



# GREATSCHOOLS

## NETWORK

# SCHOOLS FORUM

## REPORT



## Dedication

To the principals, teachers, parents, students, school business managers, community members, researchers and policy leaders and developers who are building ever-stronger partnerships within, between and beyond schools to improve student learning, engagement and achievement.

## Acknowledgments

The Great Schools Network project team is grateful to the hundreds of people (including the participants at the December 2014 schools forum) for their generous commitment of expertise, time and contributions. Their knowledge and insights have advanced what we know about the concept of 'great' schools and the practice of becoming 'greater together'.

This report is the product of these many people who shared their tremendous knowledge and experience with us. We warmly thank them for their powerful input.



## Introduction

“Supporting school networking has to be given a high priority.”

**PASI SAHLBERG**, educator and scholar

The Great Schools Network (GSN) is an exciting new initiative. It is planned as a broadly co-owned, grass-roots and sustainable network as a means of supporting collaboration and knowledge-sharing among and across government, Catholic and independent schools. It pivots on the strong causal relationship between what is shared and co-developed in networked learning communities and optimising student learning, engagement and achievement.

A project team has been working on the GSN since mid-2014. The team has comprised Nicholas Abbey, Andrew Baylis, Karen Money and Carl Stevens. An important step in the consultation phase of the project was a roundtable of invited representatives of various stakeholder groups held on 2 October 2014 at 2 Treasury Place.

To hear the thoughts and suggestions from representatives of schools, a schools forum was held on 16 December 2014 at

2 Treasury Place. It was attended by about seventy principals, teachers, school council and board members, parents and students as well as stakeholder groups. Participants commented on the significance of the inclusiveness of the event that also involved parents and students and the importance of conversations among diverse stakeholders.

The forum included discussions in small groups around questions such as:

- The specific services and tools that schools want the GSN to develop
- Practical strategies such as collaborative networking and professional learning
- The criteria, expectations and protocols for membership of the GSN
- Establishing a group of foundation member schools
- Governance of the GSN and how schools and stakeholders can co-own the network.

## Four key issues

The participants considered the purpose and role of the GSN and the specific ways it can meet schools' needs and help improve outcomes.

Four key issues emerged in the forum as the specific foci for developing the GSN. These are:

- 01 The power of partnerships
- 02 Tools and services
- 03 Co-owning the network
- 04 Next practical steps

### 01 The power of partnerships

The learning and development of children and young people are fundamental to the vision and purpose of the GSN and propel the power of partnerships within, between and beyond schools.

It was noted that a clear and challenging focus is an important feature of a network that can bring people together in strong partnerships and minimise a clutter of activity.

There was broad support at the forum for a multi stakeholder, cross-sectoral network that provides further opportunities to:

- Build stronger partnerships and broker new relationships through an online community
- Share resources (intellectual and physical) and information such as good practices, ideas, innovation, expertise, strategies, templates, policies and performance plans
- Build stronger learning relationships among and between students, parents, families, teachers and principals
- Build system capacity, enhance system improvement and promote a collective sense of direction for education as may be co-developed among diverse stakeholders.

In similar vein, there was strong interest in how best to:

- Facilitate speedy access to readily available and reliable resources for principals, teachers, parents and students through a repository of knowledge, information, current research and innovative practice
- Improve teaching and learning for children and young people through shared strategies and benchmarks
- Collaborate on projects to co-create improved practices and avoid duplication of effort
- Form links beyond schools to early childhood and other education providers, industry and business, local government and universities and research institutes
- Develop an advocacy role and shared voice around the future of education
- Support collaborative, multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral professional learning.

The very nature of the forum made it clear that the GSN must be inclusive of all stakeholders. Participants' views resonate strongly with those previously expressed in the consultations and the earlier forum that the GSN should help promote teacher, parent and student participation in the network.

It was noted that this can further support the partnership work of principals, teachers, parents, students and community members in shaping a personalised, networked approach to student learning and co-creating improvements in educational practice.

The participants outlined various means that could build stronger partnerships through the GSN and contribute to the development of an effective GSN:

- Sharing and publishing resources, ideas, information and benchmarks
- Advocacy for, and promotion of, the GSN
- Speedy links to knowledge networks and individual contacts
- Training and shadowing opportunities
- Pooling expertise in engaging students
- Opportunities for shared work in curriculum development
- An infrastructure as well as administrative support for the GSN
- How best to host online and video conferences
- Access to high-end technology and tools
- Linking schools in regional and rural areas with schools in metropolitan areas
- The pivotal role of 'boundary spanners' in connecting schools and networks and building a multi-stakeholder network.

By bringing together teachers, school council/board members, parents and students with similar interests, it was also noted that the GSN could help provide a networked learning community around 'joined-up' education, health, family, youth and community initiatives such as:

- Schools, clusters of schools and early childhood services becoming community and family hubs
- High-quality communication and collaboration between schools and families/parents
- Stronger health, education, community and local government partnerships such as full-service school models.

