



Institute of Child Protection Studies

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# **Evaluation of the Schools as Communities Program in the ACT**

September 26, 2005

A joint initiative between the Australian Catholic University  
and the  
ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support

This evaluation of the ACT *Schools as Communities* program was commissioned by the ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support in March 2005. The Program was introduced in February 2001 with the program goal of improving educational and social outcomes for children and young people at risk by creating strong and effective working relationships between families, communities and their schools.

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## Executive Summary

This evaluation would not have been possible without the constructive and significant participation of stakeholders including parents; school principals and other school staff; representatives of relevant community welfare agencies; officers in the Department of Education and Training and the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support; and in particular the Schools as Communities community outreach workers themselves.

### Terms of reference

The terms of reference for the evaluation were:

- to review the operation of the *Schools as Communities* program to determine how effectively it is achieving its objective and intended outcomes, and make recommendations about future program directions and delivery; and
- review the management and staffing arrangements for the program and make recommendations about any changes required taking into account new ACT Government agency structures and responsibilities.

### The *Schools as Communities* program

When ACT *Schools as Communities* program was introduced it had the **explicit program objective** of improving educational and social outcomes for children and young people at risk by creating strong and effective working relationships between families, communities and their schools. The **intended program outcomes** were:

- Children and young people at risk and their families receive more effective case coordination.
- Children and young people at risk and their families are supported by schools, which become accessible sites for the provision of community services.
- Schools, communities and business work to build capacity and develop partnerships which will strengthen families and the community as a whole.
- The capacity of children and young people at risk and their families is strengthened by their participation in cross sectoral programs with proven efficacy in other jurisdictions.

- Professional development programs of specific relevance are established which will support and enhance authentic partnerships between the educational, health, community services and business sector.

Essentially, the program works to achieve its objective by helping schools and families to link into the extensive network of health and community services that exist in the ACT. It does this through two major sub-programs.

These are:

- **The employment of skilled community outreach workers working from selected school and preschool sites with children at risk and the families and communities that support them.** The outreach workers have a dual role involving both case coordination for individual families and the facilitation of community development initiatives to support families. Currently there are eight community outreach workers operating in ten primary schools (and their on-site pre-schools) and two high schools within the ACT.
- **The funding of strategic projects across the ACT community to enhance partnerships between families, communities, local business, schools and government.** Approximately 80 community projects have been funded under the strategic projects sub-program since 2001.

## Policy and program context

The *Schools as Communities* program was introduced in 2001 as part of the ACT Government's commitment to building social capital. The program was seen primarily as a family and community strengthening program within the (then) Department of Education and Community Services. Although located at the time within the Family Services Branch of the Department it was constructed as an early intervention program.

This emphasis on early intervention remains a focus of the program. The 2005-06 ACT Budget articulated a comprehensive and integrated approach to early intervention across a range of government activity and identifies *Schools as Communities* as an early intervention initiative along with other family support programs. We note that the Budget's definition of 'early intervention' covers intervention not only in the child's early years but also at an early stage in problems that may arise for the child at any age.

There was a commitment made in the Canberra Social Plan launched in 2004 to an expansion of *Schools as Communities*, with the program described as ‘working with families and communities to build resilience and foster a sense of connection and belonging in local communities.’ While this commitment to expansion was overtaken by 2005-06 Budget priorities, several of the themes from the Social Plan have particular relevance for *Schools as Communities*:

- An increasing body of evidence points to the importance of investing in our children and young people to enhance life opportunities.
- Strong supportive families and communities are crucial for our well-being.
- By focusing on early intervention and prevention across the entire lifespan we can improve the likelihood of positive health and social outcomes for everyone.
- Effective outcomes are delivered through partnerships between professionals, government and non-government organisations, business, community organisations and the community.

The *Schools as Communities* program was originally managed within the (then) Department of Education and Community Services. It is now located in the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (within the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services), along with other family support, care and protection, and youth justice services.

### **Theoretical framework and review of the literature**

The report provides an extensive overview of the ideas that surround the *Schools as Communities* program. It highlights the significance of taking a ‘strengths perspective’, the role of networks in building capacity and social connectedness, the interlinked nature of social problems and the need for early intervention and collaborative approaches.

The *Schools as Communities* program reflects current good practice as demonstrated in the current school linked/school based literature. This literature illustrates how integrating services into schools addresses the health, welfare and education needs of children and young people more effectively. However international examples go one step further with schools transforming their school culture to not only focus on educational needs of children and young people but also the health, social, recreational and cultural needs of

the community (Anderson-Butcher, 2004). This is reciprocated by the community sector incorporating *educational* outcomes in service delivery.

The *Schools as Communities* (SAC) program provides an important opportunity for this reciprocal transformation to occur. This could be progressed by developing new inter-departmental and broader governance arrangements for this program.

## **Key themes**

The evaluation process focussed largely on feedback obtained through interviews and surveys with stakeholders, including families, schools, care and protection workers, community-based agencies, relevant government departmental officers and the workers themselves. We also accessed program documentation and any available quantitative/statistical information.

Key themes which emerged from the evaluation, a number of which were consistent across all stakeholders, include the following:

### **Key theme 1**

#### **Wrap around services for children and families by better integration**

- Workers have a high level of success in their family support role, by wrapping services around families and filling service gaps. They do this by establishing relationships with children and families; arranging appropriate referrals for families and supporting them to attend appointments; supporting families in their parenting roles; providing ongoing coordination of support including in cases where the family's issues are complex and long-standing; and supporting families in their contact with the care and protection system.
- The research indicates that a family left unsupported simply may not or cannot attend appointments or access services to which they are referred.

### **Key theme 2**

#### **Identifies children and families at risk earlier**

- One third of all families referred to the program had drug and alcohol, mental health, financial, housing and other identified risk factors.



- Principals understand that prevention and early intervention have long term impacts and don't expect miracles overnight. They appreciate the impact of incremental change over time.

The early intervention/prevention focus of the program covers intervention and prevention early in the child's life and also early in the life of a problem for the child or young person. In other words, the focus of the program makes it effective across pre, primary, and high school aged children.

### **Key theme 3**

**The potential for the program to assist in child protection reports and responses could be strengthened.**

- There is evidence that collaboration between SAC workers and care and protection workers can be very effective on occasions.
- Care and protection workers are not always aware of the role of SAC workers and their potential in supporting families at risk or where there has been a report.
- The presence of a worker in the school makes it more likely that children who are at risk of actual harm will be identified.
- Neither schools nor care and protection services are fully utilising the SAC workers in carrying out child centred practice.
- Opportunities to develop a better understanding of the SAC and CPS roles by introducing joint activities such as case discussions and training should be explored.

### **Key theme 4**

**Brings parents into schools**

- Parents of children and young people at risk are more likely to come to the school when there has been contact with the SAC worker. Sometimes this contact leads to willingness to see the principal or teachers about issues related to their children, but it can also help them to feel more welcome generally and more comfortable about being involved informally in the school.

## **Key theme 5**

### **Helps children and families to connect with services and other networks in and beyond schools**

- 96% of all families referred actually had contact with the SAC worker. This reflects the effectiveness of an outreach model.
- Workers have been very effective in networking *within* schools to develop a stronger sense of community and support among families and between families and teachers. Their success in networking *beyond* schools, establishing links and collaboration with a whole range of external agencies, has been fundamental to their capacity to connect parents and children to appropriate community services. Principals in particular spoke of the value of the worker being on site as a bridge, as someone who can connect with children and their families and then help them link with services and support inside the school and in the wider community.

## **Key theme 6**

### **Brings services into schools**

- Workers have not only referred families to services outside the school, they have also been able to attract services into schools to provide support and training to both students and parents, usually in group settings.
- Services range from nutrition programs, anger management, peer pressure, parenting skills, recreational activities, sexual assault and family violence programs.

## **Key theme 7**

### **Building social connectedness**

- There is evidence that schools acknowledge the broad and complex role of the worker which includes: immersing themselves in the life and community of the school, understanding how a particular school's culture works, and helping parents to link with each other and not just with the worker or external services.

- Workers' effectiveness in community development roles contributes to their ability to earn the trust needed for their family support/case coordination work with individuals.
- The wider if less tangible set of activities allows the workers to fulfil the other aspect of their dual role, that of community development and the cultivation of social connectedness in the school community.
- A list of excellent examples can be found in the main report.
- Strategic projects have been very successful in encouraging partnerships across sectors but some questions have been raised about the limit on the amount per grant and the fact that grants are available only on a one-off basis.

## **Key theme 8**

### **New administrative arrangements require new governance**

- There have been some unrealistic expectations of this quite small program in terms of its impact on systemic change in school practice and philosophy.
- With new administrative arrangements between community services and education there is a need for new governance arrangements at all levels to oversee the program. This would also include the potential for re-visioning of the role of the manager and team leader.
- To ensure the ongoing shared understanding of the program across the partnership MOUs could be developed between schools and the SAC program.
- As the SAC outreach worker role requires a special mix of skills, experience and personal qualities more attention is required both in the recruitment and ongoing professional, support and development of workers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendation 1**

That strategies be put in place to

- (i) increase awareness within Care and Protection of the role of Schools as Communities outreach workers in schools and
- (ii) promote collaboration between SAC workers and CPS workers. Such strategies might include:

- joint training and shared case discussions in practice forums;
- training/orientation for CPS workers about SAC; and
- participation of Director Early Interventions and Partnerships and the Director Care and Protection Services in joint forums to improve collaboration/communication;
- creating more opportunities for collaboration between line managers/team leaders in Schools as Communities and Care and Protection to improve the sharing of information.

### **Recommendation 2**

That the coordinator/team leader position description be reviewed as a matter of urgency to clarify realistic expectations for the team leader role, and that this clarification be achieved through careful consultation with interested parties, in a cooperative and transparent process, taking account of the needs of the agency, the workers in the field and the program overall.

### **Recommendation 3**

That a more carefully targeted and proactive recruitment process be developed, to ensure that applicants for the community outreach worker positions have an understanding of the role and the qualities required to undertake the job. This could be done by more active use of the existing job descriptions, duty statements and selection criteria.

### **Recommendation 4**

That a process equivalent to the partnership negotiations be developed and implemented whenever there is a change of principal or worker, and that the Principal, the SAC worker and the SAC team leader should all participate in this process.

### **Recommendation 5**

That attention be given to revitalising the level and nature of professional support provided to SAC community outreach workers. Two areas that appear to require attention include:

- more focussed and structured use of the weekly group sessions when workers come together for support for their professional practice and for strengthening of their identity as a professional team;
- addressing the need that several workers identified for individual, professional supervision..

### **Recommendation 6**

i That consideration be given to introducing more flexibility into the guidelines for the strategic projects sub-program, to allow for:

- an increase in the maximum amount available per grant; and
- the funding of selected projects for more than one year.

ii That if and when budgetary considerations allow, increased funding be made available for the strategic projects sub-program to facilitate this more flexible approach.

### **Recommendation 7**

That the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services and the Department of Education and Training meet as soon as possible to:

- (a) identify clearly the respective responsibilities and interests of each department in relation to the *Schools as Communities* program as the basis for a formal memorandum of understanding covering matters such as funding, recruitment and staffing, training, provision of facilities in schools, recommendations for project funding, communication with schools about policy and program guidelines, budget submissions, and program reporting and accountability;
- (b) establish a mechanism for regular, high level contact between the two departments as an opportunity to jointly set directions and priorities for the ongoing implementation and development of the *Schools as Communities* program; and
- (c) consider the establishment of a partnership with other departments or sectors (such as Health) whose services are of particular relevance to families being supported through *Schools as Communities*.

## **Recommendation 8**

In relation to the expansion of Schools as Communities flagged in the ACT Social Plan, it is recommended, if and when budgetary considerations allow:

- that there be an increase in the number of school sites from which the program operates;
- that any increase in the number of sites be accompanied by an increase in the number of outreach workers, to ensure a viable presence for the program in all participating schools;
- that in the event of an expansion, the additional sites should be selected using the original criteria of need (outlined in the original program guidelines and also in section 2.1 of the full report (*Schools As Communities Evaluation*), and identifying those suburbs which are the next highest in the ranking; and
- that given the wider definition of early intervention that underpins the Government's integrated early intervention framework, any increase in the number of school sites should include consideration of secondary as well as primary and preschools.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Aims and objectives of the *Schools as Communities* Program

The ACT *Schools as Communities* program was introduced in February 2001 with the **program objective** of improving educational and social outcomes for children and young people at risk by creating strong and effective working relationships between families, communities and their schools. Its **intended outcomes** were:

- Children and young people at risk and their families receive more effective case coordination.
- Children and young people at risk and their families are supported by schools, which become accessible sites for the provision of community services.
- Schools, communities and business work to build capacity and develop partnerships which will strengthen families and the community as a whole.
- The capacity of children and young people at risk and their families is strengthened by their participation in cross sectoral programs with proven efficacy in other jurisdictions.
- Professional development programs of specific relevance are established which will support and enhance authentic partnerships between the educational, health, community services and business sector.

### 1.2 Aim of the evaluation

This evaluation of the ACT *Schools as Communities* program was commissioned by the ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support in March 2005.

It aims to:

- evaluate how effectively the *Schools as Communities* program has achieved its objective and intended outcomes; and
- review other factors affecting the program, such as governance arrangements and the relationship between the program and overall policy context in which it operates.

### 1.3 Terms of Reference

The broad terms of reference for the evaluation were:

- to review the operation of the *Schools as Communities* program to determine how effectively it is achieving its objective and intended outcomes, and make recommendations about future program directions and delivery; and
- review the management and staffing arrangements for the program and make recommendations about any changes that might be needed to take account of new ACT Government agency structures and responsibilities.

### 1.4 Approach to the evaluation research

The evaluation took a multi-method approach. In line with the Institute's strong commitment to seeking the viewpoint of those affected by the program, including client groups and stakeholders such as service providers, there has been a strong emphasis in the evaluation methodology on direct contact with stakeholders through interviews. To the extent that it was available, we have also taken account of relevant quantitative data.

### 1.5 Data collection activities

The evaluation was conducted between April and September 2005 and included the following data collection activities:

- **Initial discussion workshop:** involving all community outreach workers currently employed under the *Schools as Communities* program together with the program coordinator.
- **Interviews with school principals:** in-depth, semi-structured interviews were held with all 12 principals (and in some cases deputy principals also) of participating schools, 2 at high schools and 10 at primary schools.
- **Telephone survey of parents:** 132 parents who had had contact with SAC workers in preceding twelve months were invited by letter to take part in a telephone interview; of these, 34 consented to participate and were subsequently interviewed.



