

Schools and communities: developing links;
understanding the role for information and communication technologies

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**INFORMATION SYSTEMS
AND INNOVATION GROUP**
Department of Management

PEN paper 4



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An ideas paper for BECTA in preparation for the 21st Century Schooling white paper.

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This report explores the complex relationships between schools and their communities.

Community is an ambiguous and overused term. It is used so frequently and to refer to so many different phenomena that its meaning is often obscure. The report considers the very different sorts of communities that schools seek to relate to. It describes the varied aims that schools and communities may have for collaboration and some of the forms that such collaboration may take. It examines the circumscribed (but, within these limits, critical) ways in which technologies may facilitate collaboration or be the object of collaboration. The report also considers the increased pressure experienced by schools arising from collaboration; the difficulties of achieving successful partnerships; and some mechanisms that may support positive outcomes.

Schools live within and have links to many different types of communities and their links with each differ. Schools, in the narrowest view, see themselves as communities of students and staff, both teaching and non-teaching. This community is typically broadened to include parents and/or governors and for many everyday purposes this is often the extent of the community as viewed by the school. However, for some schools at least, the community also embraces local residents and businesses. More widely, it may also include: partner education establishments, schools that feeder or referral the school, cluster schools who share teaching resources; colleges that provide additional learning opportunities or provide destinations for pupils; or higher education establishments with whom schools share teacher education programmes.

However, schools have links to other communities as well, often less well defined. Schools with a religious foundation will see themselves as part of a faith community; teachers and other staff will see themselves as parts of communities of professional practice and of trade union communities; schools with an interest in adult and community education identify with wider all-age learning communities; many schools are heavily involved in interest communities around sports and cultural activities. Individual members of schools will see their school rôles informing their connection with linguistic, cultural, ethnic and faith communities, and with political communities.

Schools are also members of networks of social provision along side health, pre-school, libraries, police, youth and social services – both statutory and voluntary.

Schools are owners of many tangible resources, such as: sports halls, performance spaces, libraries, music studios, computer labs and craft workshops and many wish to see these resources used by some or all of the communities with which they identify, both geographical and interest based. They are also the home of many intangible resources including, crucially, the knowledge and skills of their members which many would like to share more widely.

This extensive, and non-exhaustive, list of relationships suggests there is no universally agreeable description of the links between schools and communities and indicates that the rôles that information and communication technologies (ICT) might play would vary.

BECTA (2009) has recently described the role of ICT in supporting the involvement of parents in learning and the life of the school. It is with this community beyond the school gates that technology has the greatest role to play, both in providing information to parents and in allowing them to communicate with the school. The technologies include SMS messaging; parents' access to the school VLE; a school website and extranet; and email. Technology plays a lesser role in the links with the other communities listed above.

Schools and Community Education

The intangible assets of schools can be a central resource for supporting learning outside school for people of all ages.

The term 'community school' was for many years used to designate a school which carried a responsibility for adult education and sometimes youth service provision (Wallis and Mee 1983), until its recent usage to denote a local authority controlled school. The recent DIUS (2008a) consultation on Informal Adult Learning, however, suggests schools as a venue for adult learning rather than as providers, stating that, "8,000 Extended Schools services which already offer

community use of school facilities for adult learning, due to widen to all schools by 2010” (p15). Schools feature little in the analysis of the responses to the consultation (DIUS 2008b).

The consultation pays little regard to the tradition going back Henry Morris’s development of village colleges in Cambridgeshire (Morris 1924), a pattern copied in many other parts of the country, most strikingly in Leicestershire in the 1960s to 1980s (Fairbairn 1980). While the advantages of delivering adult education through the school, rather than through a dedicated adult education service making use of school buildings, was hotly debated (Gordon 1986, O’Hagan 1991) the absence of this dimension from recent consultations is somewhat surprising. Specialist schools regard the provision of adult learning as part of their community responsibility for which they are funded and schools with a technology specialism often use their community funding for introductory ICT courses.

Community education as an important element of the relationship between schools and their communities has become more difficult to sustain since the 1988 Education Reform Act and the subsequent weakening of the role of LEAs and the narrowing of the ambit of publically funded adult education to examination and vocationally oriented courses (see, for example, Cushman 1997).

