

11-1-2010

First interim report of Schools First: Evaluation of the 2009 awards

Robert Simons
ACER, simons@acer.edu.au

Recommended Citation

Simons, Robert, "First interim report of Schools First: Evaluation of the 2009 awards" (2010). *Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation*.

http://research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/6

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation at ACEReSearch. It has been accepted for inclusion in Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation by an authorized administrator of ACEReSearch. For more information, please contact mcdowell@acer.edu.au.



**First Interim
Report of
Schools First**

**Evaluation of
the 2009
Awards**

Submitted to
The National Australia Bank Group
November 2010

Robert Simons
Principal Research Fellow

Australian Council *for* Educational Research



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
First Interim Report of Schools First -- Evaluation of the 2009 Award Winners.....	3
The Methodology.....	3
The Findings	3
Introduction.....	5
Schools First.....	5
Schools First Awards	5
The evaluation.....	6
Method	7
Structure of the Report.....	7
Critical Success Factors of Winning Applicants	8
Introduction.....	8
Impact and Seed Models of Funding	8
Thinking and Planning Strategically for Partnership Growth and Expansion	10
Formalised structures and processes of communication.....	12
Strategies for sustainability.....	14
Partnership capacity for replication	15
Strengthening Partnership Capacity.....	17
Strengthened partnership capacity	17
How Schools First helped	17
The Case Studies.....	17
Stimulating Partnership Creativity: Partnership Objectives	22
Introduction.....	22
Improved Learning Outcomes	23
Development of Workplace Skills	24
Promotion of Healthy Life Styles, Mental Health, and Wellbeing.....	25
Social and Emotional Support for Students and Families	27
Children’s Readiness for School.....	28
Conclusion	30
Strategic planning and action.....	30
Enhanced partnership expertise, performance, and motivation	31
Expanded vision.....	31
APPENDIX ONE.....	33

Executive Summary

First Interim Report of Schools First - Evaluation of the 2009 Award Winners

The *primary objective* of the Schools First Awards Program is to recognise the social networks that already exist between schools and communities and to encourage both the strengthening of these and the building of new linkages.

This Report looks at a subset of the 2009 Schools First Award winners in order to assess how effective the program has been in providing:

- Financial recognition of success in establishing effective school-community partnerships, and
- Financial support to build stronger school-community partnerships.

The Methodology

Interviews were conducted with a subset of Award Winners from each category. From a total of 1552 applications in 2009 from all states and territories, there were 88 successful applicants. Fifty-three, or 62.5%, of this number agreed to be interviewed for the evaluation. From this number, 26 were Impact Schools and 14 Impact Community Partner winners. Seven were Seed Schools and six Seed Community Partner winners.

The Findings

Critical success factors at a strategic level

Five closely interrelated factors emerged from the analysis of interviews with successful applicants. They were:

- Impact and Seed models of funding
- Thinking and planning strategically for partnership growth and expansion
- Formalised structures and processes of communication
- Strategies for sustainability, and
- Partnership capacity for replication.

The five strategic success factors that were identified among the winning Schools First partnerships suggest that, overall, the Schools First initiative has contributed to a significant increase in strategic capacity for the enhancement and growth of partnerships beyond that envisioned before Schools First.

In all cases, the Awards either provided for already successful partnerships to grow their capacity and to benefit significantly larger numbers of students, or to facilitate the growth of early stage partnerships.

Strengthened partnership capacity

Partnerships in which collaboration had been strengthened by formalised processes of communication and strategies for sustainability, strengthened their partnership capacity in three main areas. These were:

- Improved partnership performance
- Enhanced partnership expertise, and
- Heightened partnership motivation and commitment.

Improved collaboration contributed to improved sustainability, and improved sustainability tended to validate and strengthen the motivation for collaboration. Together they contributed significantly to improved partnership capacity.

Partnership objectives

The objectives generally reflected one or more of the following themes:

1. Improved learning outcomes
2. Development of workplace skills
3. Promotion of healthy lifestyles, mental health, and wellbeing
4. Social and emotional support for students and families
5. Children's readiness for school.

Well-chosen objectives assisted in guiding and marshalling otherwise disconnected resources from schools and community partners into creative initiatives in many different situations and circumstances across Australia. All of the partnerships displayed creativity and imagination in achieving improved learning outcomes and removing barriers to learning.

Introduction

Schools First

Schools First is a national awards program initiated by the National Australia Bank (NAB) in partnership with the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). NAB has committed \$15 million in awards funding over three years to recognise and encourage excellence in school-community partnerships. The program was launched in October 2008 by the then Hon Julia Gillard, MP, and is being implemented from 2009-2011 inclusive.

Schools First builds on the growing recognition that the task of raising young people who are resilient, adaptable and well-adjusted, rests on the shoulders of the entire community. It aims to bring teachers, students, parents, business, local government and community members together to share this responsibility.

Schools First wants communities to become more involved in their local school and for an extended range of people to contribute to student learning. Effective school-community partnerships mean schools can draw from a much broader range of resources and support networks.

The *primary objective* of the Schools First Awards program is to recognise the social networks that already exist between schools and communities and to encourage the strengthening of these and the building of new linkages.

For the purposes of Schools First, ‘success’ in a school context means *improved outcomes for students*. Such outcomes may include:

- improved attendance, retention or graduation rates
- better academic performance
- more student engagement in learning, or
- increased self-esteem.

Successful outcomes for a school starting from a low base, in terms of student performance or levels of student engagement, may be quite different from the successful outcomes of schools that are already high performing.

Schools First Awards

The Schools First Awards are intended to encourage schools to think creatively about the kinds of partnerships they might build with groups in their local community. The creators of the awards want schools to look carefully at the resources and skills that exist in their local community and to think about how these might be harnessed to improve outcomes for young people.

An important feature of the Schools First Awards is that the winning entries must be exemplary. The awards are intended to showcase what is happening in school–community partnerships across Australia and thus need to reflect best practice. Winning entries need to be exemplary in terms of their *outcomes*, and in terms of their *processes*.

It is possible that some school–community partnerships may not have achieved all that they set out to achieve but can nevertheless demonstrate what they have learned. This learning is an important outcome of a partnership engagement and, if disseminated, may assist other school communities to lay solid foundations for their own linkages.

