



Schools as Community Hubs Development Framework Workshop 2 Insights from Canada and the USA

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How are we going to measure impact?

... everyone is a potential stakeholder ...

...shared vision is important. It can't be run as a single person's pet project.

Building or renovating a school ... It's investment in a community.

There has to be someone who wakes up every day thinking "How can I support the principal?"

We co-located a community senior centre with a high school ... at a fraction of the cost.

Security in schools should be invisible ...

...schools shouldn't look like they have bars on them.



Development Framework Workshop # 2

Workshop overview

1. CANADIAN & USA SCHOOL CONTEXTS
2. PARTNERSHIPS, COLLABORATION, VISION & INTENTIONALITY
3. BROAD DEFINITION OF 'STAKEHOLDERS'
4. CHANGING ENTRENCHED ATTITUDES
5. COORDINATION
6. LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES
7. DESIGNING FOR COMMUNITY
8. SAFETY, SECURITY & RESISTING A CULTURE OF FEAR
9. THE IMPORTANCE OF EVALUATION
10. POSITIVE OUTCOMES

On 22 April 2021, the [Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs](#) ARC Linkage Project team delivered an ambitious stakeholder workshop via Zoom with a range of experts from Canada and the USA.

The workshop was the second in a series. It gathered insights and emerging themes about the relationships between schools, community programs and services, and school infrastructure in Canada and the USA.

The workshop findings will help inform a 'How to Hub' framework that will provide guidance about developing, implementing and sustaining schools as community hubs. This will address the planning, design, governance, management and use of shared or co-located facilities on school sites, offering practical guidance for navigating the 'obstacle course' that stakeholders commonly encounter when undertaking hub projects.

Participants

The virtual Zoom format enabled the participation of 19 experts from Canada and the USA. They offered perspectives from research, school and classroom design, non-government and not-for-profit organisations.

Universities represented included Boston College, Brock University, California Polytechnic State University, Illinois State University, Towson University, University of Albany, University of California Berkeley (Center for Cities & Schools), University of Maryland, University of Pennsylvania.

Participating architects, landscape architects, interior designers and learning space specialists included EIW Architects, LPA Design Studios, Nature Play Designs, SMMA, Stantec and Wayfind Education.

Participating non-government and not-for-profit organisations were [Christensen Institute](#), [Institute for Educational Leadership](#), [Coalition for Community Schools](#), [National Center for Community Schools](#) and [Susquehanna Greenway Partnership](#).

The research team appreciate participants' time, expertise and insights.

Workshop discussions & survey

The interactive workshop included whole group and small group discussions, including two sessions run in three virtual breakout rooms.

The first breakout session saw participants discuss partnerships and collaboration between organisations, such as may assist in the delivery of community-facing programs and services from co-located or shared school facilities. Stakeholders were asked: Who should be involved? What can partners contribute? And, what would constitute success if the objective was to offer community access to education, health services, arts programs, sport and recreation?

The second session saw participants explore the barriers typically faced by organisations when developing school sites for shared use. Participants discussed what information could typically aid decision making, and what lessons they would share to ease the path of others attempting similarly complex projects.

Completion of a pre- and post-workshop survey provided additional insights that are integrated into the following summary of findings.



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Highlighted themes

The workshop discussions generated a 25,000-word transcript which, combined with the surveys and facilitators' notes, offered a rich bank of narrative data. This was analysed by the research team to identify important themes. While dozens of themes were identified, this document summarises the 10 most significant themes that emerged. Quotes have been lightly edited to enhance their readability.

1

Canadian and USA school contexts

Participants noted the contextual differences between the schooling systems in Canada and the USA (and Australia). The school district system in the United States was identified as influencing highly varied approaches to the development of schools as community hubs:

"To set the scene, Canada looks more like Finland. The United States looks like 50 individual states and about 13,000 individual school districts."

"It's so localised in the United States ... You have to focus on the school district management. Because that's where the decisions are made, not only for the school but for the community as well."

"In the US you have districts where some of this may be centralised out of a district office, but you also have districts where principals at individual schools are empowered to do whatever they want. They control their own school budget. So, they may have 15 partnerships or three partnerships. And the central district office may or may not be attuned to the diversity and variability across their own schools."

"Each of them (school districts) essentially operates as if they're a non-profit board. The big city ones are operating in a more professional manner, but most are not."

