This research document has been prepared by the Student Wellbeing Unit of the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM). It is designed to enhance the role of Student Wellbeing Coordinators through exploring evidence-based research related to the role of clusters as a key structural support to teachers and leaders in schools in implementing a whole-school approach to student wellbeing.

In 2008 every Student Wellbeing Coordinator in primary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne will be part of a cluster.

Evidence-based research outlined in this document indicates that participation by schools in clusters contributes to an environment of shared learning and development, innovation and creativity, and collegial support.

It is with these key aspects in mind that the Student Wellbeing Unit has chosen clusters as a key structural support to Student Wellbeing Coordinators in their role.

'The best way to encourage teachers to share knowledge within a school is to get them to share knowledge with others outside the school, improving teaching and learning through partnership working between schools.' (Bentley, 2002)

What is a cluster?

A cluster is a group of schools that work together for a specific purpose. They can be issue based, geographically determined, they can be short-term, long-term or even on-going. Schools can and do belong to, and function within a number of clusters, each for seemingly different reasons.

Why do we have clusters?

In an environment where most planning, resourcing and delivery of education is focussed on the individual school, why have clusters? Why develop programs, services initiatives that involve clusters?

Is it primarily a cost issue? That is, is it less expensive to support clusters rather than allocating sufficient resources for each school, or is there some other underpinning reason. In some instances there are economies of scale that can be achieved through working together but this is only part of the reason. There are many advantages to schools 'working together' beyond economic.

Programs and initiatives that have used clustering as an implementation strategy appear to have focussed on:

- Overcoming isolation – geographic and/or social
- Innovation and creativity
- Cross year level (P–12) and/or cross sector
- Shared learning and development
- Community involvement.

As an education community there is much to gain from working together, sharing good practice and supporting each other in the work. The different perspectives and shared experiences are important elements of what makes clustering worthwhile and interesting.

Benefits of Clusters
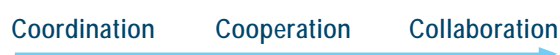
There are a number of key benefits of clustering:

1. Coordination – Cooperation – Collaboration

Clusters requires schools to 'work together'.
Working together focuses on:

- Coordination
- Cooperation
- Collaboration.

These three concepts can be viewed as parts of a continuum, that is:

Coordination   Cooperation   Collaboration

Examples of these – Cooperation, Coordination and Collaboration are useful and important but they are different. David Pollard (2005) developed the following framework for understanding the differences between each term.

Under this framework each requires 'shared objectives' and 'more than one person to be involved'. However the relationship requirements for each are different with the requirements becoming more complex in the move from 'coordination' to 'collaboration'. Therefore as with all relationships 'time' and 'prior experience' are important dimensions for cooperation and collaboration.

Most schools have had considerable experience with coordination and cooperation, for example:

- sporting events
- shared specialists
- curriculum development
- professional development

Schools have limited experience with collaboration even though this approach is more powerful.

	Coordination	Cooperation	Collaboration
Purpose of using this approach	Avoid gaps & overlaps in individuals' assigned work.	Obtain mutual benefit by sharing or partitioning work.	Achieve collective results that the participants would be incapable of accomplishing working alone.
Desired Outcome	Efficiently-achieved results meeting objectives.	Efficiently achieved results meeting objectives plus savings in time and cost.	Efficiently achieved results meeting objectives plus savings in time and cost. Plus innovative, extraordinary, breakthrough results and collective 'we did that!'
Pre conditions for success	Shared objectives. Need for more than one person to be involved. Understanding of who needs to do what and by when.	Shared objectives. Need for more than one person to be involved. Mutual trust and respect Acknowledgement of mutual benefit of working together.	Shared objectives. Need for more than one person to be involved. Mutual trust and respect. Sense of commiment. Acknowledgement of mutual benefit of working together.

