Community Centred Education

Owen Smith

Victorian Skills Authority Fellowship, 2025

International Specialised Skills Institute

Victorian Skills Authority

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Acknowledgements

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02
Glossary

Care Leavers
People who have had engagement with the out-of-home-care system.

CIS
Communities in Schools

CS
Community School/s

ISSI
International Specialised Skills Institute

JSA
Jobs and Skills Australia

PA
Pennsylvania

PACS
Pittsburgh Area Community Schools

TAFE
Technical and Further Education

UCF
University of Central Florida

USA
United States of America

VET
Vocational and Educational Training

VETis
Vocational and Educational Training in Schools

VTAC
 Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre

VU
Victoria University

03
Executive Summary of Fellowship

The Fellowship sought to understand how the tertiary education system can better support learners who experience marginalisation. Through the Fellow's own lived experience of being a youth worker and a VET teacher, he has seen how tertiary education institutions have not been effective in supporting these students to succeed in their courses. The Fellow decided to undertake this area of study in order to provide options for institutions to better serve their learners. It is the Fellow's belief that the Australian education system needs to do more to improve outcomes for these Australians.

It was identified that the CS sector in the USA was an ideal subject to study. CS use a community development approach to support improved student outcomes in schools. Jane Quinn, a significant figure in the CS movement, describes this as "a strategy for organizing the resources of the school and the community around student success" (2024). Although the CS model is primarily focused on the primary and secondary school system in the USA, the principles of the model can be adapted to adult education.
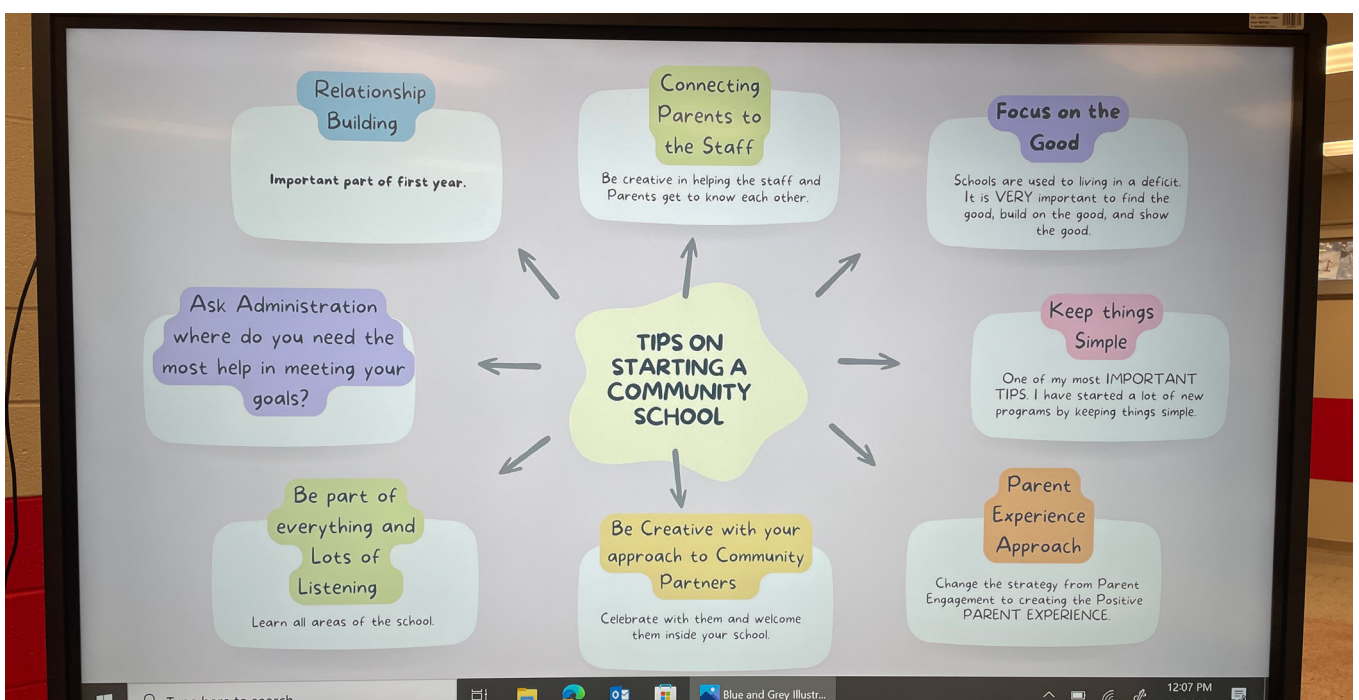
Figure 1. Tips on Starting a Community School – Trexler Middle School

Although approaches within each CS are different, there are shared principles that guide the model's implementation. The most referred to principles are the 'four pillars of Community Schools'. The Learning Policy Institute (LPI) defines these pillars as,

- "Expanded and Enriched Learning Time and Opportunities
  - After-school, weekend, and summer programs provide academic instruction and individualised support.
  - Enrichment activities emphasize real-world learning and community problem solving.

- Collaborative Leadership and Practices
  - Parents, students, teachers, principals, and community partners build a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility using strategies such as site-based leadership teams and teacher learning communities.

- Integrated Student Supports
  - A dedicated staff member coordinates support programs to address out-of-school learning barriers for students and families.
  - Mental and physical health services support student success.

- Active Family and Community Engagement
  - Schools function as neighbourhood hubs. There are educational opportunities for adults, and family members can share their stories and serve as equal partners in promoting student success." (LPI, 2025)

Figure 2. Owen Smith and Roby Chatterji – Learning Policy Institute

Below is an image developed by Communities in Schools explaining their approach to implementing the CS model. This approach is focused on service delivery and Site Coordinators leveraging services and resources in local communities to support students and their families. Although service delivery is an important part of the CS model, seeing local community as an asset to be harnessed is a key factor.

Figure 3. CIS, 2025

In Australia, completion rates of VET qualifications are not where they need to be in order to meet future economic and industry demands. In the four years leading up to 2023, the completion rate for VET courses was 47.3% (NCVER, 2024). This was slightly down from 2022 at 47.6%, but an overall increase since 2019, at 41.4% (NCVER, 2024). The Australian Universities Accord (DET, 2024) suggests that by 2034, 90% of jobs will require some sort of post-secondary school qualification. One of the recommendations in this report is to lift attainment rates of a Certificate III level qualification or higher to 80% by 2050. It is clear there is significant amount of work needed to be done to achieve this target.