"About 15 years ago the Ontario government [in Canada] had a Minister of Education who was very keen on hub schools, so funding was set up for community organisations to share the use of schools. It's not very planned though, because you've still got school principals who are the gatekeepers and will not necessarily give access to community organisations. So, it's not as collaborative and it's not as coordinated and intentional as [it could be]."

"It's hard to make a justification around educational interventions in this country [USA], if you're not tying it to student achievement as measured by a standardised test score. Student outcomes becomes a quantitative metric to which we reduce all successes of anything that goes on inside a school building. I think this has a lot to do with the culture of federal education policy and standardised testing."

"What you're describing is not a concept [widely adopted] in the United States. We just don't think the way you're describing. I wish we would! There are certainly people heading in that direction. You might look at well-funded Catholic schools. You might look at other faith-based institutions that have their own schools, because they're already in the community business."



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“Funding is helpful. But funding alone isn’t going to drive it. You’ve got to have a collaborative effort. You need people moving towards shared goals.”

2

Partnerships, collaboration, vision & intentionality

Participants identified collaborative approaches as critical to the effective establishment of community hub projects, highlighting the importance of developing a ‘shared vision’ between partners and being intentional:

“The most important issue for any partnership initiator is the need for a clear vision—for what you hope to achieve, what your end goals are. Then seek out partners who may share those goals ... If you’ve got a clear vision of who you want to use the space, then you want to invite representatives from those kinds of organisations.”

“Coming to that shared vision is important. It can’t be an initiative run as a single person’s pet project.”

“Let’s be clear about the outcomes. And if we’re clear about the outcomes, then we’re much clearer about which partners we need to work with. What kinds of programs do we need? Do we need to be more intentional about which young people get into which programs? It just becomes an entirely different way of working. And that does not happen automatically.”

“So not waiting until the end of the year to figure out what to do or what we should have done. [Being intentional] helps you mobilise the resources that you’ve pulled together in a much more strategic way.”

“This point around intentionality is really true ... I think it’s true on the program side and it’s also true on the physical design side ... intentionality of the program to the community and who the children are [and] ... equal intentionality around the design, assuming you’re designing a brand-new building or campus to what that program does.”



“Who wouldn’t be a stakeholder of a new school like this? I think everyone is a potential stakeholder.”

3

Broad definition of ‘stakeholders’

Participants shared broad definitions of ‘stakeholders’, suggesting that any interested parties or people should be ‘welcome at the table’ when discussing a school as a community hub:

“Who wouldn’t be a stakeholder of a new school like this? I think everyone is a potential stakeholder. We’ve worked with a number of school communities where they’ve done a good job of demonstrating the value of a hub school or community school as being owned by everyone, including adults who don’t have children, or who don’t have school-aged children.”

“We’ve had law enforcement at the table. We’ve had the local church pastors at the table. Whoever is the community and how the community defines itself [should be recognised].”

“I would pay particular attention to minoritized groups, as they’re classically excluded from decision making in schools. In a community school, you’d really want to pay attention to those groups of folks. And in the United States we have community schools that are designed without them—and that’s troubling.”

4

Changing entrenched attitudes

Challenging entrenched attitudes about how schools should be planned, designed and managed was considered a potential ‘game changer’ with respect to creating opportunities for more meaningful school-community connections:

“One of the barriers ... is our cross-sector groups not feeling free to think outside the box. Not feeling free to ask, “What is it that our communities and our children really need and how might we get there—perhaps in ways that we haven’t gotten there before?”

[School boards think] “we’ll make sure the buses run on time. We’ll make sure that we come in on budget. But we’re not going to do anything radical ... And we’re certainly not to change the definition of our relationship to the community because there’s liability.”

“[Reaching out to the community] can be a tough thing for a school board to accept. There’s fear of the fear. And the fear of change.”



“We are now doing a much better job in the States of providing capacity (resources) for coordination.”

5

Coordination

Participants flagged coordination as important when developing innovative school projects, especially when stakeholders must be introduced strategically to the conversation. Coordination and oversight were also identified as vital to the effective day-to-day offering of community-facing programs and services from school sites:

“We see schools that have tons of programs happening in them, but it’s chaos. We call it “random acts of programming”. It’s unclear who-is-doing-what-to-whom-for-what-reason. Is there any value coming from it? Are those partners being set up for success? Are they ships passing in the night? Is it a principal who can’t say “no” and has all these partners engaged but it’s not really moving towards any real outcomes? So, having a coordinator is important, and having the kinds of systems that Mary Walsh has developed in Boston (Boston College, Centre for Optimised Student Support/City Connects).”

