**Embracing Student and Family Wellness for School Success: An Invitational Approach to Full-Service Schools**

The problems affecting schools are now well beyond mere academic interventions. Basic needs like nutrition and a stable home environment are important, along with the mental health and the self-concept of the child. Appropriate supports are required for students, staff, and caregivers. Providing wrap-around school-community services by Building Connections provides a different approach to the provision of services and support across a range of school communities.

[JOHN S. YOUNG, COMMISSIONING EDITOR OF EDUCATION TODAY](https://www.educationtoday.com.au/news-detail/Embracing-Student-and-Family-Wellness-for-School-Success-5903)

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Schools are in a unique position to extend care to students and the wider community.

"If you're a child today from a poor family, or from the bush, or you're an Indigenous child, then you're three times more likely to fall behind at school….Fifteen years ago, the gap in the reading skills of 8-year-olds from poor and wealthy backgrounds was a bit over a year. Now it is over two, and with every year, that gap grows bigger." Jason Clare, Federal Minister for Education

Many Australian schools seek to foster school-community collaboration to engage students. This is especially relevant given the decline in student attendance rates and attendance levels in recent years. School leaders need a defensible theory of practice to improve school climate and ensure schools are inviting places.

In many towns across Australia, attempts to address inequality in students' educational outcomes have not always been successful. A traditional school model is not working in a number of communities. For some, the situation is dire, and there is an urgent need to strengthen school-community collaboration. This is especially so in schools where attendance is in decline.

The scale of the issues confronting Australian schools necessitates significant change. Henry Levin, an American economist of education, believes that the greatest predictor of health, wealth, and happiness in adult life is not achievement at school but the number of years engaged in schooling.

**A Defensible Theory of Practice**The fundamentals of Invitational Education, its theory and practice, provide the beacon on the hill, the vision, and intentionality to create, sustain and enhance the emotional climate of schools. Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) provides a defensible theory of practice to reshape the thinking about what works best to bring schools and their communities to a shared understanding that every child needs a literate future. Because inexorably, school-community collaboration must result in children attending school, engaging in classrooms, and thus help ensure the impact of learning is visible.

Engaging children in schools is a wicked problem and especially so in low socio-economic communities. It is important for schools to attract and retain students. There is an overarching need to invite student involvement, and this concept lies at the heart of contemporary educational thinking:  
"We could simply lower the school beginning and raise the leaving ages, but that would trap many students who do not want to be there in a cycle of proving to themselves why schools are not inviting places. Or, we could start our debates about how to make schools inviting places to be - which involves the fundamentals of Invitational Learning." Professor John Hattie in correspondence (2015)

Collaborations with schools and mental and physical health service organizations have proven to improve the quality of life for both students and caregivers, as these needs must be addressed before a student will be 'available' for learning.

A school-community strategy that also uses an [Invitational Education](https://www.invitationaleducation.org/_files/ugd/db20ed_4a46c345e7534d26addf59d18d9ab87e.pdf) (IE) framework ensures that the people, places, policies, programs, and practices are all aligned to message to students and families that they are able, valued, and responsible and will be treated with care, respect, optimism and trust by their school. An intentionally positive school culture in all five domains of the school, as well as collaborative initiatives to provide health services to families, creates the best foundation for success in school and life.

**Full-Service Schools**  
As far back as 2017, the Western Australian state government launched a full-service school trial at Armadale Senior High School and stated in a media release:

[Media Statements - Armadale Senior High School to Pilot Full Service Schools program](https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2017/12/Armadale-Senior-High-School-to-pilot-Full-Service-Schools-program.aspx)  
"Full-Service schools … provide a range of services and activities, often beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of children, their families, and the wider community...A Full-Service School could include services such as after-school activities, vacation care, life skills training (e.g., parenting support, prevention of teenage pregnancy and substance abuse, and social and relationship skills), TAFE/VET services, specialist health services, classes to reintegrate early school leavers and part-time community-based projects."

The 2015 WA Labor government position paper makes the key point as cited below: [Creating Strong Communities: Full-Service Schools](https://australianpolitics.com/downloads/wa/2017_election-policies/alp/Creating_strong_communities-Full_Service_Schools.pdf)

"The long-standing tendency has been for the focus of education reform to be predominantly inside the school and focused on standards, testing, and teacher quality. But as shown by the complex issues above, academic development needs to be complemented by focusing on external factors that influence student achievement. Schools need assistance and resources to address external issues and work together with other institutions or agencies with responsibilities for children. Evidence both in Australia and internationally shows that schools that work with parents are likely to achieve the greatest success. Parents are the first and most important teachers in a child's life, and they are the most important influence on a child's learning, development, and well-being outcomes. Inter-generational learning is a natural extension of the schools in many cases."