The five criteria used to judge the Awards, have been written in such a way that they can be used either for existing partnerships or adapted for proposed partnerships:

- *Criterion 1:* The partnership has been set up to address an identified need or opportunity that will benefit students.
- *Criterion 2:* A plan has been developed with each partner contributing to the plan.
- *Criterion 3:* A program has been successfully implemented.
- *Criterion 4:* Students have benefited from the partnership.
- *Criterion 5:* The partnership has become part of the culture and planning activities of each partner organisation.

While the awards funding is targeted mainly at school–community partnerships that show evidence of outstanding achievement, there is also a discretionary element that allows the judges to recognise the potential for excellence. (This discretionary element recognises that significant educational change can take years to achieve. Some school–community partnerships may not yet be in a position to demonstrate improved outcomes for students but may be able to show evidence of exemplary processes and collaborative engagement.)

The evaluation

The primary aim of the evaluation was to focus on the initiative’s core purpose, that is, to encourage the formation of effective school–community partnerships.

All of the successful applicants had demonstrated qualities that were identified in the literature as marks of successful school–community partnerships. This evaluation shows how in applying their Awards, they developed a further layer of *strategic* critical success factors that enabled them to extend their partnerships to another level and to extend their impact more broadly.

The secondary aim of the evaluation was to make a significant contribution to the existing body of research on effective school–community partnerships. This Report represents the first of three evaluations to assess the impact of the Schools First Awards on the development and strengthening of effective school–community partnerships in

Australia. As such it represents a first instalment in contributing to a growing evidence base on effective school-community partnerships.

Specifically, the evaluation aimed to assess how effectively the program has been in providing:

- Financial recognition of success in establishing effective school-community partnerships; and,
- Financial support to build stronger school-community partnerships.

Method

All partnerships that had won a Schools First Award were approached to participate in the evaluation. Of the 88 winners approached, 53 agreed to participate in the evaluation. The data were collected in mid-2010. Interviews were conducted with 33 schools and 20 partners.

Data were gathered via telephone interviews. The interviews lasted for a minimum of 45 minutes, with 18 lasting longer than an hour.

Interviews were used, rather than surveys, because this method allowed data of greater depth and detail to be gathered. The result has been an information-rich base from which case studies have been developed to illustrate the impact of the Schools First initiative during the first full year of its implementation.

Structure of the Report

This Report comprises three sections.

The first section shows to what extent participation in Schools First contributed to the identification of critical success factors for school-community partnerships *at a strategic level*.

The second section traces how participation in Schools First contributed to strengthened partnership capacity. In particular, it focuses upon how the formalisation of communication and the development of strategies for sustainability were facilitated by Schools First.

The third section provides an overview of how the Awards stimulated creativity in the formulation of partnership objectives.

Critical Success Factors of Winning Applicants

Introduction

This section of the Schools First evaluation identifies the success factors that were critical to enabling the Impact and the Seed Award winners to strengthen or expand their partnerships and so improve learning outcomes for larger numbers of students. Five closely interrelated factors emerged. They were:

- The flexibility that the Impact and Seed models of funding gave to partnerships
- Strategic thinking and planning for partnership growth and expansion
- The establishment of formalised structures and processes of communication
- The development and implementation of strategies for sustainability, and
- The demonstrated capacity for the partnership to be replicated in other settings.

These factors were interdependent. None of them existed in isolation from the others. The Awards clearly stimulated partners, who were not already thinking and planning strategically, to do so. In these cases, structures and processes of communication were formalised to monitor strategic integrity, track progress, and address issues when they arose. In varying degrees, all of the partnerships began to address sustainability issues, and, in a smaller number of cases, had already put into place strategies to ensure long-term sustainability. In partnerships where programs had been successfully embedded in the community, replication in other sites became possible.

The availability of investments that can be applied flexibly has been shown to be very important, *in the first instance*, in generating significant expansion and growth among all of the winning applicants. Beyond this, it was not as easy to assign temporal priority to the other four factors. They tended to occur more or less simultaneously.

The rest of this section of the Report looks at each of the five strategic success factors that characterised winning partnerships after they began to use money from the Awards.

Impact and Seed Models of Funding

There were two key features of the Impact and Seed Models of funding that NAB employed as part of the Schools First Strategy.

The first feature was the amounts provided by the Awards – they were large. This allowed Impact Award winners to use the funds as investments to expand already established partnerships. It allowed Seed Funding winners – those in the early stages of partnerships – to consolidate their resources and establish a platform for further growth. In both cases, the models represented adaptations of business investment models applied to achieve improved educational outcomes.

The second feature of the model was the flexibility the winners had in applying the funding. All interviewees emphasised the critical importance of this flexibility.

Thus, the amounts of investment provided and the flexibility of the funding models contributed significantly to the development and growth of school community partnerships. The following case study and subsequent comments from winning partnerships provide a snapshot of the critical importance of the funding model's key features.

Case Study 1

A partnership of regional schools had come together to address a serious problem with large numbers of students at risk of leaving school before the end of Year 10. The partnership, which had already been in existence for over ten years, linked up with around 300 small and medium sized businesses to provide mentors, role models and other forms of support.

The partners, who had effectively addressed the problem of early school leavers, decided that a Schools First Award would give them the capacity to shift the emphasis from school retention to sourcing the best possible career choices for students after they had completed their schooling.

Flexibility to apply the funding provided by Schools First enabled the school to increase the diversity of the businesses it brought on as partners. This opened up a wider range of post-school pathways. The amount of the Award captured the attention of the entire community, raised the profile of the partnership, and facilitated an understanding that the whole community, not simply the school, has responsibility for its young people.

Since having won the Award, 54 per cent of students who enter the program return to complete Year 12; 27 per cent of the students take up apprenticeships; and 19 per cent are in a traineeship and related job. This was an important outcome for the school and the community. The partnership has been significantly strengthened and many students, who previously would have been early school leavers, are now pursuing work and career options that they would probably not have previously considered.

