

SWAP : Student Wellbeing Action Partnership

Beginning the journey towards becoming a “School as Core Social Centre (SACSC)”

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

This paper was prepared for partial fulfilment of the Master of Education (Welcome), Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, 2007. It has been written in accordance with the ethical standards of confidentiality and anonymity of the persons and organisations involved and has been further modified for online use. The purpose of this paper is to provide educators with general information and examples of issues related to student wellbeing and does not necessarily represent the views of CEOM or the University of Melbourne. CEOM and the University of Melbourne do not accept liability for inaccuracies, misrepresentations, omissions or errors in information referenced in the paper or the citations. CEOM and the University of Melbourne gratefully acknowledges the author for making the action research available for public use.

School Profile

Sector – Catholic

Type – Primary / Co-educational

Setting – Rural

Size – 100-250 students

Abstract

Research is now showing that young people who have developed meaningful connections within their school community and the broader community function more effectively and tend to be more resilient in the face of problems and stress. The development of these connections is termed ‘social capital’ and it has been shown that schools are key sites for the promotion of student wellbeing and the development of social capital. As the well known saying goes “It takes a village to raise a child”; human development requires community.

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM) began a project in 2002 called Schools as Core Social Centres (SACSC). The principle underpinning the project is that the participation of parents and the community in the life of the school will contribute to improved student wellbeing and student learning outcomes through the promotion of school-community connectedness. The purpose of this action research project was to analyse our school’s current situation in line with our School Development Plan with a view to becoming part of the SACSC project. The long term objective is to achieve a cultural and policy change whereby staff would adopt a culture of seeking involvement with the wider community across the curriculum and would value the benefits that come from establishing firm partnerships and connections with the parent community and the broader community. The short term objective was to educate the key stakeholders and receive their in-principle agreement to involve our school in the SACSC project. This took the form of developing a presentation that was used with the school leadership team, the school board, the student wellbeing core team and the whole staff. Healthy discussion followed each presentation after which unanimous agreement was given for our school to proceed with becoming part of the SACSC project. In doing so we have agreed to continue to find new and innovative ways to strengthen the links between school, the parent community and the wider community.

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As a teacher in a small Catholic primary school of 120 families, it has become more apparent that the abundance of “social capital” has dwindled over time for many of our families and in turn affected the learning outcomes for some of our students. An external review of our school in 2005 highlighted that parent involvement in the school and the school’s involvement within the community was an area of concern.

In my role as Teaching and Learning Co-ordinator, a member of the Leadership team and classroom teacher, I had directly witnessed the benefits of parental involvement and the level of engagement exhibited by the children when they perceived parental and community interest and involvement in their learning activities.

Students who are experiencing a sense of acceptance create a high degree of connectedness and belonging, which also motivates greater interest in curriculum activities and increased participation in the broader life of the school. (CEOM, 2007, p. 2).

Epstein (2001) found that as support from school, family, and community accumulated, significantly more students felt secure and cared for, understood the goals of education, worked to achieve their full potential, built positive attitudes and school behaviours and stayed in school.

Research has overwhelmingly shown that the “wellbeing of students in the school community is promoted through developing connectedness and social capital” (CEOM, 2006b). Over the last eight years the school has been working towards developing partnerships with the parent community based on the belief that parents are the primary educators of their children. As expressed in our 2005 school review, as educators interested in the development of the whole child, we have strived to create a culture where the school staff and parents are partners in the educational process. As a school we recognised, along with supporting research, that the building of these strong and positive connections between young people, their families, schools and communities not only builds social capital for all concerned but also helps young people see the support structures and framework around them from which they can receive support (Debbie Ellis, 2000; Hayes & Chodkiewicz, 2006; NCREL, 2005; Tobin, 2004).

The school vision statement (2005) states that in recognising and promoting acceptance of differing abilities and needs within the community, we nurture and develop the potential of each individual. We acknowledge that learning is an interactive process, members of this welcoming community participate in the development of life-long learners. In 2005 our school, underwent an External School Review. During this process the school critically reviewed its policies and practices under the Five Key Spheres of Schooling; Education in Faith, Learning and Teaching, Leadership and Management, Student Wellbeing and School Community (CEOM, 2006a). At the conclusion of the review the school developed an evidence based School Improvement Plan that would take the school through from 2006-2009. This School Improvement Plan, which was developed within the context of the Strategy Plan for Catholic Education within the Melbourne Archdiocese, stated the goals, intended outcomes and strategies for achievement that staff felt were realistic and achievable.