- **Survey of child protection workers:** a survey of ACT statutory child protection workers was circulated electronically, with 14 responses.
- **Analysis of child protection files:** 10 selected child protection case files were analysed in detail to ascertain the extent of contact with SAC workers.
- **Analysis of documentation for SAC Strategic Project grants from 2001 to 2005:** this included details of grants and final project reports.
- **Reports and publications:** The evaluation took into account a number of earlier reviews and reports arising from the SAC program as well as source documents such as the original program guidelines and the research context which provide the original underpinning for the program.
- **Analysis of data from the *Schools as Communities* database**
- **Analysis of child abuse reporting data**
- **Survey of relevant government and community-based agencies:** telephone interviews were conducted with nine agencies with a history of involvement with *Schools as Communities*.
- **Contact with key individuals in government:** interviews were held with key individuals in the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (mainly in the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support) (the Office) and the Department of Education and Training (Education).

## 1.6 Ethics approval for the research

Ethics approval is required for research carried out under the auspice of ACU to ensure “the conduct of research protects the welfare and rights of all human participants in research and ensures the principles of integrity, respect for persons, beneficence and justice are upheld”. Ethics approval was applied for and approved.

The decision was made not to interview children and young people to elicit their views due to the constraints of the ethics process and resources available.

## **2. The Schools as Communities program**

### **2.1 What the program looks like**

Essentially, the program works to achieve its objective by helping schools and their families to link into the extensive network of health and community services that exists in the ACT. It does this through two major sub-programs.

These are:

- *The employment of skilled community outreach workers working from selected school and preschool sites with children at risk and the families and communities that support them.*

The outreach workers have a dual role involving both case coordination for individual families and the facilitation of community development initiatives of benefit to the school community. Their primary objective is to establish and maintain links between families, schools and community service providers. This involves working both with families directly and with the broader community to develop initiatives that care for children, reduce parental isolation and provide parents with new knowledge and skills.

Eight community outreach workers are currently operating in 10 Primary Schools (and their on-site pre-schools) and 2 High Schools within the ACT. These include the primary schools of Isabella Plains, Richardson, Charles Conder, Charnwood, Macgregor, Holt, Higgins, Narrabundah, Duffy and Weston Creek, the Ginninderra District High School and Calwell High School.

The participating schools were chosen based on a range of available data including the IRSED (Index of Relative Social and Economic Disadvantage) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the ACTCOSS Poverty Task Force findings, Department of Education, Youth and Family Services data including child protection reporting rates sorted by location, and recommendations from the Ministerial Advisory Council on Defining a Priority School (1998).

- *The funding of strategic projects across the ACT community to enhance partnerships between families, communities, local business, schools and government.*

Approximately 80 community projects have been funded under the strategic projects sub-program since the inception of the program. Under the guidelines, projects may be funded for one year only and with the exception of the first two years, grants have usually been for amounts of no more than \$5000.

## **2.2 Policy and service delivery context for the program ... then and now**

The *Schools as Communities* program was introduced in 2001 as part of the ACT Government's commitment to building social capital. The program was developed around the view that the well-being of children and young people is strongly associated with the levels of social capital (the presence of social support and good community networks) that exist in their families and communities; and social capital is considered to grow most effectively in communities when there are strong links across different sectors such as government, communities and business.

*Schools as Communities* was seen primarily as a family and community strengthening program within the (then) Department of Education and Community Services, with an emphasis on early intervention. Program guidelines referred to its explicit focus on improving social and educational outcomes for children and young people at risk by creating strong and effective working relationships between families and their schools and communities.

Departmental arrangements at the time allowed three main avenues for focussing on the needs of children and young people at risk. These were:

- programs directed at improving educational outcomes for this group by targeting educational settings;
- direct care and protection services (and the funded family support agencies with which they have collaborative relationships), which provide services for this target group directly; and

- programs aiming primarily to achieve broader social, educational and health outcomes by working with families and communities together with schools.

*Schools as Communities* was part of this last category of services working towards broader outcomes, but there were obvious policy and service delivery links with care and protection and family support services on the one hand and school/education services on the other.

The service delivery context within which the program is now delivered has changed significantly since that time. Two key aspects of this change are that:

- All ACT care and protection and family support services (including *Schools as Communities*) are now delivered through the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support within the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services. The Office was established in response to the Vardon Report in May 2004, with responsibility for a continuum of service delivery responses to children and families, from care and protection services and related functions, youth justice, targeted early intervention through to family support services.
- Responsibility for ACT schools now lies with the Department of Education and Training

In other words, the two key government stakeholders for this program are now in different departments, and the role of one of these, Education and Training, is largely the provision of school sites from which the outreach workers operate. The findings of the evaluation set out later in this report look at some of the implications of these changes.

There has also been some development of the broader policy context in which *Schools as Communities* operates. This has occurred in several ways:

Clear priorities and goals for future social policy for the ACT were articulated in *Building Our Community – The Canberra Social Plan* (launched in 2004). The following Social Plan themes would seem to have particular relevance for initiatives such as *Schools as Communities*:

- An increasing body of evidence points to the importance of investing in our children and young people to enhance life opportunities.
- Strong supportive families and communities are crucial for our well-being.
- By focusing on early intervention and prevention across the entire lifespan we can improve the likelihood of positive health and social outcomes for everyone.
- Effective outcomes are delivered through the partnerships between professionals, government and non-government organisations, business, community organisations and the community.

While it has been overtaken by 2005-06 Budget priorities, a commitment is made in the Social Plan to expansion of *Schools as Communities*, describing it as a program ‘working with families and communities to build resilience and foster a sense of connection and belonging in local communities.’

The intention to focus strongly on early intervention stated in the Social Plan is reflected in the ACT Government’s 2005-06 Budget. This document identifies *Schools as Communities* as an early intervention initiative along with other family support programs. It also specifies that the number of families who have face to face contact with staff in these programs is to be used as a longitudinal indicator of the success of early intervention across Government.

We note that the 2005-2006 Strategic Focus statement from the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support clarifies that ‘early intervention/prevention’ initiatives include those available early in the life of a child and/or in the life of a problem. In the case of *Schools as Communities*, this allows coverage of a wider age group than the pre-school age group sometimes associated with the term ‘early intervention’.

### **3. The theoretical framework**

The next section discusses the theoretical underpinnings of programs in some detail to provide a comprehensive review of what this program is expected to achieve and why. One of the defining features of the *Schools as Communities* program is its strong program

logic including the set of assumptions which provide the basis for the design of the program. The assumptions and the theoretical framework which underpins the model were drawn from a review of the empirical and theoretical literature in 2000. This evaluation revisits and refreshes this framework by including relevant theories and contemporary studies of school based and school linked services over the past five years.

### 3.1 The 'Strengths Perspective'

The overarching theoretical base of SAC is the set of discourses known in human services as 'the Strengths Perspective'. Proponents of the 'Strengths Perspective' suggest that this is a way of seeing and recognising what is already available to individuals and communities, with the 'professional person' thus becoming

a translator who helps people see that they already possess much of what they need to proceed on their chosen path (Weick, et al, 1989 cited in Healy, 2005)

Interventions thus concentrate on ways to *enable* individuals and communities to articulate and work towards their hopes for the future rather than remedying the problems of the past. It challenges models that have dominated conventional mental health and other 'psycho social approaches based on individual, family and community pathology, deficits, problems, abnormality, victimization and disorder' (Saleebey, 1996 cited in Healy, 2005) The Strengths Perspective draws on a broad range of theoretical knowledge and empirical research and is strongly aligned with solution focused and empowerment approaches (Healy, 2005). These approaches, according to Ife, can be simply defined as increasing 'the power of the disadvantaged' (Ife, 1997).

Some of the theoretical approaches of relevance to this evaluation which can be broadly incorporated in the 'strengths perspective' include: family strengths approaches; assets based community building, capacity building and 'social connectedness'; early intervention; resilience; cross sectoral collaboration; and universal vs targeted services.

#### *Family Strengths Approach*

The 'Family Strengths' approach (Early & GlenMaye, 2000) recognises the structural barriers that prevent families from realising their potential. Some of the principles

underpinning this approach according to Elliot and others, (2000) include: starting with issues identified by the *family* as needing attention; developing respectful relationships (regardless of the negative view of the family that others may have); helping in practical ways (such as transporting children to the dentist, taking families to emergency relief agencies, organising appointments with Centrelink); building networks (such as inviting parents to playgroups, coffee mornings); and building on existing strengths (such as drawing attention to the things that families have achieved rather than what they have not). Interventions associated with this approach include solution focused, narrative, cognitive and community building approaches (Elliott, Mulroney, & O'Neil, 2000).

#### *'Assets based' community building*

The strengths perspective also extends to the way in which practitioners work with local communities. The SAC program for example consciously adopts 'an assets based' approach which is strongly focused on the intrinsic strengths or 'assets' that exist in local communities.

This approach, which became popular in the early 1990s (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), is substantially different from the deficit, needs based approaches of earlier years. According to Hounslow, it challenges the paternalism inherent in many public policies and the notion that capacity building is about 'professionals' and 'experts' working with communities (Hounslow, 2002). It also recognises that building on community capacity that already exists is more likely to result in the desired outcomes than approaches that take a more traditional 'top down' approach (Hounslow, 2002).

The focus on community assets is one part of the broader discourse of social connectedness and capacity building which in recent years has become the focus not only of local and state governments but national and international bodies such as the World Bank, the EEU and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Productivity Commission, 2003).

### **3.2 Capacity building, social connectedness and the importance of networks**

'Social connectedness', (Canberra Social Plan) and other related concepts refer to the trust, norms and networks which enable people to work collectively together to resolve

problems and achieve common goals. Although there is a degree of uncertainty still about the meaning of some of these terms Tony Vinson argues that it is useful to “capture what is basic in the long standing sociological study of social connectedness” (p.33) and to use it to assist our understanding of how governments can in small and practical ways contribute to the building of strong communities (Vinson, 2004).

The literature further argues that ‘networks’ enable many positive social outcomes, from the provision of support and looking out for each other to working together to access employment, training and economic resources (Putnam, 1993). The *Schools as Communities* program is viewed as one such small and practical contribution which is strongly focused on the development of networks.

One approach to the study of networks which has gained greater interest in recent years, and which has relevance for this evaluation, is the model initially proposed by Woolcott and Naryan and more recently developed by Healy and others. Known as the ‘synergy’ model it is helpful because it argues the importance of a multi-layered approach to network building in disadvantaged communities. It is particularly relevant to the SAC context because it explains the importance of different kinds of relationships, including those that ‘bond’ people to others like themselves, relationships which provide a bridge to new networks and opportunities and those that create ‘links’ with important civil institutions (Healy & Hampshire, 2001, p 6) such as schools.

### **3.3 Early intervention to reduce risk and build protection**

In recent years great interest has developed in how the life circumstances of children and young people can be altered by early interventions to change the balance between risk and protection. Cashmore argues the importance of early intervention ‘to forestall abuse and neglect’ and ‘before problems develop to the point where full scale protective intervention is necessary’ (1999, p 153 in Edwards & Wearing, 2003).

#### *Ecological theories*

Our understanding of ‘early intervention’ has been heavily influenced by Urie Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological (now called ‘bio-ecological’) theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this view the risks to children and young people



and the protective factors which might alleviate these risks are located across a wide range of different domains: the individual, the family, the community, the wider society and the global environment. Furthermore a meta analysis of 1200 outcome studies of prevention programs in the United States (Durlak, 1998 in Scott, 2000, p 77) and extensive research cited in the seminal Australian *Pathways to Prevention* project (National Crime Prevention, 1999) demonstrates that the same sets of risk and protective factors are associated with major negative and positive outcomes in many different spheres of life such as health, education, employment. There are therefore good reasons for adopting a multiple layered approach to risk and protective factors, early in life and early in the life of the problem (National Crime Prevention, 1999) because the social and economic ‘payoffs’ for doing so are evident in so many different spheres of life.

The notion of ‘risk’ and ‘protection’ being found across these different domains or systems.<sup>1</sup> is particularly relevant to the *Schools as Communities* program because it specifically acknowledge the importance, not only of the child’s individual biological makeup and their families, but also the other important ‘face to face’ relationships that the child or young person experiences (such as teachers) and the *congruence of the connections* between these relationships. There is a compelling argument for the adoption of a cross-sectoral, collaborative approach including the development of integrated service models to improve the positive connections between families, schools, neighbourhoods and other important institutions in the lives of children and young people. Schools emerge as one of the most persuasive locations for the adoption of these models.

### **3.4 Collaborative approaches**

Collaborative or ‘cross sectoral’ approaches to complex problems such as the prevention of child abuse and neglect, early school leaving, and substance misuse, have increasingly emerged in the literature over the last ten years (Morrison, 2000; SPRC, 2000; Gadja, 2004).

The idea of ‘working together’ ‘collaborating’, ‘partnering’ to provide more effective responses to children and young people at risk is not new. In recent years, however, there

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<sup>1</sup> These domains are known as microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macro systems and chronosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

has been a more determined effort to conceptualise the systemic implications of ‘collaboration’ including how it can be fostered and sustained at all levels in organisations and across sectors.

Most definitions of ‘collaboration’ generally refer to different agencies coming together cooperatively to work towards better service delivery for their clients. Gadja describes this process as ‘pooling information time and resources in an environment of ‘sincerity and hope’ (Gadja, 2004; Jones & May, 1999). Gray notes that collaborative practice is

a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible (Gray 1989, p. 5 cited in Vichealth, 2000).

A number of models of collaborative practice are evident in the literature and refer to a spectrum of activities ranging from the development of networks and better communication between agencies at one end, to highly complex new structures to address complex needs at the other.

The European and UK literature on partnerships takes the idea of who is involved in these collaborative ventures further than *only* human services agencies working together to improve service delivery. With a focus on reducing social exclusion through cross-sectoral initiatives (that is, the government, not for profit, for profits, community organisations such as clubs, religious groups and interested individuals) (Nelson & Zadek, 2000; Stott, 2003), it is not confined to interventions that just improve service delivery. This literature argues that thinking more widely about collaborative partners can result in the creation of new opportunities for people to engage in the ‘normal’ life experiences (such as attending playgroups, remaining at school and not leaving early, gaining vocational skills and taking up employment) which increase their sense of ‘social inclusion’.