Comments from other winning partners

All of the interviewees noted that the funding was sufficiently large to make a difference. Since it was not tied it also provided the freedom to concentrate on priority challenges and opportunities identified by the schools and their partners in the community. Some of the comments made affirming how the funding model contributed to success were:

- *The open-ended, flexible model of applying the funding facilitates conversation and interaction among the partners and sets a great precedent for what works in school-community partnerships.*

- *Nowhere before were we ever allowed to apply money to fit our strategic plan. We did not have to apply the money to someone else's plan.*
- *The funding model provides an example of good practice and good outcomes that other funding bodies can learn from and other schools can consider in developing their partnerships with the community.*
- *The model is very good. It gives partnerships an opportunity to represent and implement their own programs. Other corporations and state jurisdictional authorities can learn from NAB's funding model.*
- *The money can be applied so flexibly that decisions on how it is used can be made at the coal face.*
- *The flexibility of NAB and the team have made working with the process a delight.*

Thinking and Planning Strategically for Partnership Growth and Expansion

A funding model that encouraged flexibility provided opportunities for partnership growth and expansion. This flexibility enabled and encouraged partnerships to think strategically about enhancing existing programs and about extending them to greater numbers of students.

The evidence collected during the interviews demonstrated that the funding models for Impact and Seed Awards were particularly suitable to expanding and setting up partnerships among diverse stakeholders. These included:

- Schools individually and in partnership with each other
- Universities and other tertiary institutions
- Community health, welfare, family and children services organisations
- Large, medium and small businesses
- Commonwealth, state and local government departments.

In the case of Impact Award winners, established partnerships provided a platform to apply a significant amount of funding strategically, either to enable a larger number of students to benefit from the partnership, or to engage additional partners, or both. The winners of the Seed Awards were able to use their awards to grow their capacity to take early stage partnerships to a more mature stage.

The following case study shows how one Impact Award winner was able to think more strategically and grow an already successful partnership.

Case Study 2

A regional school with a large indigenous population had a major problem with a large number of their students not being work-ready when they left school. The students were not thinking about the type of work they might do when they left school, and when many of them left, they could not find work. The school wanted to find careers for them so that they would have the motivation of a future job as an incentive to complete their studies.

The school decided to work with a local business. The business, a large resource company working in the region, was attracted to the partnership because it wanted to meet its Human Resources target in relation to employing Indigenous young people. Together they drafted a business plan that involved a guaranteed job for students who completed their schooling.

The Schools First Award has enabled the school to build partnerships with other businesses to expand the number of work opportunities the students can consider. As a result, all of the student body is now in the program, and the school is continuing to work with its partners to ensure successful post-school placements.

The Schools First Award affected how the partners thought about future possibilities. It gave them the opportunity to think beyond their limited operational scope. They were able to think more creatively.

Comments from other winning partners

The Impact and Seed Awards provided freedom to think more broadly about partnerships, and to consider how effective initiatives could be further developed and strengthened. Some comments made affirming how the Awards contributed to thinking and planning more strategically were:

- *The model encourages community partnerships better than anything else on offer.*
- *We enjoyed the striving for an otherwise unattainable goal that the Award made possible.*
- *The size of the Award dared us to think big.*
- *The model facilitated thinking about additional partners that could be brought on and gave us the freedom to start thinking about the future and next steps. The community's awareness was moved to think 'big picture' and the school's capacity was increased to be able to work with other schools.*
- *The funding model facilitated thinking about approaching other business groups with partnership opportunities.*
- *The size of the Award inspired the development of an integrated strategy, which brought a number of 'little initiatives' together in a coherent package. The Awards prompted the development of an integrated framework.*
- *The Award has enabled the program to be taken more seriously and to take the program to a higher level. Everyone is thinking on a more advanced level.*

Formalised structures and processes of communication

Having formalised structures and processes of communication incorporates a number of the characteristics of successful school-community partnerships. These include:

- shared decision-making
- clear roles and responsibilities
- frequent and effective communication, and
- regular monitoring and review.

Critical to success, however, was the extent to which the above components were integrated into a formalised structure or process. When partnerships increased their partnership base or started to involve larger numbers of students, communication could no longer be dependent on informal, intermittent exchanges which might have sufficed at an earlier stage of the partnership.

Formalisation could involve different methods: the development of Memorandums of Understanding, the scheduling and minuting of meetings, regular distribution of newsletters, and, providing separate but complementary meeting structures for executive level oversight, as well as for day-to-day operations.

The number of structures and processes employed generally corresponded to the duration and maturity of the partnership. Those that had been in existence for several years tended to employ most if not all of the structures and processes. Start up or newer partnerships usually formalised a process or structure as the need was identified.

The partnerships cited two main benefits from having formalised structures or processes of communication. They established a framework in which the different areas of expertise of the partners could be brought to bear on the objective of the partnership. They also promoted cross-sectoral learning.

The case study below shows that by formalising communication processes the capacity of the partners to contribute in the areas of their expertise was enhanced. They also had a heightened sense that they were making a genuine contribution and were motivated to continue doing so.

Case Study 3

A partnership between a large vocational college and a national industry body had been in existence for three years. It was set up to address two problems: 1) students who did not have *current* industry standard skills when they left the college; and, 2) an industry that had a serious shortage of qualified labour.

While the partners had been reasonably successful prior to Schools First, the Impact Award made it possible for them to reach a larger number of students and resource an expanded scope of activities.

The driver of the program at the College coordinated all of the school-based stakeholders. The industry partner worked as a broker in bringing community stakeholders on board. The public relations department of the industry partner worked with the school to set in place executive and operational level meetings and distribution of minutes for ongoing communication. The Schools First Award enabled contracts to be developed so that each of the partners knew exactly what was expected and when.

Formal lines of communication encouraged the partners to participate actively and, as a result, enabled the partnership to become more robust. The communication processes also facilitated tapping into and directing the expertise of the partners to where it was most needed. In this way, the partners could see the contributions they were making and the benefits they could derive from them.

The largest change attributable to the partnership has been the retention of the Year 10 students into Years 11 and 12, or their transition into general employment or to an apprenticeship. Program participants now have a higher retention rate for Year 10 than the State average. The school's reputation was enhanced because its students were more often graduating with current, state of the art industry skills. Industry could see a stream of work-ready young people. The publicity generated by the Award also created excitement by recognising the partners' contributions more broadly. All partners reported how they valued being associated with a winning project that has been independently assessed and validated.