As an example of the partnership potential, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association is exploring synergies among diverse stakeholders in order to harness the potential for shaping shared educational initiatives.



## 02 Tools and services

There was tremendous interest in how access to ideas, information and practices can be improved and how the design and types of tools and services may be informed by stakeholders' input.

Access pivots on the extent to which there are readily available and reliable resources for teachers, parents and students through a repository of knowledge, information, current research and innovative practices.

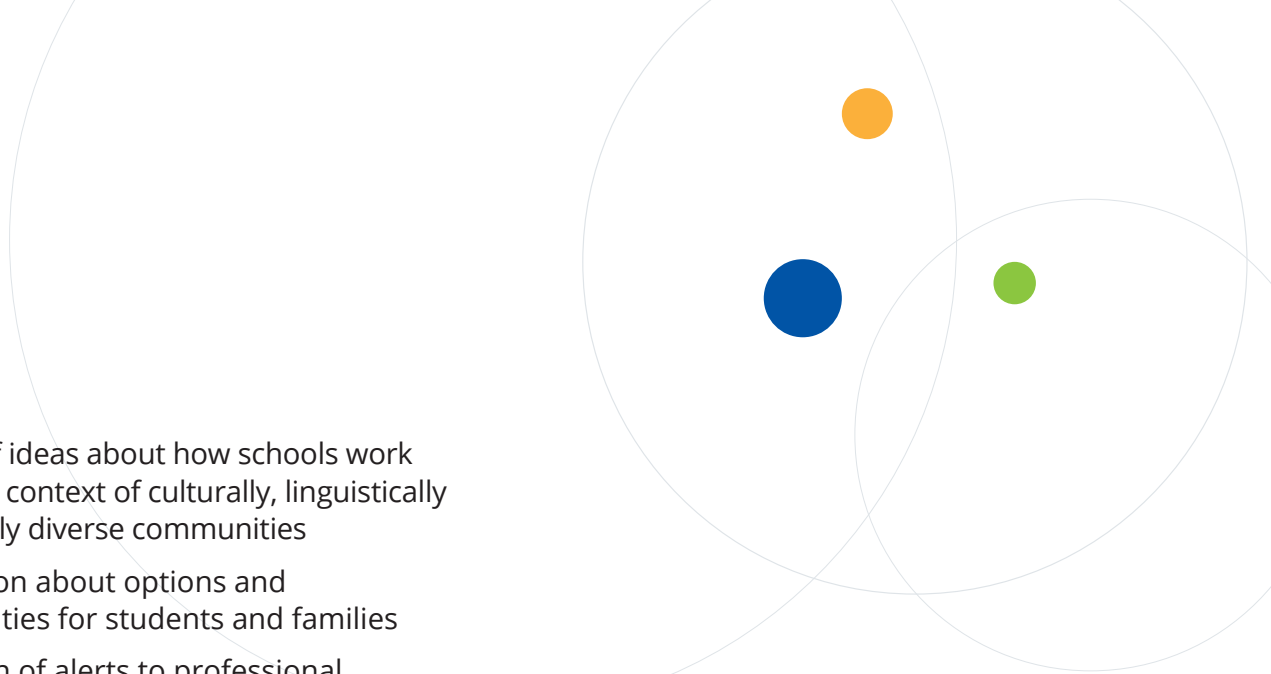
It ought to be easy for any one teacher or parent to quickly contact another to find out about a great practice (including what may be emerging as benchmarks).

If tools and services are informed by input from many relevant stakeholder vantage points, it is possible through this collective effort to optimise the impact on student learning.

Participants named a range of specific services and tools that schools may want:

- Online support, resources, spaces and functions as well as apps together with a highly interactive, user-friendly website enabling easy sharing and joint work
- A search facility to find schools, communities and individuals who can help with a particular project or program

- Live chat, LinkedIn, video conferencing and discussion forums
- Co-creation of practices and collaborative and cross-sectoral professional learning
- Evidence-based and peer reviewed teaching and learning tools, programs and templates
- Speedy dissemination of school-based research, innovations and benchmarks and access to educational leaders
- A register to assist schools, teachers, parents, students and groups with shared interests and foci to find each other
- A regular update on new content or threads
- Access to assistance in building and analysing school data sets
- Information on how to engage parents and families and practical tools for building family-school-community partnerships, with ideas drawn from across the sectors


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- Sharing of ideas about how schools work within the context of culturally, linguistically and socially diverse communities
  - Information about options and opportunities for students and families
  - Promotion of alerts to professional learning opportunities
  - Information about school councils/boards and school governance best practice.