A distinctive feature of the SAC program is its focus on cross sectoral partnerships that go beyond human services agencies to not only improve service delivery but to increase opportunities for children and young people and their families. A particular focus of

these cross sectoral initiatives, informed by the Australian and International literature, is their focus on local communities which is often referred to as ‘place based’ approaches.

### **3.5 Local ‘Place Based’ approaches to reducing child abuse and neglect**

As this account of the literature has already argued there is a substantial body of research which indicates that local communities high in social capital or ‘social connectedness’ are also the most effective on a wide range of social indicators (Kenny, 1999; Putnam, 1993) such as crime, delinquency, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, school leaving age, unemployment (Farrington, 1997; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980). In 1976 Garbarino’s examination of child abuse reporting data from 58 counties led to a conclusion that social and economic status of local communities was associated with levels of child abuse/maltreatment (Garbarino, 1976). Significantly, he argued not only that economic stress has a negative impact on the coping mechanisms of parents but also that the neighbourhood and community in general may be seen to compound the problem. He claimed that improving the standard of living and resources “support systems” (p185) available to parents in local communities would reduce the incidence of child maltreatment.

Vinson’s 2004 study of disadvantaged postcodes in NSW and Victoria supports these earlier studies. His findings demonstrate the effectiveness of whole of community approaches in developing educational, work, health and other opportunities for children in NSW’s most disadvantaged postcode which saw the suburb move from the worst 1% in 1999 (child abuse reports) to the top 25% in 2004. Community engagement activities included large successful festivals, drama groups for local youth and a successful Crime Watch system involving informal surveillance by residents (Vinson, 2004). These activities involved groups of people across sectors and were organised from normal non-stigmatising everyday places such as schools.

#### *Universal services in targeted areas*

Consideration of empirical studies about how families at risk are best ‘enrolled’ in services is important for the SAC program because it has implications for the way SAC resources should be best distributed across the ACT. Of significance are various studies including a meta-analysis of 19 controlled outcome studies conducted through Columbia

University in 1999 which found that in relation to family support programs such as early home visitation, *population based* studies (ie: services universally offered) appear favourable to *screening based* ones (services offered to particular high risk groups only). The majority of programs analysed in this study reported that programs with the most robust outcomes used demographically based criteria for enrolment and that they did this in targeted areas. In other words they delivered services, open to all, in normal non stigmatising environments such as schools and child care centres. Geographic areas characterised by high numbers of people with social risk factors such as child abuse reports and unemployment were targeted fro these programs. Neighbourhood based services in disadvantaged areas which are available to all are therefore considered to be the most effective way to deliver outreach services (Guterman, 1999) in a climate of scarce resources (Winkworth, 2003).

The *Schools as Communities* program specifically adopts a universal, non-stigmatising service delivery approach in communities, which are high on the Index of Relative and Social, Disadvantage. The workers are deployed at one or two schools only to enable them to develop universal approaches to their work with children, families, schools and local communities.

### **3.6 The Literature on School Based and School Linked Human Services**

#### *An historical view of schools and human services*

Throughout last century the way in which schools in the United States and Australia have conceptualised their role in local communities has shifted between an internal focus on the school 'team' as problem solvers and a focus on turning outwards for more external and collaborative approaches (Winkworth & McArthur, 2005). Early last century progressive educational reformers in the United States wanted schools to include a wide range of human services to alleviate poverty and respond to human needs. The vision for reform included lunch programs, health clinics and other human services (Sedlak & Schlossman, 1985). By the 1950's, however, most public school systems in America and Australia had become large bureaucracies operating as closed systems (Tyack, 1992). Minimal attention was given to collaboration with personnel or human services systems outside the school (Franklin & Allen-Meares, 1998 in Winkworth & McArthur, 2005)..

There is very little accessible historical material on the interface of human services and education in Australia. Innovative programs with a focus on children's broader social environment characterised the school social work programs of the Whitlam years but these declined in Australia under the pressure of economic reform in the 1980's and 1990's. Initiatives for children at risk, which took schools beyond the school gate, were modified once again towards classroom focussed interventions as human services departments narrowed their child welfare focus to a forensically driven child protection model (Winkworth & McArthur, 2005).

In the 1990's some of the earlier visions of reform resurfaced as human services agencies grappled with escalating reports of child abuse and schools attempted to address the increasing complexity of social problems affecting public schools. Models of practice spanning a number of domains including interventions with individuals, families, groups, classrooms and local communities, larger systems and policy development re-emerged in the United States. Services, also known as 'school linked' services, 'full service schools' and 'wraparound' services developed a profile in America and then in Australia.

Proponents of the push to integrate services at this time regarded the school as the central hub for human services delivery because it allowed maximum access to children (Franklin and Allen-Meares 1995). Dryfoos (Dryfoos, 1991, 1996) presented persuasive arguments for centralising family support services and locating them in school sites. The term 'full service school' was originally used in Florida legislation to describe the establishment of "one stop centres where the educational, physical, psychological and social requirements of students and their families are addressed in a rational and holistic fashion" (Dryfoos, 1996, p.19).

Dryfoos asserted that driving the movement in the US have been teachers and educators frustrated by children arriving at school daily in a state unfit to learn. The impact of homelessness, drug use, poverty, violence and neglect have long made their presence felt in classrooms. Ryan (1996, p.2) argued that "to meet the challenge of an advanced industrial society, no one group of professionals can function in isolation from another." In Australia the apparent 'failure' of human services departments to reduce the incidence of child abuse reports and the frustration of the education sector in tackling increasingly complex social problems in schools, led these separate silos to look again at cross

sectoral models with renewed interest. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some Australian States had recognised, once again, the interdependence of schools, families and communities and that problems involving one, also involve the others (Lawson 1994, p.64; Ainley et al 1995 in Winkworth & McArthur, 2005).

*More recent developments in schools – seeking integrated outcomes*

An important distinguishing feature of the past five years in the United States at least is that intervention in schools is no longer simply focused on extending human services into school settings. It is now increasingly focussed on advocacy and community collaboration, a direction which is further reinforced through relatively new US Legislation. The *No Child Left Behind Act*, 2001 requires schools and their external ‘partners’ to plan and implement programs that benefit the educational, health, social, recreational and cultural needs of the community (Anderson-Butcher, 2004). In the US schools are transforming into community centres, and community centres are incorporating educational outcomes into *their* agendas (for example: school readiness programs and health promoting child care centres. These are reaching out to schools and creating strategies that build on school curricula.

In NSW a number of collaborative ventures of this kind have emerged such as the NSW Interagency Schools as Community Centres. As a pilot project in the mid 1990s the SACCs initially were implemented “with a view to preventing disadvantage at school entry” (NSW Schools Community Centres Evaluation, 1997). The program in its early stages placed high importance in the development of networks, community strengthening and systems approaches to the role of the school (NSW Department of Education & Training, personal communication, 2005). Today it takes a cross sectoral, collaborative approach by focusing on the establishment of partnerships with parents and other key stakeholders and has increasingly identified the school as part of the wider network and not necessarily the focus of their activities. This is particularly evident in the early intervention 0-8 years programs (NSW Department of Education & Training, personal communication, 2005).

The NSW SACC’s programs have also been incorporated into wider strategies for community renewal in disadvantaged areas. One example of this is the Hunter Community Renewal Program. Its *Windale Wisdom* project has its foundations in the NSW Families First strategy and research into social disadvantage and social exclusion

(Vinson, 1999). The project incorporated a SACCS site in Newcastle and has integrated the school based program within broader goals of community renewal of this severely disadvantaged community (Windale Wisdom Report, 2003). The project aims to build social networks by improving social support for families with young children as well as enhancing the connectedness of older people in the community.

Flexibility of program implementation has also been identified as a key factor in successful implementation of the NSW program (personal communication, April 2005). The extent to which schools have changed through the implementation of the program and their subsequent contribution to changes in the community is not yet known (Department of Education & Training website, 2005). The Schools as Community Centres Program (SACC) is currently being evaluated with the report expected later in 2005. It includes forty school sites in NSW.

The previous sections provided an overview of the ideas that surround the Schools as Communities program. This highlights the significance of taking a 'strengths perspective', the role of networks in building capacity and social connectedness, the interlinked nature of social problems and the need for early intervention and collaborative approaches.

The SAC program reflects current good practice as demonstrated in the school linked/school based literature. This literature illustrates how integrating services into schools addresses the health, welfare and education needs of children and young people more effectively. However international examples go one step further by requiring schools to transform their school culture to not only focus on educational needs of children and young people but also the health, social, recreational and cultural needs of the community (Anderson-Butcher, 2004). This is reciprocated by community sector agencies incorporating educational outcomes into their program goals.

The *Schools as Communities* program provides an opportunity for this reciprocal transformation to occur. This could be progressed by developing new inter-departmental and broader governance arrangements for this program

## 4. Findings of the evaluation

The information in this part of the report is arranged as follows:

- First, there are sections on each broad stakeholder group for the *Schools as Communities* program which include consideration of the stakeholder roles and views about the operation and management of the program;
- Second, additional relevant material such as statistical data and file and document analysis is considered.
- All of these findings are then related to program objectives and intended outcomes, to provide the context for our recommendations.

The Institute's view is that a primary focus for any program evaluation is the satisfaction of the individuals or groups receiving the services offered by the program. The program has a strong focus on family support, with intended outcomes, which include:

- Children and young people at risk and their families receive more effective case coordination.
- Children and young people at risk, and their families, are supported by schools which become accessible sites for the provision of community services.

### 4.1 Identifying sample of parents/carers for the evaluation

Telephone interviews were conducted with parents anonymously in order to receive direct feedback about their experience of *Schools as Communities*. See Appendix 1 for a detailed sampling process.

- A total of 34 families were interviewed. While this is a relatively small number of families, it nevertheless represents 12% of the total number of parents who have had contact with the program in the past year.
- The interviews were structured but provided an opportunity for parents to expand wherever they wished to do so. The average interview length was 15 minutes.



## 4.2 Analysis of data from telephone interviews

The picture that emerged from this analysis was fairly consistent:

- **All respondents articulated a high level of satisfaction with the services** they were receiving. One parent made a comment on the need for more resources ‘such as equipment to make her work easier’. Respondents felt that the workers were reliable in providing information when they said they would; included and valued all members of their family; were available to their family when they needed them and were flexible in their availability which included giving their mobile phone number for after hours contact.

Some of the comments made by the parent included:

‘She gets back to me and does not treat me as a number’

‘All members of my family were valued as important’

‘I can’t speak too highly of the worker and her fantastic help and skills’

‘She is flexible and will help with anything’

- **Workers played a significant role in linking families to services within the school and the community**, through referrals and provision of transport. Further, it appeared that the SAC worker enabled an increase in efficiency in services already in use by the advocacy and support they provided. The services referred to can be considered as two groups: counselling/mental health, and health screening such as speech pathology and hearing.
- **A small number of the parents reported that even though they had not accessed services through the SAC worker, they had been informed as to what was available.**
  - A number of parents acknowledged that new connections had been made with other parents at the school due to SAC worker input contributing to a more positive relationship with the school.

- In the sample of 34 respondents there were two reports of a worker and parents having contact with statutory care and protection services and one situation where the worker supported a mother to contact the child at risk unit.

Examples of some of the comments from parents:

‘He has given lifts if needed’

‘I have had help with appointments and phone calls’

‘It has been a lot easier for me to attend the school to discuss the children’s reports, educational requirements and progress of the children.’

- **Workers are well known within the school community.** This was achieved by information in the school news letter, SAC workers contributing to school orientation presentations, advertising of skills groups and the SAC worker having direct contact with many of the parents. This gave parents a feeling that the worker was part of the school community yet ‘unbiased’ and ‘approachable’ in a way that did not stigmatise the parent.

The main reasons parents accessed the SAC worker were:

- *Practical support:* this type of support ranged from help with transport and filling in forms, providing balanced menu plans and accompanying parents/children to appointments. Eight respondents had attended a skills program run by the SAC worker, all reporting that this had helped in changing their own and their child’s behaviour in a positive way.
- *Counselling and emotional support:* This support was mentioned by 21 of the respondents, with 10 parents acknowledging that this was the primary support received. The remaining 11 parents recognised that the emotional support was significant, albeit not their primary support. This type of support emerged as a key benefit from contact with the SAC worker.
- **Change in children’s behaviour and attitude**

It was evident from the parent survey responses that change had occurred within the family facilitated by the SAC worker. Parents were asked to comment on any change in their children, such as in attitude to going to school and general behaviour. Many parents acknowledged that there was a positive change in their child's attitude towards school since having contact with the SAC worker. This was similar to the number of parents that reported a positive change in their child's behaviour. There were no reports of negative changes in behaviour although a small number did report that there had been no observable change in either attitude or behaviour.

'My child is more attentive and wanting to go to school. She is doing her homework and talks about the SAC worker in a positive light.'

'No worse since he has got to high school, he liked the SAC worker but it hasn't changed his [negative] attitude towards school.'

'The child has a lot more self confidence about negotiating bullies and has major improvements in self identity.'

'I haven't been into school much as they haven't been fighting as much'.

- Parents also identified positive change in their own behaviour, relationships and increased self efficacy they felt was a result of contact with the SAC worker. Some parents said they felt more confident with parenting and in their relationships at home and in the school and indicated it was the usefulness of the strategies and ideas suggested by the SAC worker that led to the changes.

'She has such a calming manner she makes you feel like you're doing a good job even if your not.'

'We have all changed since the play skills/parenting course and my relationship with my husband is much better.'

**To summarise**, the results from the parent satisfaction survey reflect achievement for SAC in a number of ways. *School as Communities* aims to create strong and effective working relationships between families, communities and their schools. It also aims to

ensure more effective case coordination for children and families, better access to community services through their schools. Evidence that this has been achieved is demonstrated in:

- a high rate of parental satisfaction with support received from SAC workers, including a sense of being supported to feel more confident in their ability to parent and access alternative resources;
- a high rate of positive change that parents identified for themselves and their children in both educational and social situations: and
- a high rate of satisfaction with the way SAC workers have coordinated their access to appropriate resources within the school and the community.

The results from the survey we conducted generally mirror the findings of earlier surveys undertaken internally, most recently towards the end of 2004.

#### **4.3 Feedback from children and young people**

Interviews with parents obviously did not give us the opportunity to hear from the primary stakeholder in this program, that is, children and young people themselves. We gave particular consideration to ways of doing this, but came to the view that it was not possible. Ethical research practice would have required us first to establish consent from both parents for children to be interviewed and second to provide support for children and young people during interviews (and possibly afterwards also). This latter consideration was especially important given the likely vulnerability of the children involved. Unfortunately, the relatively limited scope of the project simply did not allow the time and resources for this to happen.