Learners who experience marginalisation face additional barriers in completing tertiary education. These learners could be individuals who live with a disability, early school leavers, learners from low socio-economic groups, learners who experience homelessness, physical and mental illness, experience family and domestic violence, who

have caring responsibilities, learners leaving out-of-home-care, who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, English as an additional language and low literacy and numeracy skills (MA, 2020; Myconos et al, 2018; YA, 2018). It is important to note, this is not an exhaustive list, however a snapshot of learners who might be experiencing marginalisation in the Australian education system.

Literature provides some examples of what these barriers look like. One of these is access to appropriate finances. This includes trying to navigate complex scholarship offerings within institutions, administrative burdens placed on them from welfare (Centrelink) payments, managing day-to-day living expenses while studying and taking on debt to study (YA, 2018). Access to support services is highlighted as problematic. They are described as 'hidden away' and not visible to students enrolled in the institution. (YA, 2018). Myconos (et al 2018) describes the enrolment process as intimidating for early school leaving students, where students are expected to navigate complex administrative tasks and disclose personal issues to gain access to appropriate supports (Myconos et al, 2018). Again, these are just some examples of how these experiences create additional barriers to successfully completing their studies.

Successfully completing tertiary education is one of the key tools for social mobility in Australia. When looking at the VET sector across Australia, there are positive outcomes that come from completing a VET course. The JSA (2023) shows that overall employment rates post completing a VET qualification were at 82.3%. Income was also higher for VET graduates. The JSA (2023) states that overall median incomes for VET graduates had an uplift of $10,285 in financial year 2018-19 (p8). The JSA (2023) also highlighted that VET graduates were less likely to rely on welfare (Centrelink) payments after completing their course, as compared to accessing payments during their course. These figures were 17.7% accessing payments during their studies and compared 9.4% accessing post-completion (JSA, 2023, p9). Based upon these sets of data, completing VET courses has a positive impact on the individual and the broader Australian community.

Prior to travelling, the Fellow undertook research in the Australia community. This involved talking with stakeholders who work in the tertiary education sector and who support learners who experience marginalisation. This was done to get a good understanding of the problem in Australia. The Fellow travelled to the USA in late November and early December 2024. The Fellow visited Washington DC, Pittsburgh (PA), Allentown (PA) and Bethlehem (PA). The Fellow decided to travel to the USA to get a better understanding of the CS sector. Although variations of CS can be found in other parts of the world, the USA has a robust model that is implemented across the nation. Also, with the USA being a predominately immigrant country, it has similar demographics to Australia.

Five key areas were identified from the project. Below is a dot point summary of these findings. These key areas provide a focus for institutions. Showing them, they can implement practical solutions to better meet the needs of their community.

- Relationships are key to supporting learners who experience marginalisation,
- Student supports should be focused on integration and expansion,
- Power and decision making should be a shared process, with the inclusion of community,
- Educational institutes as placed based organisations,
- Community as an asset, not as a deficit that needs to be 'fixed',

It is hoped that institutions will be able to use this framework as guide to implement community-based interventions for their learners. Thus, providing an enhanced teaching and learning environment for all learners.

04
Fellowship Background

The interest of the Fellow in this topic comes from his own lived experience of being a youth worker and educator. The Fellow has seen first-hand the challenges that young people from marginalised communities face in accessing education in Australia. However, they have also seen the successes that many of these students have had when the right supports have been put in place.

Below is a conceptual model of the research that was undertaken during the Fellowship.

- Aim:
  - To better understand the CS sector in the USA and how it could be applied to the tertiary education sector in Australia.

- Objectives:
  - To understand how the tertiary education sector in Australia is supporting students from marginalised communities.
  - To meet with and speak to members of the CS sector in the USA.
  - To imagine how principles of CS can be applied to the Australian tertiary education sector.

- Why do we need this?
  - Education and further education are pathways for social mobility.
  - Further education supports the workforce needs of Australia.
  - Tertiary education needs to have strong connections to their community.

- Students who experience marginalisation are getting left behind by the status quo.

The Fellow positions themselves as an insider researcher for this project. This is due to their experience working as a youth worker and educator. Although the Fellow has never worked in the education system in the USA, given their experience both in Australia and aboard, it is appropriate for them to take this perspective.

The Fellow wished to better understand the barriers that learners face in accessing tertiary education in Australia. While also seeking to understand (1) the CS model and (2) how it could be applied in the Australian tertiary education sector.

The Fellow incorporated a qualitative methodology in the project design. Methods used in the project were,

- Semi-structured individual interviews (virtual and in-person),
- Semi-structured group interviews (virtual and in-person)
- Readings,
- Observations,
- Journaling.

The Fellow incorporated different methods for initiating contact with stakeholders. One of these methods included targeted communication of stakeholders. Information about potential stakeholders was obtained through the Full-Service Community Schools Program website. This website

includes information about stakeholders who received grants from the US Federal Government to implement the CS model. From this list, the Fellow sent cold emails to individuals and institutions. The Fellow also used the 'snowballing' strategy. This is when a stakeholder will put in you in contact with another person. This method allowed for greater penetration into the CS networks.

The Fellow did not obtain ethics clearance to undertake the research project. However, the Fellow followed ethical guidelines to ensure individual safety. This included,

- Providing clear communication about the research project,
- Providing opportunities for individuals to withdraw consent from the participating in the project,
- Only identifying individuals who agreed to be identified,
- Only interviewing adults who were employed or previously employed in the field,
- Only taking photographs when people consented,
- Not recording or taking images of people below the age of 18.

The Fellowship was awarded in September of 2024. The Fellow received the International VET Practitioner Fellowship in the 2nd round of grants in 2024. Due to work commitments and family obligations, the Fellow was required to travel in November and December of 2024. This meant creating new contacts in the USA very quickly.

The Fellow spent October and early November reaching out to members of the CS sector to arrange onsite and virtual visits. Prior to leaving for the USA in late November, the Fellow had already conducted six virtual visits with members of CS sector.

Alongside reaching out to contacts in the USA, the Fellow also spoke with individuals linked with tertiary education in Australia. These were individuals who support learners from marginalised backgrounds in tertiary education. This allowed the Fellow to have clear understanding of the problems facing these learners.

The Fellow travelled to the USA from late November to mid-December. Upon returning to Australia, the Fellow continued virtual meetings with contacts made in the USA and with stakeholders in Australia. From early 2025, the Fellow has been engaged in dissemination sessions and report writing.