When analysing the School Improvement Plan, stepped out in the Five Key Spheres for Learning, a central theme of parent and community participation emerged across the spheres. The Five Key Spheres are:

- 1 **Teaching and Learning.** To maintain the focus of improving children’s outcomes in numeracy and literacy and to investigate ways of increasing the number of parent helpers in the p-4 literacy program.
- 2 **Education in Faith.** To develop the Christian culture of supporting families, their children and staff on their faith journey as an integral part of Parish life and increase parent involvement in family programs.
- 3 **Leadership and Management.** To write a Parent Participation Protocol and to create opportunities for parent education.
- 4 **Student Wellbeing.** To increase whole-staff involvement in the Student Wellbeing process, support network and explore ways of communicating behaviour management processes to parents.

- 5 **School Community.** To review and evaluate communication systems between school and families, to explore ways of generating interest in pastoral programs offered within the parish, to compile a resource manual that lists the available support services in the district, to review and evaluate homework policy with parent input and to explore ways of training parent helpers in the library.

In 2002 the CEOM began a project called Schools As Core Social Centres (SACSC) and its inception came from an OECD Report Titled "Schooling for Tomorrow" (OECD & CERI, 2007). Using the third scenario set out by the OECD, the CEOM developed its own SACSC proposal. It established a partnership with VicHealth who funded a case worker. The aim of the project was to assist schools to develop a strategic approach to school change and school improvement with an emphasis on wellbeing, learning outcomes and school community partnerships. The key objectives of the SACSC projects are:

- To promote an understanding of the links between wellbeing and improved school learning outcomes;
- To support the development of a whole-school approach to student wellbeing;
- To increase the capacity of schools and communities through the development of collaborative partnerships (personal communication with SACSC project worker September 2007).

One of the major benefits of the project is that it is totally driven by the schools needs. There are no strict guidelines about what has to be achieved and by when. The projects and activities taken on by other schools who are currently involved in SACSC are very diverse and include meeting and greeting parents in the school yard in the mornings, organising community vegetable gardens within the school, cluster singing class with Community Singing Victoria and meditation classes. These sessions boosted staff morale with some staff then taking those skills back into the classroom. Another cluster of schools in the SACSC project saw physical health as an area of need and organised health professional Sue Dengate to speak to the cluster school communities on the benefits of healthy eating. Another cluster of schools started a breakfast club and also conducted a community expo on leisure and community activities available within their area as they found that their students and families did not know about many of the local sporting facilities and were consequently not involved in any clubs of teams outside of school.

SACSC is a whole school approach that provides a strategic umbrella for forming partnerships with parents and the broader community that aligns with our school vision statement and enables us to address the issues designated in our School Development Plan as a whole school instead of dealing with them as isolated projects.

We adopted the spiral structure of Action Research as a framework to bring about this change into our school. The process involves setting about a plan, acting upon it, observing the change and critically reflecting on the effects, using these reflections as the basis for the next cycle of replanning-acting-observing and reflecting. The cyclical nature of action research recognises the need for flexibility, responsiveness and the formation of a collaborative task group where each person contributes and each person has a stake (Lewin, 1995). With repeated cycles it is hoped that the collaborative members will become better at identifying and solving problems and that the breadth and content of the inquiry will also increase (Calhoun, 1993).

The long term goal of this project was to bring about a culture and policy change that would permeate all facets of the school. It was hoped that the staff would adopt the culture of seeking involvement with the wider community across the curriculum and that the staff would value the benefits that come from establishing firm partnerships and connections with the parent community and the broader community (Thomas, 2004).

The short term goal was to educate the key stakeholders (the school leadership team, the school board, the student wellbeing core team, the Parish Priest and the school staff) and receive their 'in principle' agreement to involve our school in the project. The timeframe for this action was nine weeks. Within this space of time we were also keen to implement the SACSC audit tools. The data from this audit would help us establish the direction needed to embed in our policies and practices the need to always be mindful of establishing partnership between school, families and the community.

