, C.A., Chilvers, M. & Roussel, S. 2002. Unemployment Duration, Schooling and Property Crime. Centre for Economic Policy Research. Canberra: Australia National University
- Cobbold, T. 2005. A Review of Middle Schooling; Concepts and Approaches. Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations
- Cole, P. 2001. Review of Curriculum Provision: An Overview of Interstate and International Approaches to Curriculum Provision. Prepared for the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training, Melbourne
- Cole, P. 2006. Reforming Year 9: Propositions for school policy and practice. Occasional Paper Number 96. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education
- Connell, R.W., Ashenden, D.J., Kessler, S. & Dowsett, G.W. 1982. Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin
- Cresswell, J. 2004. School Effectiveness: A Schooling Issues Digest. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training
- Cumming, J. 1999. Guide to Effective Community Based Learning. Canberra: Australian College of Education
- Cuttance, P. 2001. School Innovation: Pathway to the Knowledge Society. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
- Darling-Hammond, L. 2000. 'Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence', Education Policy Analysis Archives 8 (1)
- Department for Education and Skills 2004. A National Conversation about Personalised Learning. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills
- Department of Education & Training 2003. Blueprint for Government Schools: Future Directions for Education in the Victorian Government School System. Melbourne: Department of Education & Training
- Department of Education & Training 2005a. A Performance and Development Culture: Advancing Professional Practice in Schools. Melbourne: Department of Education & Training
- Department of Education & Training 2005b. Professional Learning in Effective Schools: The Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning. Melbourne: Department of Education & Training
- Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005. Better Outcomes for Disengaged Young People: Initial Scoping, Analysis and Policy Review

- Education Foundation 2005. *Equity, Excellence and Effectiveness: Moving Forward on Schooling Arrangements in Australia*. Melbourne: Education Foundation
- Elmore, R.F. 2006a. *The Politics of Education Reform*. Online article at [www.issues.org/14.1/elmore.htm](http://www.issues.org/14.1/elmore.htm)
- Elmore, R.F. 2006b. What (so-called) low-performing schools can teach (so-called) high-performing schools. *The Journal of the National Staff Development Council*, Volume 27 Number 2, Spring 2006, Pages 43-45
- Farrace, B. 2002. *Building capacity to enhance learning: A conversation with Richard Elmore*. *Principal Leadership*, January 2002. Online article at [www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa4002/is\\_200201/ai\\_n9046037](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4002/is_200201/ai_n9046037)
- Fullan, M. 2000. 'The Three Stories of Education Reform', *Phi Delta Kappan*, Volume 81, Number 8, Pages 581-584
- Fullan, M. 2006. *Change theory: A force for school improvement*. Seminar Series Number 157. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education
- Fullarton, S. 2002. *Student Engagement with School: Individual and School-Level Influences*. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report Number 27. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research
- Grant, P., Badger, L., Wilkinson, L., Rogers, A. & Munt, V. 2003. *Nothing Left to Chance: Report on Literacy and Numeracy Outcomes Evaluation in High Achieving Disadvantaged Schools*. Adelaide: Department of Education and Children's Services
- Haberman, M. 1991. 'The Pedagogy of Poverty versus Good Teaching', *Phi Delta Kappan*, Volume 73, Number 4, Pages 290-4
- Hargreaves, D.H. 1998. *Creative Professionalism: The role of teachers in the knowledge society*. London: Demos
- Hargreaves, D.H. 2003a. *Education Epidemic: Transforming secondary schools through innovation networks*. London: Demos
- Hargreaves, D.H. 2003b. *Working Laterally: How innovation networks make an education epidemic*. London: Demos
- Harris, A. & Chapman, C. 2002. *Effective Leadership in Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership
- Hattie J. 2003. *Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?* Paper presented at Australian Council for Education Research Conference, Melbourne, 19-21 October
- Hill, P. 2001. *Teaching and School Effectiveness*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Training
- Hill, P. & Russell, V.J. 1999. *Systemic, whole-school reform of the middle years of schooling*. Centre for Applied Educational Research. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne
- Hopkins, D. 2004. *Transforming Schools: Key Strategies for Action*. Presented at the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals Conference, Melbourne, 26-28 July
- Hopkins, D. 2006. *System Leadership for School Transformation*. Presented as the Dean's Lecture, Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, 1 August
- Istance, D. 2006. *Emerging Models of Learning and Innovation and "Schooling for Tomorrow" – The Background and Key Questions*. Joint OECD/Mexico International Conference, Merida, 14-16 June
- Johnson, N.J. 2003. *Working in Teams*. Melbourne: Department of Education & Training
- Kannapel, P.J., & Clements, S.K. 2005. *Inside the black box of high-performing high-poverty schools*. Lexington: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
- Keating, J. 2006 (unpublished). *New Arrangements to Close the Gap: Following on from The Case For Change*. Discussion paper prepared for Education Foundation Australia
- Keating, J. & Lamb, S. 2004. *Public Education and the Australian Community. A report to the Education Foundation*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne
- Koshland, E. 2006. *Quality education for all: mapping the educational landscape*. New Matilda.com, 1 December
- Lamb, S. 2007. 'School Reform and Inequality in Urban Australia: A Case of Residualising the Poor', Pages 1-38 in Teese, R., Lamb, S. & Duru-Belat, M. (Eds) *Education and inequality: Volume 3*. Springer: Dordrecht
- Leadbeater, C. 2004. *Learning about personalisation: How can we put the learner at the heart of the education system?* Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills
- Long, M. 2005. *How Young People are Faring: Key Indicators 2005*. Sydney: Dusseldorp Skills Forum
- McGaw, B. 2006a. *Education and Social Cohesion*. Paper presented at the Dean's Lecture Series, Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, 16 May