At the time of this report's publication the Fellow is employed as a TAFE teacher at VU. He has been teaching in the VET sector since 2015. The Fellow is part of the College of Health, Early Childhood and Community Services. He predominantly teaches in the Certificate IV and Diploma of Youth Work. He also undertakes research within the Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities (ISILC).

The Fellow holds qualifications in a number of different disciplines. These include Social Sciences, Youth Work, Tertiary Education, International Community Development and Teaching English as a Foreign Language. He is currently enrolled in the PhD Integrated Program at VU and undertaking his Minor Thesis. The topic of the Minor Thesis looks at how TAFE teachers at VU teach about trauma in the Certificate IV and Diploma of Youth Work. He holds membership with Youth Workers Australia, the Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work Australia and the Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Education.

The Fellow's professional experience has predominantly been in the Youth Work sector. He has more than a decade of experience working with young people who experience risk and marginalisation in society. This includes working in the OOHC sector, working with asylum seekers, adventure camps, in community development programs and in flexible education. He also has experience teaching in a number of different settings. These include teaching English as foreign language, teaching in high school (Mexico) and delivering VETis qualifications. The Fellow's passion lies in supporting young people to become their fullest self, regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in.

The Fellow has undertaken research projects that align with the Fellowship aims. These include:

- Trauma Aware Teaching and Learning Practices Research Project – VU TAFE (2024 – 2025)
- Victoria University and the Hester Hornbrook Academy: Examining the relationship between the two institutions - VU RISE Skills & Jobs in Melbourne's West (2022)
- Addressing Young People's Trauma and Mental Health Issues to Increase Completion of Training - VET Development Centre (2017)

These research projects have all focused on increasing accessibility to the VET sector and supporting young people who experience marginalisation.

05
Fellowship Learnings and Findings

For the purposes of the report, the Fellowship was broken into three sections. These are (1) understanding the Australian context, (2) virtual meetings with USA representatives and (3) in person visits with USA representatives.

Section one was carried out pre and post travel to the USA. This part of the project was aimed at understanding the barriers that learners who experience marginalisation face. Section two was completed both pre and post travel to the USA. Due to the limitations of travel, the Fellow was unable to meet all contacts in person. Conducting meetings virtually allowed the Fellow to understand how the CS model is implemented across the USA. Finally, section three was conducted in person with organisations in the USA. As mentioned previously, the Fellow spent approximately three weeks in the USA in late 2024.

1. Understanding the Australian Context

This part of the Fellowship was conducted both in person and through virtual meetings. The Fellow wanted to better understand the issues that learners who experience marginalisation face. The Fellow met with representatives from Monash University, VU, JSA, Hester Hornbrook Academy, Griffith University, Raising Expectations and Capital City Local Learning and Employment Network. Responses provided to the Fellow highlighted key areas where learners experience additional barriers in accessing tertiary education.

Access to Resources

Professor Philip Mendes of Monash University highlighted that people who are care leavers experience disadvantage in access to resources. The two main areas are (1) financial and material resources and (2) social capital.

(1) Financial and material resources pertain to the monetary cost associated with accessing education. A major factor in this area is access to housing. Recent studies have shown that 30% of care leavers experience homelessness within the first 12 months of leaving the care system (AIHW, 2025). This figure rises to 54% when extending the period to four years (AIHW, 2025). Not having access to safe and stable accommodation can have a significant negative impact on a person's ability to engage in education.

As well as unstable housing, Professor Mendes emphasised that the day-to-day needs of attending tertiary education can be a barrier. These include money for food, clothing and materials. If students are unable to have access to basics needed to survive, engaging in education becomes extremely difficult.

(2) Young people leaving care often have strained relationships with their families. The lack of social capital further isolates care leavers in their community. This can lead to them feeling alone within the world and not having a relational and financial safety net to fall back on. This can be compounded when tertiary education institutions do not have dedicated care leaver positions for supporting this cohort. Not only are care leavers navigating broader society in isolation, they can also experience further isolation in their educational institution.

Complex Systems

A continuous theme that appeared throughout conversations with people was the complexity of systems that sit around tertiary education. An example of this is the process for enrolling in tertiary education. Cathy Cassar (Hester Hornbrook Academy) highlighted the difficult nature of students applying through VTAC in order to secure a place in a TAFE or HE course. She referenced how VTAC applications are usually due in early Term 4 and that it becomes more difficult to apply through this process as the year progresses. As the Hester Hornbrook Academy is a flexible education school where students finish their qualifications on their own timeline, this rigid process does not suit the needs of their cohort.

Institutional Barriers

Once students enter the tertiary education system, they continue to face barriers. This is even more prominent for students who experience marginalisation. Examples of these barriers include (1) siloed support systems, (2) fragile connections with community and (3) the institution acting as a barrier.

(1) Joanne Maret and Madeline Nicholls are TAFE Student Supports Officers at VU TAFE. They are responsible for supporting TAFE students throughout their courses. They both spoke of the difficultly of being visible within an institution that enrols approximately 10,000 students each year. This can be compounded when frontline teaching staff are unaware of the supports offered by their team and do not provide internal referrals when students show signs of struggling in their course. They mentioned when a student reaches out for support and connects with their team, the educational outcomes for the student increases. However, they find that many students fall through the gaps are not able to access the internal supports in the TAFE.

(2) Since the Fellow has worked full-time in tertiary education, he has noticed there are not strong connections between institutions and the community they serve. Many of the connections that do exist are dependent on individual relationships that connect the institution with an individual or organisation in the community. It was highlighted by Joanne and Madeline that they experienced barriers to accessing student support through already existing 'top-level' partnerships in the institution. Thus, making the 'on-the-ground' experience different to that of senior leadership.

(3) When speaking with Pearl Goodwin Burns from Raising Expectations, she highlighted who gets access to 'equity' status within an institution can be a barrier to accessing support. Pearl gave the example of 'care leavers' (learners who are transitioning from the out-of-home-care sector). There are still tertiary institutions that do not classify 'care leavers' as an equity group. This means that these students may not get access to the same level of supports as other students who also have accessibility needs.

Another example of the institution acting as a barrier are the rigid structures that sit around tertiary education. Many of these structures exist to provide consistent support for students as well as meeting regulatory compliance standards. However, these systems can be difficult to navigate for both staff and students. If learners require flexibility throughout

their course, trying to apply this in an institution with rigid structures becomes very difficult.

2. Virtual Meetings with USA Representatives

This part of the Fellowship was dedicated to creating connections within the CS sector in the USA. Prior to travelling to the USA, the Fellow reached out to State and Federal Government agencies, not-for-profit organisations, universities and research institutions. Due to the limitations of the time available to travel, the Fellow was not able to meet all representatives in person. By holding virtual meetings, the Fellow was able to gain insight into how they implement the CS model. Below are relevant examples of what supports the implementation of the CS model in different contexts across the USA.