#### **4.4 Data from SAC database about help for families**

Activity data from the SAC database provides information about contact with, and the nature of, the program's client group over a 12 months period from 1 June 2004 to 1 June 2005.

- In that period, there were 300 children/families referred to the *Schools as Communities* outreach workers in schools.
- Of these 300 referrals, 287 (or 96%) led to contact with the workers.
- The number of referrals varied widely across the twelve schools included in the program. Interestingly, the two high schools between them accounted for 108 (or approx 36%) of these referrals, while the 10 primary schools accounted for the balance.
- Of the 300 referrals, 123 (approx 41%) were from two-parent families, 114 (approx 36%) were from single parent families, seven (2.3%) were for children in substitute care and three (1%) were for young people living independently. There were 73 (approx 25%) for whom the family structure was unknown. 10% of referrals were for indigenous families.
- There was a wide range of reasons for referrals. In the period reported on, this breakdown was:

**Table 1 Reason for Referral**

<b>Reason for Referral</b>	<b>Number of referrals</b>
Academic problems:	8
Behaviour problems:	38
Child appears to be a carer:	1
Erratic attendance/regularly late:	12
Family issues (including drug and alcohol, financial, mental health, other)	84
Health issues:	15
Housing issues:	6
Parent seeking parenting advice:	21
Parent seeking other information:	9
School has care concerns:	11
School refuser:	3
Social problems:	19
Other/ not specified:	73

- There was a total of 2957 client contacts during the twelve month period.
- In 35% of cases, the child or young person was the primary contact.
- It is noted that referral statistics do not by themselves provide information about the amount, complexity or duration of a worker's involvement with a child and/or family.

#### 4.5 Feedback from schools participating in *Schools as Communities*

##### *Where schools fit in the Schools as Communities program model*

The program model was developed on the basis of research supporting the effectiveness of early intervention, cross-sectoral collaboration and wide community involvement in improving outcomes for children and young people at risk. An essential tenet of the model was the value of school-based and school-linked service provision to families. Within the model, school-based services are those which are actually located, relocated or coordinated in or near a school that serves a large number of at-risk families. When activities are coordinated in a separate centre or near a school, they are considered community-based but school-linked. This rationale is evident in the overall mix of program strategies and activities currently implemented in schools within the program, specifically the school-based dual role of the outreach workers and the community-based but school-linked strategic projects.

Given this critical importance of the role of schools within the program, we considered that feedback from schools would constitute a major part of our data collection.

##### *How we obtained feedback from schools.*

We became aware that in almost every school, the Principal (and in some cases the Deputy) was the member of school staff with whom the outreach worker had most contact. Also, principals are signatories to the partnership agreements with the Office of Children, Youth and Family Support that schools are expected to complete each year as statements of mutual understanding and respective responsibilities related to the program. Taking account of all these factors, we made principals the focus for our information gathering about *Schools as Communities* activity in individual schools. We conducted semi-structured interviews of about an hour's duration with principals at eleven of the participating schools and with the deputy at the remaining school (where that person had major carriage of student welfare matters). In three schools, both the principal and the deputy or an executive teacher were involved in the interview; and in one school, we also had the opportunity of speaking with all the staff in a staff meeting.

Set out below is our discussion of the feedback we obtained through this process, assessed against these three intended program outcomes:

- Children and young people at risk and their families receive more effective case coordination.
- Children and young people at risk and their families are supported by schools, which become accessible sites for the provision of community services.
- Schools, communities and business work to build capacity and develop partnerships which will strengthen families and the community as a whole.

The importance of the worker on site as a bridge, as someone who can connect with children and their families, and then help them link with the school and with services and support inside the school and in the wider community, was articulated by every principal; this was the most strongly and widely held of all the views expressed by stakeholders.

#### *Family support and case coordination*

Principals were unanimously positive about the SAC outreach workers' family support and case coordination role, and much of their feedback concerned the extent to which having a worker on site made it easier for children and families to ask for help and access services. Schools clearly strive to make the worker as accessible as possible for families, for example by:

- introducing the worker to families as part of the standard enrolment procedure; or by the Principal and worker regularly hosting morning teas for parents as an opportunity for informal contact between the worker and parents and between parents themselves;
- promoting the worker's role to families as a resource to help with difficulties or crises that might come up for any member of the family, not just for the children; and
- allowing the worker's role to be seen as separate from discipline and the enforcement of school rules, not part of the hierarchy of authority, and therefore not perceived as threatening.



Principals emphasised the skill that workers demonstrate in making connections with families, gaining their trust, encouraging and supporting them to come into the school, helping them to identify the kind of help they need, and linking them with that help, either through services that may be available on site (eg parenting training/support) or referring them to outside services and supporting them to get there. The following selection of comments made by principals illustrates this theme:

‘A lot of the parents with whom SAC worker has contact are school phobic because of earlier experiences either when they were kids themselves or as parents. So the worker, as someone who is not directly associated with the school, can help parents get a bit closer to the school, make this a positive experience, then bring them even closer.’

‘ Workers can get to places in the parents’ experiences that teachers and the school can’t.’

‘The worker fields the area the school can’t i.e. the families, including in their homes, which is not appropriate for teachers.’

‘She plugs holes in the school that teachers can’t plug’

‘The worker fulfils a role the school can’t. She acts as an excellent advocate between the school and parents of at-risk kids. Many of the students need a lot more than teaching when they come to school and it is difficult for teachers to always provide what they need; our SAC worker is the person who is able to deal with this, fill this gap’

‘A key role for the worker is to win parents over from their mistrust and suspicion of schools. Ours is fantastic at making these kinds of connections: she seems to be seen by parents both as a member of the school staff but also sufficiently removed from the school for them to be able to confide in her, without fearing that it will go straight back to the school. She is an extremely helpful go-between – seems to keep these two roles in perfect balance.’

‘I feel that our worker has helped some parents build trust with school. I have a strong view that partnerships with parents are crucial in the schooling process; it’s vital to get parents on side and comfortable about coming to talk about any problems before they got too severe. The role of the SAC worker obviously supports that approach.’

Perhaps the most adamant on this aspect was one secondary school Principal who had this to say:

‘If you’re fair dinkum about linking with kids, you should be in a school. My experience is that even kids from very difficult backgrounds, who give the school hell, still tend to come to school because they feel some sense of community there. So the school-based worker can link with students in their own school but also connect with their families and in turn connect them with resources/ activities/services in their own community and really get constructive partnerships going.’

#### *Casework or case coordination?*

The program guidelines are clear about the expectation that the primary focus of the SAC worker’s family support role is case coordination rather than casework (or direct one-on-one contact). It would appear, however, that the process of engaging and working with parents and/or children directly is an essential step in building trust as a basis for case coordination activity. Once trust is established, the family or child is more likely to be open to help and support from other services to which the worker directs them. It is also clear from case studies later in this report and particular examples from principals that a continuing relationship between the worker and the family or young person can be an important part of the process. At a practical level, so our feedback suggests, a family left without support simply may not (cannot/ will not) attend appointments or access services to which they are referred. It can be critical for the worker to accompany the family or child to a service, either just to provide transport and ensure they get there, or to support and advocate for them with a service to help them get issues resolved. As one Principal observed:

‘Transport to and support at appointments can be crucial for children’s well-being; making these things happen can be overwhelming for parents whose circumstances are already stretched e.g. they may have cars but not be able to afford petrol’

The SAC worker’s involvement is vital in cases where parents are unable, due to their mental health and/or substance abuse issues, to access the offered help. One example is mental health issues, where a parent’s condition might mean that the child becomes the carer and requires support. The parent may be unlikely in this instance to be the person to seek the help for the child. In this example the active outreach of SACs can prevent the need for child protection intervention.

### *Networking and linking with community services/agencies*

Having a network of contacts across services is fundamental to effective case coordination. Comments such as the following were standard across all principals interviewed: ‘The worker has been a mine of information about sources of community support and has broadened the school’s ability to support families by helping them link with help in the community’.

One principal brought an additional perspective to this, commenting as follows: ‘The SAC worker’s role is basically a liaison role that brings a different mindset about how links can be made across schools and their communities. Principals know about ‘education’, and think about what ‘schools’ do, without the perspective of how they fit into their communities; SAC worker’s knowledge of community and its resources is crucial, brings a broader knowledge.’

It is clear that workers have not been simply referring families to services outside the school. They have also been able to attract services into schools to provide support and training to both students and parents, usually in group settings. The focus may be on areas as diverse as nutrition, anger management, peer pressure, parenting skills, recreational activities, sexual assault and family violence. In one case, a worker negotiated for a significant community-based family support program to operate from unused classrooms on the actual school site, leading to more integrated service delivery and readier access for parents.

### *Work with homeless adolescents*

The family support role can take on a different perspective in secondary schools. In both primary and secondary schools, the emphasis is on working with children whose needs suggest that involvement with or support for the family is an important consideration. One difference can arise in the SAC role in high schools when a young person becomes homeless or needs to leave home because of family violence or neglect. The worker’s role in these cases is often ‘... to help them through the legal, emotional, financial, and trauma aspects of their experience; to help them understand their rights and how to access services’. One Principal commented that while lots of parents find the worker supportive, there are also some in these circumstances who are angry because she had helped their kids escape violence and live outside home.

As all ACT high schools have a youth worker attached the advantage of the SAC worker in high schools is that they take on additional roles; mediating and working with families and young people and working to develop community opportunities.

*Impact on reporting of child abuse*

Staying with the question of family violence, we were interested to hear principals' views about whether they felt the presence of SAC workers had had any impact on their reporting of child abuse. Later in this document, we examine whether there is any evidence from official child abuse reporting statistics that the *Schools as Communities* program has affected the rate of reporting of child abuse in SAC suburbs. Interviews with principals gave us the opportunity to explore this question in a different way.

It appeared that not all schools involve their SAC workers in the same way in child abuse reporting activities. All workers are part of their school's special needs team, which is often the forum for deciding that a report should be made. Some principals discuss particular cases with the worker before deciding whether and how to report, particularly if the worker has a background in child protection. One question of interest was often the likely effect on the child of making the report. Bearing in mind confidentiality issues, some schools involve the worker in developing strategies to deal with particular situations. One Principal commented that he would be the one to deal with the police in a serious case, but would involve the worker in supporting the child and liaising with the family. This reflects principles of child centred practice by ensuring that children are involved in what happens to them and are informed about processes that affect them. Providing support to the child/family and liaising with the care and protection worker were mentioned as common roles for the SAC worker.

While principals stated it would be difficult to establish accurately whether there had been an impact on their rate of reporting, they all felt that the presence of a worker in the school made it more likely that children who are 'really' at risk of harm will be identified. They suggested this was because the workers' involvement with families made issues more visible, or workers' visits to homes revealed circumstances the school was not aware of, or having a worker in the school increased awareness of the reporting role.

One Principal made this rather damning comment:

‘There is probably no really discernible impact on the number of reports, but we are probably more relaxed about making them because we now realise how little is likely to happen if we do report!’

*Impact of Schools as Communities in the longer term.*

A couple of principals felt strongly that while they were very satisfied with the way the program is presently operating, they anticipated significant longer term benefits. One commented that it was no exaggeration to say that there are quite a few students at his primary school who would be headed for Quamby but for the worker’s involvement with them and their families. He has observed a big protective or preventive element in the role.

The Principal at one high school expressed it this way:

‘The worker helps students and their families connect with a broad range of services, and supports students to engage with and make the most of their learning opportunities... and the results may be seen only in the long term. Workers are like the grit in the oyster: they may never see the pearl but will have contributed to its production!’

*Broader role for worker*

So far we have been looking at feedback about the role of the worker in linking with individuals and individual families. But responses indicated that the workers have a much broader and arguably more complex role in the school which relates to immersing themselves in the life and community of the school, understanding how a particular school’s culture works, and helping parents to link with each other and not just with the worker or external services. One Principal described the complexity of the role and the skills shown by the worker in her school in the following way:

‘X is very attuned to signals in the environment, to the likelihood of a particular situation arising. She is always alert to what’s going on, is proactive. She has good judgement – knows when to go in, when to wait, and how best to intervene with particular children or families; she understands that her role isn’t just about responding but also about networking, making links, and creating opportunities to get involved. X has been able to really involve herself in building the ‘social

community' of the school, including better links between school and parents and between parents themselves, as well as with external agencies.'

It would seem obvious that the workers' effectiveness in this role contributes to their ability to earn the trust needed for their family support/case coordination work with individuals. But it is also this wider if less tangible set of activities that allows the workers to fulfil the other aspect of their dual role, that of community development and the cultivation of social connectedness in the school community.

### *Community development role*

Our responses from Principals revealed a range of understanding about what constitutes community development in the context of *Schools as Communities*. (This is perhaps not surprising given the lack of agreement on this point in the literature.) The following examples have in common the development of formal or informal partnerships but also illustrate the diversity of community development activity that has occurred:

- greater informal parental involvement in the school e.g. through regular morning tea groups;
- more parents participating in activities related to the running of the school such as the canteen or the P&C;
- 'community building' activity within the school where parents as well as people from the local community participate together in small, school-based activity groups e.g. crafts of various kinds; a computer literacy course; playgroups; community gardens;
- school-based activities such as parenting courses which have something of a therapeutic focus but also aim to encourage parents into the school and establish a support network for parents of children with special needs in the school
- community information "expos" involving extensive collaboration with community agencies;
- establishing links between the students and a local facility such as a nursing home;

- an annual suburb-based Community Carnival involving children and families from the local government primary school (with a SAC worker), the local Catholic primary school, and the local pre-school and child care centre;
- school-based services to children and their families which rely on community involvement to operate e.g. a breakfast program which targets children with particular needs, brings in an outside service (Tucker Talk) but has also involved the P&C, and the local church and high school; and
- an innovative health and well-being service coordinated by the worker, providing a range of health services to school families from direct bulk-billing through GPs from the nearby Aboriginal Health Service, dental health, nutrition, immunisations, maternal health nurse right through to general health promotion/education.

*What makes an effective partnership?*

Every principal commented that one factor for a successful partnership is the selection of the SAC outreach worker. They suggested that the following were important characteristics of a good worker: experience, maturity, willingness to be proactive, being alert and intuitive, ability to exercise good judgement about how and when to intervene, and having an established network of community contacts.

A couple of principals spoke of the need for improved orientation and training for workers. One mentioned his observation that workers sometimes need to be better prepared to understand the pressures on teachers and schools. Schools are generally not well-resourced, and both teachers and workers need to be self-starters, to be able to 'just get on with it'. Without a good orientation process, he felt that it was easy for workers to be overwhelmed.