“There has to be someone who wakes up every day thinking “How can I support the principal?” ... Investing in that capacity is really important. Most folks can find money for programming. That’s hard to do sometimes, but it’s even harder to find money for the less tangible, less sexy [job of making] connections between all those programs.”

“With institutional collaboration ... there’s always going to be leadership change, there’s always going to be new funding and funding that stops. [The challenge is finding consistency] through those inevitable changes, ebbs and flows.”



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“There needs to be this navigator or coordinator in the building, and then you build out to the community partners and families.”

6

Leadership capabilities

Building on the theme of ‘coordination’, participants highlighted the importance of having well-trained school leaders and staff. Principals may have received excellent teacher and educational leadership training, but may lack the skills to liaise effectively with community members:

“It is important to think about teacher, principal, and superintendent capacity ... They express that they are challenged [by liaising with community members]— they are not prepared by their training. This isn’t to knock our education leaders, but when we think about technical assistance and capacity building, it’s not only the community folks that need this capacity, but the current educational leaders too.”

“We have Community School Coordinators or Community School Directors who are in charge and oversee partnerships that the school has. Sometimes they work well with principals and sometimes they don’t. But principals in general are not trained in the United States to run [community schools]. They’re trained to run conventional schools in which they’re in charge. And so that power sharing becomes a challenge.”



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“About a dozen years ago we put in place a community senior centre as part of a high school. We bid with the high school, and it came in at a fraction of the cost than it would have as a separate green-field project.”

7 Designing for community

Those from the design professions, including architects, landscape architects, interior designers and learning space specialists, expressed some pessimism about a lack of design innovation in American schools:

“Our school grounds have looked the same for decades in the United States. It’s grass. It’s a parking lot. And it’s a paved playground.”

Yet, others noted schools experimenting with designs or co-located facilities that engage the community and/or create budget efficiencies:

“One school we recently designed has a strong cultural influence where they do lots of large gatherings. So right outside the large gym area, where people could gather inside if it’s raining, [we designed] a beautiful patio with overhead lights. It’s a very warm, welcoming space. They can meet there for a school event, or they can rent the space for their neighbourhood community picnic, or a cultural event.”

“A high school / middle school we designed on the island of Nantucket off Massachusetts included a community theatre, which served both the school system and the community. We included a swimming pool too, which was the only swimming pool available to the public on the island. They run an extension of Cape Cod Community College out of the school in the evenings ... all kinds of activities.”

“About a dozen years ago we put in place a community senior centre as part of a high school. We bid with the high school, and it came in at a fraction of the cost than it would have as a separate green-field project.”



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“Security in schools should be invisible. Schools still should look like schools. They should still engender joy in children. Schools shouldn’t look like they have bars on them. And we have years of experience in being able to create these kinds of environments [in other contexts] that are quite secure, but you can’t see it. ”



Safety, security, access & resisting a culture of fear

Safety, security and access were major themes of the discussions. While always a consideration for school projects, safety was cited as of heightened importance when community hub projects may see children mixing with adults:

“Mixing students and other adults (non-school employees) gives everyone hyper fear in America ... despite very little evidence it’s a common problem.”

Participants noted that it was important to resist a ‘culture of fear’. How design can facilitate, or hinder, community connections was a recurring theme:

“Design-wise, it’s about striking a balance between a defensible posture and a welcoming atmosphere. Transparency goes a long way toward both. Seeing and being seen goes a long way toward both security and promoting a sense of community. This is counter-intuitive to a lot of security folks with whom we speak, but the evidence bears out.”

“I’ve been working on signage and wayfinding, which is quite significant for a site that’s got community usage ... and all the signs say ‘no!’ There’s “staff only” and “don’t go here” and “don’t bring your dog.” I’ve had to work hard to say “actually, if we want people to come here, then we need to find a way of balancing what might happen when they are here and try to remove barriers.”