Government Support

The Fellow met with Dr Amy Ellis, the Director of the Center for Community Schools at UCF. Dr Ellis explained that their centre plays a key role in the development of CS across the state of Florida. They act as an accrediting institution for schools who want to adopt the CS model, as well as providing technical assistance (professional development) for these schools, to ensure the model is implemented effectively. Dr Ellis explained that UCF receives approximately $20,000,000.00 (USD) each year from the Florida State Government to support the development and implementation of CS across Florida. Dr Ellis highlighted the importance of having direct funding from the State Government. Having this level of financial support provides certainty for UCF to be able to support the CS model in Florida.

Similar to Florida, the New York State Government provides direct funding for CS. The Fellow met with Carri Manchester from the New York State Education Department to discuss how they implement the CS model across the state. She stated the State Government provides $250,000,000. each year to run CS in New York. This services 240 school districts across the State. The State Government provides funding directly to highest need schools districts. Districts have a level of discretion about how this money is spent, allowing them to implement programs and interventions that best suit their schools, learners and communities.

Institutional Support

One of the key themes throughout the Fellowship was the dedication of institutions to the CS model. Dr Ellis talked about how the Center for Community Schools was supported by leadership at UCF. She explained that this was a crucial factor in the success of CS in Florida. Even when there has been leadership change within UCF, incoming senior leaders see value in the program and are supportive of the work the Center for Community Schools does.

Oprah Keyes from the University of Maryland spoke of a similar institutional support. Oprah is a Director at The Center for Restorative Change. They are a lead agency for operating the CS model in local schools. Oprah spoke about how leadership is onboard with the mission of The Center, even when the work can be difficult and complex to manage. Oprah highlighted that they were able to directly employee parents from local schools to be community liaisons. She spoke about the value that these parents brought to the table and how they were able to support the CS models in their local schools. Although the onboarding of these parents was not straight forward for the university, the institution saw the potential in these hirings and provided the necessary support for the process.

3. In Person Visits with USA Representatives

It was an honour to be able to travel to the USA to meet with CS representatives in person. The ability to meet with representatives face-to-face and being physically present in educational spaces provided the Fellow with a deep and enriching learning experience. During the period the Fellow was in the USA, he attended research institutions, public and charter schools, not-for-profit organisations, universities and a national conference. The Fellow was in awe of the level of commitment shown by countless individuals to improve the lives of students and communities.

The below section provides an overview of the key themes that arose during the international travel component of the Fellowship. The Fellow believes that these themes can be adopted by the tertiary education to improve outcomes for all students, including those who experience marginalisation.

Relationships are Key to Supporting Learners who Experience Marginalisation

The most prominent theme that arose during the trip was the importance of relationships to improving outcomes for students and communities. This does not just focus on the importance of the relationship between teacher and student (although, this is very important), it highlights the importance of relationships at all levels. This includes relationships between staff, school leadership, external organisations and governing bodies.

When visiting Pittsburgh, the Fellow met with Bridget Clement and Samantha Monks from PACS. PACS is a not-for-profit organisation that is dedicated to implementing the CS model in schools across Pittsburgh. The Fellow spent a full day with Bridget and Samantha visiting four public schools. Staff in these schools were employed by PACS to run the CS model. Some of the staff provided direct support to students who were experiencing marginalisation, others were employed to be CS liaison officers for the local community. It was inspiring to see the dedication that staff had to improving the lives of the students in these schools.

One of the key messages from visiting these schools was the importance of relationships between organisations and the schooling system. Bridget and Samantha spoke about how having a close and trusting relationship with the school's leadership team allowed PACS to implement programs and interventions that met the needs of the students and their community. They also spoke about the importance of having a good working relationship with the school districts they operated in, including with the Superintendents of the school districts. Again, having trusted and positive relationships with the administration supported them to be able to be flexible and nimble with how they implemented the CS model.

Figure 4. Shawntea Mahdi, Bridget Clement, Owen Smith and Samantha Monks – Sto-Rox Middle School

After visiting Pittsburgh, the Fellow went to Bethlehem. It is a small city that sits just outside of Allentown. It is a very diverse city, with a large proportion of the community from a Latino background. The Fellow met with Ashley Sciora and Carolina Hernandez from Lehigh University at Donegan Elementary School. Ashley and Carolina both coordinate the CS program through local schools, including at Donegan. They all met with the leadership team at Donegan. Including the Principal (Erin Martin-Medina) and the Community School Coordinator (Rosa Carides-Hof). Both Erin and Rosa spoke about the importance of the CS model to their school.

Rosa has been the Community School Coordinator since the school became a CS 15 years ago. Rosa emphasised the importance of having a stable Community School Coordinator in the role. She spoke about how this allowed her to develop long lasting and trusting relationships with students and families. She spoke with pride about her local

community and how she was a part of the community herself. This allowed her to have a deep understand of the strengths and needs of the local community, enabling the school to be responsive and leverage community assets for the betterment of students.

Figure 5. Community School Mural – Donegan Elementary School

Student Supports are Integrated and Expanded by the Community

Since the Fellow has worked in tertiary education, he has noticed how student supports can be siloed in adult education. Students who experience marginalisation and hardship while studying in tertiary education often face fractured and complex support systems in institutions. The examples shown below highlight how support systems can be integrated into the day-to-day practice of educational institutions and how they can be bolstered by external providers.

