



Community – Place – Governance – Sustainability

SCHOOLS HAVE IT GOOD ENOUGH TO SHARE IN 2021.

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In 2021, I propose that schools have it good enough to share. I confess, it is a brave person that writes on schools from a position other than as a teacher. I sit on the fence of various school communities as a consultant to schools, a friend to many teachers, and a resident living next to a school. As I look in, I see schools as communities of purpose, wonder and opportunity. As I listen, I hear voices and the sounds of people gathering, learning and playing together. There is a palpable sense of warmth and positive energy that emanates from these secure places. Whilst wellbeing issues like anxiety and depression may be of growing concern in schools¹, just as they are characteristic of our broader society², the joy found in school communities still looms large³. It is always appropriate to be thankful for the quality of our schools in Australia. And now, in light of the past year, we are thankful for our teachers as well. In this article, I provide something new to consider, a flipped view if you like, an inside-out perspective. I am proposing a shift from schools focusing inwards to individual students, to schools reaching outwards towards collaboration with others. I want to highlight three things that place schools in a position of community strength and make them a good place to share from.

1. Schools are currently one of the most stable and secure industries in Australia.⁴ Our kids will keep needing school and schools will keep needing staff. This is a core industry for Australia, and it has full government support. So, while teaching staff may have been busy this past year rethinking teaching processes, they are pretty fortunate relative to other Australians in industries where jobs are being cut radically and business opportunities are shrinking.

Teachers, I know you get tired, but please know, you are the lucky ones in 2021.

¹ McCrindle Research (2020) **Future of Education Report**

² George J **Education Future Forum** (2020) Keynote Presentation cited from **ABS Data** (2014 and 2018).

³ McCrindle Research (2020) **Future of Education Report**

⁴ Dadvand B & Dawborn-Gundlach M (2020) **Pursuit**, University of Melbourne.



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Community engagement is key to building the kind of resilience that will undergird our individual and collective futures.

2. Teachers are on a popularity roll in 2020/1, with recent research⁵ showing that they are more appreciated and trusted by parents than ever. With parents across Australia having had to play the teacher support role at home during

the worst of the 2020 pandemic and many doing it while also juggling their own work demands. As a result, parents of school students are overflowing with praise for teachers in light of the work they do, their expertise and the patience they demonstrate to our kids.

Teachers, I know you get busy, but please know, you are the loved ones in 2021.

3. Schools function as communities in action, offering purposeful roles and a strong meaningful identity that the rest of us are often yearning for. Teachers and parents have shown that they love the communities they are part of,⁶ and so they should. On the whole, children are a hoot to be around: positive, energetic and fun. Schools offer a very safe and contained pod of relational care and interaction, with a upbeat purpose for human development and education. This is achieved in an environment offering teachers clear boundaries while also allowing opportunities for independence and creativity.

Teachers, I know your work is very challenging, but please know, you are the connected ones in 2021.

I suggest that these strengths offer opportunities for schools to consider in 2021. And the timing is right. Pandemic related changes in 2020 have provided the circuit breaker to think afresh about what works well and our what our responsibility might be beyond the classroom walls - to parents, to our local community and to the broader society. Now is the perfect time to lean out of the safe bubbles we usually inhabit and engage helpfully with more divergent groups of people. Yes, schools need to be safe havens where students are protected from some of the dangers of the world beyond the school fence, and teachers protected from unnecessary changes or increased workloads. But what if, rather than the trajectory of focus being entirely an inward one characterised by risk-averse mantras, what if we could flip it and move towards an outward focus characterised by possibility and generosity? The benefits of our young people acting in generous ways towards others is well

⁵ Hefferman et al (2019) **Perceptions of teachers and teaching in Australia**, Monash University

⁶ McCrindle Research (2020) **Future of Education Report**



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documented.⁷ In fact, research has shown that generativity is one of the pillars of wellbeing. And the demand is certainly there, with loneliness and poor mental health increasing at an alarming rate in our society. Just as significantly, our world is now demanding more complex cooperation⁸, which serves as a timely call for teachers and students to be reskilled in new ways. Community engagement is key to building the kind of resilience that will undergird our individual and collective futures.

More concretely, it would involve considering positive and safe approaches to being helpful to others beyond our bubble, connecting others into our bubble, and sharing in creative ways, both physical and virtual. As I see it, there are three ways we could undertake positive and safe approaches to sharing the good will that schools naturally foster.

1. Community engagement and collaboration within schools can be embraced and enhanced. This is important when community outside of schools may still be limited for some time. The importance of teaching our students to collaborate meaningfully (both face to face and on-line) is key to future success. Collaboration between students at different schools is also a great way to broaden perspectives. Such learning is encouraged when the teacher can demonstrate meaningful collaboration with other teachers and people. This ability to collaborate within schools is arguably more important than ever, especially when other groups in society are restricted from meeting and gathering like schools can.

2. Community engagement of schools with parents has had fresh thinking. Over recent months, schools have trialled new on-line methods, with new learnings about parent needs and preferences. Some parents are struggling with challenges like losing work or families working under challenging and intense new circumstances. As many have accounted: “We all sit at the same dining table doing our jobs and then eat our dinner together and then do it all the next day again”. Parents also have capacity and are strongly invested in their children’s education for collective gain. Some parents have expertise, time and big hearts. They are keen to contribute to society, especially schools. Figuring out how to do this can be a win-win - good for the students to see their parents giving, good for schools and good for parents.