Comments from other winning partners

Comments affirming the importance of a formalised structure or process for communication in acknowledging partner expertise and learning across sectors included:

- *Prior to the Award, the partners operated on the basis of verbal agreements. The Award has convinced us of the importance of formalising our collaboration processes to ensure continuity.*
- *The Award has made a more sophisticated management structure possible and the relationship has been enhanced.*
- *Formalising a structure for collaboration ensured that we focused on more innovative ways to engage with the school. We learned which students to fast-track through the recruitment process for traineeship and apprenticeship programs. The closeness of the collaboration challenged how each of us worked and assisted in the development of an integrated framework.*
- *The strength we brought to the partnership was a sophisticated system for the coordination of care and services and the transferral of information to the community. These structures helped us formalise our communication processes with the school so that each of us was able to quickly learn how we could contribute to the partnership.*

Strategies for sustainability

All of the winning applicants who were interviewed thought that their partnerships and programs were sustainable for the next three to five years. One of the distinguishing factors underpinning their assessment was the extent to which they had implemented one or more strategies to ensure sustainability, beyond those in place prior to winning an Award.

Nearly all of the partnerships had initiated long-term strategic and business planning to ensure that effective initiatives were able to continue and did not become vulnerable to one-off short term funding grants. Strategies for diversified sources of funding were part of a number of these plans.

Shifting ownership of successful initiatives to the entire community was a further strategy used by some of the partnerships. One partnership ensured that there was a strategic alignment between the planning processes of the city and the school. Another partnership ensured that a student program clearly had benefits for a local industry in the community and was sufficiently attractive for the community to want to take it on.

Other partnerships focused on the long-term by targeting a portion of the funding for training staff and building their capacities to be able to continue to provide the program after the monies from the Award had been allocated.

One especially enterprising strategy for sustainability involved schools in partnership with local industries developing commercially viable student-based programs that delivered a profit stream to the school. This profit was used to sustain the partnership.

The following case study shows how one school set up a diversified funding stream by attracting matching funds from its partner to leverage Department of Education funding.

Case Study 4

A senior high school in a regional city was concerned about a significant number of students who were not engaging in the science curriculum. Previous evaluations of the science courses pointed to their lack of practical application as a major reason for lack of student interest. In response, the school formed a partnership with the city council to design a science program that was directly linked to a major marine life project for the city.

In consultation with scientists employed by the city, a new learning pathway linking the science curriculum with this project was developed. It is contributing to improved participation and achievement levels in science, while the students are also becoming involved in, and aware of the contribution they can make to, the community.

Although the partnership was formed over ten years ago, the prize money has enabled the addition of computer aided design to the project with even more impressive results for

the students and the city. School facilities have been improved and the school's recently acquired license to work with the city's threatened fish program is providing students with access to a program that integrates literacy and numeracy with the city's wetlands project. The city's wetlands have been upgraded as part of its strategy for sustainable marine life and the city has recognised the value of the project by providing matched funds to ensure that it continues.

The Award has also encouraged the school to look ahead and to think creatively about other possible partnerships, for example, with mining companies for programs in engineering.

Partnership capacity for replication

One of the strongest indicators of a partnership's growth is its capacity for replication. Only one of the winning partnerships that had been interviewed had reached this point. The following case study shows how it facilitated another school-community partnership in another setting in offering an already proven program.

Case Study 5

A medium sized vocational college in a regional setting had a problem with a large number of male students who were engaging in unhealthy lifestyle activities and placing at risk their enrolment at the college.

The school currently provides at-risk students with a one-to-one relationship with a caring adult. This mentoring program has been effective in assisting the students develop a sense of belonging to the school community and the resilience to deal with a variety of life circumstances. The main indicators of its success have been a significant reduction in at-risk behaviours and increased motivation to participate in school.

Since the winning partnership was already enjoying the benefits of the mentoring program, it flagged a readiness to roll out this successful program and share the partnership skills it had learned as the focus of its Schools First application.

The prize has enabled the program and its management committee to operate as a parallel structure supporting the work of the school. The prize has also contributed to the school seeing how it could become an umbrella organisation to broker a similar initiative that addresses at-risk behaviours and enables teachers to focus on the learning of the students in a more dedicated manner in another community.

By effectively embedding the program in a second community, the school is now considering how it could work with other schools in supporting the development of similar partnerships and programs.

Summary: Strategic Success Factors Stimulated by the Schools First Awards

The evaluation of the Schools First Awards identified two aims by which its effectiveness would be assessed. The first was the *nature of the contribution* made by the Schools First Awards to encouraging the development of effective school-community partnerships. The second was *how to encourage* more schools and communities to form effective partnerships.

The findings from the evaluation suggest that overall there has been a significant increase in strategic capacity for the enhancement and growth of partnerships beyond that envisioned in the lead up to the development of the Schools First strategy.

In all cases, the Awards either provided for already successful partnerships to grow their capacity to increase the number of partners and to benefit significantly larger numbers of students, or to facilitate the growth of early stage partnerships.

A framework for acting strategically has been driven, in the first instance, by the Schools First funding models for the Impact and Seed Funding Awards. The size of the awards and the freedom to apply them flexibly has enabled the winning partnerships to expand their impact or to consolidate a planning and development process. In particular, the partnerships have been strongly encouraged to think and plan strategically; to formalise structures and processes for communication; to devise additional strategies for sustainability; and, to grow partnership capacity to the extent that they are ready to replicate in other settings.

The strategies employed by a number of the partnerships to build sustainability into their partnerships and projects represent a sophisticated level of learning that has taken place throughout the program and partnership development phases.

The Schools First strategy has effectively enabled mature partnerships and partnerships ready to consolidate their growth to think longer term.