The Fellow met with Wendy Seiffert from CIS in Eastern PA. Wendy drove the Fellow to multiple schools across the Allentown area. Similar to Bethlehem, Allentown is a very diverse city in PA. With a large proportion of the population a Latino background. The first school they visited was the Lincon Leadership Academy Charter School. Although the school is funded through the public school system, they are able to be more selective about the students who attend their school. The school is focused on developing the leadership capacity of their students to be leaders in their communities.
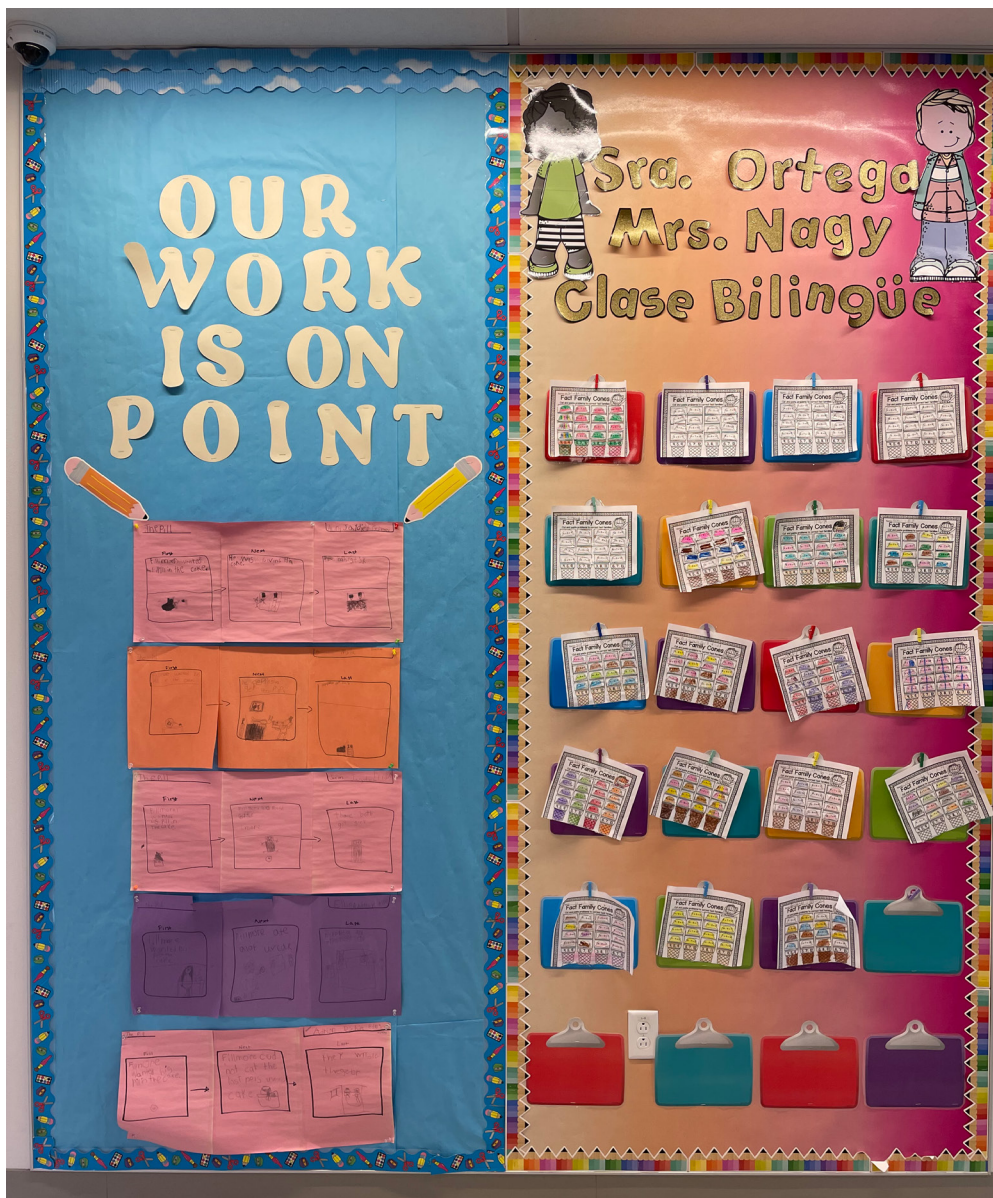

Figure 6. Class Work - Lincoln Leadership Academy Charter School

CIS is a not-for-profit organisation that supports the CS model in schools. As a part of the CS model at Lincoln, CIS provides case management services to students and their families. These support services are available to students who are deemed at-risk by their attendance rates. Students who fall below a 90% attendance rate (also known as chronic absenteeism) are flagged for extra support from the CIS team. Although they are not formally a part of Lincoln, the CIS staff spoke about how they have been able to integrate their support services into the school. Students and their families know who the CIS staff members are and their role in the school. Teachers and administrators have close working relationships with the CIS team and extremely supportive of their role within the school. Administrators of the school spoke about how the CIS team have been able to integrate into their community and provide seamless care and support for their students and families. Enabling a wrap-around care approach to education.

Figure 7. School Entrance - Lincoln Leadership Academy Charter School

At Donegan Elementary School, the Fellow saw how expanded models of care can be integrated into education systems. While visiting the school, the team at Donegan took the Fellow to their newly opening Fowler Family Centre. Located at the ground level of the school and facing into their community, it is an area of the school that will be dedicated to providing health services to students and their families. Although the health professionals who working in the centre will not be employees of the school, they will be providing direct healthcare services for the students and their families. Erin and Rosa spoke about how nurses will be able to provide care for students who might injury themselves while at school, students getting access to mental health care professionals and having dentists onsite to provide care. This model of care shows how schools can be hubs for services and support in their community. By allowing external services to operate on their grounds, it extends their capacity to achieve positive outcomes for their students and their communities.

Figure 8. Folwer Family Center - Donegan Elementary School

Power and Decision Making Includes the Voice of Community

One of the more powerful themes that arose from the in-person visits was the use of community voice in CS. Similar to the Australian school system, power and decision making is concentrated at leadership levels in the US systems. School and district leadership have significant power when it comes to making decisions about how schools function. The CS model invites schools to reimagine how power and decision making can be shared between the school and the communities they serve.
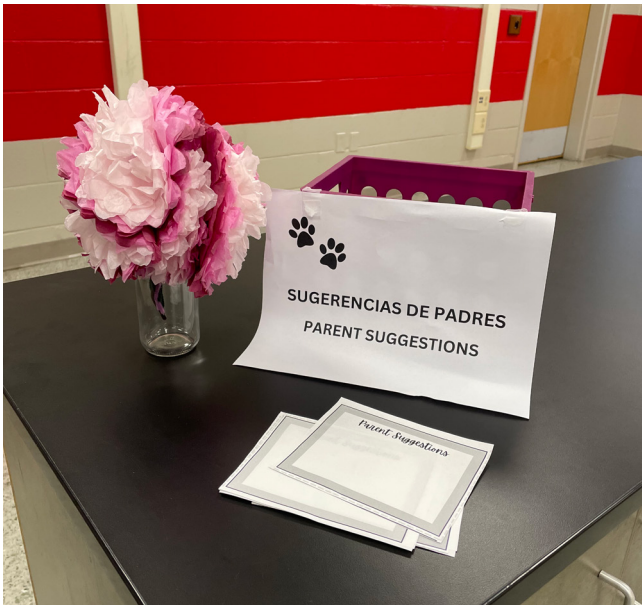
Figure 9. Parent Suggestion Box – Trexler Middle School

