

Redesigning Schooling

Collaboration between schools



REVISED AUSTRALIAN
EDITION

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Introduction

Change is needed in our education system, and schools must lead the way in educational reform because they are the ones with the knowledge and experience to do so. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing education landscape, this is at once an exciting and daunting challenge.

It is not a challenge that any one school working in isolation would be able to meet. But, an entire system of schools, working collaboratively, may well have the potential to meet it, along with any other challenges that might be encountered in the future. This is why collaboration and networking are so important to the Redesigning Schooling agenda. It is only by schools working together that beneficial and lasting change can be brought about.

While the concepts of collaboration and networks will not be new to those reading this, there is a certain haziness around the concepts, and particularly the practical implications, of both. As a result, there is a danger that their potential benefits will not be fully realised.

Too often school-to-school collaboration lacks a clear purpose, resulting in inefficiency and participants who are unsure when and how to withdraw from a partnership. A clearer understanding of them, of how they interact and what this means in practice, is needed.

The next chapter will discuss the power of collaboration and the need for schools to collaborate. Chapter 2 will examine current research into school collaboration, drawing out eight broad lessons for schools. Chapter 3 will explore the characteristics of networks and how collaboration operates within them. Chapter 4 will use this understanding coupled with academic insights to explore the implications for collaboration. Finally, chapter 5 will build on this to develop a collaboration framework for schools and show how it can help facilitate the redesign of schooling.

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Chapter 1

Why we need to collaborate

Almost invariably, humanity's greatest achievements have relied on people working together to achieve a common goal. It took, for example, the combined efforts of an estimated 100 000 people to allow Neil Armstrong to take 'one giant leap for mankind' onto the alien surface of the moon. From engineers to scientists to the astronauts themselves, a huge number of people with a wide range of skills, talents and experiences pulled together to achieve one of the great moments of the 20th century.

More generally, Neil Mercer of Cambridge University, in his fascinating exploration of how we use language to think and work together, concludes that

explosions of literature, art, science and technology, which occur in particular places at particular times, represent more than coincident collections of individual talent: they represent the building of communities of enquiry and practice which enable their members to achieve something greater than any of them ever could alone. (Mercer 2000, p. 3)

The lessons here seem intuitive and clear: that humans are capable of far more when they work together. When they collaborate.



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Collaboration, of course, is by no means limited to space travel and nor is it new. Primitive trade systems in the very earliest days of man clearly demonstrate that humans quickly realised its benefits. And as these basic systems of trade grew ever more complex, the benefits of collaboration began to be recognised not just in the sharing of goods but in their creation too. With the advent of the industrial revolution in particular, it was realised that by dividing between people the tasks required to make something, it was possible to dramatically increase the efficiency of the process. The great classical economist Adam Smith (2008) termed this the division of labour and illustrated the idea with the example of pin-making, an industry in which one man alone could make no more than 20 pins a day. Yet, in a small factory he had visited, 10 men performing separate tasks produced 48,000 pins in the same time.

The importance of human interaction and exchange in every sphere of activity is now generally accepted (Ridley 2011). This is certainly the case in education circles today, where collaboration is a topic of interest for leading international academics such as David Hargreaves and forms a central part of the argument made by Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012) in *Professional Capital*. In Australia, organisations like the Centre for Professional Learning Communities are also beginning to recognise and leverage the value of a nationwide school network (see <http://www.centre-for-plc.com.au>).