Another commented on the need for a clearer sense of program logic, including assumptions, expectations and roles of schools and the worker. This would lead to higher level of shared understanding of the program and how it should operate. The annual Partnership Agreements are intended to achieve this, but seem to be managed in a low-key way when both the Principal and the worker have been at a school for a while. It would appear that this process is not being fully used to restate, revitalise and clarify program goals and expectations. Several commented that in the event of a change of

personnel, this 'role and goal' clarification is crucial and should be recorded in an Agreement.

#### *Importance of stability and sustainability*

Several workers were about to leave the program around the time of the evaluation. Principals at all these schools expressed strong dissatisfaction with the lack of contact from the SAC program about arrangements to replace these workers, even as late as a worker's last day. This is perhaps an example of the need highlighted by one Principal for the manager of the program to engage more effectively with participating schools. This issue could presumably improve with the introduction of cross departmental governance.

Principals commented that it takes time to establish the role and the way their relationships evolve with other key players in the school and its community. Gaps and changes are counter-productive, as building relationships is a key element of role. Instability of workers impacts on the effectiveness of the program.

There was also a unanimous view that the program should continue. Without exception, principals placed very high value on the support they themselves receive from the worker in terms of involvement with family welfare, being the person who, because they are at the school but not 'of it', can make it easier for the parent to come to the school, and open up lines of communication between the school and parents. They all agree that parental involvement has increased overall in school, in some cases quite dramatically so; and that workers have really helped develop a sense of community within their schools and extensive and helpful connections beyond the school.

#### *Summary*

Feedback from schools, mainly through interviews with principals, has led us to the view that the way the program is currently being implemented in schools is contributing strongly to achievement of the relevant intended program outcomes, namely:

- Children and young people at risk and their families receive more effective case coordination.



- Children and young people at risk and their families are supported by schools, which become accessible sites for the provision of community services.
- Schools, communities and business work to build capacity and develop partnerships which will strengthen families and the community as a whole.

#### 4.6 Feedback from Care and Protection Services

Given *Schools as Communities'* focus on children at risk, its emphasis on prevention, early intervention and family support, and the active case co-ordination role that the outreach workers are involved in, there has always been an expectation that there would be significant links between SAC workers and the care and protection system (CPS). As a result, we were interested in finding out how often CPS workers have contact with SAC workers and how helpful that contact is. The two data collection methods we used for this purpose were firstly, an analysis of a sample of CPS case files for children and families who had also had contact with SAC workers, and secondly, an electronic survey sent to all ACT child protection workers during the first two weeks of June.

(a) The **analysis of ten Care and Protection case files**, for clients who were not identified to us at any stage, was undertaken by a CPS worker on our behalf.

The picture that emerged from this analysis was somewhat mixed:

- Firstly when contact with the SAC worker occurs, it can be very helpful. For example: SAC workers can be listed as a protective factor for a child about whom a report is made; being present at the appraisal following a report; actively co-ordinating services for the child/family in liaison with the CPS worker; attending Care Conferences; acting as a contact point in the school for CPS involvement with a child; actively monitoring a child's circumstances and progress following a report, through regular contact at school; and providing direct emotional or practical support to the child/family e.g. providing transport to counselling or medical appointments. In our view this exemplifies child centred practice and an ideal model of working together to support families.
- The second observation is that CPS workers often do not have a strong awareness of the role, or even the existence, of SAC workers. This means

significant opportunities are missed to intervene and support children and families who are involved with Care and Protection Services. By coordinating the efforts of the CPS and SAC workers better outcomes for a child/family could be achieved.

(b) The results of the **electronic survey of CPS workers** prompt similar conclusions. The survey was given general distribution to workers across Care and Protection Services, with no attempt made to limit the distribution to workers who were more likely (e.g. because of the region in which they were working) to have come into contact with SAC workers. We received fourteen responses. This relatively poor response rate may well be attributable to a generally low level of awareness of *Schools as Communities* with the result that workers were not motivated to respond to the survey. It could also simply indicate heavy workloads acting as a disincentive to engage with requests outside direct job requirements.

- Of the 14 respondents, only one had a ‘high’ level of understanding of how *Schools as Communities* operates, while three respondents indicated they had no knowledge at all of how it operates and had never had any contact with a SAC worker. Most respondents, however, had at least some knowledge and experience of the program.
- As with the analysis of the case files, there is evidence that when there is contact between the CPS worker and the SAC worker, it is very helpful, as the following quoted examples show:

The more this family engages with the (SAC) worker, the less intensive involvement we (CPS) need to have.

I did have a positive experience working with the SAC worker as her role appeared to be very beneficial for the family I was working with.

I have had very good experiences of working with SAC, both as a caseworker and now as a team leader. We were able to do some good work at Z Primary with a couple of families of Moslem background, by having the SAC worker basically build bridges for us between children and our service... In a couple of families where we could not successfully intervene but still had concerns, the SAC workers have been able to engage the family

at a community level which has ensured the safety of the children and hopefully allowed the family to access services.

Our team ... has had some very good outcomes working with the SAC worker at X High in particular. We have been able to develop good case plans in conjunction with the worker around issues of health, support and accommodation for young people. In one recent case, with a young person at risk of being homeless and engaging in high risk activities, we have been able to work collaboratively to keep this young person safe and have now successfully moved her into medium term accommodation. The mother was supported through this process and I believe, she felt that we gave restoration a fair go, and came up with a good plan when this was no longer a viable option. It was helpful having the mother supported by SAC and by CPS as she was given consistent information. It was also helpful having the worker continue to engage with the young person especially around issues of safety, as young people will not always trust CPS workers and will not always let us know exactly what is happening in their lives.

The family I was engaging with was already being supported by the SAC worker, and because of her extensive and positive role this became a protective factor, so CP services didn't need to be involved any more.

SAC workers are sometimes able to offer support or services to families that they will accept but wouldn't if approached directly by CPS. It also offers a collaborative approach which is useful to families – also provides a link between schools and child protection services which is good.

There were also some comments about difficulties experienced in contact with SAC workers. See the quoted examples below:

SAC worker made little difference as most of these cases seemed to end up in court, and created more work for me, because the SAC worker would pass on issues such as an inadequate lunch – which I believe could have been addressed with the family by the school or SAC to avoid the more intrusive or confrontational CP involvement.

The involvement of Schools as Communities needs clarification especially in relation to their role in the case management of a CPS client. It seems that SAC workers provide reports to CPS, however it is unclear what SAC have already attempted with clients prior to notifying CPS for their involvement.

In these and other similar cases, the cause of the difficulty seems to be that the two workers do not have an understanding of each other's roles and how they could work to support each other. This underlines the need already highlighted by the analysis of case files for both programs to have opportunities to share information about their practice. This could be done by way of presentations to each others teams and/or by joint training. Now that the Office is co-located these opportunities would be easier to identify.

The SAC program has enormous potential to support children and families who are involved with Care and Protection Services.

Other comments related to the need for more schools to have workers. These came particularly from CPS workers who have had contact with SAC workers and are aware of the contribution they could make on other sites.

**To summarise**, there is evidence in some cases of highly useful and effective contact and interaction between SAC workers and Care and Protection Services, resulting in better outcomes for children and their families. This seems to occur most readily when there is strong mutual understanding of the respective roles of the SAC and CPS workers. To the extent that effective interaction does occur, it provides a good example of *Schools as Communities* helping children and young people at risk and their families to receive more effective case co-ordination (**SAC intended program outcome 1.**)

Survey comments from CPS workers suggest that a key feature of the usefulness of SAC involvement in case coordination is that it occurs at school through everyday, low-key contact between the SAC worker and the child and family. In this way, the SAC worker is able to monitor and facilitate the child's access to any services that may be required under a statutory case plan for that child, but in a more supportive and positive way than may be possible for a CPS worker. From the family's perspective, their involvement with the SAC worker is voluntary and depends on the trust and connection the worker is able

to establish with the family in the course of supporting them to have their needs met. The family's involvement with the CPS worker is, however, usually involuntary.

The generally low level of awareness about *Schools as Communities* could be the result of several factors, in particular the rate of CPS worker turnover during the last couple of years; workers' heavy and complex workloads; the fact that the program operates in only twelve schools across the ACT so that workers in some regions do not come into contact with SAC workers; and the existence of several other small school-based initiatives and programs between which a worker may not be able to differentiate. Whatever the causes, low awareness points to a strong need for regular information/training about the program to be provided across the board in Care and Protection Services. This is particularly so given the scope for synergies between the activities of *Schools as Communities* and Care and Protection Services.

### **Recommendation 1**

**That strategies be put in place to (i) increase awareness within Care and Protection of the role of *Schools as Communities* outreach workers in schools and (ii) promote collaboration between SAC workers and CPS workers. Such strategies might include:**

- **joint training and shared case discussions in practice forums;**
- **training/orientation for CPS workers about SAC; and**
- **participation of Director of Early Interventions and Partnerships and the Director Care and Protection Services in joint forums to improve better collaboration/communication.**

### **4.7 Impact of *Schools as Communities* on child abuse reporting rates**

As mentioned above, schools were chosen to participate in this program on the basis of a range of available information including; data on social and economic disadvantage, poverty data and the location of the family of origin of children in care. There was an expectation from the outset that a significant proportion of the SAC outreach workers' time would be spent in supporting families who were involved with the child protection system and that the workers would play a strong preventative role e.g. by identifying and heading off a potential crisis for a family. Given this background we investigated whether

there was evidence of a reduction in child abuse among families at schools with a SAC worker, using child abuse reporting rates as an indicator.

We examined relevant reporting data over the life of the *Schools as Communities* program, specifically the reporting, substantiation, and proceed-to-appraisal rates from 2000/01 to 2004/05 in SAC suburbs. During this time, major changes occurred in the child abuse reporting process making direct comparisons over time impossible.

Following the introduction of mandatory reporting in 1997 a differentiated response to reporting was introduced to ensure that the best level of intervention was determined. The process allowed for the Child Protection services to record information either as 'reports', (requiring appraisal) or 'consultation reports'. 'Consultations reports' allowed the caller (particularly a professional involved in mandatory reporting) to discuss their concerns and to receive advice on how best to support a family. One effect of this was to contain the total number of reports requiring appraisal.

A different reporting regime was implemented in 2002 and the concept of 'consultation reports' was dropped and all calls were recorded as reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. Numbers of reports recorded as suspected child abuse and neglect dramatically increased. These counting changes make clear comparisons over time impossible.

More recently, during 2004, in response to the Vardon Report, work has been proceeding to refine the risk assessment framework against which reports are assessed for appraisal and intervention. In other words, further change has been implemented which could be expected to affect the comparability of data.

Our examination of the data over the life of the program shows a big increase in the total number of reports, and an apparent drop in the rate of substantiation. It is not clear, however, exactly what this means. First, as discussed above, the method of defining and counting reports has varied, so that figures from one year are not easily comparable to those from other years. Second, under current reporting arrangements, an increase in the number of reports is not necessarily linked to an increase in the incidence of child abuse. This is because there can be duplicate and triplicate reports (or in a school setting, occasionally even more) made about the one episode or situation. In fact, it could be

hypothesised that the presence of SAC workers in itself contributes to higher reporting rates in particular suburbs by, for example, making schools more aware of issues within particular families or more alert to indications of abuse generally. It is also likely that in suburbs with a strong disadvantage profile, there will be more interaction between families and mandated health/welfare workers, with resulting higher rates of reporting, including duplicate reports. Indeed, it is one of the intended outcomes of the *Schools as Communities* initiative that families and children at risk be linked to appropriate community services, resulting in greater opportunity for contact with mandated workers.

Third, when multiple reports are all counted individually, the rate of substantiation will be distorted. The ratio of substantiated reports to total reports could be expected to be significantly higher if all reports on a particular episode were counted as one.

Fourth, there did not appear to be a significant difference between the changes in reporting rates in SAC suburbs and those in suburbs where there is no SAC worker at the local school. In other words, the changes to the child abuse reporting process (as described above) over the life of the program may have had the same broad effect on rates in SAC and non-SAC suburbs.

To summarise, our findings *in relation to child abuse reporting figures* are that:

- The figures as they stand do not provide clear evidence of any change in the risk of child abuse in communities whose schools have a SAC outreach worker.
- The figures on their own do not allow differentiation and analysis of the impact of diverse factors, and therefore have limited usefulness for the kind of analysis needed for this evaluation.
- If accurate data on child abuse is a priority, it would be very useful to look further into how accurately the revised reporting processes reflect the incidence of abuse and the impact of appraisal and intervention.

#### **4.8 Feedback from community-based agencies (government and non-government)**

As we have stated in earlier sections of the report, *Schools as Communities* works to achieve its objective by linking schools and their children and families with the network of ACT health and community services. From a program delivery perspective, this linking occurs

mainly through the dual role of the SAC outreach workers, that is, through their family support and case co-ordination work and their community development activities.

Although accurate figures were not available for the number of agencies with which SAC workers or clients have had contact, it was possible to extrapolate from the SAC database that the number of agencies/entities that have provided services to SAC children and families during the life of the program is approximately **265**. While in some cases the contact was a one-off or limited, other agencies have become part of a well-established network of providers within the program.

Drawing on a list provided by SAC workers of the community-based agencies with which they have had contact and where they have referred children and young people and/or their families, we selected ten agencies to talk to about the involvement they have had with the *Schools as Communities* program. They included agencies working in the following areas: child and adolescent mental health; domestic violence; sexual assault; family, child and adolescent support; health promotion, especially relating to eating and nutrition; parenting skills; indigenous health; and young people having trouble staying at home or recently left home.

We obtained feedback from nine of the ten services approached, either by direct telephone interview or by information provided in writing by the agency in response to a series of questions.

**Details of feedback.** We were interested firstly to identify in what capacity agencies had been involved with *the Schools as Communities* program. Their responses covered two types of activity: direct contact with clients, and training and support through working in groups. In several cases, the agency also had involvement with *Schools as Communities* through having received strategic project grants.

When asked about their experience of the program, all agencies made positive comments such as:

Adds extra support and contact within school

Excellent program



Worker has provided an excellent liaison point

It is extremely helpful that there is someone on the spot at school to deal with issues for troubled adolescent as they arise

It was because there was a worker at the school that we were able to set up our fortnightly support group

Our agency has developed a very strong relationship with *Schools as Communities* in the Belconnen area and the program has helped us to make excellent links with the school communities where we have taken programs.