While this section of the Report has been concerned primarily with identifying the nature of the contribution made by Schools First to Award winning partnerships, the next two sections consider the partnership processes that have strengthened partnership capacity. They will also consider the types of partnership objectives that are contributing to successful outcomes for students. These sections of the Report address the second aim of the evaluation, namely, *how to encourage* more schools and communities to form effective partnerships

Strengthening Partnership Capacity

This section of the Report considers the second aim of the Schools First evaluation, namely, to encourage more schools and communities to form effective partnerships. Specifically, it looks at processes that have (i) strengthened partnership capacity and (2) how these have been encouraged by Schools First.

The research conducted for the evaluation showed that as a result of Schools First, the Award winners were able to strengthen their partnership capacity in three main areas. These were:

- Improved partnership performance
- Enhanced partnership expertise, and
- Heightened partnership motivation and commitment.

Strengthened partnership capacity

Those partners who developed and used regular channels of communication, were monitoring the impact of their initiatives on their objectives, and were thinking creatively about sustainability, were able to attract requisite expertise and invariably enjoyed heightened partnership motivation and commitment.

All of the Impact and Seed Award winners either validated or strengthened working collaborations, or took opportunities to grow and become stronger. Typically, they were able to do this while also directing more attention to the sustainability of the partnership. Improved collaboration contributed to improved sustainability and improved sustainability tended to validate and strengthen the motivation for collaboration, so strengthening partnership capacity.

How Schools First helped

All of the winning partnerships that had been in existence for more than five years tended to report that the Awards had the greatest impact on their capacity to improve implementation, including the quality and development of the programs and services. Where partnerships had existed for less than five years the Awards mainly acted to heighten motivation and commitment. In a smaller number of newer partnerships, the Awards facilitated the introduction of additional skill sets and expertise.

The Case Studies

The remainder of this section looks at Case Studies. They demonstrate and confirm the importance of processes that that can be applied to school-community partnerships anywhere in Australia.

The following case study shows how a school that already had several industry partners was able to *improve partnership performance* by attracting other partners and stakeholders who could bring in skills and expertise to create stronger linkages between the curriculum and the development of workplace skills.

Case Study 6

This partnership is based at a medium sized vocational college in a capital city suburb where there is very high unemployment. The school had already been in partnership with a major business for over 10 years and had developed a learning pathway to improve the students' employability, but fewer were participating as the years passed.

While the partnership had started out well, the challenge was to improve its performance by offering a learning pathway that would attract a higher proportion of disengaged students.

After receiving an Impact Award, the school consulted a national auditing agency to identify how they could improve their performance. This agency identified mathematics, science, computer aided design, and studies of society as areas of the curriculum that needed to be part of a more relevant learning pathway. The agency also recommended that families be engaged as a further support for the students.

The school and its original industry partner developed new learning pathway. It linked science and social studies to the growing of a plant and vegetable garden. Plants from the garden are being processed in a Laboratory Skills (Level 3) unit of study to make medicinal oils. Vegetables are also being grown as part of a project with local councils to show families in the area how they can develop their own gardens as a source of fresh produce.

The prize money has also made it possible to provide time release for the teachers to develop the curriculum so an Australian Qualifications Framework certificate is available for horticulture. The original partner and new industry partners are continuing to work with the teachers to develop the curriculum to ensure that students' workplace skills remain current and up to date.

The impact of the extended program has been much broader than anticipated. Some 50 per cent of the target group are now in the new program. But it has also attracted more business partners, and more expertise from within the college and the community.

The second case study shows how a high school recognised, during the formation of a partnership, the need for *added expertise* in the school to achieve its main long-term objective. By quickly identifying and tapping into the most important area of the partner's expertise, this early stage Seed Funding partnership has been able to build a strong platform for ongoing improvement in student learning outcomes in a remarkably short period of time.

Case Study 7

This medium-sized, regional high school, with a predominantly low socio-economic Indigenous student population, identified a serious problem after administering a cognitive baseline test. Evidence supporting successful initiatives in the United Kingdom suggested that one way to address the problem would be with a cognitive skills acceleration program. The school also recognised that such a program could not be implemented effectively unless the teachers were active supporters of it, and had received the required professional development to deliver it.

The school approached the Education Faculty of a major urban university. They jointly developed a strategy to introduce the teachers to the cognitive acceleration program. Central to this strategy was an access plan that involved bringing the teachers to the University for an introductory session and also setting up continuing online access to training after they returned to their regional setting. The latter proved essential for the professional development of the teachers and in securing their support for the cognitive acceleration program.

By recognising from the very beginning a critical area of expertise needed by the teachers to improve the students' cognitive skills, the school has boosted the capacity of the teachers to deliver the program and also introduced a pathway for their continuing professional development.

The university partner has also benefited. The enthusiastic response of the teachers to the university's continuing teacher education programs has spread to teachers in other schools who are also interested in the program. The university considers the school that initiated the partnership an excellent example of its professional development model.

More recent student data were unavailable at the time of the evaluation to assess the fuller impact of the program on the students. However, the extent to which they are participating and achieving in the cognitive skills program suggests an upward trend from the original baseline.

The third case study gives an example of how partnership capacity was strengthened when three regional schools, together taking in Kindergarten to Year 12 that had already been working together on a number of issues, strengthened their collaboration with a sharpened focus on a project with a community partner. The Seed Award *heightened the motivation and commitment* of the partners and enabled them to strengthen the capacity of their partnership.

Case Study 8

Three regional schools had been coordinating student visits to a number of aged care facilities for almost twenty years. They decided that the visitations could be developed

into richer learning opportunities for the students and residents, but they had not been able to identify a way to do this.

When the schools won a Seed Award, their motivation and commitment were strengthened. The Award provided more resources for their joint initiative than they previously had available. Their idea of what was possible was extended. What had previously been a fairly loose sharing of time and ideas was transformed into a more formal partnership in which considerable planning preceded agreement on a single project.

The partners decided to develop an opportunity for cross-generational learning between the students and residents. The community partner in collaboration with the state Catholic educational jurisdiction developed a ten-week series of lessons for the students about the normal ageing process. The students learned about ageing as a normal part of life by engaging the residents in writing part of their life histories. The residents shared their stories and the students used information communication technologies to convey the stories. The residents and students worked together compiling media-rich biographies.

The initiative has enabled participating students and residents to learn from each other. The students learned much about life from the residents while improving their writing and communication skills. The residents were also introduced to the world of the students and some chose to learn how to use the new technologies themselves.

