



GREATSCHOOLS NETWORK

REPORT OF THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

HELD ON 2 OCTOBER 2014



Introduction

The Great Schools Network (GSN) is an exciting initiative planned as a broadly co-owned, grass-roots and sustainable network. The GSN provides a means of supporting collaboration and knowledge sharing among and across government, Catholic and independent schools.

A project team has been working on the GSN since mid-2014. The team comprises Nicholas Abbey, Andrew Baylis, Karen Money and Carl Stevens, who between them have extensive experience in the three school sectors.

The project team has been consulting widely with schools and key stakeholders to assist in clarifying the purpose of the GSN and shaping, scoping, planning and building support for the GSN.

An important step in the consultation phase was a roundtable of invited educators and representatives of various stakeholder groups. It was held on 2 October 2014 at 2 Treasury Place. (Attendees and apologies are listed in Appendix 1). That a preliminary discussion attracted such a diverse range of people augurs so well for the GSN. The roundtable was an opportunity to share information and expertise and to:

- Discuss the vision and rationale of the GSN

- Gather stakeholder views on the benefits and opportunities of the GSN and the potential challenges
- Open discussion on practical strategies and tools to ensure success of the GSN
- Seek in-principle support for the GSN by stakeholders
- Consider the structures and processes that would be required to support the GSN and strategies.

The roundtable was chaired by Nicholas Abbey. Nicholas welcomed participants and was pleased to see the broad mix of stakeholder and grass-roots schools representation. He gave a special welcome to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) Secretary, Richard Bolt, and Deputy Secretary Sonia Sharp. Richard discussed the importance of hearing the voice of all school community stakeholders and making it easier for great ideas and practices to be shared.

Nicholas also gave a special welcome to the Minister for Education, the Hon. Martin Dixon MP, who visited the roundtable. Minister Dixon commended the organisers and participants for their strategic vision and strengthening partnerships around student learning.

The major part of the meeting, facilitated by members of the project team, was a discussion of the vision and rationale of the Great Schools Network and its perceived benefits, issues, challenges and ongoing strategies. At the conclusion of the meeting, Nicholas thanked participants for attending and sharing. He suggested that the group,

with its significant expertise and breadth of views, would be valuable to continue as a reference group, and participants indicated that they were happy to do so.

The main part of this report is a summary of the key points arising from these discussions. It should be read in conjunction with the Great Schools Network Information Brochure 2014 and the PowerPoint presentation distributed to participants.

The participants' ideas and suggestions comprise ten key themes. Each theme is addressed briefly in the report. The report concludes with the next steps.

Key themes:

- 01 Vision and rationale
- 02 Purpose, scope and identity
- 03 Membership of the network
- 04 Student learning
- 05 Students, parents and teachers
- 06 Indigenous and non-Indigenous links
- 07 Partnerships and competition
- 08 Research and insights into networks
- 09 Online tools and communication
- 10 Resources and sustainability



Areas of discussion

01 Vision and rationale

The idea of the GSN has been in gestation for twelve months, building on an increasing interest in a grassroots network. It is a powerful concept: on the one hand, celebratory, affirming the great things that schools already do, and, on the other, aspirational, emphasising the great things that schools plan to achieve including through working together.

A number of schools and other organisations have already expressed interest in being GSN members.

Among the reasons discussed at the meeting for forming the GSN were to:

- Develop better ways to support powerful learning for all students through stronger partnerships within, between and beyond schools
- Develop an education commons through which schools can readily pool ideas, resources and strategies in the common interest
- Increase capacity to share knowledge and great practices and to facilitate speedy access to information and opportunities to co-create learning resources
- Provide a cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder network, complementing other networks and not being confined to an intra-professional or intra-sector focus

- Support collaborative and cross-sectoral professional learning including through a barter model
- Support collaborative leadership models
- Support schools in their broader community engagement and partnership-building work.