Source: Will That be Coordination, Cooperation or Collaboration? David Pollard, 2005

	Degree of Power Sharing →		
Degree of Resource Sharing	**Cooperating** Using resources to assist other agencies.	**Coordinating** Organising or combining resources to more effectively reach a mutual goal.	**Collaborating** Collectively applying resources toward problems which lack clear ownership.
	Contributing Resources School and community contribute resources to project or effort; contribution is clearly defined and usually material.	**Reconciling Activities** School and community adjust or combine existing programs in order to deliver services more effectively; usually entails on going relationships among partners.	**Sharing Program Responsibilities** School and community come together as a new entity to provide services or to manage a resource.
	Promoting Others School and community willingly share information about the work and services of others.	**Sharing Resources** School and community, which use the same goods or service, agree to share costs often defined by a contract.	**Creating New Systems or Programs** School and community work to create and implement a new model to deliver services or address a public problem.
	Sharing Information School and community share information on a formal or informal basis.	**Joint Projects** School and community depend upon each other to produce a specific product or event; generally involves short-term commitments.	**Collective Planning** School and community develop a collective vision (and/or study) to identify community assets and for the management of resources to alleviate social problems.

Source: Working Together Toolkit School Family Community Partnerships 2006

This framework is based on the model proposed in the Working Together Toolkit – School Family Community Partnerships (2006) developed by the Centre for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations New Mexico Highlands University which describes these terms as a continuum in 'power sharing' and 'resource sharing'.

Again what changes in this model is the nature of the relationship between the parties involved.

Real collaboration occurs when members of the cluster (schools) provide their own resources to plan together to achieve a common purpose based on the belief that they can achieve more by working together.

'The first step for building strong relationships in schools is the first step for building any strong relationship: talk to each other.'
Working Together: A Guide to Positive Problem Solving – Manitoba Education, Citizenship & Youth, 2004
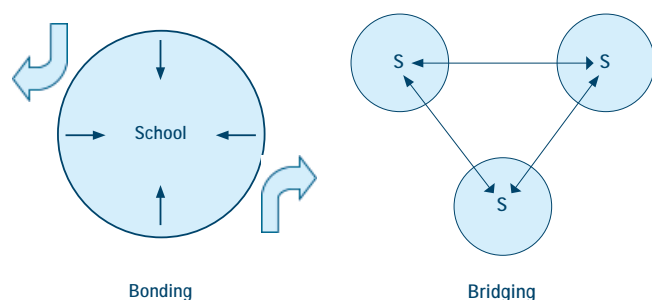
2. New Relationships

As indicated previously one of the benefits of clustering is that new relationships can be developed and maintained. These relationships can contribute to the work of the individuals, the schools and the communities.

The cluster provides opportunities for new relationships between teachers and school leaders, between teachers and students, between parents and teachers and between community members and teachers and school leaders.

In clusters the key players (stakeholders) start with relatively equal status and this enables new relationships to grow and new issues and challenges to be explored. These issues and challenges are informed by different perspectives and enable the sharing of ideas, strategies and approaches taken within schools and communities.

John West-Burnham, Maggie Farrar and George Otero in *Schools and Communities – Working together to transform children's lives* (2007) describe the processes of bonding and bridging. They refer to **bonding** as the building of internal social capital, that is, it is inward looking and exclusive and **bridging** as building social network and interdependency, that is, it is outward looking and inclusive. They assert that 'effective communities combine the capacity to bond with the ability to bridge' (pg. 33).

Bonding   Bridging

Clustering incorporates both bonding and bridging. It facilitates networking and builds new relationships that can enhance schools and their achievements. Shifts toward greater school based management have tended to result in schools becoming more inward focussed and competitive. This is not good for school community relationships.

Clusters support schools working together with an increased focus on community.

3. Sharing of Good Practice (Professional Learning)

Increasingly clusters have been recognised as a means of supporting and encouraging the sharing of good practice. The Schools Innovation and Excellence (SIE) clusters were established by the Department of Education and Training (DEET) in 2003 to develop strategically effective education programs to advance student learning.

A 2005 evaluation of the Schools Innovation and Excellence (SIE) program conducted by ACER identified a number of key findings:

- Survey responses indicated a clear recognition that improving student learning outcomes is directly linked to the provision of professional learning for teachers. Around 90% of schools used the SIE program funding for professional learning within schools. Cluster Educators played a leadership role in the organisation of professional learning activities directly relevant to local needs and interests.

- Changes reported as having taken place in schools as a result of participation in the SIE program included changes in teaching practices, school organisation and practices affecting transition from primary to secondary school.

- Survey responses provided evidence of a range of outcomes for teachers and teaching, with the strongest agreement being in relation to teachers catering more effectively for the diversity of individual needs and learning styles in Years 5–9, an increase in collaboration between primary and secondary schools, increased teacher understanding of the differences between primary and secondary schools, and the implementation of more effective strategies to support transition.

