

# Making Better Use of School Facilities – What are the Issues?

Ian McShane, Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University

Chris K Wilson, Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University

*Are local schools the beating heart of our communities? Or are they underutilised public assets, closed out of school hours and off limits to local residents?*

A new [discussion paper](#) on the extended use of schools released by New South Wales Labor asks these questions and raises a significant national issue. Australia has more than [9,000 schools](#), located in almost every community. But discussion over the best use of these key public assets struggles for public attention in policy debate focussed on big ticket transport and utility infrastructure.

The wider use of school facilities is far from a new issue. The relationship of schools and their surrounding communities has been a central concern of Australian education policy since the inception of public education in the nineteenth century. Making better use of school facilities outside the formal hours of schooling has been debated since at least the 1920s. In recent years, policies encouraging shared community services and educational partnerships, together with strains on the infrastructure budgets of education authorities and local councils, has rekindled interest in the topic. This financial stress may be heightened in coming years as a result of school funding decisions in the 2014 Federal budget.

So what do we know about the current use of school facilities for non-school purposes, and what are the issues to consider in advocating their wider use?

Data from a [Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission \(VCEC\) inquiry](#) into shared public facilities show that up to two-thirds of Victorian government schools share or make available facilities for non-school uses. In recent years, state education departments have encouraged community and even commercial use of schools. The uses, and the arrangements under which they operate, have varied widely, and state authorities have developed guidelines and model agreements to assist school-based decision makers to deal with risk and liability issues. Locking up schools after-hours, though, carries its own risk of unauthorised use or damage.

In Australia and internationally, recent 'shared schools' policy has focussed on primary schools, and their role in fostering links between early childhood learning and formal schooling. The most significant trend in this area has been co-locating childcare and pre-school facilities with primary schools. Some of these co-located facilities also offer health, community and recreation services, making them true community hubs.

The focus on primary schools is understandable. They outnumber secondary five to one, and their neighbourhood location and responsibility for young children encourages close contact with parents and carers.

While secondary schools have received less attention, the VCEC data show they are more likely to be used for non-school activities, with gymnasia and sporting fields in particular demand. Four in five secondary schools contribute to our stock of accessible community infrastructure.

Also missing from recent shared-school policy debate is the potential for schools to open up their digital infrastructure for community use. The potential for schools to provide internet access and promote digital literacy to supplement the increasingly stretched resources of local public libraries remains largely unexplored.

NSW Labor's work-in-progress document isn't a model lesson in proofreading. But one of its errors unwittingly draws attention to a key policy issue in debates over the school-community interface.

In asking "how can we support better school principals in the process?" the document is clearly seeking to identify appropriate levels of support for busy school principals charged with extending the use of their school facilities and resources.

Current education policies do indeed aim to produce 'better principals', and better schools, by reviewing the role that principals play in managing school facilities. Schooling is the core mission of schools and a major problem with the push for wider community access to schools is the extra responsibility it places on principals. This burden is difficult to shrug off. 'Engaging and working with the community' is one of the five performance measures in the [nationally-agreed professional standards for principals](#).

One solution to this dilemma, pioneered by New South Wales, is the use of public-private partnerships (PPPs). These partnerships aim for timely construction of schools in new metropolitan growth areas and increasingly incorporate building designs that facilitate shared use. They also seek to relieve principals of the school maintenance burden through long-term facility management contracts. The costs and benefits of PPPs have been vigorously debated, but there is some evidence they reduce the load on principals. According to one principal of a PPP school in outer Melbourne with whom we spoke, this has freed up time to focus on how the school engages with its surrounding, newly settled community.

Developing sound policy and practice around the extended use of schools, though, is not simply a matter of engaging with 'the community'. Schools are part of the wider stock of public assets in neighbourhoods, towns and cities, and dialogue around school provision and use needs to take place within a wider discussion of urban infrastructure. Certainly the VCEC inquiry found that the availability of other private and community facilities influenced the use of school facilities across different communities (p.53).

The distinctive roles of Australian governments, by which state authorities oversee school education while local councils provide community-level facilities, adds complexity to this discussion. In recent years, all Australian states have grappled with issues of inter-jurisdictional coordination. Australia has some good examples of cooperative developments in areas such as [shared school and community library provision](#). But policy discussion also needs to take more account of the wider challenges presented by demographic change, by experimenting with alternative uses for school sites during periods of low educational demand. The conventional approach of public asset sales seems inconsistent with closer school-community relationships.

NSW Labor's call for information on current trends on school sharing in that state could be usefully extended to a national level. The VCEC data, currently the best snapshot of Australian trends, is now five years old. However, it's unlikely that you'll hear 'infrastructure prime minister' Tony Abbott talking about the shared use of schools anytime soon. Education, particularly public education, is too close to Labor's heartland. However, it is a conversation that could be stimulated in 9,000 communities across Australia.