- McGaw, B. 2006b. Schooling. Paper presented at Making the Boom Pay: Economic and Social Outlook Conference 2006, The University of Melbourne, 2-3 November
- McMillan, J. & Marks, G.N. 2003. School Leavers In Australia: Profiles And Pathways: Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report Number 31. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research
- Muir, K., Maguire, A., Slack-Smith, D. & Murray, M. 2003. Youth Unemployment in Australia: a contextual, governmental and organisational perspective. Sydney: The Smith Family
- Murray, S., Mitchell, J., Gale, T., Edwards, J. & Zyngier, D. 2004. Student Disengagement from Primary Schooling: a Review of Research and Practice. A report to the CASS Foundation. Melbourne: Monash University
- New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2005. One size doesn't fit all: report of the consultations on future directions for public education and training
- Oerlemans, K. 2001. Local Area Education Planning – Policy Planning and Practice. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Fremantle, 2-6 December
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001. Knowledge and Skills for Life – First Results from PISA 2000. Paris: OECD
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2005. Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2005. Paris: OECD
- Productivity Commission 2005. Report on Government Services 2005. Canberra: Productivity Commission
- Rothman, S. 2003. The changing influence of socio-economic status on student achievement: recent evidence from Australia. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research
- Rowe, K.J. 2003. The importance of teacher quality as a key determinant of students' experiences and outcomes of schooling. Paper presented at Australian Council for Educational Research Conference 2003, Melbourne, 19-21 October
- Schleicher, A. 2006. The economics of knowledge: Why education is key for Europe's success. Paris: OECD
- Schmoker, M. 2004. Start here for improving teaching and learning. School Administrator, November 2004
- Stewart, B.E. 2006. Value-Added Modeling: The Challenge of Measuring Educational Outcomes. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York
- Suda, L. 2006. Building Community Capacity Through Student Led Action Research. Paper presented at Learning Communities Conference 2006, Brisbane, 24-25 September
- Teese, R. 2000. Academic Success and Social Power: Examinations and inequality. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press
- Teese, R. 2006. Condemned to Innovate. Griffith Review Edition 11. Brisbane: Griffith University
- Teese, R. & Polesel, J. 2003. Undemocratic Schooling: Equity and Equality in Mass Secondary Education in Australia. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press
- Thomson, P. 2002. Schooling the Rustbelt Kids: Making the difference in changing times. Sydney: Allen & Unwin
- Thomson, P. & Comber, B. 2003. Deficient "disadvantaged students" or media-savvy meaning makers? Engaging new metaphors for redesigning classrooms and pedagogies. McGill Journal of Education Number 38, Volume 2
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2004. A Framework for Essential Learning: Victorian Curriculum Reform 2004. Melbourne: Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
- Vinson, T. 2004a. Community adversity and resilience: the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales and the mediating role of social cohesion. Melbourne: The Ignatius Centre for Social Policy and Research, Jesuit Social Services
- Vinson, T. 2004b. Education and Poverty. Paper presented at Poverty Week Forum, Sydney University, 19 October
- Vinson, T. 2005. Valuing children's education. Online article at [www.newmatilda.com/policyToolKit/policydetail.asp?PolicyID=52&CategoryID=9](http://www.newmatilda.com/policyToolKit/policydetail.asp?PolicyID=52&CategoryID=9)
- Watson, I. & Considine, G. 2003. Learning experience of students from low-income families. Working Paper 83. Sydney: University of Sydney
- Willms, J.D. 2003. Student engagement at school: A sense of belonging and participation. Results from PISA 2000. Paris: OECD
- Zappalà, G. & Considine, G. 2001. Educational performance among school students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Working Paper No 4. Sydney: The Smith Family

# Appendix: method

The methodology of this study has four main components.