The Award made it possible to purchase enough technology and provide transportation so that all of the students who wanted to participate were able to do so. Enthusiasm for the project has been generated among all of the participating schools. The sustainability of the initiative has also been increased because one of the three schools has incorporated it into its curriculum.

The school partners, who had responsibility for the Seed Funding application, felt that applications do not have to be comprehensively innovative or ground-breaking. It is sufficient to focus on a relatively simple initiative already underway, showing how it can be made better or taken to another level. Winning the Award stimulated motivation and commitment. It has also contributed to formalising the partnership. Finally, by enabling a project which had been running more or less informally to be implemented well, winning the Award highlights how partnerships at different levels of development might be extended to other schools and community organisations.

Summary: Schools First Awards Strengthen Partnership Capacity by Encouraging the Development of Formal Communication Processes and Strategies for Sustainability

This section of the Report has shown how Schools First has been able to encourage more schools and communities to form or extend effective partnerships. The case studies illustrated a feature of the successful applicants – Schools First encouraged more schools and community organisations to join and become contributing members of school-community partnerships.

These expanded partnerships quickly recognised the need to formalise their communication processes and to devise strategies to ensure sustainability. In all of the case studies where these developments had taken place, partnership capacity had been increased and reflected in one or more of the following

- Improved partnership performance
- Enhanced partnership expertise, and
- Heightened partnership motivation and commitment.

In most cases, these outcomes did not occur in isolation from each other. The presence of one seems to have facilitated the emergence of the others. Together they set the stage for more sophisticated ways of operating, enhanced program development and implementation, and, greater access to quality learning options for larger numbers of students.

The achievements and accomplishments made possible by these partnerships, suggests that they offer a viable model for other school-community partnerships in Australia. The next section of the Report looks at how broad and diverse the possibilities have been.

Stimulating Partnership Creativity: Partnership Objectives

Introduction

The objectives addressed by the award winning school-community partnerships reflected considerable creativity in how the partners brought together resources from a number of different sectors to address complex problems and to improve student learning.

The idea of ‘creativity’ can refer simply to creating, but it usually connotes something which is also imaginative. In the examination of the Award winning partnerships that follows, it was clear that the prize money stimulated many creative and imaginative ideas and actions.

The objectives towards which this energy and creativity were directed reflected one or more of the following themes:

1. Improved learning outcomes
2. Development of workplace skills
3. Promotion of healthy lifestyles, mental health, and wellbeing
4. Social and emotional support for students and families
5. Children’s readiness for school.

Table 1 shows the numbers of successful Schools First Impact and Seed Award Winners who agreed to be interviewed for this Report and who nominated one of these themes as their *primary* objective.

Table 1 Primary objectives, Schools First Award type and partner type

Primary Objective	Impact Award Schools	Impact Award Partners	Seed Award Schools	Seed Award Partners	Total
Improved learning outcomes	12	6	3	2	23
Development of workplace skills	4	3	1	1	9
Promotion of healthy lifestyles, mental health, and wellbeing	5	2	2	1	10
Social and emotional support for students and families	4	3	1	2	10
Children’s readiness for school	1	--	--	--	1

Improved Learning Outcomes

The partnerships that focused on improved learning outcomes used a variety of strategies. These included:

- The development of student cognitive and literacy skills
- Stimulating interest in science and mathematics
- The professional development of teachers
- Strengthening student awareness of the relevance of their studies to their lives beyond school
- Fostering a sense of students' connection with, and service to, their local communities.

The following case study provides a snapshot of how a cluster of schools worked with a number of community organisations to creatively adapt how they had been working together on other initiatives to improve the numeracy and literacy outcomes of Aboriginal students.

Case Study 9

A partnership developed among a number of small regional schools whose Aboriginal students' had unacceptably low literacy and numeracy levels. Under the leadership of one of the principals, the schools came together with the objective of improving the students' literacy, numeracy, attendance and retention.

Prior to Schools First, the principal developed a partnership with a local Aboriginal community organisation that wanted to ensure that Aboriginal students were readily employable in the local community when they left school. Together they developed a program that linked the literacy and numeracy components of the curriculum with skills training in either farming or construction, and also provided incentives to stay on to complete Year 12.

After the partnership won its Schools First Impact Award, the prize money was seen as an opportunity to strengthen the partnership. More organisations and people were encouraged to become interested in the partnership. Their additional contributions stimulated thinking and paved the way for its expansion. The principal reported that the students' pride and confidence increased as a result of the growing support from the community, which strengthened as its trust in what the school was doing also grew. The impact of these changes was seen most in the school's improved NAPLAN scores. In some of the test outcome areas the lead school had the best improvement rate for the state.

In reflecting on the increase in community trust and the improved NAPLAN scores, the principal observed: '[These results are] best judged within the context of an isolated, once run-down community, that [is] now building itself as an exemplar of Aboriginal education'.

The principal argued that the Schools First award was a public recognition that was powerfully symbolic for the community.

The next case study shows how a girls' school joined forces with a university research centre to promote the understanding of the physical sciences and their impact on society.

Case Study 10

A medium-sized urban girls' school was concerned about the lack of interest in the physical sciences among most of the student body. It decided to form a partnership with a research centre at a major Australian university to promote understanding of the physical sciences and their impact on society.

After the partners won their Award, they devised a program that involves building a small compact model synchrotron. The girls are learning how cyclic particle acceleration has applications in many different areas of life. These include: observing the reaction of living cells to drugs; geological material analysis; medical imaging; and proton therapy to treat some forms of cancer.

The number of girls taking part in the program has increased by nearly 40 per cent since the school won its Impact Award, and according to the Principal, the interest that has been generated is continuing to attract new students. The Award has made it possible to enrich the school's science program with additional activities when other partners and sponsors came on board. The initiative is also contributing to the professional development of the teachers involved in the program.

Further flow-on effects have been the enthusiasm for the program generated among the parents and the opportunities the students have, not only to engage with staff from the research centre, but to familiarise themselves with a university setting while still in secondary school.

The university partner was also delighted with the benefits for the research staff and students. An academic at the university said: 'It has been pleasing to see how our PhD students can have a positive influence on school students. Staff have also been surprised seeing how their contributions have stimulated interest in their research with so many students'.