While visiting schools with CIS in Allentown, the Fellow was taken to Trexler Middle School. Similar to other schools in the Allentown area, Trexler has a large Latino student population. Many identifying that English is not their first language. When incorporating the CS model into the school, one of the challenges they faced by being able to engage with the community. Renee from the CIS team identified this issue and worked towards rectifying the problem. She created 'Parent University' at Trexler. This is a program parents can complete to better understand the school and the education system their children are in. Parents and care givers are able to participate in the program and develop their understanding of the education system. However, Renee articulated that this was not just a one-way-street. She emphasised how the program allowed her and the school leadership to develop closer relationships with community members and give them opportunities to provide feedback to the school. This process allows the school to engage members of their community who may never have had the opportunity to provide direct feedback to school leadership, enabling the school to get a clear indication of how they can better serve the community they are located in.
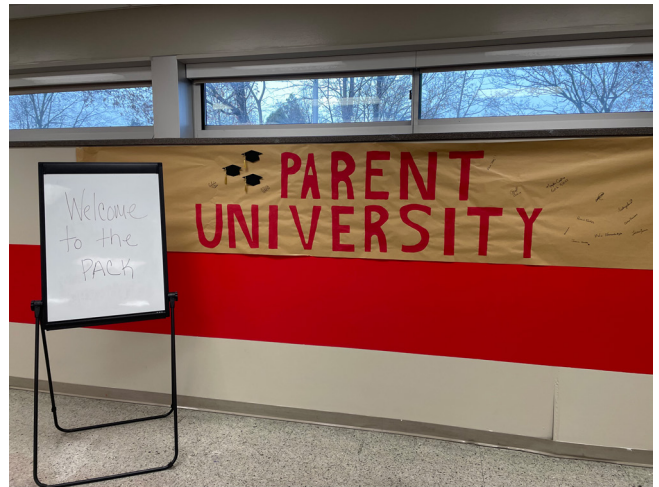

Figure 10. Parent University – Trexler Middle School

Another example of how schools incorporated community voice was at Northeast Middle School in Bethlehem. Similar to Trexler, CIS operated the CS model at the school. Again, the student cohort at the school is very diverse, with a large immigrant population. The Fellow arrived at the school towards the end of the day. This gave him the opportunity to speak with the school leadership team after the school day had ended. This conversation was one of the more inspiring conversations the Fellow had during his Fellowship. One of the key elements that ran through the conversation was about how the Principal viewed his position in the school and in the community. It was clear that the Principal was a passionate advocate for the CS model and for the work that CIS did in the school. He explained how he saw his role as guiding staff to buy-into the CS model. He also talked about how he saw himself as a leader within the community. He spoke passionately about how he felt the community needed to have ownership of the school, how he saw his role as being a steward of the school for a period of time and the school ultimately belonged to the community.

Figure 11. Community School Coordinator – Northeast Middle School

The Fellow was inspired by the work that many individuals were doing to ensure that community had power and decision-making capabilities in their local school. Having worked in education in Australia for a long time, he has witnessed how institutions often lack the capacity to be able to include community voice in their decision-making processes. With community having direct influence on how decisions are made, it allows institutions to be much more responsive to their needs and desires.

Educational Institutions as Placed Based Organisations

Tertiary education institutions occupy an important position within Australian society. They are places where people go to develop themselves and strive to self-actualisation. However, these institutions can be places that are closed off to the wider community. They can be perceived as places of privilege, where only those who have access to wealth and resources can enter. In this context, here lies an opportunity for institutions to reimagine their role in society. Examples seen in CS in the USA show how this could be achieved.

While visiting CS in Pittsburgh with PACS, the Fellow noticed that all the schools had resources available to their students and their families. Every school had a location in the building where community members were able to donate clothing and accessories for use. This included winter coats, shoes, headwear, tee-shirts, sweaters, pants, shorts and many more items. During one of the visits, a student and a school employee arrived to access clothing. The student had forgotten their sport clothing for the day and needed something to use. This is a simple example of how these programs can provide support to students throughout the school day. However, they also play a vital function for students and their families who may not have the resources to afford quality clothing throughout the school year.

Figure 12. Clothing Space – Logan Elementary School

Another example of a similar program was at Sto-Rox Upper Elementary. The PACS team at the school provided a food pantry service for students and their families. The community was able to access food from the pantry twice a week at the school. All students and their families had access to the food pantry. In addition to accessing food on campus, the PACS team provided weekly food distributions in the community. Each week the team would rotate through different community locations to provide food. When the Fellow was speaking with the PACS team about this program, they emphasised that the students at the school were part of a larger community. If the community did not have access to food, the students would not either. They saw their role as developing the community their students lived in.

Figure 13. Food Pantry - Sto-Rox Upper Elementary

Figure 14. Resource Area – East Allegheny Junior & Senior High School

The partnership between Lehigh University and Donegan Elementary School showed how universities can provide much needed resources to local schools. Rosa and the Donegan team explained how Lehigh University students provided

tutoring support to students at Donegan. These were typically the kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2 students. Through the university, students were able to take part in the program at the school. The university students are provided with training around the curriculum, classroom management and cultural competency. The program is aimed at addressing skill gaps for the Donegan students, ensuring that they do not fall behind in the early stages of primary school. As well as supporting educational outcomes, Rosa explained how the tutors developed positive relationships with the Donegan students, leading to an enhanced sense of belonging and connectedness in the school.

Seeing Community as an Asset

The Fellow saw CS as fundamentally based in the principles of community development. Those who work from a community development lens believe that communities have the ability to respond to issues within their society. It is a belief that communities are assets, and the role of professionals in this space is to support and empower. Community development practitioners do not see communities as deficits that need to be fixed.

When meeting with representatives in the USA, the Fellow noticed that many (if not all) prescribed to this framework. Although some did not articulate the work they did as based in community development, they spoke about how community had the answers to the issues that their students were experiencing in schools. An excellent example of this was at the University of Maryland. As mentioned previously, the Parent Leaders program at the university hired parents within the school community to be community liaisons. Due to their cultural knowledge and capital, they are seen as experts in being able to engage with the school's community. Oprah explained how they have been key to bridging the gap between schools and families, enhancing communication and collaboration between the two. Rather than employing outside 'specialists' to fill these roles, Oprah and her team acknowledge the immense skills these individuals have and empower them to create change within their communities.