There was support for a strong value statement about core beliefs and principles guiding the network, including what is different about the GSN and how it best meets the needs of stakeholders.

It was suggested that there be development of a broad vision of great schools, from student, teacher, parent and other stakeholder perspectives. It was acknowledged that there is no one template for a great school. A vision should also have something to say about the specific types of networks that may be particularly useful.

02 Purpose, scope and identity

The GSN is planned as a grassroots, independent initiative, driven and owned by its member schools. It can be considered as an enabling and facilitative network.

Participants raised a number of questions about the purpose, scope and identity of the GSN:

- What is the focus of the GSN? It pivots on student learning, engagement and achievement, but should it also extend to broader school community matters such as active citizenship and distributed leadership?
- What kind of entity is the GSN? Is it simply a facilitative mechanism providing support for networking or should it become a more defined organisational entity?
- How may members relate to it? How will the governance work?
- What is its relationship to governments, schools, education departments and other organisations as well as other networks?
- Should it have an advocacy role and, if so, what may this role comprise?
- What is its relationship to the proposed School Governance Network?

It was emphasised that the GSN will work only if driven and owned by schools. The word 'schools' in the name was discussed. An inclusive title such as a 'Great Learning Network' or 'Education Network' was mentioned. It was felt that such names may be too broad in scope and unclear as to the audience - at least in the initial stages.

Interpretation of the word 'great' varies. Some schools may not readily identify themselves as 'great' schools. The message needs to be clear that schools are all doing great work and this network is about schools having an opportunity to showcase and share the great things that they already do and aspire to do.

The 'greater together' theme implies an improvement process that is both aspirational and realistic and increasingly underpinned by collaboration. The GSN vision and mission need to make this clear and the 'greater together' theme should be prominent.

03 Membership of the network

The network initially will be based on schools as clearly understood entities. Allied organisations from the education, community and health sectors could also join as partners or associate members.

The criteria for membership need to be defined. Participants noted the value of criteria as well as protocols to support schools' active membership of the network.

The GSN could evolve into a network of networks, with possibly multiple networks around different ideas, practices and issues.

One of these networks is the School Governance Network. There are opportunities to share and benchmark school governance practices. More work is needed on how this may work, given that governance arrangements vary within and across the school sectors.

04 Student learning

Central to the vision and purpose of the GSN is the learning of children and young people. A key issue is how best to support and promote partnerships within, between and beyond schools to improve learning outcomes.

Partnerships within and between schools, communities and related organisations increase opportunities to meet the needs of children and young people and improve student learning, engagement and achievement.

Students will benefit the most from strengthening collaborative, cross-sectoral and cross-cultural networks. Through sharing great practices, the GSN may also

assist with maximising the potential of student learning outside of school.

The GSN may provide an opportunity to support personalised learning and share great practices in personalisation across the education community and within schools. Through the GSN, innovative programs such as the 'New Pedagogies for Deep Learning' project may be shared in new ways.

05 Students, parents and teachers

The approach to the GSN should be inclusive and ensure that the full range of stakeholder perspectives is heard. It is vital that students, teachers and parents are supported as key stakeholders in this network and engaged in ways that inform, shape and build the network.

The GSN can facilitate working across the whole education community and provide further opportunities for building specialist networks of parents, students and teachers.

Families and parents as co-educators of their children have a crucial role to play in this network. The GSN aims to provide more ways to promote family and parent engagement, participation and collaboration. The GSN can support parent, teacher and student networks and provide a vehicle for hearing their views and suggestions about improvements in education and partnerships.

Students value inter-school collaboration and like schools working together to improve educational experiences for learners. At the recent VicSRC Congress, it was resolved that the VicSRC help establish links of communication and collaboration between schools. Networking, partnerships and professional collaboration also model social behaviour for students, whether it is online or face-to-face.

Key members of school communities such as business managers have also expressed interest in being involved in the GSN.