Development of Workplace Skills

The partnerships that worked towards the development of workplace skills also devised a variety of creative strategies to realise their objective. These objectives were:

- A state of the art *work-based* school-to-work pathway to increase student interest in the housing construction industry, to increase school retention to Year 12, and help make available a skilled workforce for the industry.
- A *school-based student business* to develop a school-to-work pathway to the hospitality industry while also teaching enterprise and business skills that could be applied in a variety of settings.

The following case study shows how winning an Award stimulated the thinking of partners to creatively blend a school's primary learning objective with a community partner's objective of having employable young people from the community become part of its business.

Case Study 11

A large suburban high school was concerned about the number of students who were leaving without having developed basic workplace skills. The school invited a local business in the hospitality industry to set up a student run school café.

The business partner devised a plan for the café to be managed as a commercial enterprise within the school. It also provided mentors to work with the students during the set-up phase and during the growth and development phase. The school identified and layered areas of the curriculum that could be linked to the initiative.

When evidence was first collected none of the students were gaining employability skills in hospitality training while at school. Now the school has had 23 students who have received industry certificates; 28 who are preparing for one; and, there have been 20 special need students who have been given training for a modified certificate.

The interest generated by the café has attracted students beyond the target groups. It has also contributed to improved attendance of students. Additional outside agencies and schools have approached the partners to train students with special needs, and they are now able to offer food and beverage hospitality early commencement VET for year 10 students because of the training café at the school.

A number of the students taking part in the café have been offered employment upon finishing school, and as subsequent groups of students are taking part in the initiative they are building on the experiences of the earlier groups. The most recent group has created a business plan to make the services of café available for events outside of the school.

Promotion of Healthy Lifestyles, Mental Health, and Wellbeing

The partnerships that promoted healthy lifestyles, mental health, and wellbeing as ways to remove barriers to learning employed several strategies. These included:

- Involving students in the growing and production of healthy foods
- Linking school sports and exercise programs to healthy lifestyle options for the whole community
- Providing opportunities to learn safe driving skills and road safety awareness
- Providing seamless preventive services and support for suicide prevention
- Putting in place role models to support students' self-esteem, encourage their engagement with school and their engagement with their community.

The case study below shows how a school joined forces with a telephone counselling service to develop a preventive service pathway to engage students in challenging outdoor activities instead of reckless risk-taking behaviours.

Case Study 12

A small private regional school and a local telephone counselling service became concerned at the number of disengaged young people engaging in risk-taking behaviours. They formed a partnership with the objective of creating referrals through the counselling service to a healthy life-style program on offer at the school.

Youth who had been referred were linked up with others who had also been clients of the counselling service. They were then introduced to an 'outward bound' type of activity that the school designed. This program was designed to 'stretch' their physical capabilities and enhance their sense of accomplishment and self-esteem.

The Award fed into the program's development at a number of stages. Initially, the flexibility to apply the money as needed enabled the program to be opened to the broader community. Relationships with other schools and networks with the entire youth sector in the region were strengthened. A larger number of instructors were trained to accommodate students from all of the schools and the community. Additional exercise programs were developed for students at different levels of fitness and were articulated so that they could progress as their fitness and skill levels increased. A total of 216 students at the schools and an additional 289 students from the surrounding community have taken part in the program.

Since the partnership has been formed, its combined approach has resulted in a dramatic improvement in the participation of previously disengaged youth in healthy activities as well as provided an ongoing source of healthy peer support for the students.

The following case study looks at how a primary school that was concerned about the number of its students with low self-esteem, worked with a community organisation to provide role models to help students to feel good about themselves, their school and their community.

Case Study 13

A small rural primary school with a predominantly Indigenous population formed a partnership with a community organisation to provide mentors and role models to help the students feel better about themselves and their learning by encouraging and supporting the students' participation in swimming and other healthy activities.

The strongest outcomes have been to wellbeing, literacy and numeracy. As the school principal said: 'NAPLAN results showed that we are punching above our weight. They show we are teaching well, there is evidence things are getting better. I can't say that this is just attributable to the partnership ... It's not just the partnership but the partnership is a significant part.'

After winning the Schools First Award the partners have been able to subsidise life skills activities outside the school, provide transport for students at a considerable distance from the school and involve a further 150 students in the swimming program.

In the Principal's view, the partnership has been a major contributor to an overall change in school culture.

Social and Emotional Support for Students and Families

Some partnerships provided social and emotional support for students and families so that they could overcome barriers to learning and to participate more fully in school.

The following case study shows how a number of schools came together in a partnership with a community service organisation to devise an innovative network of family learning to support parents and students.

Case Study 14

A suburban primary school had been experiencing recurrent problems with student attendance, challenging behaviours and low levels of student engagement. Along with two other primary schools it formed a partnership with a community organisation that provided crisis and therapeutic intervention services; early childhood development programs for children and their parents; and, community development and adult and community education.

Prior to Schools First, the partners were able to address the most pressing problems that the students and their families were experiencing, but they also wanted to make early childhood and adult education programs more accessible in all of the schools.

After they won an Impact Award the partners developed a family support system for life skill development. It included coordinated support services delivered in the school;

bringing resources from the community into the school; and, initiatives to bolster early childhood development and readiness for school.

In particular, the Award helped the partners to clarify the purpose of the partnership to integrate the services more effectively. The Award also assisted them to document their journey. The management committee was better informed and able to monitor finances and support staff activity.

In looking back on how far they have come, one of the partners commented: ‘The Award provided a great opportunity for schools and our partner. We’ve all learned more about good practice and good outcomes. Other schools in the area are now considering how they could form partnerships in the community’.

Children’s Readiness for School

There was only one prize winning partnership that addressed children’s readiness to start school. The case study follows.

Case Study 15

A language development centre which caters for K – 3 children with language impairments recognised that the parents of these children often did not know how to support their children’s development of language skills. To address this problem, the Centre formed a partnership with a state government department that supports the development of parental skills and confidence.