Figure 15. Health Center Mural – Donegan Elementary School

At the very end of the Fellow's time in the USA, he had the privilege of meeting Jane Quinn. She is a giant in the CS community, having worked in the space for over 30 years. The Fellow met Jane at the final day of the 2024 Promise Neighborhoods and Full-Service Community Schools National Network Conference in Washington DC. This was the national conference for all grantees of the Federal Government's Full-Service Community Schools Program. During the conference, the Fellow was able to speak with Jane about her experience working in the CS sector. One of the key takeaways from the conversation was how she viewed the role of community in education. During the conversation, she emphasised the importance of community in providing positive outcomes for students in the education system. She challenged the Fellow on the notion of CS only providing services directly to the community. Rather, shaping the conversation around CS activating assets within local communities to provide sustainable positive outcomes for young learners.

Figure 16. Jane Quinn and Owen Smith

Limitations

Although the Fellow believes that the CS model has clear benefits for the tertiary education system in Australia, he acknowledges that there are limitations to its application.

Firstly, from what the Fellow witnessed in the USA, the CS model is usually applied in elementary (kindergarten – grade 5) and middle (grade 6 – grade 8) schools. Many of the people the Fellow spoke to in the CS community stated that it is not as common to see its application in senior secondary schools (grade 9 – grade 12). Taking a model of education that is usually applied to younger learners and transferring it to adult education can be problematic. Many of the interventions that the Fellow witnessed in the USA would not be appropriate for an adult education setting. However, the principles that underpin the CS model can be applied across education settings.
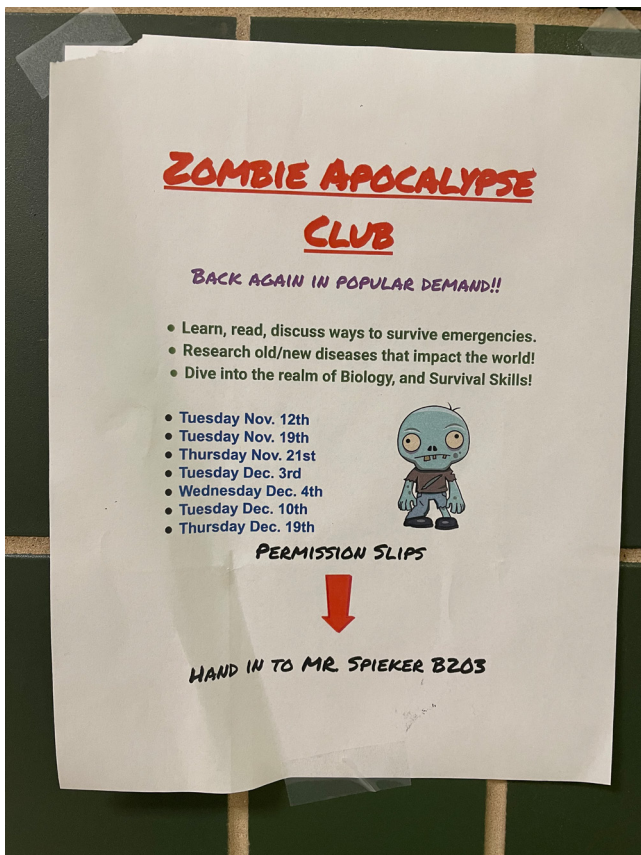
institutions and communities would take effort and dedication. This model does not flourish when people take a short-term view of positive outcomes. In order for the model to work, institutions need to be onboard for the long-term (10 years or more). Institutions in Australia may not be invested in taking on a foreign model for an extended period of time, with little to no evidence that it could work in the Australian context.

Even though there are clear limitations and challenges to implanting the model in Australia, the Fellow still believes that there are significant benefits that institutions could experience from taking up the CS model.

Figure 17. Zombie Apocalypse Club – Northeast Middle School

Secondly, the USA is very different to Australia. The way the education system is arranged in the USA is different to Australia. The way that funding is allocated is also different to the Australian context. Communities, culture and access to services are arranged differently in the two countries. One of the biggest limitations in this respect is thinking that one could simply apply the same model from the USA to an Australia context. This would not succeed. A common quote the Fellow heard during his time in the USA was "once you have seen one community school, you have seen one community school". All CS operate differently, there may be similarities between them, but the needs and strengths of one community are different to others. Although there are clear differences between the countries, it does not require much imagination to see how the CS model could be applied in Australia.

Lastly, this would be a new way of doing education in Australia. This model of education does not exist in Australia currently. Having buy-in from educational

06
Considerations and Next Steps

The Fellow believes that the results of this Fellowship primarily should be focused towards institutions and their leaders. From research that he has done, if leadership is not onboard with the application of the CS model, it is bound to fail.

Below are some values-based suggestions for institutions and their leaders to consider.

- Relationships are key to supporting learners who experience marginalisation,
  - Educational institutes should focus on developing positive and trusting relationships with their learners and the broader community.
  - Establishing a foundation of trust with community supports connection and inclusion for learners.

- Student supports should focus on integration and expansion,
  - Institutional support should be integrated into the school system, allowing for more dynamic and appropriate care.
  - Educational institutes cannot be the experts in all areas of student development. Partnerships with external organisations allow for better targeted and more sustainable care.

- Power and decision making should be a shared process, with the inclusion of community,
  - Educational institutes should allow for partnerships and shared decision making.

- Institutions do not exist outside their community context, how decisions are made should be representative of their community.

- Educational institutes as placed based organisations,
  - Educational institutions play an important role in the development of their communities.
  - Institutions should reimagine themselves as providers and connections to resources for the broader community.

- Community as an asset, not as a deficit that needs to be 'fixed',
  - Community as an important asset that should be leveraged for institutional success,
  - Institutional and community development cannot be achieved through a hierarchical system that places further education providers above others.

In addition to these values-based suggestions, below are some practical examples of how institutions can incorporate aspects of the CS model.

- Hire and/or strengthen community engagement teams within institutions,
- Move community engagement teams into leadership roles and have them report directly to senior leaders,
- Develop strong connections with local not-for-profit organisations and service providers.

Support these organisations to deliver services on campus for the benefit of students and the broader community,

- Engage with local community to map assets. Leverage these assets for the benefit of the institution, students and the broader community,

- Engage with local flexible schools to better understand the needs of this specific community,

- Reduce barriers for equity students to enrol in courses and communicate this in local community,

- Utilise physical campuses as place-based assets. Providing access to services and resources for the broader community,

- Expand student service teams in institutions,

- Empower student service teams to support individual students to navigate complex and rigid structures,

- Incorporate local community members into governance structures of the institution,

- Provide clear pathways for local communities to provide direct feedback to institutions and their senior leadership teams,

- Invest in hiring staff members from the local community.

