Rethinking Urban Schools

Critical Policy Brief

This briefing draws upon the expertise of RMIT's education, design and construction, and urban planning research community to inform policy makers and the wider community on critical challenges and opportunities in the establishment of new urban schools.

An increasing school age population in Melbourne's inner city areas is driving the need to establish new urban schools. This presents an opportunity to rethink our approach to urban schools, including how they can respond to dynamically changing learner needs, build seamless connections to local communities, and use innovative facility design to optimise learning, social and environmental outcomes.

Key Messages

◆ School leadership capabilities in inclusive engagement and community partnership-building will be critical in establishing new urban schools as community hubs. There needs to be explicit focus on these capabilities both in leadership appointments to new urban schools and in professional development.

◆ Early engagement with local communities is vital to ensure the siting of new urban schools is both close to existing community facilities and optimises shared use of school and community infrastructure.

◆ Urban schools can be future proofed through adaptive design that accommodates new approaches to education delivery and emerging technologies, with potential to be re-purposed as the local demographic changes.

◆ Innovative facility design can provide long-term benefits including improved learning, health and well-being outcomes, as well as more sustainable and cost-effective school operation.

Overview

The school age population in Melbourne's five inner-city local government areas has been estimated to increase between 30-60 per cent by 2026.[1] The Victorian Government has recognised the need to respond to growth in inner city areas and elsewhere with an extensive program of school construction across the State.[2] The provision of schools in inner-city areas will involve constructing new education facilities within constrained physical spaces - including design of vertical schools - and establishing partnerships with the local community and businesses where no prior relationship exists. Planning for new urban schools presents an opportunity to re-think the way in which education is delivered, including the role of schools as educational community facilities.

This policy brief highlights three areas in which we can maximise the potential of education within a rapidly-evolving urban landscape: promoting adaptive and responsive school leadership and governance; establishing urban schools as community hubs; and innovative facility design.

Promote Adaptive and Responsive School Leadership and Governance

While traditionally schools have been established in new communities and develop relationships as they evolve, urban schools will be constructed within well-established communities, requiring school leaders to actively foster new relationships with the local community and employers. All schools should seek to engage the experience and knowledge of community experts, partners, students and families to inform relevant and forward-thinking education. This includes embracing new technologies and developing capabilities that will be sought by re-imagined businesses and in new types of careers. Inclusion of community and student voices in school decision-making would ensure that education is responsive to the social, cultural, economic and technological dynamics students negotiate in their everyday lives and will encounter in the future workforce.

To be adaptive and responsive to student and community education needs, schools require a culture in which responsibility for the day-to-day and strategic direction of education is shared with both students and community partners. Governance arrangements need to promote inclusive and transparent decision making. Giving students agency and involvement in authentic decision making about matters that affect them is especially beneficial, building their

capabilities to act as informed and active community members, as well as developing critical thinking and problem solving skills.[3]

Inclusive engagement and partnership-building are crucial capabilities for school leadership when negotiating with established urban communities on co-usage of facilities and other community expectations. This needs to be a key consideration in appointments of school leaders and supported through professional development activities.

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Establish Urban Schools as Community Hubs

The value of opening up school campuses to local communities to foster community learning and build social connectedness is well recognised in the education and policy communities.[4] Viewing schools as community hubs makes better use of education assets, enhances education outcomes across the wider community, and supports community cohesion and place-based identity.[5] Properly resourced, schools can also contribute as digital hubs, boosting the digital connectivity and inclusion of local communities.

It is important that dialogue with local communities occurs in the early stages of planning for new urban schools – particularly decisions related to siting – to maximise their potential as community hubs. This includes consideration of the impact on residents of extended use of school facilities after-hours or on weekends, as well as planning, heritage or infrastructure constraints. For vertical schools, consideration needs to be given to the optimum mix of built and green spaces and design that supports access to nearby recreational green space.

The growth and densification of Australian cities has highlighted the importance of adopting a long term view of school facilities as sites for life-long learning within the community.[6] Inner city neighbourhoods that are now experiencing a shortage of schools may have previously lost their education facilities. Designing urban schools as flexible structures that can be adapted over time would provide greater capacity to respond to future demographic shifts and changing user need.[7]

Accessibility of community facilities and services needs to be reconciled with the safety and security of students. This should be considered in both facility design and in program development. Agreements on site use, resource-sharing and management of extended-use schools have long been areas of contention, with local Councils also raising concerns at how negotiated arrangements can be vulnerable following a change of school principal.[8] Shared facility use requires clear and consistent governance arrangements that document roles, responsibilities and resourcing. Education agencies

could support this by providing access to guidelines and templates to assist agreement-making.[9]

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Innovative Facility Design

The development of new urban schools provides an opportunity to design learner-centric, innovative learning environments that are responsive to the requirements of 21st century learners. Engagement of internal and external stakeholders in the design process helps ensure that the design of urban schools reflects shared values, aligns with teaching practice, and can adapt to emerging uses. The characteristics of physical spaces influence how they are experienced[10] and effective school design creates stimulating spaces for teaching and learning. Good design can also act as a nexus for increased community convergence, unity and identity, providing seamless community access and reciprocity that builds social cohesion.[11]

Incorporating environmental sustainability in facility design can reduce operating costs, as well as demonstrating environmental and cost-saving benefits to students and the community.[12] Examples include installation of photovoltaic panels for renewable energy, or grey water recycling to reduce water consumption. Life cycle considerations can be incorporated from initial design through to end of life, including disassembly and refurbishment.

Effective building design can also optimise indoor environmental quality,[13] which has been found to have a significant positive impact on learner behaviour and achievement, as well as contributing to enhanced creativity, interactivity, communication and effective group work.[14] Holistic design and use of sustainable materials can enhance both indoor and outdoor environmental quality in support of health and well-being.[15]

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4 This is reflected in various models of engagement denoted by terms such as 'shared schools', 'extended use', 'co-location', 'full-service', 'wrap-around' and 'foyer'.

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9 See for example the NSW Dept of Education policy library at https://policies.

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13 Indoor Environment Quality (IEQ) is the combined impact of air quality, thermal comfort, lighting and acoustics on people inhabiting artificially created spaces.

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