In 2005 the principal was interested in exploring SACSC, however in that year our school underwent its external school review. Now that this moment had arisen, we were both very interested in our school declaring itself as making connections with the parent and wider community an essential part of the prevention aspect of student wellbeing. Together with myself, the school principal, the student wellbeing coordinator and an interested teacher representative (who was also a member of the student wellbeing core team) we formed a collaborative working group.

Our first step was to research SACSC and the process involved in becoming part of this initiative. I attended two research circle meetings at the CEOM where other schools already involved discussed their experiences in implementing SACSC in their school. One school spoke of how the principals in their area discussed amongst themselves that they needed to address the issue of lack of parent involvement in their children's' education and possibilities for trying to rectify this. As a group they decided that SACSC would address their issues and would be good for their schools to adopt. Upon reflection these schools stated that they found it hard work to try and get the rest of the staff onboard without that shared vision and the progress had been slow.

Another school spoke of how they identified the need for more parental and community involvement. They then took the time to introduce the philosophy and the research behind the need for SACSC to their leadership team, school board and staff. They found that the process moved a lot more quickly and received a lot more energy and motivation by all stakeholders because they all shared the same vision and could see the purpose for this change.

Upon discussion with my peer tutors from other schools and collaborative group we chose to adopt this same approach in implementing SACSC in our school. The implementation of SACSC, was not to cause an upheaval of our current practices, but rather enhance, complement and develop what we have already achieved in student wellbeing. As a school we were at the point where we were able look at what else we needed to consider in terms of all our students and allowing them to be educated to their fullest potential. For SACSC to be successfully implemented it needed to be on a whole school scale where all stakeholders shared the same vision and sense of purpose.

Our plan commenced with educating the Parish Priest and members of the school board. The CEOM conducted a professional learning activity in developing community participation for primary school boards. Two members of the board attended and came home very inspired. "We gained a real understanding of the responsibilities of the school board and how we really can make a difference by developing strategies to connect and nurture a oneness of being, making sure that no one is left out by reaching out to others, by listening and looking, by knowing and inviting, by considering options and working strategically (Personal communication with School Board member, 2nd July 2007)." These board members put together a presentation for the school board. As facilitators of change this was a best case scenario where the parent representatives on the board felt as though they were leading the change and were totally participating in the decision to change (Freeman & Strong, 2007). After the school board presentation there was a unanimous vote to become part of the SACSC project (school board minutes 1st of August 2007). The Parish Priest in particular was extremely supportive of this initiative.

Before we began to educate the leadership team and staff we conducted structured interviews with eight staff members (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996); four who were on the leadership team and four who were classroom teachers. For the purposes of the action research we needed to gather data on how members of staff viewed the current situation and then after we had carried out our action plan we would reinterview these same people using the same questions to establish what progress had been achieved.

The questions we used were:

1. Could they see any advantages/disadvantages from our school joining the SACSC project?
2. Where do they see SACSC fitting into our school?

3. What do they believe their role is in integrating SACSC into our school?

The initial results were 50% could see that becoming part of the SACSC project was going to be advantageous for our school. One member of staff was particularly keen as she was involved in an outside agency that was involved in forming community partnerships. Four of the eight interviewed believed that we are already doing enough to connect with parents and the community and could not see the point of taking it any further. The most common comments included;

“We already have so much to do we cannot possibly take on another thing”

“What is in it for us? If it means more funding we will consider it.” (Comments from interviews with staff members July 2007).

All of the staff interviewed stated that they did not really understand what SACSC meant and how it would fit into our school. One staff member commented that it seemed a bit nebulous. Most of the programs she has previously been involved in were more directed and associated with specific activities. As they were unclear of what the project entailed, 75% of the staff were unsure of what their role in implementation would be. Two members of the leadership team who were also members of the Student Wellbeing Core Team could see how they would be involved in the decision to become part of the project and would be part of the driving force in implementing the project.