- The identified changes in teaching and teachers' understanding and practices, enabling teachers to provide better learning opportunities for students, are likely to lead to improved student outcomes in the key areas targeted by the SIE program (literacy, numeracy, engagement, participation and transition).

4. Sharing of Resources

The sharing of resources is a key objective of clustering initiatives. This is based primarily on efficiency, that is, getting the best result for the use of the available resources.

A number of cluster programs have been built around the use of shared resources such as the Department of Education 'Shared Specialists', 'Mobile Art Resource Centres (MARC)', primary and secondary school sports associations and School Focussed Youth Service (SFYS).

The resources allocated to such initiatives are limited and therefore require the participating school communities to make decisions about timetables, priorities for service and program structure.

The sharing of resources often leads to a sharing of, and reflection on practice. Schools through the coordination process have conversations about how resources are used and they explore more productive and efficient ways of using the limited resource.

The shared sense of ownership of the resource empowers people and they take a stronger interest in the effective and fair use of the resource within the cluster.

5. Potential for a stronger connection to the community

Teachers, students and parents are all part of a community. A community is defined by shared values and ideals. These shared values and ideals are developed over time and are the result of living and working together.

The school is part of the community, indeed a community may have a number of schools as part of that community. Links between schools within a community can help encourage cooperation between schools rather than competition.

The Department of Family and Community Services identifies the following attributes to strong communities. They:

- have strong leaders
- have strong networks with other communities
- can build on their existing assets and resources
- have a 'can-do' community spirit and are optimistic about the future
- can grasp the opportunities that come their way

- have a sense of 'belonging' to the community among it's members
- embrace change and take responsibility.

These attributes are enhanced through clustering and in many circumstances made more sustainable.

Key Issues

There are three key, interrelated issues that impact on the sustainability and effectiveness of clusters – the formation process, the purpose and on-going operation of the cluster.

Formation Process

The initial process of determining clusters and forming clusters is critical to their on-going success and effectiveness. As clusters are primarily about 'working together' the relationships that are formed and how they are maintained over time are vital to the work of the cluster.

Who selects the schools to be in or out of a cluster and how this is carried out is important as this influences both commitment and purpose.

The **size** of the cluster in terms of both number, and geographic spread are important considerations. Schools can partner and cluster with schools in different states or countries for particular purposes but generally speaking clusters include schools within local communities or defined geographic areas. The schools and the communities themselves are generally best placed to understand the local community dynamics and therefore with whom they can most effectively work.

The size and composition of a cluster may well be influenced by the purpose of the cluster. There are many examples of where clusters have been used to drive innovation and change. This generally means that new relationships need to be formed and supported.

An important function in the formation stage is for clusters to consider and agree on their operational procedures and protocols. This may include simple issues such as meeting frequency, meeting locations, convenor responsibilities and cluster communication. These may change over time as the cluster develops but it is important to share the workload and roles and responsibilities.

Purpose – whose purpose?

As indicated above when discussing Coordination – Cooperation – Collaboration, each requires 'shared objectives'. In a cluster it is important to allow time for cluster members to explore their 'shared purpose'.

It is through the exploration of shared purpose, that the new relationships are developed. The purpose(s) for a cluster will change over time. This may be influenced by changes in personnel and, or changes in local or systemic conditions. An effective, or mature cluster will be able to redefine its purpose in response to changed conditions.

It is important that the shared purpose is the purpose of the cluster. Too often clusters are formed for a very narrowly focussed purpose, or to access funds, or are formed for a systemic purpose. The acceptance and ownership of the cluster and its purpose by those involved is vital.

Generally insufficient time is allowed for the cluster formation process. The cluster is a complex set of relationships and as with all relationships they need time to explore and build trust.

Sustaining the Cluster

Sustaining the cluster for as long as it serves a useful purpose is important. It is underpinned by commitment, shared purpose and resources.

Commitment by key stakeholders is important. The underpinning belief needs to be that 'together more can be achieved than would be possible individually'. The commitment of not only those directly involved but also of the school and community leaders is necessary to *enable* the cluster to work.

As indicated above the **purpose** does not have to be static but there does need to be a shared purpose which is clearly articulated and understood by those involved. The purpose needs to be revisited and updated as the cluster grows and develops.

A cluster needs to have access to sufficient **resources** to enable it to carry out its purpose and functions. Too often this is seen within the education context as resources provided to the cluster. Schools need to consider giving 'their own resources' to

a cluster to enable it to do its work. This should be both possible and sensible if the commitment and belief exist.