School managed community education has become attenuated for a number of reasons beyond the reduction in funding available over a period of three decades. As school success has become increasingly measured in terms of examination outcomes, all activities that do not contribute to this aim, or other externally imposed targets, become marginalised; in particular the diversion of scarce senior management effort has become less likely. A particular feature of some school based community education was inter-generational learning; this is seen to have benefits for both older and younger learners and for social cohesion (NIACE Dysgu Cymru nd). The concern with child protection and the consequent reluctance of schools to admit members of the community onto school premises while children are present makes has hampered this work. Some of these barriers may be overcome by transferring such learning to a virtual environment, either by using existing school VLEs or by using dedicated tools (Hilsen and Ennals 2009).

School VLEs have other potential uses for supporting community learning. Schools have carefully worked out programmes of study within their VLEs; in principle there is no reason why these cannot be made freely available outside the school for self-study. The cost of doing this would be negligible, and so could possibly become a free service to the community. However learners are not generally concerned whether the VLE they would access is located next door or a hundred kilometres away. A portal with a catalogue of available material would make such a

service of greatest use to communities. This could be a service offered by Learn Direct as a supplement to their own courses.

Community Links

The tangible assets of schools in their land, buildings and equipment are potentially a great asset to groups and individuals in their neighbourhood. Secondary schools, in particular, control resources that are not available, or only available to a limited extent, elsewhere. While school sports halls are paralleled both by local authority leisure centres and private health and sports clubs, there is a great shortage of affordable facilities in most areas. The craft, technology and art workshops in schools are facilities that are rare elsewhere in the locality. School computer labs potentially supplement and complement UK online centres. However schools have found it difficult to devise a costing model for community use that accurately covers the cost of management, out-of-hours access and depreciation. They have either found themselves underpricing and diverting school resources or over-pricing and deterring users, especially the less affluent who have most need of public provision. Schools also face the challenge of managing the health and safety and public liability risks arising from public use

The separation of school assets from their local communities is another consequence of the 1988 Education Reform Act, compounded by other more recent changes. Under the Act the system of Grant Maintained Schools outside LEA control was established to greatly extend the fragmentation of the system initiated by the earlier establishment of City Technology Colleges. Assets were transferred from an authority with wider community responsibilities to a governing body only responsible for the successful running of their school. While directed use for community purposes was only patchily enforced across England, where the LEA was proactive, most notably in inner London, access was easy and widespread. Community use has advantages for schools as well as for the community, especially in the case of secondary schools. Parents visit primary schools to drop off and collect their children but they rarely enter secondary premises. Opening them for other uses has the potential to enable parents, particularly those with less happy memories of school, to see the school as less hostile and thus allowing them to engage more in their children's education.

The school system has been further fragmented through: the recent Academies programme; the growth of specialist schools; and the increasing emphasis on religion based schooling. These changes have meant that an increasing proportion of school assets are controlled by bodies with no wider public responsibilities. Involvement with the wider community becomes voluntaristic rather than being encouraged by a local authority with wider responsibilities. This is in striking

contrast to other strands of Government policy which seek to promote partnership, cohesion and a wider sense of community responsibility (OCLG 2006, ODPM 2005).

Simultaneously, pressure on schools to demonstrate success has steadily increased: through the growing salience of test and exam results; the growing importance of league tables and punitive regimes for schools failing to meet arbitrary targets; and the strengthening of the use of quasi-markets for funding and control (Fielding 2001). These changes have all contributed to an impoverishment of the vision of heads and governors. Where there is a concern with the community there is a risk that concern is narrowly focussed on how it will enhance students' learning rather than seeing the community as autonomous actors with their own separate interests to be met.

The Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme (4ps and Partnership for Schools 2008) repeatedly proclaims the need for community use of schools and community involvement by schools. Under BSF, the strategy document produced by a local authority is required to show "school facilities will be open to the whole community, taking account of local priorities and needs" (p 16) and the design brief must describe "buildings that will inspire new ways of learning and provide excellent facilities to benefit the whole community" (p30). However this section continues, "recent research shows that well-designed schools lead to greater engagement, higher motivation and educational attainment." This emphasises the argument for community involvement in terms of the benefits to the school rather than to communities with their own disparate interests. There is no prior reason to see these interests as detrimental to the school or in conflict with the school's aims; however this emphasis of the document suggests a subjugation of community aims to those of the school not the negotiation and reconciliation of disparate concerns.

