

Towards a development framework for schools as community hubs

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How can research, policy and practice be linked to inform the planning, design, governance and use of school infrastructure to meet the emerging needs of Australian communities?

This is the overarching research question being asked by the *Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs* ARC Linkage project – a three-year project that is investigating how best to plan, design, govern and manage schools to operate successfully as ‘more than a school’, encouraging the development of resilient and connected communities.

In the next decade, Australia will need up to 700 new schools to meet the demands of a growing population. This presents a significant opportunity to embed new knowledge about the role that indoor and outdoor spaces can play in developing and supporting school-community connections across the country. Schools are some of the most underutilised assets in Australia. Many are used sparingly outside of school hours and on weekends. The co-location of school infrastructure with other forms of social infrastructure, such as sporting, recreation and health services facilities, is also not as common as might be expected.

This paper outlines the overall research design that is guiding a multi-disciplinary team of academics with backgrounds in education, urban planning, architecture, human geography and educational facility planning, plus four PhD candidates and five research partners, including the Queensland and South Australian state governments and Catholic Education Diocese of Paramatta. The paper then illuminates the research strategies that have been employed during the first two years of the project to bring the multiple strands of research together. These include: an international conference that was held online during the Covid-19 pandemic to explore the wide-ranging issues pertinent to the research; a series of workshops held with expert participants in Australia, North America and UK/Europe to identify the opportunities and constraints associated with schools operating as community hubs; the production of a Value Focused Thinking framework developed to guide decision making about what is fundamentally important and by what means such fundamental objectives can be pursued; and the creation of a national survey of schools that is being conducted to ‘map’ school as community hub activity and infrastructure across the country. In conclusion, the paper discusses the emerging Development Framework for Schools as Community Hubs, which aims to inform decision making about how new and existing school infrastructure can be better utilised for broader community benefit and ultimately provide students with the best possible opportunities in life.