

The Community Room: Connecting schools, support agencies and families and transforming lives

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“Schools can ignore what lies beyond their gates but they cannot escape it. Students bring with them ... everything that has happened to them elsewhere in their lives.”
(Cummings, Dyson & Todd, 2011, p. 231)

School-based wraparound programs which provide social, financial and mental health support for students and their families are not new. Often known as Full Service Schools, Extended Schools, Community Schools or Community Hub Schools, they recognise that academic achievement is affected by numerous factors outside the academic domain. Such programs focus on the student within a wider social context in order to reduce obstacles to learning and enhance educational outcomes. The negative impacts of chronic stress and poverty on learning are well established (e.g. see Perry, 2001; Haig, 2014). Much has been written about the educational, social and philosophical justification for community school projects (e.g. Dryfoos, Quinn, & Barkin 2005; Dyson, 2011), as well as their effectiveness (e.g. Moore, Caal, Carney, Lippman, Weilin, & Muenks, 2014; James, St Leger & Ward, 2011). This article offers a first-hand perspective of one such project in practice.

In 2012, Niland School initiated a wraparound Community Room Project to ameliorate chronic needs in our community and improve learning outcomes for students by increasing family access to support agencies and strengthening family-school partnerships. The Community Room is a practical space – a large room just next to the main playground area where family, community agencies and school staff can connect. More importantly, it represents a philosophical commitment to provide holistic care for our students.

The school context

Niland School is a School for Specific Purposes servicing Western Sydney schools and catering for students who have a dual diagnosis of a Mild Intellectual Disability (IM) and an Emotional Disturbance (ED). The school also has an Early Intervention class that caters for Primary aged students with an Emotional Disturbance. Classes at Niland range from Year 3 to 12 with eight IM/ED classes and one ED class.

Niland is a low Socio-Economic Status, equity funded school. It is also a National Partnerships Program School and ESES (Every Student Every School) site. At Niland there is a focus on community engagement to improve the attendance of our students as well as the role the parents

and carers play in their child’s education. Unfortunately, Niland has long been stigmatised and community involvement has historically been very low. Our families struggle with complex social and educational support needs and this is often exacerbated by parents’ own negative school experiences. Indeed, parental involvement and cooperation with school was so poor that many parents refused to even answer school phone calls.

In an attempt to start shifting school and community culture, Principal Renee Culgan used ESES funding to establish the Community Room Project in her first year of leadership. She sees the process as twofold: “The community room serves our families by helping them access services and this helps build rapport with school staff. But it also helps connect parents and students with opportunities to help themselves long after students leave Niland.” By facilitating connections with support agencies such as Mission Australia, Disability Services Australia, and Centrelink, parents are provided with the tools to access ongoing support. Parenting skills, transition to work, social and TAFE outreach programs can also help to increase a family’s capacity for positive change and aspirations for employment or further study.

Making changes

Billy’s* story is a powerful example of the community room’s success as a hub for holistic support. Billy is a year 6 student in his Aunt Rachel’s care. Rachel and Billy had arrived in Australia 3 years earlier. They had been living with Rachel’s sister-in-law in a violent and precarious situation with no external support or knowledge of her entitlements as Billy’s carer. In her first visit to the Community Room open day, Rachel was connected with Centrelink, Mission Australia and Graceades Community Cottage, a local community group. Centrelink arranged for financial support and back pay so Rachel could become independent. Mission Australia worked to find her and Billy a new home, helped furnish it appropriately and provided individual counselling for Rachel. She was also connected with social support groups through the Graceades Community Cottage and made new friends. Billy has participated in a number of school programs aimed to build his self-worth, resilience and self regulatory skills. His home life is much more settled these days, and he is succeeding in class. The school and Rachel have established a strong positive relationship and work together to support Billy to reach his potential.

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Other parents have also reported meaningful improvements from Community Room Programs. One parent participated in a parent support program run by a visiting Occupational Therapist. She reported that the work helped her to clarify relationships and meaning in her personal life, increased her feelings of hope, and gave her positive coping strategies. Community Room Coordinator Kisane Wilson says, “The great thing we do is help connect families with the right support. Many of these people have tried to seek help before, and that’s such a big thing, to ask for help. So when it’s not the right agency, they get so defeated and take it so personally. It’s a kick in the guts and they stay down. They don’t get up again. Our job is to care for people and the Community Room helps us do that in a way that works for them.”

The results have been positive. School culture is shifting to greater inclusiveness and shared decision making between school staff and carers. Parent participation at meetings, school open days and presentation days has tripled. Inter-agency collaboration has begun to occur. Through their partnering work at Niland, Mission Australia and Disability Services Australia have now established joint programs in other local schools. Coreen School has employed our Community Room Coordinator to help establish their own Community Room Programs.

Principal Renee Culgan attributes Niland’s Community Room success to 3 main factors: careful planning and commitment to long term change rather than ‘quick fixes’; dedicated resources such as the ESES funding and personnel; and all staff sharing a common purpose of supporting students and their families beyond the school gate. Looking

ahead, Niland School will further develop its focus on holistic care of students by implementing trauma informed practices in classrooms. Staff will receive training on how adverse childhood experiences affect learning and behaviour, as well as strategies to help students achieve socially and academically. Once known as the “last stop on the line”, Niland’s future as a place of learning and success is bright. *Names of students and their families have been changed for privacy reasons.

References

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