06 Indigenous and non-Indigenous links

Indigenous education programs focus on building respectful partnerships between schools, regions, families and community members.

The GSN has the potential to raise the profile of these innovative partnerships and provide opportunities for sharing educational ideas and practices among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and stakeholders.

The GSN could also provide a platform for working across the school sectors around Indigenous education and the personalised learning of Indigenous students.

07 Partnerships and competition

So many partnerships already exist between schools, including shared provision for curriculum breadth and options, co-planning of educational programs and shared facilities and professional learning.

Schools in regional and rural areas often share resources and provision. The Country Education Project has played a key role in developing learning alliances, which provide insights for all schools building networks.

Cooperation between schools obviously evolves alongside competition between schools not only between but within the school sectors. There are also issues of schools' intellectual property.

Collaboration needs a greater emphasis to get the balance right. Participants noted the importance of exploring how schools are developing better ways to build inter-school partnerships in a spirit of collaborative autonomy.

Networking is a process and needs advocacy and support. It is important to nurture a networking mindset for shared success and consider how this may be best promoted.

08 Research and insights into networks

Participants emphasised the importance of the GSN consulting with, learning from, supporting and complementing existing networks and organisations.

Key issues mentioned included:

- Learning from other organisations (such as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association) about their networking strategies
- Linking with professional organisations (such as the Australian College of Educators) to help support educational research and school practice partnerships
- Supporting existing clusters of schools
- Working with health, youth and community services
- Learning from the experiences of broadly collaborative and cross-sectoral networks
- Reviewing the research literature for insights from similar initiatives in other jurisdictions.

09 Online tools and communication

It is envisaged that the GSN will operate through a website, providing an easy-to-use directory, knowledge bank, document repository and access to social networking and co-development tools.

Schools with similar interests, strategies and improvement challenges will be able to quickly locate each other and develop opportunities for collaboration and co-creation.

In this regard, it was suggested that the GSN:

- Establish an effective online presence and network as a priority project, based on what can be developed immediately and what may evolve in the longer-term

- Begin a regular eBulletin
- Plan a forum for schools and the launch of the GSN as soon as possible.

An annual Great Schools Network conference could be organised by another educational organisation. An online TV channel was also suggested as a longer-term possibility that may be developed with other organisations.

10 Resources and sustainability

Participants emphasised the importance of ensuring that the network is properly resourced and has the capacity to become a significant vehicle for school improvement.

Clarity was sought as to the sources of funding to support the network and the best ways to be cost-effective.

The GSN needs a widely shared commitment for sustainability. Some financial commitment from governments and stakeholders is necessary to support the network.

The GSN should have an infrastructure and staff to optimise the service and build the network. There are various relevant models.

In the immediate term, it is best to start small, avoid trying to do too much too soon, setting clear achievable goals to gain traction and meeting schools' early expectations. The model needs to be incremental and scalable.



Next Steps

As suggested by the project team members and roundtable participants, the project team needs to undertake the following over the next few months:

- Conduct further consultations, especially with schools and communities
- Promote the GSN across government, Catholic and independent schools
- Establish an effective online presence and network for the GSN, based on what can be developed immediately and what should be planned for the longer term
- Start a regular eBulletin
- Develop criteria, expectations and protocols for membership
- Establish a small number of foundation member schools with strong, active ownership
- Plan a forum for schools and a launch of the GSN
- Plan and develop a GSN governance structure - establishing what kind of board is required and how schools and stakeholders can co-own the network
- Begin the planning and development of the School Governance Network and link it with the GSN
- Develop a theory of action for the GSN and the School Governance Network
- Develop a business plan for a sustainable and self-funded GSN and identify possible resources.

There is much work to be done and the journey will be challenging, but the GSN already has momentum and a support base. By promoting the great ideas shared at the roundtable, we can move the discussion forward and collaboratively build the GSN.

GREATSCHOOLS NETWORK Project Team



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