Together they formulated a strategy to support families with 0 – 4 year olds in the development of pre-literacy skills by enhancing parent-child attachment through shared learning activities. The first part of the program involved open morning music programs in which parents of pre-school children were invited to bring their children to the local school. They were then shown how specific music learning exercises with their children could be fun while building their language skills. Parents were also shown how they could continue these exercises at home.

This partnership is making a unique contribution to the development of the children by strengthening their readiness to learn before and as soon as they arrive at school. The partnership is an effective alternative to the school’s current focus on remedial programs and ensures that more children with language impairments can keep up with the rest of their class.

Summary

The purpose of this section of the evaluation has been to provide an overview of the objectives nominated by a sample of winning Schools First partnerships and the extent to which the Awards stimulated their creativity in realising them. The case studies show how well-chosen objectives can assist in guiding and marshalling otherwise disconnected resources from schools and community partners into effective initiatives in many different situations and circumstances across Australia. All of the partnerships displayed creativity and imagination in addressing challenges that impact on achieving improved learning outcomes or on removing barriers to learning.

Those that addressed improved learning outcomes directly focused on developing capacities, such as cognitive, literacy and numeracy skills. Those that opted for a contextual approach to improved learning acknowledged the importance of removing barriers to learning by providing complementary forms of support for the personal development of students and for their families.

Both types of approaches demonstrated that improved learning outcomes are not always achieved by schools addressing problems on their own. Schools can be much more effective when they work together with other organisations in their communities.

The evaluation provides compelling examples and evidence of how schools and communities in partnership can nurture, improve and sustain the learning capacities and personal development of Australia's children and young people.

Conclusion

The National Australia Bank, in partnership with the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) have collaborated in making Schools First Awards available to leverage existing, and to encourage new, school-community partnerships.

This Report has followed the progress of the 2009 Impact and Seed Award Winners during 2010 and provides evidence that, in the first full year of its operation, the initiative has effectively demonstrated, on a national scale, how quite diverse school-community partnerships can be strengthened and expanded, and also assisted to reach maturity.

Schools First has contributed to enhanced levels of capacity among the winning partnerships in three areas. These include: strategic planning and action; enhanced partnership expertise, performance and motivation; and, expanded vision.

Strategic planning and action

The success factors identified in the literature review that informed the design of Schools First relate primarily, but not exclusively, to the operational concerns of program development and implementation (See APPENDIX ONE). The winning partnerships had already given evidence of these in their applications for Awards.

With the benefit of the Awards, the partnerships began to be characterised by additional, higher level, success factors. These included:

- Business funding models – capital growth and seed – implicit in the Impact and Seed Awards
- Thinking and planning strategically for partnership growth and expansion
- Formalised structures and processes of communication
- Strategies for sustainability, and
- Partnership capacity for replication.

These were critical to enabling the Impact and Seed Award winners to consolidate their partnership resources to contribute to improved learning outcomes for students. All of the winning partnerships reported improvements in student attendance, retention or graduation rates; academic performance; continuing engagement in learning; and, self-esteem.

The Awards stimulated partners, who were not already thinking and planning strategically, to do so. The strategies employed by the winning partnerships represent a sophisticated level of learning that has taken place during the first year of Schools First. To this extent they have demonstrated how to encourage the formation of effective school-community partnerships.

Enhanced partnership expertise, performance, and motivation

The winning partnerships also provide evidence of higher levels of expertise, improved performance and motivation. In combination, these factors contributed to their overall capacity to achieve the objectives they set for themselves. When partnerships became aware of the challenges involved in reaching their objectives for which they did not already have the relevant expertise, they sought out additional partners who did.

In addition to the inclusion of additional expertise in partnerships, another contributing factor to improved performance was regular communication to monitor the impact of initiatives on their objectives, as well as where and when adjustments had to be made. Formalised processes for communication were critical to keeping all stakeholders interested and committed.

Enhanced expertise and performance heightened the motivation of existing partners and the interest of potential partners. Motivation and interest were also foundational to developing strategies for sustainability. The Awards provided a further stimulus to think and plan more seriously for longer term sustainability.

The evaluation provides examples of how the Awards facilitated the development of a number of strategies for sustainability. These included: embedding partnership initiatives in the community; diversified models of funding; and leveraging financial and other resources in the community.

Expanded vision

In most instances, expanded partnership vision found expression in school and community stakeholders identifying how to combine resources to address complex problems. In many instances, this simply meant expanding the original vision by connecting student problems with learning at school with resources in the community. By bringing community resources into the school and simultaneously providing opportunities for the students to learn in the community, the students and communities benefited.

The partnerships demonstrated that improved learning outcomes are not achieved by schools addressing problems on their own. Schools can be much more effective when the complementary objectives of schools and stakeholders in the community are aligned. The partners deepened their understandings of how strengths can build on strengths.

In all of the situations, the evaluation provides compelling examples and evidence of how schools and communities in partnership can nurture, improve and sustain the learning capacities and personal development of Australia's children and young people. As such, the Schools First school-community partnerships are a source of encouragement to others who are considering or have begun to form partnerships of their own. The evidence collected from the first year of the program also represents the first instalment of Schools First in contributing to research on effective school-community partnerships in Australia.

APPENDIX ONE

Characteristics of highly effective school-community partnerships in the 2008 Schools First literature review and winning Schools First Community Partnerships that had given evidence of them in their applications

The Literature Review	Winning Schools First Partnerships
An identified need or opportunity that the partnership is set up to address	The winning partnerships had an identified need or opportunity that they addressed.
A mission to improve student outcomes	The winning partnerships had a plan or strategy to improve student outcomes.
A strong, committed leader and leadership team	A strong leader, either the Principal or a particular teacher, and a leadership team was committed to the partnership.
Shared decision-making	Decision-making was shared between the partners.
Clear roles and responsibilities	The partners' roles and responsibilities were spelled out clearly.
A structured and well-organised program	The partnerships had structured and well-organised programs.
Frequent and effective communication	The partners communicated frequently and effectively.
Regular monitoring and review	The partners arranged regular management and operational meetings to monitor progress and review areas that needed attention.
Tangible results	Tangible results were achieved.
Sustainability.	The partnerships had either been sustainable, developed a sustainable base, or had put further plans in place to ensure longer-term sustainability.