In one case, an agency commented on how the worker had been able to provide excellent liaison for a support group they were offering for young women at a high school, identifying who might need the group and helping them to access it, providing a relaxed and comfortable space for the group to meet, doing follow-up work with individual girls as required and helping to set up links with other relevant agencies.

Contact occurred in both directions: sometimes the SAC worker approached the agency, while at other times the agency itself asked the worker to become involved because of a family or young person's at least initial reluctance to accept its services.

One agency gave this example:

One of the SAC workers visited a young person at home who was experiencing anxiety. This young person did not want to engage with mental health services, but would speak to the SAC worker, whose intervention prevented the young person from dropping out of school.

Often the referral resulted in the worker and the agency cooperating to provide a service together rather than responsibility being handed over entirely to one party. A good example of this is the way SAC workers and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) have worked together to establish treatment and management plans. Another is the worker's role in facilitating meetings, often on site at schools, involving the family and other agencies.

Overall, comments obtained from agencies during our interviews suggested that workers are fulfilling their case coordination role very effectively. It is also clear that they are facilitating families' access to community services by:

- making well-supported referrals to community- based services outside the school;
- helping to attract and coordinate the provision of certain types of services from or near schools themselves; and
- building partnerships between families, school and community services.

The following quotes capture very well the tone of the responses we received from agencies. The first is from an agency that works with people who have experienced domestic violence:

Basically I think the program is good, very valuable generally, and I think that long term we will see great outcomes for the young people who have been involved with the workers from the program. Young people need to have a sense that they are heard and valued, that there is fairness especially at school in order to remain hopeful, even if things at home are hard.

The second is from Belconnen Community Service, an agency which provides a range of services to families and individuals:

Our partnership with *Schools as Communities* has been a very positive experience...the links that the workers can make are extremely beneficial to the children and parents in the schools. I know the workers help in connecting the parents with other agencies and services to help their children and themselves. I have seen them involved in the community development aspect of their job, devising and initiating programs for the school. They also help in liaising with teachers when they were unable to meet with me because they are on class.

One final point is that every agency we contacted expressed the view that there was a need for SAC workers in many more schools, while one even commented that there was

a real need for this kind of support for children and families at Catholic schools or other non-government as well as government schools.

#### **4.9 Feedback from the *Schools as Communities* team**

The vast bulk of activity under the *Schools as Communities* program is the work undertaken by the community outreach workers in schools. A quite detailed picture of their role and functions has already been documented in this report. Evidence of the ways in which their work contributes to the achievement of intended program outcomes is also provided in case studies which appear below.

This section of the report complements information provided so far by presenting the perspective of the workers themselves. Their involvement in the evaluation has included:

- participation, together with their team leader, in our initial consultations about the nature and scope of the program;
- identifying families with whom they have had at least two contacts, as the basis for our de-identified sample of parents for telephone interview;
- participation in a structured workshop to provide us with feedback about their experiences of the SAC outreach worker role;
- preparation of individual case studies relating to both aspects of their dual role, that is, to family support/case coordination and community development (as already mentioned, a selection of these appears below): and
- availability on an individual basis to provide additional information or clarification about aspects of the program.

Responses from the workers indicated strong enthusiasm for their role. When asked to nominate the most exciting and positive aspects of their jobs, they offered the following comments:

- the reward of the obvious changes in the families they work with;
- the variety within the work - the range of issues, different ways of working, the variety of children and families they work with, the spectrum of contacts they make through case coordination and community development;

- what they learn about themselves from the people with whom they work;
- being perceived as a positive figure in the school and realising that their presence can motivate staff into action to address a particular problem for a child/family; and
- awareness that their presence has had a positive impact on the school staff by turning negative thinking about families into a strengths-based attitude.

As well as identifying the positive aspects, workers also raised a number of significant concerns. These are set out below.

**‘Off-site’ days.** There has been a longstanding arrangement that Wednesdays are set aside as an off-site day, when workers go to the program’s administrative site for the purposes of professional support and supervision, professional development, case coordination meetings, interagency information forums and research and administrative work. This arrangement recognises the need for time to specifically strengthen professional identity of workers and further develop the program.

Issues raised include:

- The off-site day can cause conflict between the requirements of the school and the Office. The most common example is that Wednesday is the day that some schools hold their special needs meetings, which are integral to the workers’ involvement in their schools, so the worker has to choose between the two.
- While it has been suggested that this conflict about the chosen day could be handled through clearer Partnership Agreements between the Office and principals, a larger issue is that workers appear to consider that the off-site days are no longer as helpful as they once were and lack the motivation to be fully involved.
- This sets up an unfortunate cycle whereby the less committed the workers feel to making themselves available, the more difficult it is to offer meaningful and helpful activities.
- Because the SAC workers are the only people in their schools undertaking this kind of role, they can become isolated. The Wednesday off-site is an

opportunity to reinforce a sense of being part of a team, make time for the sharing of skills and effort, and encourage a feeling of being supported by the wider agency in which they work. It is clear from feedback that workers consider this aspect of the day needs to be strengthened.

- The lack of physical resources (e.g. desks and computers) has made it difficult to use the time productively for administrative tasks. We understand that it is likely that the new premises now being occupied by the Office make more adequate provision.

**Team leader/coordinator position.** Several workers observed that there are some issues related to the team leader/coordinator position and made a number of observations, including:

- It is important for the team leader to have a strong understanding of the program if they are to be able first to provide support to workers (e.g. in a dispute with a school/principal) and second to promote the program and its benefits to senior management. The position has been held by a number of people over the five years of the program (including periods where it has actually been unfilled), and it was suggested to us that this level of turnover undermines strong, informed leadership.
- The same kind of leadership is undoubtedly required for maintaining a strong program vision and clear priorities within that vision. This is particularly so with a program like *Schools as Communities* which involves a lot of flexibility and discretion and operates across a number of school sites, each with their own culture and priorities. Related challenges for workers can be to keep sight of who the client is (the children and families or the school) and to whom they are accountable (families/schools/the Office). To further complicate the issue of maintaining vision and priorities, workers also have to keep a balance in their dual roles of family support and community development.
- The job is unwieldy and it is difficult for one person to cover all the tasks which it appears to require: management; professional and clinical supervision; and networking in the community and with schools to ensure the team leader

has a strong understanding of what is actually happening in the program and an understanding of the needs of different schools.

- There is an urgent need to clarify what is expected of the team leader position. In our view, clarification would be best achieved through careful consultation with all interested parties, taking account of the needs of both the agency and the workers on the ground, in a cooperative and transparent process.

## **Recommendation 2**

**The team leader role is currently a complex one requiring both program management across both strands (ie: the outreach workers and strategic projects), and community development across three ACT school districts (North, South and Central). Therefore we would recommend a restoration of the original model of two team leader positions. This would have the added impact of strengthening the SPOB's role in overall management of the program. Therefore we would recommend a restoration of the original model of two team leader positions**

## **Recruitment, induction and professional support**

There were a number of comments from workers about the qualities and personal characteristics that are needed to undertake this work effectively. Many of these relate to professional isolation and the ability to work independently. These comments reflect common experiences of outreach workers in other settings. Some examples are:

‘You need to be checking inside yourself all the time whether you are doing a good job; it can feel really tough if you don't have enough personal motivation and confidence.’

‘If you like the opportunity for creativity, flexibility and freedom in your work, the SAC outreach worker role is fantastic. But the job would be very difficult if you were at all insecure about what you were doing in the SAC role, or needed affirmation that you were handling things well. It is the sort of job where you can easily feel that no one cares or appreciates what you are doing.’

‘A program based on outreach with individual workers across a number of sites has all the more need for structures and clear objectives underpinning it, supported by strong professional supervision.’

‘I find I need to work on reinventing myself every day, always searching for new approaches and new ways of dealing with issues, but it is easy to slip into cynicism and become burnt out...you really need to create mind space and time to process.’

‘This work involves particular coping skills; outreach workers need to be able to pick themselves back up, not be overwhelmed when their self-esteem is challenged, need to be resilient and confident. And this is doubly so when you have to get to know and earn the trust of two schools and their respective communities, not just one!’

‘It is important that workers receive regular reminders about self-care and ways to avoid vicarious trauma.’

There are obvious implications in all of this for the recruitment, induction, and training of workers and for providing support for practice. The **recruitment process**, for example, needs to be targeted at particular skills and experience. We noted a recent newspaper advertisement for outreach worker vacancies describing the duties in this way: *‘Assist with the implementation of the Schools as Communities program. Provide information and advice to schools in relation to the existence of relevant community, health and family support programs.’* It is hard to see how such a bland statement of duties could suggest the challenges and complexity that we have observed during our evaluation, or attract applications based on an informed understanding of the work; nor would the description of the position as a health professional role, ‘Health Professional Officer Level 3, (resulting from a recent reclassification of the outreach worker positions), have helped to make the nature of the job any clearer. While the recruitment process clearly involves much more than the initial advertisement, a generic or uninformative position description at the first point of

contact may deter potential applicants and, conversely, attract applicants who underestimate the requirements and are unsuited to the job.

### **Recommendation 3**

**That a more carefully targeted and proactive recruitment process be developed, to ensure that applicants have an understanding of the role and qualities required to carry out the job. This could be done by more active use of the existing job descriptions, duty statements and selection criteria.**

The **induction/orientation process** following recruitment is an opportunity for workers to develop knowledge about the different systems and roles they will work with. Closely associated with good orientation is the need for a new worker and the Principal to work together to identify the Principal's understanding of the role and objectives of the program and how the worker can provide support and be supported in the school. Depending on the timing, this process may take place as a matter of course through the annual Partnership Agreements. Based on feedback from both principals and workers there is a need for a process where a shared understanding of and commitment to the worker's role is developed. This is regarded as fundamental to the program's success.

### **Recommendation 4**

**That a process equivalent to the partnership negotiations be developed and implemented whenever there is a change of principal or worker, and that the Principal, the worker and the SAC team leader should all participate.**

Our feedback also suggests that workers feel that support for practice including **professional development** (e.g. the opportunity to do a case presentation and discuss within the team; or to have a speaker talking about gambling or mental health issues and their likely effects on families) and **one-on-one supervision** could be improved.

### **Employment arrangements and conditions.**

There is a perception that there has been a lot of staff change and movement, and that the pattern of staffing has been 'all over the place': poor (or no) handover; positions left unfilled or filled on short contracts; or filled without consultation. Feedback indicates that this approach to staffing impacts on the sense of community in a school: it is hard for a worker to feel settled if she is on a short contract; developing relationships as a



basis for community development is almost impossible; principals and teachers are reluctant to invest in the worker's efforts if they are unsure how long the worker will be there; and it damages the process of establishing trust with families if the workers keep changing. On this last point, workers commented that lack of continuity is particularly unhelpful for families who may already be feeling frustrated and let down by government and community services.

### **Recommendation 5**

**That attention be given to revitalising the level and nature of professional support and supervision for the team of community outreach workers.**

**Two areas that appear to require attention include:**

- **Use of the Wednesday 'off-site' day to strengthen the professional practice and identity of the team**
- **The way in which professional/clinical supervision is provided**

### **Relationship with Care and Protection Services**

SAC workers were unanimous in believing that they have a major preventative and early intervention role in child protection. In the event of a report, they are recognised in the child protection intake process as a "protective factor". They commented however that the level of liaison between them and CPS workers has diminished. While there is clearly scope for individual workers to establish contacts in the Office, and vice versa, there appears to be a need to improve awareness, communication and collaboration systemically.

There was a general view that schools have a strong awareness of their mandated role in reporting child abuse and have not tried to transfer this responsibility to SAC workers. Workers commented that there is a risk of jeopardising their ongoing work with families if they simply replicated the child protection role. A more effective role (as discussed in section 3.5) involves them in activities such as actively coordinating services for the child and family in liaison with the CPS worker; attending Care Conferences; acting as a contact point in the school for CPS involvement with a child; actively monitoring a child's circumstances and progress following a report, through regular contact at school; and providing direct emotional or practical support to the child/family e.g. providing transport to counselling or medical appointments.

## Case Study Examples – Family Support and Community Development

### Case Study 1

*(Some details changed for confidentiality reasons)*

Andrew aged 14 lives with his mother following his parent's break-up and a subsequent move to Canberra. Andrew was excluded from his previous high school because of violence towards other students and chronic truancy. The SAC worker made a report to Child Protection Services because of concerns about Andrew and his mother's violence. Because the worker knew the family they were able to provide comprehensive information to CPS.

Andrew left home and subsequently his mother refused to let him return. CPS were concerned about his ongoing safety when he refused to answer his mobile phone. The SAC worker was able to reassure Andrew about CPS involvement and made arrangements for Andrew to meet with the CPS worker at the school.

The SAC worker

- provided ongoing support to Andrew
- provided ongoing information and became the contact person for his mother
- provided feedback to the school
- organised a case conference with Andrew, his mother, school, Belconnen Community Service, Reconnect, and the Northside High School Centre, **to improve the co-ordination of services** for Andrew and his mother
- referred Andrew to an anger management group and provided transport for him to attend
- supported his involvement with Reconnect for crisis accommodation and
- provided regular information to CPS about Andrew's school attendance and emotional welfare.

### Outcomes

Andrew returned home and the worker continued to facilitate meetings with Andrew, his mother CPS regarding future support.

## Case Study 2

*Some details changed for confidentiality reasons)*

Peter, aged 11, arrived in Canberra from rural Victoria at the beginning of the year. His mother took her own life when he was six years old and his father is an alcoholic. Peter has also been diagnosed with having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). His sister Anna, aged 21, rescued Peter from his father in Victoria when she found out that he was experiencing physical and emotional abuse from his father. Anna became his guardian. However, she also had an infant child (11 months at that time), a partner who was reluctant to support Peter, and she had just discovered that she was pregnant again. Peter was referred to the SAC worker because the school was concerned about the problems he was having adjusting to his new school. Anna was finding it difficult to manage Peter's behaviour at home also.

In consultation with the school and Anna, the SAC worker referred Peter for counselling at the Family and Adolescent Counselling Service (FACES). After several sessions with a FACES counsellor, to which the Community Outreach Worker transported Peter, the counsellor requested Anna and her partner to attend counselling sessions with Peter to address the issues that were affecting all of them. However, Anna and her partner were not willing to invest additional time in managing Peter's emotional development due to work and other family commitments.