In considering ICTs the BSF programme states:

ICT provision should be area-based, integrating schools (e.g. across an entire local authority or LEP), and be scalable across the life of the BSF programme. ICT provision on a school by school basis is unlikely to be value for money or provide the basis for a transformational programme. The area-based solution will also enable effective integration of ICT services into the wider community. (p40)

Unfortunately it gives little guidance on how it envisages this integration is to be achieved, nor the benefits it is intended to deliver. It is possible to see that in rural areas, where there is limited broadband access, local households and business may be able to use such a network for internet access and thus help progress towards the national target of universal broadband access by 2012

(Department for Culture Media and Sport and Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform 2009). The installation of Wide Area Networks linking schools could also form the backbone of the high speed Next Generation Networks envisaged in the report.

Given the difficulty the private sector is having gaining investment finance in the current economic climate integrating the aims of BSF with the broadband strategy would provide an important public sector investment opportunity providing high economic and community benefits. Making funds available for universal access was an important part of the 2009 budget statement; integrating this with BSF would help achieve Next Generation Broadband more widely and more quickly than would otherwise be possible.

Such a programme, no matter how desirable, would, however, not increase links between schools and their communities. Households and businesses would obtain their access through local authorities or educational partnerships; there would seem to be little advantage in devolving administration of access to the school level, it would only burden them with a bureaucratic task they are ill-adapted to.

Constraints on Community Engagement

Community engagement by schools or any other public agency is not, however, unproblematic. The Government is inclined to talk in terms of community cohesion (see, for example Home Office Community Cohesion Unit 2003), while local organisations also articulate community action (Brent 2004).

The former implies a reconcilable set of interests, thus a school's engagement with a community group would be in the pursuit of identifying and promoting common objectives. Much research (e.g. Butcher *et al.* 2007, Chanan 2000, Richardson 2008) suggests, however, that interests may be far less reconcilable and settlement is attained through the promotion of a particular view of the situation: the continued dominance or the overthrow of a hegemonic vision. Cohesion projects community as a poultice; action recognises conflicting demands. This can also be understood within the contrasting frameworks offered by a sociology of regulation and a sociology of conflict (Burrell and Morgan 1979).

An understanding of community as a seat of conflict, either within an organisation, between organisations or between an organisation and a public or private agency presents schools with problems if they wish to make their resources available. Allowing a community organisation use of a hall for a meeting or an ICT suite to produce a leaflet may lead to unpredictable consequences. For example allowing a tenants' association to use a room for a meeting to

organise a campaign against their landlord over repairs may be represented as either a contribution to local democracy or the encouragement of divisive, possibly even militant, action.

A school may be cautious about affording space or facilities to an unfamiliar community organisation which announces an action agenda. However if the group has regularly used school resources to plan and run play schemes and car boot sales the school will be far more reluctant to demonstrate a restrictive view of action they deem supportable and by implication endorse as legitimate. Schools may easily find themselves the object of unwelcome local media attention in such circumstances. Schools need to operate in a policy framework which is supportive of community engagement or they will be forced to act so restrictively that they will never gain the confidence of local groups and attempts to use engagement to build local support for the school will be stifled.

Schools attached to a religion may feel a greater freedom to engage in community action with political overtones than other schools. However even for such schools, action may lead to difficulties. For a Jewish or a Muslim school involvement in Middle East issues may attract vocal support from students, staff, parents and governors but such an involvement may be far less appreciated by the wider community. A secular school with a pro-choice staff body and governors may resent the freedom a catholic school might exhibit in intervening in abortion debates on the anti-abortion side. A school's religious outlook may strongly indicate its stance on political and moral issues and its willingness to support its communities in advancing those stances; equity demands that they either abjure such involvement or that non-religious schools must be equally free to intervene on the same or opposite side without fear of sanction.

The interaction of schools and communities may give the appearance of being restricted to technical issues of architecture and fair charging tariffs. However more important are the issues that fall in areas of public policy and of the delimitation of appropriate political action by publically funded bodies. Community action beyond fundraising for the local children's hospital or care home for the elderly is rarely without a political or controversial dimension. Community action is the articulation of ways in which micro or macro society can be better organised and is whose interests.

As Brent (2004 p221) argues "Community's main import is the way it affects the relationships and lives of the people taking part, and the relationships they have with other people and social forces." However he also points out more optimistically, "Community may lack tangible substance, but it possesses a gravitational pull, a magnetic existence that creates real effects – at its best, social relationships of mutual care and responsibility."