A review of the research literature was conducted to contextualise the study in relation to student disadvantage, disengagement and attempts by systems and schools to change teaching and learning for the middle years.

Interviews were held with five key research and policy informants to add a local understanding to the findings of the literature review.

Case studies were created to document the experience of local schools in disadvantaged communities that are implementing student-centred learning strategies for the middle years and identify the processes integral to introducing and maintaining these strategies. Five government and four Catholic system schools agreed to participate in the study. These comprised four government secondary colleges, four Catholic primary schools and one government primary school: unsuccessful attempts were made to engage a Catholic secondary school.

The western metropolitan region of Melbourne was selected as the focus of the study because of the comparatively high degree of socio-economic disadvantage among its schools. At the start of 2006, the region had the highest proportion of government schools in Victoria with a significant number of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (measured by the proportion of students in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance, Youth Allowance or Austudy) or for whom English is not a first language. This study uses school inclusion in the Department of Education's Like School Groups 6-9 or comparable categories used by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne as a proxy for student disadvantage.

The schools were firstly selected because they fitted these categories of student disadvantage. Secondly, they were recommended for participation by the Western Metropolitan Region office of the Department of Education (for the government system schools) and the Western Region office of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (for the Catholic system schools) on the grounds that they are well embarked on the implementation of student-centred learning in the middle years.

One school leader and up to three teachers in each of the nine schools participated in an initial 45 minute semi-structured interview and supplementary telephone interviews. These were

followed some months later by a second round of 45 minute semi-structured interviews with school leaders to discuss the study's draft recommendations. A number of the schools provided documents such as evaluation reports and proposals that have been used in the study.

One meeting of a Reference Group was held to advise on practical strategies to support the take-up of student-centred learning across more schools.

## Interview questions

### Interview with school leadership

What are the five chief ways in which student disadvantage manifests in the school?

Why did the school begin this strategy? Do you view it as innovative and if so, why? What is the strategy intended to change and how is it designed to do this?

What resources within the school have you drawn on to implement this strategy? What resources have you drawn on from outside including the central system? What resources do you still need? Have other priorities been shelved to allow this strategy to go ahead?

How does this strategy relate to the existing school culture and vision? What impact has it had on these? Is this strategy part of a whole school approach or are there plans for this to happen? If not, why not? What would be required to scale it up across the school? Was this strategy set up for the long term? If not, why not? What supports or impacts on its sustainability?

How do you share the learnings from this strategy with other schools? Do you learn from the experience of other schools? How transferable do you think the model is to other schools?

How do you share the impact of this strategy with parents and the local community? What level of community support does the school generally have? What level of support has it had in implementing this strategy? Has there been a change in the community's perception of the school and in enrolments since the strategy began?

If you could have one magic wish granted that would genuinely improve outcomes for the students at this school, what would you wish for?

**Interview with a nominee with senior responsibility  
for middle years curriculum and pedagogy design and  
implementation in the school**

What model/s did the school look at in designing the strategy and how did it find these? If the model was adopted from elsewhere, what adaptations had to be made?

To date, what impact is the strategy seen to have had on students in terms of engagement, retention and achievement? How has this been measured?

What impact has it had on teacher practice, learning or motivation? How has this been measured?

Have teachers worked together on the strategy? Has this been different from usual teacher practice? Did teachers need to be introduced to the strategy through formal PD or induction? What did this involve, what difficulties if any did you face and what resources were needed? How is this professional learning passed on to other staff?

What is the biggest limitation on the success of the strategy? If you could have one magic wish granted that would genuinely improve outcomes for the students involved, what would you wish for?

**Interview with a teacher implementing the strategy**

How has this new approach made a difference to you as a teacher?

What difference do you observe in your students?





This report is available at [www.educationfoundation.org.au](http://www.educationfoundation.org.au)

**Education Foundation Australia**

Level 4, 252 Collins Street  
Melbourne, Victoria 3000  
Telephone +613 9650 4277  
Facsimile +613 9650 5443  
[enquiries@educationfoundation.org.au](mailto:enquiries@educationfoundation.org.au)  
[www.educationfoundation.org.au](http://www.educationfoundation.org.au)

Education Foundation Australia Inc.  
ABN 92 729 761 066  
Registration No. A0018452R