The redesign of Sandy Hook Elementary School was cited as an example of best-practice design; security conscious while remaining welcoming, calm and connected to the natural elements. The school was the site of a shooting in 2012 that killed 20 students and six adults. The original building was demolished. The new school buildings use environmental design concepts like openness and clear sightlines for security, as well as subtle and concealed safety features. Safety, security and access challenges were regarded as surmountable, provided there was willingness – and funding – to work collaboratively towards solutions:

“The Sandy Hooks redesign leverages transparency to its advantage.

“They have intentionally, thoughtfully and soulfully redesigned that school. [The design really understands] how to make it safe without hardening the infrastructure. It was about keeping the connections and relationships. And keeping the school safe, but in a way that was still welcoming to the community.”



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“How are we going to measure impact? Is that the well-being of the children? Is that some social and emotional, mental health metrics that we might see in families and communities? Or are those metrics outcomes like graduation and then workforce development? ”



The importance of evaluation

To effectively promote the concept of schools as community hubs, participants felt that evaluation data was essential. Some felt evaluation was a challenging task, too often guided by unreachable targets and inflexible system metrics. There was a feeling that much more work is required in the area to get evaluation right, including more applicable frameworks and measures. Another priority is to translate the evaluation information for wider use:

“Evaluation is critical and there’s two ways it’s been done in the States that I can see. One way is getting a lot of varied evidence to say, for example, if you provide healthcare to kids, we know they do better. If you provide after school programming to children, we know they do better. So, it’s looking at a whole bunch of studies and finding the evidence for each of these supports or resources or services. The other way is to actually look at the school itself or a set of schools and say “if the intervention is in all of these schools, how can we measure what’s happening in those schools related to the intervention?” ... How do we make causal inferences? There’s been some work, not a lot. It’s hard to do in a traditional community school. ... It’s hard, but it can be done.

Canada and the USA have different approaches to educational evaluation, and in the following quote the participant is referring to challenges of working in the USA:

“The culture of federal education policy and standardised testing means that it’s hard to justify educational interventions in this country if you’re not tying it to student achievement as measured by a standardised test score. “Student outcomes” becomes the quantitative metric by which we reduce all success of anything that goes on inside a school building. But I think that’s problematic because it misses the fact that a lot of these support services are going to pay dividends in future years, not on a third-grader’s reading test three weeks from now, right? The other thing is that it misses is complex social and emotional learning outcomes that again can’t be reduced to this kind of measure. Figuring out how we capture that is a hefty challenge. It’s about honouring the ecosystem in which the child and the school are located, that there’s mutual benefit, that it’s a multidirectional relationship. I haven’t seen good evaluations that capture that benefit. Ephemeral or emotional [aspects] don’t seem to be present in our evaluative culture yet when talk about the vision and mission of these places, that’s what we talk about. We talk about sort of the joy, connectivity, relationships and the depth of connection that results in positive outcomes for kids and families and community. But then when we turn to evaluation, we become really reductionist. And that’s kind of disappointing and frustrating. And there’s probably a better way to do it. But I haven’t seen too much of it.”



“Building a new school, or significantly renovating one, has enormous and deep potential for community empowerment and community organising. It’s investment in a community.”

10

Positive outcomes

Despite noting challenges associated with creating schools that effectively serve their communities, participants described the whole of community benefits that can be achieved as making the collective effort worthwhile:

“Building a new school, or significantly renovating one, has enormous and deep potential for community empowerment and community organising. It’s investment in a community.”

“The benefit goes beyond students. It benefits the seniors, or the grandparents who can visit with their students. When it crosses those generations it’s hard to argue against those benefits.”



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Research dissemination

The themes emerging from this workshop will be explored further in forthcoming conference papers, academic journal articles and book chapters. If you would like to discuss a workshop theme in more detail, please contact Dr Philippa Chandler, Research Fellow: philippa.chandler@unimelb.edu.au

Upcoming workshops

This stakeholder workshop was the second of a series that will help inform the creation of a 'How to Hub' framework for developing, implementing and sustaining schools as community hubs. [The first workshop held in May 2020](#) focussed on Australia, while the third workshop held in April 2021 focussed on the UK and Europe.

Summaries of all three will be available on the [Building Connections website](#), with further workshops to follow.

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Building Connections

Schools as Community Hubs

ARC LINKAGE PROJECT
2019 – 2022

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