This dual nature of community, to articulate interest and to build mutual support also encompasses important elements of the dispositions that schools are charged with developing in their students. If schools fail to embrace an enthusiastic stance towards their communities, however defined, they not only deprive these communities of access to much needed resources, they also restrict the informal parts of the citizenship agenda: there is little disagreement that schools should engage in this, even if there is far more debate over the content of that agenda (Ajegbo *et al.* 2007). Schools' active partnerships with communities outside their gates will, in practical ways, explore citizenship education and reveal its content for debate and agreement. This means the acceptance of risk at school and at local and national political levels but the benefits far outweigh the size of those risks if we regard community involvement as serious issue and not the educational equivalent of 'greenwash'.

Overcoming the Constraints

A different strategy for schools' involvement with their communities is through co-operation with other statutory agencies to meet a wider range of local needs. The approach known as full service schools in the USA and full-service extended schools (FSES) in Britain was endorsed as government policy in 2003 as part of the Every Child Matters strategy. The aim was to support the development in every local authority area of one or more schools providing a comprehensive range of services, including access to health and family support services, adult learning and community activities as well as study support and pre and after school childcare. The initiative was an attempt to ameliorate educational inequality and social exclusion. Raffo and Dyson (2007) who evaluated the programme for the DfES reported at best ambiguous success in these aims. However the official report (Cummings *et al.* 2007) states (p3)

FSESs were also generating positive outcomes for families and local people particularly where they were facing difficulties. Impacts were less strong in relation to local communities as a whole, but positive outcomes for some groups and individuals could nonetheless be identified.

This reflects the common problem that when services are offered by an agency directly to individuals rather than through a community organisation the benefits, which may be considerable, flow to individuals and are not reflected at community level. If the aim is one of community development and capacity building then community and voluntary organisations must be partners in designing and delivering the offer.

The development of the statutory partnerships required for successful FSES itself presents problems. Milbourne *et al.* (2003) have described the difficulties involved in aligning the expectations of statutory bodies and of accommodating differences of culture and management.

The role of champions in establishing successful technical innovation is well established (Howell and Shea 2006, Mullins *et al.* 2008). There is an equal need for support at a senior level for innovative ways of linking schools and their communities. All innovation is challenging and potentially disruptive and without clear senior management support frontline staff engaged in the new ways of working will continually encounter resistance from people with a commitment to the previous ways of working and will find their efforts blocked or diverted (Taubman and Cushman 1980). In a public sector context Bartlett and Dibben (2002) argue for the need for an *empowered champion* and a *political sponsor*. The champion, the person who is forging the community links, must be seen to be acting with institutional authority and the ability put their decisions into effect. The political sponsor, a senior person in the school (a deputy head, head or senior governor) and acting on behalf of the senior management, must give visible support to the champion. Building community links requires the deployment of scarce skilled time and energy, the champion, and of management time that is always scarce.

Schools do not have to see the community only as clients. Schools are increasingly outsourcing many of their support services. This provides an opportunity to support local community enterprise. There is pressure for schools to collaborate and bundle their services into large packages to attract large contractors who are believed to possess the resources to supply high quality services and offer economies of scale. However, offering small contracts that attract either small businesses or community groups and community enterprises to tender offer considerable advantages. Tracey *et al.* (2005) argue that private sector firms can gain great benefits from and provide considerable support to community enterprises by engaging in partnerships with them. This will be even more true for schools as many of the people working on the contract will be parents of students at the school or friends or neighbours of parents. This will provide both support to the local economy and increase communication and thus tend to increase knowledge about the school's activities and local trust.

The Role of ICTs

The report has identified a few delimited arenas where ICTs can be central to collaboration. In general, though, the issues are those of resources, management, culture and intent. ICTs play a role in all of these as they do in similar issues within the school. Email speeds communications, spreadsheets assist in transparent and equitable sharing of resources, web pages and desk top

publishing allow the communication of ideas and aid gaining support for cultural change. However in each case technology is called in aid of a political purpose it does not lead it, although on occasion it may disclose previously hidden possibilities and change the political climate. A blog open to the community may reveal a demand for a form of collaboration that had previously been unnoticed; a Facebook page for a project may surprise everyone with the support and interest it attracts; a stream of Twitter messages may convince a Head that an initiative will be well received. However all this communication will be sterile if a willingness to engage and take risks has not already been developed by the traditional means of talk and debate, even if more of this carried on digitally and less face-to-face than in earlier times.

6 May 2009

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