Incorporating some of these recommendations could see institutions being able to effectively respond to the issues outlined in this report. Some of these could include,

- Supporting marginalised learners to access service through the institution and in the community. This could support learners to remain engaged in education and reduce the impact of adversity in their lives.

- Being more responsive to the needs of marginalised learners, allowing for more flexibility in how the institution supports this cohort.

- Reducing the internal barriers created within the institution. Understanding the needs of learners in a more holistic manner and being able to adapt systems to meet their needs.

- Supporting more learners to enrol and complete courses. Allowing for higher attainment rates within their local communities, thus enhancing the capacity of the local community to respond to current and future challenges.

In order for tertiary education institutions to meet the demands of the moment, they must be willing to try new approaches. The status quo is not meeting the demands of contemporary Australia and will certainly not be adequate for future generations. The CS model provides a roadmap for institutions, exploring how they can leverage the strengths of their communities for mutual success.

07
Impacts of Fellowship

The Fellowship has had a significant positive impact on the Fellow. The Fellowship has created opportunities for the Fellow that did not previously exist. It has given the Fellow a platform to speak from and the opportunity to become an expert in the area of CS.

Personally

Firstly, to be given the opportunity to complete a Fellowship was a significant achievement. The Fellow was very grateful for the trust that the ISSI and the VSA placed in him to complete the Fellowship. This gave the Fellow the confidence to be able to dive headfirst into the Fellowship and take risks. Since starting the Fellowship, the Fellow has made close connections with new people, both in Australia and internationally. Although the Fellowship is a challenging process, the Fellow has grown as an individual throughout.

Figure 18. Owen Smith – Learning Policy Institute

Professionally

The Fellowship has played a significant role in the professional development of the Fellow over the past year. It has allowed the Fellow to grow and evolve as a TAFE teacher and as a researcher. It has given the Fellow the opportunity to create meaningful professional relationships across the world.

One of the major achievements from the Fellowship has been the opportunity to support others at his workplace. The Fellow encouraged two colleagues to successfully apply for the Fellowship. The Fellow has supported these colleagues (and another) throughout their journey. One way in which this was done was by creating an 'ISSI Working Group' at VU. This has been an informal support group for the Fellows. Providing space and time to help each other throughout the Fellowship journey.

Since undertaking the Fellowship, the Fellow has been exploring options to continue research in the area of CS. The Fellowship has opened up a new world for the Fellow to explore. It is hoped that this will be the beginning of a long career in exploring the benefits of the CS model.

Figure 19. 2024 Promise Neighborhoods & Full-Service Community Schools National Network Conference

VET Sector

The impacts of the Fellowship have yet to be seen in the VET sector. The Fellow sees the VET sector is heading towards cross-roads. The release of The Universities Accord in 2024 emphasised the importance of supporting learners from all backgrounds in tertiary education, especially those from marginalised communities. The Fellow sees this as an excellent opportunity for change in the broader system. It is hoped that institutions will see the benefits of the Fellow's research and choose to implement aspects of it in their practice moving forward.

The Fellow believes that if institutions in the VET were to incorporate aspects of the CS model, they would see positive outcomes. Below are some examples they could see,

- Immediate (0 – 12 months)
  - Increased attendance rates of students,
  - Decreased withdrawal rates of students,
  - Decreased rates of students experience negative well-being issues (for example, access to food, clothing, housing, mental health services),
  - Increased rates of staff and community cohesion,

- Short-term (1 – 5 years)
  - Increased rates of students completing courses,
  - Increased rates of equity students enrolling and completing courses,
  - Improved pathways from flexible schools (and other similar schools) into the institution,
  - Improved community relationships and partnerships,
  - Higher staff retention, especially those from the local community,
  - Deeper and more meaningful collaboration between the institution and local community. For example, collaboration between the institution and community in the development of academic courses. Allowing for curriculum and assessment design to be more realistic,

- Long-term (5 – 10 years)
  - Improved academic outcomes for equity groups,
  - Sustainable enrolment pathways for equity students and local community members,
  - Academic courses developing students to be responsive to the needs of the local community,
  - Integrated community voice in institutional decision making. Ensuring that the institution plays an important role in the development of local community,
  - Institutions being more responsive to the needs of their learners.

08
Sector Engagement (Dissemination):

To date, the Fellow has engaged with multiple sectors in the dissemination of the Fellowship. The Fellow has met with individuals and groups from the following sectors to discuss the Fellowship and the findings.

- Victorian State Government,
- VET institutions,
- Universities,
- Flexible Education Schools,
- Non-Government Organisations.

Through the Fellowship, the Fellow has been able to connect Australians with individuals and institutions from the CS sector in the USA. This has led to other educational institutions conducting their own visits to the USA. Allowing for more cultural and educational exchange between the two nations. The Fellow hopes to continue creating connections between the two countries and leading to further exchanges of ideas and future collaborations.

The Fellow is aiming to disseminate further in late 2025 and throughout 2026. The Fellow wants to be able to bring the learnings from the research and apply them in practice across Victoria and Australia. Although the Fellowship was focused on the benefits to the tertiary education sector, the Fellow strongly believes that other educational sectors would benefit from the findings.

It is hoped that institutions will be able to learn from the experience of the Fellow. If implemented correctly, the impacts of the Fellowship can be deep and long lasting. As Australia continues to play a significant role in global education, it is hoped that institutions can look to their local communities to find strength and purpose.

Figure 20. 2024 Promise Neighborhoods & Full-Service Community Schools National Network Conference

09
Conclusion

The Fellowship has had a profound impact on the Fellow. It is has allowed him to explore areas of professional interest that would not have been possible without ISSI's support.

The Fellow passionately believes in the power of embracing community to achieve better outcomes for marginalised learners. For those who work in the tertiary education sector, we have a responsibility to ensure that learners have the best opportunity to achieve their desired learning outcomes. In order to do this, institutions should look to their local communities to look for support and be a genuine partner in supporting their communities' development.

The current educational context in Australia is challenging. Tertiary education institutions are facing significant headwinds. It is important that these institutions do not see themselves as being removed from their communities. Without the goodwill of the Australian people, our tertiary education institutions would not be successful. As a sector, we should be embracing our local communities and creating genuine partnerships for mutual benefit.

Figure 21. PACS Room – Logan Elementary School

10
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