



Opinion piece

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Community input vital to giving kids best start

Education is at the core of our society and runs like a highway through our lives. It takes us from early years learning, through primary and secondary school, engaging families and communities, to tertiary education and life-long acquisition of skills and knowledge.

For every person education provides the chance to gain skills for better jobs, improved health and longevity, life opportunities and wellbeing.

For our community, an educated workforce will be productive with higher levels of economic growth, less call on welfare, health and justice systems and improved social cohesion.

So it is in the community's best interest, and it is our responsibility, to ensure that all of our children receive a quality education.

The world into which children are being born today is complex but three inter-dependent elements – family, community and quality education – remain critical to children's wellbeing.

Next year will be the first year in WA of compulsory pre-school for all five year-olds. Parents and educationalists recognise that the early years are the most formative of a child's life and more focus must be given to providing early learning opportunities for children up to five years of age.

For some time, many schools have recognised the benefits of having playgroups in their schools where they can help children acquire the building blocks for a good education, ensuring the transition to school is positive, enhancing parenting skills and engaging parents in their children's education.

In a positive initiative, the government is establishing 10 Child and Parent Centres for the early years. It is hoped that more of these centres will be created for other communities throughout the State.

This is an important program – one in four children is developmentally vulnerable in the year they start school. And the situation is worse in regional areas (one in three children developmentally vulnerable) and for Aboriginal children (one in two).

These statistics indicate it can be difficult in some communities to access services needed to help children flourish. Instability at home, lack of resources, nutrition and proper health care can all affect a child's wellbeing and ability to learn. If services are brought into schools where families can easily access them, children will then be able to make the most of the educational opportunities available.

Some schools are developing this extended schools model very successfully. The Challis Early Childhood Education Centre in Armadale and Roseworth Primary School in Girrawheen are excellent examples of how schools can support their community.

Challis received recognition in the media last week for its pre-primary students achieving literacy results far above the state average, a wonderful achievement.

The services offered in these schools include a child health nurse, dental clinic, not-for-profit organisations and occupational and speech therapists, all of which contribute to providing young children with the best start to life.

But the success of schools should not be the sole responsibility of administrators and health professionals. Philanthropy and community involvement can drive a thriving and innovative education system.

For example, The Fogarty Foundation, which I established with my husband in 2000, has a long relationship with Roseworth Primary School which started with support of playgroups in 2003. The foundation is now involved in education initiatives across the spectrum of the community.

Community involvement can be at any level, including local businesses and community groups contributing their expertise to the school council or board, mentoring students and staff, or simply being involved with an individual project such as establishing a vegetable garden.

These partnerships between schools and the community provide the platform for important learning programs before, during and after school hours.

Determining the priority and how the wider community would like to be connected, then co-ordinating these services and programs entails expertise and significant time.

Strong leadership and long-term strategies are required to drive change for better educational outcomes. Fogarty EDvance is an intervention helping to build the capacity of principals and their leadership teams to establish network support groups and reach out effectively.

Extra human resources are sometimes needed. The Swan Extended Schools Hub has a co-ordinator working with four schools to help their leaders work together and bring in valuable resources. This may be a model for others.

To enable our schools to be hubs supporting their communities, we need to encourage more collaboration across the sectors, among government agencies and with not-for-profit organisations. We need to support our schools to enable them to co-ordinate these services and engage with parents and businesses.

We also need to recognise that education is at the core of our society. It is in all of our interests, as well as our responsibility, to provide the best education for our children, if they are to have the future we hope for them.

Annie Fogarty runs the education-focused Fogarty Foundation, and is one of 15 ambassadors appointed by the Commissioner for Children and Young People Commissioner for Children and Young People WA