At the forum, progress with development of the GSN website was demonstrated. Expert advice has been obtained as to practical ways to proceed with the online presence in a staged approach.

Comments about the operation of online tools and resources included:

- Identifying and sharing expertise to develop a user-friendly format
- How best to encourage and invite collaboration and co-creation
- Showcasing best practice to encourage buy-in by members
- Ensuring validation and quality control of content contributed by members
- School profiles that identify the key resources and individual expertise they can offer
- Discussions and blogs with clearly specified purposes and outcomes
- Developing a system for recognising school participation and contributions
- Core staff members to build and curate an online network.

The discussions reinforced the idea that the GSN could include sub-networks around specific interests, practices and issues such as the School Governance Network.



### 03 Co-owning the network

To guide the development and operation of the GSN as a broadly co-owned network, both key principles and practical suggestions were put forward.

Among the core beliefs and principles, it was suggested the network should be:

- Sharply focused on improving student learning, engagement and achievement
- Driven by schools and grassroots needs
- Mutually supportive and beneficial to members
- Cross-sectoral, collaborative, non-competitive, spanning boundaries and breaking down barriers in order to improve student learning
- Open and transparent
- Inclusive, respecting different perspectives and engaging all relevant stakeholders.

Participants expressed a clear view that, in any governance model, schools must co-own the network. In relation to the proposed interim governing board, it was noted that a charter is needed to clarify its role, membership, meetings, protocols and demands as well as to protect board directors. It should follow usual governance formats and procedures.

There was not a uniform view of the membership of the Board. Although it was agreed that it should not be too large and cumbersome, it was suggested that GSN governance structures (including working groups) include broad expertise and skills and representatives of key stakeholders (principals, teachers, parents, students and councils/boards). The cross-sectoral character of the GSN governance was noted as was the need for a nomination process. Not all of these criteria can perhaps be met in full.

Further, it was noted that the GSN may include allied education-focused organisations, possibly as partners or associate members. Allowance also needs to be made for individual members attached to schools.

There were varying views about levels or classes of membership, whether there be only one level or several levels or types of membership, depending on the kind of organisation.

The types of membership envisaged include:

- Schools
- Other organisations such as community organisations, local government, teachers' associations, parent associations, student groups and universities
- Individuals (linked to a school or organisation, or independently).

Schools as corporate members may automatically include a school community, providing access for the principal, staff, council members and parents. But there were questions raised about:

- The appropriateness or practicality of all stakeholders as members of the GSN
- Membership of individuals not attached to a school or other organisation; thus, can individuals opt in independently?

Participants' comments favoured an inclusive, equitable approach as well as a not-for-profit status. There should be mechanisms to guard against commercial interest, promotion and marketing.

By way of guidance for schools, clear criteria and expectations of membership

need to be made explicit through a set of ethical principles. There was support for the following set of expectations of membership. Members (schools and individuals) may:

- Complete and update an institution or individual profile
- Promote available resources, documents and specialist expertise
- Be available for contact by other members
- Contribute to discussions, blogs and forums
- Form interest subgroups if desired.



## 04 Next practical steps

Forum participants reinforced the importance of ensuring that the business model is sustainable and sources of funding are clarified.

The previous roundtable had made similar points, including how governments, philanthropic organisations and stakeholders may fund and support the network as well as provide infrastructure support.

Participants agreed that the costs to schools should be kept as low as possible. Annual fees could be based on a percentage of school income or school size. Further suggestions were that contributions of time or in-kind support could moderate costs or allow discounted services or materials. It was suggested that there be no fee for student members and that foundation membership be free initially.

The earlier suggestion from the roundtable to start small, avoid trying to do too much too soon and then scale up was discussed at the forum. It was noted that growing gradually was helpful in managing the formation of the GSN and building momentum. Perhaps a geographical piloting strategy could be used by starting in an enthusiastic area. Or schools could be selected by invitation or expressions of interest.

Many participants felt that it would be productive and expeditious to seek to invite as many schools as possible and emphasised that the spirit of inclusiveness, collaboration and non-competition should guide the formation of the GSN.

As well, the GSN needs champions, media exposure, promotion and membership numbers to build momentum. A multi-level communication strategy is also needed, operating at state-wide, regional and local levels.

The suggestions in the schools forum are informing the development of a business plan for a sustainable GSN.

Among the practical steps are:

- Seeking further advice, suggestions and support from schools and stakeholders
- Developing a GSN governance structure
- Creating a set of tools including an effective online presence and network for the GSN, based on what can be developed immediately and what should be planned for in the longer term
- Starting a regular e-Bulletin
- Inviting schools to be foundation members with strong, active ownership
- Building a School Governance Network as a network within the GSN.

For further information and to provide feedback and suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact a GSN project team member on **(03) 9429 5900**.

### GREATSCHOOLS NETWORK Schools Forum Organising Team



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