Our task then was to create a shared vision (or “unfreezing”) amongst the leadership team and school staff (Marcus, 2000, p.367). We decided to create a presentation that detailed the concepts behind SACSC and how the research and evidence supported the development of such partnerships as being beneficial to the learning, health and development of all children at the school. We needed to present to stakeholders that helping to create social capital for our school families and developing connections within our local community would have beneficial outcomes for all involved. We were mindful also of making the presentation relevant by referring to the school development plan. The presentation demonstrated how under SACSC these areas could be addressed not just as isolated projects but combined under the strategic umbrella of forming partnerships with parents and the broader community and at the same time develop some promotional and prevention strategies for the continual development of the health and wellbeing of all our students.

Our first presentation was to the student wellbeing core team which consisted of the principal, deputy-principal, student wellbeing coordinator, a teacher representative and a parent representative. This is the group that would continue to monitor and drive this initiative if it was decided to go ahead. The presentation was very well received, clarifying questions were asked and unanimous approval was again given. The vice principal whilst giving her approval stated that she was still unsure as to how the project was going to unfold and exactly what was required of the school by becoming part of this project.

With this feedback the collaborative group reassessed the presentation and contacted our SACSC project worker at the CEOM to clarify exactly how the project was to proceed. The presentation to the leadership team included more detail on the practicality of the process involved. It included items such as an audit tool and how the data from the audit was used to develop a strategic plan in relation to student wellbeing, helping to identify key priorities and set both long term and short term goals. We included examples of projects other schools have undergone through the SACSC initiative. The leadership team agreed that the proposal was going to be beneficial for our school and the CEOM support worker should be invited to come and provide detail on the project for the whole staff for consideration.

At this point we were in contact with the SACSC project officer from the Student Wellbeing Unit at CEOM who asked that if we were keen to go ahead with SACSC one of the requirements was that we needed to be part of a cluster. An information meeting was scheduled amongst the four other Catholic schools within a 40 km radius. We are a rural school with the other Catholic schools located in larger rural towns. Three members of the CEOM came to deliver the presentation on SACSC. The four other attending schools thought that whilst the initiative had a lot of merit they could not see their schools being in the position at this point in time to come on board and form a cluster. This posed our first block. The CEOM was reluctant to allow us to continue at this

point as from their previous experiences forming a cluster was pivotal to the success of SACSC becoming a sustained and purposeful change. The benefits of being part of a cluster were the sharing of resources including physical resources and people resources i.e. meeting together for the purposes of sharing knowledge, ideas and sharing workload (personal communication CEOM SACSC project worker August 07).

At this point I met with some peer mentors from other schools and discussed possible avenues for the progression of this action research. Their reaction was to present my case again to the CEOM and show clearly that forming a cluster in a rural environment involved very different considerations to suburban schools who are possibly located in much closer proximity of each other and would share many of the same facilities.

When the collaborating group met this time we invited the Parish Priest to join us. Our Parish Priest could see the benefits of our school taking part in this SACSC project. He was particularly interested in any way in which the school parish partnership could be enhanced and could see the SACSC project affirming his very deeply held conviction that the Catholic Church has a two thousand year history of giving service to the wider community and that staff and students in Catholic school communities base their mission on this model of service. He believed that Catholic schools in their essence should form collaborative partnerships with parents, religious and other community groups, professionals and various agencies within and beyond our immediate community that are concerned with the education and wellbeing of young people (personal communication with Parish Priest August 2007).

At this meeting a plan was formed for the Parish Priest to approach some people within the CEOM to present the case that we are the only Catholic primary school operating within this particular community and separated from other Catholic primary schools by a distance of 25 or more kilometres. The other point our Parish Priest impressed upon the CEOM was that our school had made student wellbeing and the development of the whole child a central focus within our practice and policies and that the school board, the leadership team and the student wellbeing core group could all see the changing needs within our community and were all committed to this project and very keen to become involved. I also rang the CEOM SACSC project worker and presented her with the same information.

The plan was successfully implemented. The CEOM Student Wellbeing Team had granted their approval for us to proceed as a cluster of one. They made it very clear that this is not their preferred option but they were allowing us to proceed in the hope that other schools may come along to our meetings and, upon seeing the project in action, will choose to become involved. The CEOM see us a seeding school for rural and outlying schools and are keen to watch how we progress given that we have moved outside of their prescribed model.

