Here’s why Australia needs full-service schools



By Andres Molina, Esther Doecke and Melinda Hildebrandt

Inequality is one of the most urgent challenges facing Australian schools. For decades, governments have invested billions of dollars in schools with the promise every child should have the opportunity to succeed.

But clear divides remain between advantaged and disadvantaged students. For example, in 2024, the average attendance rate of students in Australia’s most disadvantaged schools was almost 10 percentage points lower than for students in the most advantaged, up from a 6.6 percentage point gap in 2018.

Barriers to learning often begin well before a child enters a classroom.

Poverty, housing insecurity, health issues and limited access to early learning all shape students’ readiness and capacity to engage in education.

“Full-service schools” are increasingly being talked about as a way of overcoming these barriers, including in the latest school funding agreement between the federal and state governments.

What are full-service schools? And what can we learn from their implementation internationally? Our new report explains.

Australia’s disadvantage problem

Media and policy debates tend to focus on what is taught in classrooms, the quality of teaching and student behaviour. These are only part of the challenges facing Australian students. Despite more than a decade of reforms – including needs-based funding, curriculum updates and a focus on teacher quality – large and persistent inequities remain.

Australia’s school system is highly segregated compared to other developed countries. This means disadvantaged students tend to go to schools with other disadvantaged students and advantaged students go to schools with other advantaged students. This deepens inequalities.

There is a significant learning gap between high- and low-socioeconomic status students. This equates to more than five years by Year 9, according to NAPLAN results.

Socially disadvantaged students are almost three times more likely than their advantaged peers to miss school for long periods. The reasons can include illness, family caring responsibilities and lack of safety at school.

Meanwhile, one in three students from a low-socioeconomic status background skip breakfast before school, compared with one in six from high-socioeconomic status families.

Traditional reforms focused on teaching and curriculum can't address the out-of-school barriers – poverty, poor health, food insecurity, unstable housing – students face in disadvantaged communities. This is where full-service schools can help.

What are full-service schools?

Full-service schools combine education, health, social and wellbeing supports inside the school. They are designed to help remove barriers that prevent primary and high school students from attending, engaging and learning.

They require a dedicated coordinator, community partnerships and tailored supports. Examples of additional supports include: long day care, dental services, breakfast and lunch programs and mental health and wellbeing services. The services are also accessible to families and the community, but the student remains the central focus.

There are four key principles that set them apart from traditional schools.

1. **A focus on the whole child** – for example, a school would not just look at a child's academic progress but also make sure they are getting nutritious food and psychological support.

2. **Integrated services** – supports are built into everyday schooling, delivered as part of the school's core program.

3. **Tailored supports for each school** – to meet the needs of their particular community.

4. **Families and the wider community are involved** – on what is needed and how it works.

What happens overseas?

California has invested US$4.1 billion (AUD$6.2 billion) to expand full-service schools in high-poverty communities. Evidence suggests the model works when there is sustained funding, government support, expert coordination and supports are specifically tailored to the needs of their communities.

The state of New York established a network of more than 420 "community schools", similar to full-service schools. An independent evaluation of 300 community schools trialled between 2014–19 showed strong outcomes, with a drop in chronic absenteeism and suspensions and an increase in graduation rates. Surveys also found a stronger student sense of belonging and better student–adult relationships.

Full-service schools have also been implemented in the United Kingdom since 2003. Assessments have also found an economic return on this type of investment, with GBP£2.20 (AUD$4.50) return for every GBP£1 (AUD$2) invested.

Similar models have also been introduced in Canada, New Zealand and Finland.

What is needed now?

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare flagged his support for a pilot program for four new full-service school sites in Western Australia: "If we bring in potentially doctors or nurses or psychologists or occupational therapists or speech pathologists into the one place then we can support the students here with the needs that they have."

Many Australian schools already offer elements of these models but support can be patchy and reliant on local capacity or existing partnerships.

What's needed now is for states and territories to develop a clear, evidence-based framework for full-service schools. Full-service schools will also need significant and sustained funding from governments at both state and federal levels.

If we do this properly, full-service schools can combine all the supports children need to engage, learn and thrive. When those supports are in place, students arrive more ready to learn, teachers can focus on teaching, and families and communities are better connected to their schools.

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