This is real 'collaboration' when members of the cluster (schools) provide their own resources to plan together to achieve a common purpose based on the belief that they can achieve more by working together.

Implications for CEOM and Student Wellbeing

Clusters have the potential to make a significant contribution to the work of schools in their communities. Consideration needs to be given to some key issues:

- – size
- – clarity of purpose
- – membership and commitment of members
- – geographic spread
- – support
- – the process used for establishment.

Student Wellbeing Coordinator (SWC) Clusters aim to:

- • support the implementation of the Student Wellbeing Coordinators' Strategy
- • raise awareness of key student wellbeing and educational initiatives to enable SWC to make informed decisions and take action within their schools communities
- • develop and strengthen collegiality and networking opportunities among SWC
- • model and enrich the process of mutual learning among members
- • identify and build on the SWC cluster members' priorities to address focus areas.

Through the support provided by the CEOM it is anticipated that:

- • all primary schools will be part of, and participate in, their SWC cluster
- • SWC clusters will meet at least once per term in 2008
- • the CEOM will be represented at SWC cluster meetings
- • all SWC cluster convenors will have opportunities for, and participate in, appropriate professional learning activities.

The role of the CEOM Facilitator will be to:

- • guide the cluster in its understanding of the importance of clusters in the overall Student Wellbeing Strategy

- liaise with the Cluster Convenor and members to ensure the content of the cluster meetings reflects the strategic direction of the CEOM.

SWC Cluster Convenor

1. Appointment of Cluster Convenors

SWC Cluster Convenors are appointed from within the cluster in consultation with the CEOM Student Wellbeing Unit for a period of one year. At the end of this time, they may renominate for an extension of one year or a new SWC Cluster Convenor may be appointed.

2. Role Description

The SWC Cluster Convenor has a key leadership role within the CEOM Student Wellbeing Coordinators' initiative.

(i) Coordination

The role of the SWC Cluster Convenor is to ensure maximum input from members through:

- **encouraging participation** to ensure the views of members are sought, listened to, and that networking and engagement among cluster members is strengthened;
- **building connections** focused on information exchange/sharing and linking cluster members towards collectively advancing the implementation of student wellbeing initiatives in schools, and ensuring relevant interested partners are engaged in the clusters;
- **liaising** with CEOM Student Wellbeing Unit facilitators to maintain an overview of SWC Cluster developments, issues and trends.

(ii) Administration

- Develop the agenda for cluster meetings, in conjunction with CEOM facilitators and with input from cluster members.
- Chair SWC cluster meetings.
- Determine the venue/host for each meeting.
- Appoint a minute taker.
- Distribute minutes to cluster members and ensure agreed actions are followed up.

3. Support to Cluster Convenors

Ongoing support through briefings and targeted professional learning opportunities facilitated by the CEOM Student Wellbeing Unit will be offered for SWC Cluster Convenors.

4. Credentialed Learning

To enhance the capacity for knowledge and skill transfer to take place at both the individual and school level, it is desirable that the SWC Cluster Convenor has or is in the process of completing formal qualifications in student wellbeing through participation in the University of Melbourne Master of Education (Student Wellbeing).

5. Evaluating a Cluster's Progress

In assessing the progress or effectiveness of a cluster it is important to consider the following points:

- In the 'formation' of the cluster have there been clear operational procedures and protocols established and agreed too?
- Has a clear purpose for the cluster been established and agreed too? How is this communicated more widely within the cluster? Are there opportunities given to review and update this purpose?
- Have new relationships been established – between members, between schools leaders and staff, with community agency representatives and into the broader community?
- In what ways does the cluster reach out to expand its membership, contacts or influence?
- Has there been sharing of good practice and what are some specific examples of this sharing in practice?
- Has there been sharing of resources? Has the cluster been able to access new resources more effectively?
- Has the cluster been able to establish stronger links with the community, and if so, what are some examples of this?

'Social Capital is all about conversation, trust and doing things together. To nourish social capital begin with conversation. Bring people together to look at issues affecting them. Give people opportunities so they know that they matter.' (Costello, 2006)

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For information about clusters and, in particular, if you wish to clarify which Student Wellbeing Cluster your school has been allocated to please contact the relevant member of the Student Wellbeing Unit.

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