In August the SACSC project worker delivered a presentation to the whole staff at the school. At the end of the staff meeting the staff agreed to support the SACSC project proposal. A time line was set that we would have the audit completed and goals set by the end of 2007 (Staff Meeting Minutes, 28th August 2007).

At this point the short term goal of this action research project of an 'in principle' agreement from the whole staff to participate in the SACSC project was achieved. We set about gathering data to gauge how well we had achieved our objective. We interviewed the same eight members of staff revisiting the same questions from the first interview. This time the results showed a change in attitude amongst staff members. Every staff member interviewed could see the value of the SACSC project, particularly as it commenced with an audit of our current practices with the extra support from the CEOM project worker. Having an outside person compile the results from the audit and support us through the process of isolating long term and short term goals was seen as particularly advantageous. All of staff members were happy to have the SACSC project driven by the student wellbeing core team and could see that the idea of applying a strategic umbrella over all that we do would lead us to a more co-ordinated whole school approach to student health and wellbeing.

All eight staff members interviewed were able to come up with suggestions of what they believed their particular role would be in implementing SACSC in our school. They all saw themselves as being part of the

decision making for the long and short term goals and also came up with other ideas for finding ways of improving communication with parents, creating opportunities for parents to experience what we are doing in the classroom, education nights focused on how parents can access other services in the community, etc.

Reflecting upon these results the collaborating group felt very positive about the future of SACSC within our school. This was also reiterated by the SACSC project worker who remarked upon the high level of enthusiasm generated by our staff for the project. We have received 100% commitment from the teaching staff at the school and the complete backing of the school board and Parish Priest. To spread our message into the wider community we put a notice in the school newsletter and the parish bulletin and gave a presentation at the Sunday Masses about the schools intention to become a part of this project and the reasons why.

Encouraged by these results we began the second cycle of the Action Research Project. This time the collaborating group became the student wellbeing core team as it was decided that SACSC sits well within their area and that all the initiatives should be driven through them. The short term plan was to implement the SACSC audit tool to all teaching and non teaching staff and the members of the school board and then analysing the survey data as a whole school with the SACSC project worker to brainstorm possible goals for the future. 100% both teaching and non-teaching staff members completed the survey which was distributed on a completely voluntary basis. The surveys are currently being collated by the SACSC project worker. When the data is ready it will be presented to the whole staff for consideration.

The action research process has allowed us to implement this change while constantly reflecting and evaluating as we proceed. Forming a collaborative group and having peer mentors has made the task more enjoyable by being able to discuss achievements or downfalls with people who have the same level of interest and commitment. Making formal plans within a collaborative group forced us to critically think about where we wanted to go with the SACSC project and how we were going to get there. "Planning is all about taking your vision and turning it into reality (Ellis & Hughes, 2002, p.4)."

Already changes are being seen in the classrooms to raise parent and community connectedness. As one small example a teacher and some students formed a knitting group which was advertised in the parish bulletin. Two parishioners, not otherwise connected with the school, came every week and taught the children how to knit. They decided to knit a blanket for a wing of the local hospital. When the blanket was completed the knitting group walked around to the hospital to present it to the patients there. They were so warmly received that the children were overwhelmed. The hospital decided that the blanket was too special to use so they framed it and hung it in the hospital foyer, with a local newspaper publishing an article about it. This has inspired the teacher involved to pursue other partnerships such as shared craft activities with a neighbouring retirement hostel. As she stated "it's all about making those connections."

Through my daily observations I can see and hear our long term goal coming to fruition, bringing about a culture and policy change that would permeate into all facets of the school. In the staffroom teachers are discussing how to monitor parent involvement and are asking questions to find out why parents are not attending school functions as opposed to just becoming despondent at the poor turn outs. In their planning teachers are more conscious of looking for ways to include guest speakers from the community or organising excursions within the local area. We also had our first afternoon expo at the end of term 3 to encourage parents from the junior primary area to come and view their children's work.

McNiff states that action research begins with values (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996). The outcome of this action research is very much concerned with values and instilling the vision amongst key stakeholders. The next few cycles will need the same level of enthusiasm to maintain the momentum so that the vision becomes translated into practice and the school community starts to experience the benefits that come from establishing firm partnerships and connections with the parent community and the broader community. It would appear that our primary school has made a very encouraging start on the process of embracing the concept of SACSC.

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