Peter and Anna's aunty (their mother's sister) decided to invite Peter to stay with her and her husband for a week or two. This situation caused friction between Anna and her aunty because Anna felt she had failed and that her aunty was not satisfied with the way she was looking after Peter. A case coordination meeting was organised by the SAC worker, involving Anna and Peter and their aunty, Peter's teacher, the principal and Peter's FACES counsellor, to determine how they could all work together to address Peter's needs.

The outcomes of the meeting included: deciding to retrieve Peter's paediatric records from Victoria and arrange an appointment with a paediatrician in Canberra to reassess his medication for his ADHD; for Peter to continue to attend counselling at FACES, and for Anna to accompany him; for Peter's aunty to accept responsibility for guardianship for Peter; and for Anna to refer Peter to Child and Adolescent Mental

Health Service because she had discovered that he had been drawing pictures about hurting himself. The SAC worker is continuing in a case coordination role.

### **Case Study 3**

(Some details changed for confidentiality reasons)

The SAC worker became involved because of the behavioural problems of Lucy aged 8. Lucy is the youngest of four children at the school with parents in a very violent relationship. She was regularly on suspension and was not able to participate in the classroom without causing disruption, including regular violence towards staff and students.

The SAC worker became involved with the family when Lucy's mother separated from her violent partner. The worker supported the mother in a number of ways including the coordination with other services such as police, DVCS, Youth Justice and Drug and Alcohol services and made referrals for counselling. The relationship the SAC worker developed with the Lucy's mother empowered her to make significant changes to her life including stable housing and taking up further education. The SAC workers assisted this process by providing information, transporting her to appointment, supporting her in court and liaising with schools of her older children.

The worker also provided support to Lucy by acting as an advocate during disciplinary procedures at school, providing space for 'time-out', transport to various appointments. The worker also supported the child to make and maintain school friendships. Through the support and interventions with Lucy and her mother the risk of harm was also reduced.

### Outcomes

- Lucy's mother remained separated and then divorced from her violent partner.
- Lucy's mother completed year 12 and gained entry to CIT for further study;
- Care and protection orders removed.
- Over a 12 month period Lucy's school suspensions were reduced to nil.
- Lucy became a fully functioning member of the class.
- Her violent outbursts to students and teachers disappeared.

- Her current teacher who has not previous experience of the child's behaviour considers Lucy as one of her favourite students.

#### **Case Study 4**

##### **Knitting Duffy Together**

This was a community capacity-building group that aimed to support and strengthen the local community and enhance individuals' recovery after the devastation of the January 2003 bushfires. Its aim was to draw on the benefits of art and craft work to promote general and mental health.

It developed from a small parent craft group already meeting at the school. With encouragement and practical support from the SAC worker, group members decided to broaden the group by inviting the wider community to join, and the range of crafts was expanded to include creative knitting, felting, wool dyeing, and larger projects involving all of these.

Parents, local volunteers, Duffy P&C and the SAC worker were all involved in the establishment and running of the group, which involved the participation of about 30 people.

##### Outcomes

- New friendships were formed.
- Parents who normally would not feel comfortable to be involved in the school were engaged.
- Individual and community emotional recovery was supported.
- Opportunities for fun were provided.
- The group developed pride in their creative work through a public display in the Healthpact exhibition window in May and June this year.

#### **Case Study 5**

##### Parent support/self-help group

A parent at the school asked the Deputy Principal about opportunities to mix with other parents who had children with special needs or children in the special education unit.

The Deputy Principal approached the *Schools as Communities* worker and a morning tea was arranged for parents to gauge interest and explore the needs of group.

Following the morning tea, a group was formed which will meet on an ongoing basis, with parents deciding on what content they would like and how often and when to meet. The *Schools as Communities* worker will continue to provide support and coordination. This opens up opportunities for parents to meet outside the school and extend their friendship networks. It also provides the opportunity for parents with shared interests or concerns to access information about other services.

### **Case Study 6**

From early 2002, the worker at one West Belconnen primary school began nurturing relationships with workers from Belconnen Community Service (BCS), an agency that would become integral to her role as a SAC outreach worker. This began through the delivery of two programs funded by the SAC strategic grants projects. They were: 'Funky Foods' - a nutrition program for years 5 and 6 and a Homework Club which provided assistance after school for identified year 5 and 6 students.

Through helping with the delivery of these programs at her school, the worker: came into regular contact with BCS workers and their managers; was invited to join an interview panel for BCS employees; was consulted about current issues in both communities; was able to make suggestions about how future programs might operate; and became involved in the preparation and presentation of joint funding submissions for projects relevant to her school community.

Recognising that BCS programs need extra accommodation the SAC worker suggested BCS ask the Principal about using a vacant space in the school. BCS has now moved part of its operations to Holt Primary School. The programs now offered from that site include: Good Beginnings and other family support programs, Behaviour Support Program, Inside/Outside, Adult Education – support and information groups and Neighbourhood Network Programs.

### Outcomes

Families at Holt Primary and the school itself benefit from this arrangement in a number of ways:

- Vandalism has decreased as BCS offices are open during school holidays.
- Programs are school-based making access for families in the community easier.
- Support groups are also run at the school.
- The SAC worker is able to introduce families to BCS directly which increases the likelihood of successful referrals.
- There is a visible and on-going partnership between the school and a community agency.
- BCS staff participate in school programs and functions e.g. Market Day, Fetes, special school assemblies and Schools as Communities morning teas.

### **Case Study 7**

**Charnwood family free fun day** is a school holiday based program for families and friends based at Charnwood Primary for the people of the west Belconnen area. Activities are provided for children, teenagers and parents, and are free and accessible to everyone. The Free Fun Day is held on the first Wednesday of each school holiday period with the aim of families and friends coming together to enjoy themselves while also meeting other families and making plans for the rest of the holiday period. It really provides parents with an opportunity to network and build support during the school holiday period.

### Outcomes

Over 170 parents and children attend the fun days from 11 different suburbs

7 organisations participated on the day and over 10 different businesses supported the program through donations and in-kind support.

The greatest outcome is the networking that takes place over the day. Small groups of parents get together to talk and arrange to meet again during the holiday period.

This event reduces the isolation many parents feel during the school holiday period and creates an opportunity for parents to network and support one another.

The children also have great fun with friends and family

## **5. Consideration of the Strategic Projects sub-program**

Material related to the findings up to this point has focussed almost exclusively on the first sub-program, namely, the employment of community outreach workers operating from selected school and pre-school sites. This section looks at the second sub-program, which provides funding for strategic projects across the ACT community to enhance partnerships between families, communities, local businesses, schools and government.

It is always difficult to assess the impact of a program comprising diverse, small, time-limited projects. This is particularly so if there is no opportunity to speak to all the different stakeholders, of which there have been many since the start of the program. In addition, some were either not easily identifiable (e.g. individual users or participants in informal services) or their involvement was limited to providing financial or in-kind support and were not really in a position to comment on a project's effectiveness. The resources available for the evaluation did not allow this kind of detailed investigation and follow-up. As a result, the material in this section is essentially descriptive of the process and level of activity related to strategic projects since the introduction of *Schools as Communities*. Where we did obtain feedback from stakeholders in individual projects, this was usually in the context of comments about the program more generally. For example, school principals and some community agencies were aware of, or have had a role in, a number of the strategic projects.

Ways in which we were able to obtain information included the following:

- examining documentation including project descriptions for all of the (approximately) 80 community projects that have been funded since the start of the program;
- discussing broader aspects of the sub-program with policy makers and program managers in relevant government departments;



- for a limited number of projects, accessing the final reports of projects prepared by the recipients of grants; and
- taking account of comments in the report of the process evaluation of *Schools as Communities* during 2002.

## 5.1 History of the strategic projects sub-program

Strategic project funding first became available in March 2001, shortly after the SAC outreach workers started at the first eight school sites. The first funding round provided \$296,000 to Canberra schools and community agencies with a further \$100,000 being allocated later the same year. (The total amount available in the first year was significantly higher than later years because unspent salary money was reallocated for strategic projects.). According to the report of the 2002 process evaluation, this somewhat heady start caused some initial problems, largely to do with newly appointed workers trying to facilitate the development of innovative projects in unfamiliar environments, with strict deadlines for submitting applications. This meant that project proposals were rushed to meet deadlines rather than emerging as a product of genuine community development. Also, because workers spent a great deal of time writing submissions to justify funding, the perception changed within schools from a worker being a person engaged in family support and community development to being the person who was bringing in extra funding.

Over time, the total amount available for projects annually has decreased, dropping from \$396,000 in the first year, to \$98,860 in 2002, \$51,750 in 2003, \$56,672 in 2004 and \$56,500 in 2005. Not only has the total amount decreased but also the amount available for individual projects. In the first couple of years, for example, amounts of up to \$35,000 were approved for particular projects, although there were also much smaller grants approved. By 2005, there was a specified limit per grant of \$5000, with applicants being encouraged to seek extra assistance, financial and/or 'in kind', from other parties.

## 5.2 Purpose of grants

Projects approved for funding are intended to support the overall program objective of improving social and educational outcomes for children and young people at risk and their families. Funding is provided to support school- and community-linked initiatives

that build resilience in children and young people and support and strengthen parents and families, through:

- the development of partnerships and collaboration between families, schools, health and community service agencies, community and church groups, and local businesses;
- integrated service delivery; and
- community development programs.

In line with the community development principles associated with the *Schools as Communities* model, there has been an emphasis on encouraging projects that are initiated and developed by schools, families and the community partners themselves.

### 5.3 The application and funding process

There is an annual funding round for strategic projects, with a number of fixed criteria. Some key points about the process include:

- Project funding is one-off only: grants are not ongoing.
- Applications are accepted from across the community: schools, pre-schools, health and community service agencies, early childhood services, community/church groups and local businesses are eligible to apply, singly or in partnership.

**Examples of funded projects:** Projects funded to date have targeted a very wide range of needs and included participation by many parties across the community. Approximately 80 individual projects have been approved since the beginning of 2001. The following are some examples of initiatives that have been implemented:

- 2001 – COAP (Community Organisations Access Program). \$13,000. Ginninderra High School. Project is aimed at developing partnerships with key community agencies to help youth in resolving issues of accommodation, health, finances, personal and family relationships, employment and career options.
- 2001 - Volunteer Tutoring Program. Barnardos. \$20,000. This project places disadvantaged students aged between 8 and 14 who are not achieving well at

school with trained volunteer tutors in a tutoring program which provides one-to-one support in a structured setting.

- 2001 - The Development of a School/Community Based Anxiety Program for Adolescents and their Parents. CAHMS/Calvary Health Care/School Counsellors. \$6,030. Calvary Health Care will facilitate cross-sector training for school counsellors, Calvary staff, and CAMHS staff to enable them to jointly develop and conduct anxiety programs with young people and their parents.
- 2002 - After school activities program. Richardson Primary School. \$8,494. A parent initiated project aiming to establish parent and community participation in the school where little currently exists. There is no local after school program or community based alternative. The Program will provide activities one day per week. Partners are Woden YMCA, the school community, the P & C, St Johns Ambulance, and Impact Taekwondo.
- 2002 - SPICE: Students participating in community enterprises. Volunteering ACT. \$12,975. SPICE is a pilot program for students at risk of dropping out of school & provides voluntary community-based learning experience. Students will be carefully matched with an organisation & spend 1 day/week with an adult mentor who will support and facilitate their work experience. Partners include NHSS Centre, U Can research, Labor Club, Southern Cross Club. The ANU will evaluate its appropriateness for a system wide application.
- 2003 Belconnen Community Services - Food for Life \$5,000. This project provides an opportunity for low income/low literacy parents in the Charnwood, Holt and Macgregor areas to access nutrition home cooking skills.
- 2003 Lyneham Primary School - Brumbies Breakfast Program \$1,300. This is a four-day a week breakfast program operated by the canteen manager and volunteer teachers.
- 2003 Lyons Preschool - Family Networking Group \$4,800. The establishment of the Family Networking group aims to increase community resilience with

particular reference to supporting families with young children in the intake area of Lyons Preschool.

- 2004 Softball for Family and Friends – Aboriginal Corporation for Sporting and Recreational Activities. \$5,000.
- 2004 Living with strong feelings - Domestic Violence Crisis Service. \$5,000. Boys with anger management issues will be given opportunities to participate in planned activities to address their issues and develop skills to manage them.
- 2005 The School Wellbeing Project. Secondary English Centre. \$5,000 Project targets recent immigrant and refugee students and their families. It gives the students and families access to activities which will facilitate their sense of connectedness to the school and the wider community.
- 2005. Canberra Fire Cycle – Community Workshops. Communities @ Work. \$2,000. The project will conduct community workshops with 'Shortis and Simpson' to create song writing material to contribute to 'Canberra Fire Cycle' - a community event celebrating life, community spirit and resilience.

#### **5.4 Discussion**

From the feedback and discussion that we were involved in, we were able to make certain observations.

- First, and importantly, the range of projects and the number of stakeholders involved in them indicate that this sub-program has been very successful in creating partnerships between families, the community and all kinds of groups within it (church, sporting, cultural and special interest), local businesses, schools, and government and non-government health and community agencies.
- There is evidence, however, that it is becoming more difficult to attract applications. There are several factors that may be contributing to this. One is the now very limited amount of money available for individual grants (a cap of \$5000) accompanied perhaps by the amount of work required of often unpaid

parties to submit an application and later report on the use of any funds received.

- Related to this is the fact that grants are approved only as one-offs i.e. there can be no funds approved for any projects previously funded through Strategic Projects nor can funds be approved for a project beyond the current year.
- This links to the larger question of sustainability, which is an issue in a number of ways: do small, one-off projects have any beneficial impact, and if so, can that benefit be sustained once the project ceases? Can a project be sustained by financial and other support after funding has been used up (in other words, become self-funding)? Are there arguments for directing funds to large, longer-term projects in the expectation of greater benefits?
- We believe it would be unfortunate to eliminate small grants. Based on the material and feedback available to us, it appears that many small, local projects have the most active grass-roots community involvement and support, and have resulted from the kind of community development that *Schools as Communities* aims to foster. Also, we are wary of the argument that grants should not be given to small projects whose approach is not 'evidence-based'. It would seem counter to community development principles to reject initiatives developed and strongly owned by the community; based on a narrow definition of what constitutes evidence (Vinson, 2004). Further the intent of small grants was to bring people in collaborative ventures which are likely to lead to further contact and shared preventative activities.
- At the same time, it is reasonable to anticipate that a more flexible approach to the range of projects eligible for a grant, including the possibility of approval for longer-term grants for more significant amounts of money, would have the potential to revitalise community interest and creativity. A rider to this of course is that an increase in the overall amount of funds available would probably be required to make any meaningful difference. On a practical level also, a mix of eligibility to cover both short and longer term projects would

require careful management to avoid locking up available funds in successive years.