3. Community engagement of schools into communities offers a lifeline to others in need. For me, this one is where it is really at. This is the real heart for a common good understanding of the needs of broader

⁷ Sanders and Harvey (2002)

⁸ Sennett R (2013), **Together**, Yale University Press

Australia. Schools are uniquely positioned at this moment in Australian history for offering much needed care and concern, for teaching our kids about other's needs, for sharing the love and privilege of working with children, and for sharing one's community belonging and purpose with others. This could be as simple as encouraging your students to wave at their neighbours, draw a picture for a friend in need, seek out a pen pal in an aged care facility or a refuge centre, invite in and learn from a currently out of work expert and show them how much you value their input. It is a timely reminder that our schools remain hubs of light and joy in a struggling society.

Right now, the world has turned a little upside down. In this moment, schools can offer an oasis in a desert, reminding us how a community of purposeful energy feels and works. In the search for connection, many are craving for a sip from the spring of fresh water to recharge and help us our own wellness journey. Such a connection reminds us of the meaning of local community and the valued role each of us play or want to play in our communities. Growing old, being new to town or country, enduring unemployment or experiencing mental illness are not excuses for schools to keep their distance. Instead, with wisdom, they may offer a rich learning opportunity for the development of young hearts and minds. It is actually a time where community connection is needed more than ever.

It is not a new idea, to remind our collective selves of the mandate for Australian schools to participate meaningfully in the creation of citizens for the common good, rather than individuals motivated by personal success born out through scores, titles, salaries and material gain. The common good is a concept most familiar to philosophers, theologians, ethicists, town-planners and lawyers. It argues for decisions and actions that benefit the

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collective good, acting for the interests for all, rather than the individual good. Offering a counter-cultural perspective, I would suggest that by honouring the collective good and the wellbeing of others, the individual flourishes significantly. The concept presented here supports the readjustment of resources and strategic focus in education towards the common good and wellbeing of collective other. There is a strong evolutionary reasoning for why this is so⁹ and further studies are underway by this author¹⁰ to understand this better. It is also reinforced by age-long sacred texts which offer a reminder of successes of a millennium of past generations.

⁹ Sennett R (2013), **Together**, Yale University Press

¹⁰ To join your school into this study please contact me at <https://www.comcorp.com.au/#contact>



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Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.¹¹

Much more can be said about practical examples of how the common good may look in educational practice. This may be through considering social and environmental benefits rather than just economic benefits, and with an emphasis on collective wellbeing benefit rather than individual benefit. That is, we feel good when we honour others by our decisions and actions, rather than for our own self-interest. Our motivation was not merely for our own promotion, popularity or economic gain. It appears that this kind of helping another is getting harder to sustain and less understood, especially if it is unpaid, falling outside our capitalist system of monetary benefits and available resources like time. Yet, I would argue that it is more important now than ever and needs to be modelled to our children and delighted in by teachers and parents together.

I would suggest that by honouring the collective good and the wellbeing of others, the individual flourishes significantly.

While some schools have a history of seeking to do this type of practice, recent decades have seen Australian society, including our education system, increasingly legitimise an outcome-based approach over the process and the people, an inward focus over an

outward. Child safety, lack of resources, and teacher workloads are all legitimate considerations, yet perhaps at an ongoing cost to community wellbeing and to civic and social mindedness of future generations. As a result, there is now great potential for schools to reinforce their interest in and create opportunities to embrace the positive aspects of the process and the people into their strategic and valued outcomes. Several recent crises in Australia, a severe drought, a disastrous bushfire season, and a pandemic are surely crisis enough to remind ourselves to think deeply about our community engagement and responsibility, both personal and institutional. And good thinking results in thoughtful action, not done to us or for us, but by us for others. By demonstrating a program that looks outwards towards the collective good of society, granted from the safety of our school environment, the benefits are far broader than those that focus inwardly and individually. It has been said, not to waste a crisis, with history offering some positive evidence for turning challenge into learning and action. Hard but important thinking is timely, flipping current perspectives on worth, on education for the common good, and on community collaboratives sharing strength and wonder.

¹¹ **The Holy Bible**, Philippians 2.



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Teachers, how lucky you are each day. You have the opportunity to spread joy and grow better humans as part of your paid work. What an incredible privilege to lead, mentor and share this hope with others so that we encourage a young generation of connected and giving Australians.

Dr Jen George is a community engagement expert and pracademic offering collaborative consulting and research services to not for profit organisations like schools, churches and government. She runs Comcorp¹², a social enterprise seeking to build community in the gaps that exist in society. By connecting and collaborating better for people-centred purposes and places, Jen offers fresh insights and practice to schools, government, and not for profits organisations. In 2020, Jen presented at the Education Future Forum on “The school’s role in building community” with a link to this presentation below¹³. Jen is a pracademic and an urban planner with a PhD in community governance and believes in meaningful community input, valuing all people, connecting purposefully and promoting the common good. Well considered feedback on this think piece is encouraged.

¹² <https://www.comcorp.com.au>

¹³ <https://www.comcorp.com.au/wp-admin/post.php?post=1422&action=edit>