Students at educational risk (SAER) programs in schools need a range of services and supports depending on the individual and the context. Mental health professionals and invitational adults must provide appropriate support for academic interventions. Factors like poverty, social disadvantage, childhood trauma, and substance abuse restrict students' capacity for academic progress.

Inviting, Full-Service Schools should be a clear priority as schools with poor student attendance rates and educational outcomes risk inter-generational consequences. If children don't attend school, the school community has to find ways to creatively and persistently invite them. Community into schools and schools into the community! must become the mantra. What is required is a circuit breaker to leverage the structural change that drives significant and enduring school reform.

**School-Community Hubs**In recent times, several key educational bodies, such as the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education ([How-to-Hub](https://melbourne.figshare.com/articles/figure/How_to_Hub_Australia_Journey_Map/19669710/1)) and the Scanlon Institute (Australia), have deliberated on the usefulness of school-community hubs to provide wrap-around services in schools. Hub schools are the subject of a three-year research underway for the [Australian Research Council (ARC)](https://www.arc.gov.au/news-publications/media/research-highlights/building-connections-schools-community-hubs). The research team is looking at the establishment and efficacy of wrap-around schools. Community schools in New York City (NYC) demonstrate that quantifying the impact of school-community partnerships is essential; both practice and [evidence](https://infohub.nyced.org/working-with-the-doe/community-schools/nyc-community-schools-our-results/) must be intentionally aligned.

Schools are increasingly required to provide academic and non-academic support to students and their families and offer a wide range of services, including health care, mental health counseling, after-school programs, and other support services that address students' social, emotional, and physical needs. The resourcing required is substantial, and consideration must be given to the costs for both [infrastructure](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S187734352200001X) and human resources.

A number of Australian primary schools are hub schools; however, there are few examples of hubs in high schools. The complexity and size of high schools often make establishing school-community hubs difficult, and there is greater potential for a number of jurisdictional issues to affect their operation. Barriers also exist, such as parents of older students tending to be in paid employment, and high schools are often a greater distance from the family home. The high school experience is not as seamless as in primary schools, where many parents meet and chat almost daily at the school gate after walking their primary-age kids to and from school.

Full-Service or wrap-around schools' services vary depending on the context of the hub school and the community it operates within. Even without community hubs, inter-agency collaboration has been a feature of the work of many schools, including high and senior high schools, for many years.

In WA, schools have had on and off-campus, usually small-group programs, to cater to students at [severe] educational risk. These programs were akin to Full-Service Schools with an array of physical and emotional supports. SAER programs provided food, clothing, assistance with access to medical care, and emergency accommodation.

Intensive SAER programs are expensive to fund from the school budget. The teacher-to-student ratio and the number of support staff required to make it work can be formidable. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that schools in recent times can afford to fund fewer of them.

The problems affecting schools are now well beyond mere academic interventions. Basic needs like nutrition and a stable home environment are important, along with the mental health and the self-concept of the child. Appropriate supports are required for students, staff, and caregivers. Providing wrap-around school-community services by [Building Connections](https://msd.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/4211050/How-to-Hub-Australia-Framework-Building-Connections.pdf) provides a different approach for the provision of services and support across a range of school communities.

**The Nassau County Collaborative Strategy**  
A valuable insight into meaningful county-wide, school-community collaboration occurred on Long Island in 2018. Superintendents in over fifty independent school districts in Nassau County, Long Island, New York, created The Nassau County Schools' Mental Wellness Collaborative to help districts develop partnerships with community-based service providers and address growing concerns about mental health, substance abuse, mental wellness, and social-emotional learning (SEL) in Nassau County.

In 2021, the collaborative published a comprehensive guide for schools that included school-community partnerships: [Nassau County Mental Health and Wellness Strategic Plan](https://bit.ly/NassMHguide12-9-21) (updated 2023). As school administrators, mental health professionals, and community organizations worked together, it became apparent that while partnerships were essential for expanding the services needed, strengthening the relationships and communication skills of staff, students, and caregivers is key to creating safe and supportive schools, and leads to improved mental wellness and academic success.

Leadership teams began to address school climate more intentionally by examining how stakeholders are messaged by the school's people, places, policies, programs, and processes. Ongoing professional development in frameworks like Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) and Multi-Tiered System Supports (MTSS) is provided county-wide to help schools create a systemic approach and develop the interpersonal skills of all stakeholders.

"The Nassau County Mental Health and Wellness Strategic Plan" acknowledged that Invitational Education is designed to create a school environment that intentionally summons people to realize their potential. The focus is on the social-emotional climate. Invitational Education can provide a raft of preventative measures for mental health and academic issues in schools and provides a framework to address the real-life factors in the school ecosystem.

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