#### **Recommendation 6**

- (a) That consideration be given to introducing more flexibility into the guidelines for the strategic projects sub-program, to allow for:
- an increase in the maximum amount available per grant; and
  - the possibility of funding projects over a two to three year period.
- (b) That increased funding be made available for the strategic projects sub-program to support this more flexible approach.

### **6. Consultations with relevant government managers and policy makers**

We explored the program's broad policy and service delivery context in section 2.2, and identified the current key government stakeholders as the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (within the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services) and the Department of Education and Training. We met with a number of senior officers in each of these agencies to seek their views about the program.

There seemed to be a general view among these officers that *Schools as Communities* is fundamentally achieving its original intent of strengthening families by means of family support and community development activities. Some disappointment was also expressed, however, that the program had not resulted in greater systemic changes within the pedagogy of schools. This fits with a clear trend in the thinking of the policy makers to whom we spoke that schools need to be encouraged to move beyond a literacy and numeracy focus. Our view, based on detailed feedback and observation, is that while such an approach would strongly complement *Schools as Communities*, it would need to be an identified initiative within Education, developed by schools themselves. It would not be reasonable to expect a program as small as SAC to achieve this kind of systemic change in school philosophy and practice.

This need for clarity about the responsibilities and interests of the different government stakeholders highlights the importance of developing revised governance arrangements

to reflect the current program management context. The Office has direct responsibility for the *Schools as Communities* program and Education is responsible for the sites and context from which the program largely operates. The program continues to need a commitment from both parties, and good governance principles require that the nature of this commitment be made explicit. In addition, it is important to put a process in place that facilitates communication between the parties. While those we interviewed considered that this was happening at the operational level, there was nevertheless concern that there were no ‘high level conversations’ occurring. They suggested that there should be opportunities for the Office and Education to be jointly setting directions and priorities for the ongoing implementation and development of the *Schools as Communities* program. One obvious if traditional possibility would be a forum involving senior officers from both agencies which met regularly either specifically to discuss progress in *Schools as Communities* or which included SAC as a standing item, to ensure that the program comes under regular joint consideration.

Close collaboration between the Office and Education is of course highly consistent with the overall program objective of enhancing social and educational outcomes for children and young people at risk. Taking account of the range of services that SAC client families need and on examples from other jurisdictions (for example, the Schools as Community Centres Program in New South Wales), we would argue that there is also clearly scope for opening up collaboration with other stakeholders such as ACT Health. We believe this could provide healthy tension for development and enhancement of not only the *Schools as Communities* model but also other initiatives within these three portfolios which share the broad goal of improving outcomes for children and young people at risk. This kind of approach would in turn sit very comfortably with the ‘whole of government’ early intervention strategy outlined in this year’s ACT Government budget.

### **Recommendation 7**

**That the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services and the Department of Education and Training meet as soon as possible to:**

- (d) identify clearly the respective responsibilities and interests of each department in relation to the *Schools as Communities* program as the basis for a formal memorandum of understanding covering matters such as funding; recruitment and staffing; training; provision of facilities in**

**schools; recommendations for project funding; communication with schools about policy and program guidelines; budget submissions; and program reporting and accountability.**

- (e) establish a mechanism for regular, high level contact between the two departments as an opportunity to jointly set directions and priorities for the ongoing implementation and development of the *Schools as Communities* program; and**
- (f) consider the establishment of a partnership with other departments or sectors (such as Health) whose services are of particular relevance to families being supported through *Schools as Communities*.**

Other broad matters raised by managers included:

- *Uncertainty about the benefits of the strategic projects sub-program.* There were comments about the size of the grants, the kinds of projects that are funded, and the sustainability of projects and their benefits. A fuller consideration of this aspect of the program is presented in section 4.9. In summary it is our view that although there is scope for more flexibility in grant guidelines the funding of small projects has had significant impact on developing social connectedness. This is consistent with the community development literature which points to how small scale local projects which bring different sectors together build community capacity.
- *The need for better communication and cooperation between SAC workers and care and protection workers.* A fuller consideration of this is presented in the context of feedback from Care and Protection Services (section 3.5) and from SAC workers (section 3.8.). In summary the opportunities to use the SAC program as an early intervention/prevention strategy are being missed.
- *Whether there will be an expansion of the program.* We received feedback about this from Care and Protection workers and from community agencies, both of whom advocated the need for workers in more schools across the ACT. In reference to the commitment made in the ACT Social Plan to expanding the program, managers indicated that it was a lack of resources rather than a move away from the program model that impeded an expansion at present. The suburbs whose schools were originally chosen as sites for the program continue



to qualify as areas of high need according to the set of criteria used at the time (these are outlined in section 2.1). We found no evidence to support a change in these original criteria, and should budgetary conditions allow expansion in the future, extra sites could reasonably be selected by identifying those suburbs which are next highest in the ranking.

### **Recommendation 8**

**In relation to the expansion of *Schools as Communities* flagged in the ACT Social Plan, it is recommended:**

- **that there be an increase in the number of schools sites from which the program operates;**
- **that any increase in the number of sites be accompanied by an increase in the number of outreach workers, to ensure a viable presence for the program in all participating schools; and**
- **that in the event of an expansion, the additional sites should be selected using the original criteria of need (outlined in the original program guidelines and also in section 2.1 of this report), and identifying those suburbs which are the next highest in the ranking; and**
- **that given the wider definition of early intervention that underpins the Government's integrated early intervention framework, any increase in the number of school sites should include consideration of secondary as well as primary and preschools.**

At a more micro level, it was suggested there was a need to reconsider the role and functions of the SAC team leader position. As discussed in section 3.8.5, tensions have been identified about the range of expectations of the team leader position.

## Appendix 1            Sampling procedure for parents' survey

Over the twelve month period leading up to the time of the evaluation i.e. from 1 April 2004 to 1 April 2005, there were 320 children/families referred to the *Schools as Communities* program.

- Of these 320 referrals, 284 (or 89%) led to contact with the workers
- We asked workers to identify the number of families from within this group with whom they had had significant contact (defined as families with whom they had had at least two occasions of contact). There were 152 families in this category. We note that the shortfall between the 284 and 152 families was due at least in part to the fact that some of the referrals would have been for the same family or for different children within the same family; in other words, the number of referrals is greater than the number of families.
- Workers then sent letters to these families providing information about the evaluation and inviting them to consent in writing to be contacted for a phone interview with staff of the Institute. Workers made contact in person as well as in writing where a family's circumstances suggested a need for this, for example, where parents may have had poor literacy, or were non-English speaking, or perhaps where mental health or substance abuse issues may have reduced a person's capacity to provide informed consent. (In the end, only 132 of the 152 identified families were offered the opportunity to take part in a phone interview. The main reasons for this shortfall were: a number of families had moved or left the school and there were no current contact details available; staff turnover in the *Schools as Communities* team meant that some records and contact details were hard to access; and the fact that a couple of workers were ill and on leave at the time the sampling process was taking place.)
- Following this consent phase, the Co-ordinator of the *Schools as Communities* team provided the Institute with a list of contacts for the phone interviews. These contact details were limited to the parent/carer's given name, a contact phone number and the name of the child's school. The Institute had no role in identifying the families.

## Appendix 2 Interview protocols for stakeholders

### *Family Satisfaction Survey*

Interviewer's name:.....

Institute of Child Protection Studies  
Evaluation of the Schools as Communities Program

Interviewee's given name: .....

Contact phone number: .....

Child's school.....

Name of worker/ how worker is known at that school.....

Suggested time to ring.....

Introductory comments:

My name is (full or given name – whatever you feel comfortable with) and I am ringing from the Australian Catholic University.

You may remember being contacted over the last couple of weeks about taking part in a telephone interview about the Schools as Communities Program.

My list tells me that you were happy to agree to take part in the interview.

Can I just check with you that you are still happy to be interviewed. And is it convenient for you to do it with me now? It will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

Whatever you tell me will remain confidential and you will not be identified in any way. But of course, if you told me something that showed you or someone else was unsafe or at risk of harm, we may need to follow that up.

The Schools as Communities program gives support to families and has staff working in several schools in Canberra including your child's school. (*Your list should show the contact's first name, phone number, a suggested time to ring, the child/children's school, and how the worker/program is known at that school.*)

We are doing a review of the program at the moment to find out if it's useful to families and children. This interview with you will help us know whether the service has been useful for you and your family.

I have a number of questions to ask you. Please let me know at any stage if you would like the question repeated. (*The following questions assume that we are interviewing families whom we know to have had contact with the worker on more than one occasion.*)

1. How much contact have you had with *the worker* at your child's school? (*How is worker known at this school.*)

a. Hardly any (1 or 2 times)

- b. A bit (3 to 6 times)
- c. Quite a lot (6 to 10 times)
- d. You see the worker all the time

.....

2. How did you find out that *the worker* was available to help you?

- a. Your child's teacher
- b. The school counsellor
- c. Someone else at the school
- d. Another family or a friend
- e. Other.....

.....

3. Can you give me an example of when *the worker* was able to help you or your child?

.....

.....

.....

4. Has there been any change in your child's attitude to going to school since you have been in contact with *the worker*?

- a. Yes, much happier to go
- b. No change
- c. Have just noticed it's better some days/is not so reluctant to go
- d. Hard to say
- e. Less keen to go than before

.....

.....

5. Has there been any change in your child's behaviour since *the worker* has been helping you?

- a. It has improved/got better
  - b. Better in some areas
  - c. Not much better or no real change
  - d. Worse than before

Any examples?.....

.....

.....

6. Has it been easier for you to go to the school to talk about any issues your child has been having?

- a. A lot easier
- b. A bit easier – example...?
- c. No difference
- d. No, it's been harder

Example?.....

.....

7. Has *the worker* been able to help you with ideas about being a parent or about different ways of managing your child's behaviour?
- e. a lot
  - f. a few ideas – not many
  - g. not relevant to me
  - h. hasn't helped at all

Examples??.....  
 .....  
 .....

8. Has *the worker* been able to make it easier for you to deal with services that you are already using outside the school ? (eg, health services; family services). If yes, give examples.....  
 .....  
 .....

9. Has *the worker* been able to put you in touch with other help and support that might be useful for you, either in the school or outside the school
- a. in the school? – example.....
  - b. in the community? –example.....

10. How helpful has *the worker* been overall for you and your family?
- f. Extremely helpful
  - g. Quite helpful
  - h. Able to help with some things but not others
  - i. Not very helpful
- .....  
 .....

11. Is there anything you would have liked *the worker* to do differently?  
 Example?.....  
 .....  
 .....

Thank you very much for taking part in this survey. I really appreciate your time and help.

(In the event of an interviewee disclosing an episode of child abuse that you consider needs immediate follow-up, the contact number is: 1300 556 729

If there are issues to be followed up with the SAC team, let Merrillyn (6209 1227) or Morag (6209 1225) know in the first instance.)

### **Appendix 3            Interview protocol for Principals/other school staff**

What has been your experience of the Schools as Communities (SAC) Program in your school?

What do you see as the benefits of the Program? What are some examples of clearly beneficial outcomes for the school community?

What is your assessment of the impact and usefulness for individual children and families of your school's involvement with the SAC Program?

Are there aspects of the program that you consider should be changed or enhanced?

Do you have any other comments or views about the Program?

## **Appendix 4      Interview protocol for staff of Government agencies/services**

In what capacity has your agency been involved with the Schools as Communities Program?

What has been your experience of the Program?

What do you see as the benefits of the Program? What are some examples of clearly beneficial outcomes for your client group?

Are there aspects of the program that you consider should be changed or enhanced?

Do you have any other comments or views about the Program?

## **Appendix 5      Interview protocol for staff of the Schools as Communities Program**

How would you describe your role?

How do you make parents and children aware that you are available and what your role is?

How successful is your role in the schools, from your perspective – and how do you define success?

What contributes to that success?

How do you balance the direct client contact and the community development aspects of your job?

Are there any barriers to you doing your job more effectively?

How would you rate your school's commitment to the program and what you think has contributed to that level of commitment?

What is the nature of your relationship with other relevant government and non-government services?

What are your views on the program's effectiveness generally (i.e. beyond your own role).



## Appendix 6 Information Letter for participants

Australian Catholic University  
Brisbane Sydney Canberra Ballarat Melbourne



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11<sup>th</sup> May, 2005

### INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

TITLE OF PROJECT: A REVIEW OF THE "SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITIES" SERVICE.

PRINCIPAL  
RESEARCHER: MORAG Mc ARTHUR

RESEARCHERS: MERRILYN WOODWARD  
GIOVANNA RICHMOND

Dear Parent/s

We would like to invite you to participate in a review of a family support service called "Schools as Communities". This service has staff that work in a number of schools in Canberra including your child's school.

The purpose of this review is to find out if the "Schools as Communities" service is useful to families and children.

You are invited to take part in a short telephone interview as part of this review. If you agree, we will call you at a time that is convenient to you and ask you a few questions. For example, do you know about the service in your school and has it helped in any way? The interview questions will not involve discussion of anything that is personal.

This review is important because it is a way of making sure that services remain helpful to families. A report will be written about the review to provide valuable information to schools and other services. The results of the review may be published in the form of papers in professional journals to provide information to other interested people. What you tell us will remain confidential and you will not be identified in any way.

We will need to obtain your consent if you participate in the review. The consent form is attached. You are free to refuse consent altogether without having to justify your decision or to withdraw your consent and to discontinue your participation in the review at any time without giving any reason.

Once we have finished all the telephone interviews the information will be pulled together without identifying any family. We will ensure that all information remains confidential throughout the review and in any reports or publications that may follow.

Please don't hesitate to contact me on 6209 1125 or Marilyn Woodward on 6209 1127 if you have any questions about the review. Following the completion of this review we will send you the results for your information.

This review has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Australian Catholic University. In the event that you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during the review or if you have any query that we have not been able to satisfy you may write to:

Chair of Human Research Ethics Committee  
Australian Catholic University  
Strathfield Campus  
Locked Bag, 2002  
STRATHFIELD NSW 2135  
Tel: 02 9701 4059  
Fax: 02 9701 4350

Any complaint or concern that you may have will be treated in confidence and fully investigated and you will be informed of the result.

If you agree to participate in this review you should sign both copies of the consent form, keep one copy for your records and return the other copy to me.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

Dr Morag McArthur  
Principal researcher

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