

BLOG - K-12 Social Enterprise Group

Closing the loop: What I learned from the K-12 Social Enterprise Learning Group

(Margaret O'Brien, CoFounder & Chair, Young Change Agents)

Last year, I brought together a group of social enterprises working across Australian K-12 education.

We started with fairly big ambitions.

Could we increase our collective impact? Collaborate rather than duplicate? Raise awareness of the contribution social enterprises make to Australian education? Could we make it easier for schools and governments to understand the incredible range of organisations already working with young people? Could we even become a stronger collective voice for the sector?

Our original purpose was to connect social enterprises working in education, collaborate for deeper impact, share wins, lessons and challenges, and build capacity across the sector.

We talked about creating a website, increasing awareness with principal associations and government, sharing collective impact data, increasing collaboration between members and potentially even evolving into some form of peak body.

Some of those things happened. Some didn't.

But looking back as I close out this series, I've realised that the most valuable thing we created wasn't any of those things.

It was a room where people could be honest.

Different organisations, remarkably similar challenges

One of the first things we did was simply ask everyone to share their biggest challenges. The similarities were striking.

Funding. Getting access to principals and decision-makers. Navigating government. Getting into schools in a meaningful way. Finding good educators. Measuring impact without adding to teacher workload. Keeping up with AI and other changes. Building deeper relationships with

existing schools. Working regionally. Knowing when to collaborate. And perhaps most tellingly - trying to stay focused when there are simply so many problems you could be solving.

One comment captured a challenge I suspect almost every education social enterprise has experienced:

The individual school loves what you do - but doesn't have the budget.

Another was the difficulty of getting through the door when what you offer isn't one of the system's immediate priorities. None of these were problems that could be solved in a 90-minute Zoom call. But sometimes hearing someone else say, *"We're struggling with that too"* is surprisingly powerful.

The value became the conversation

As the sessions continued, we heard from organisations working across STEM, careers, entrepreneurship, mental health, philanthropy, digital skills, employability, inclusion and alternative learning. The diversity was extraordinary.

Children's Discovery shared its work introducing scientific thinking through playful learning. Study Work Grow talked about helping young people navigate their futures. Deadly Coders shared its work creating STEM and technology pathways for First Nations young people. ShoreTrack talked about supporting young people at risk through trades-based learning and connection to country and community. Kids in Philanthropy shared how young people can build their own capabilities while contributing to their communities.

We also brought in voices from the broader social enterprise ecosystem, including Social Traders and the Social Enterprise Council NSW & ACT, to help us better understand certification, advocacy and the wider movement.

But the presentations were only part of the value. For me, the best moments were often the conversations afterwards. Someone would raise a challenge and others would jump in.

"We've experienced that." "Have you tried this?" "I can introduce you to someone."

Or sometimes simply: *"Yes. It's really hard."* There is value in that too.

Social enterprise in education can be lonely

Running a social enterprise is an unusual balancing act. You are trying to create impact, but you also need revenue.

You want to respond to what schools need, while often trying to introduce approaches that sit outside established ways of doing things.

You need evidence, but measuring impact in schools takes time and resources - including the precious time of teachers. You build relationships with people inside systems, only for roles, policies and organisational structures to change.

And often you are competing for funding while simultaneously knowing that collaborating with the organisation next to you could create greater impact.

Our first session surfaced all of these tensions.

Founders and leaders don't always have many places where they can talk openly about them. I think that's ultimately what this group became.

Not a peak body. Not a grand sector-wide initiative - simply a community of peers.

Perhaps we underestimated the importance of that

Social enterprise naturally attracts people who want to solve things.

So, unsurprisingly, when we first came together we immediately started asking: *What can we build? What can we influence? What could we achieve collectively in 12 months?*

We had plans for advocacy, impact measurement, promotion, a microsite and member-led coordination. People volunteered to facilitate sessions, present their work, help with government engagement, manage content and establish shared metrics.

All worthwhile ideas. But I wonder whether we initially underestimated the value of simply creating the space.

Because not every collaboration needs to become an organisation. Not every network needs a strategic plan. Not every good conversation needs to become a new initiative.

Sometimes the impact is that someone leaves with a new idea. Sometimes it's an introduction. Sometimes it's discovering another organisation you could collaborate with rather than compete against. And sometimes it's just leaving a difficult week thinking:

Okay. It's not just us.

What I'm taking away

I'm closing this particular series, but I remain convinced that social enterprises have an important role to play in Australian education.

The organisations that participated demonstrate just how broad that contribution already is - from STEM and careers to wellbeing, entrepreneurship, digital inclusion, philanthropy,

employability and pathways for young people who aren't always well served by mainstream approaches.

They often fill gaps that schools simply don't have the capacity, expertise or resources to fill themselves - something the group identified right at the beginning.

But my biggest takeaway is simpler.

People doing difficult work need peers.

They need places where they don't have to pitch. Where they don't have to prove their impact. Where they can share the win from that week - something we deliberately made space for in almost every session - and also admit what isn't working.

We started this group wanting to elevate our collective impact. In the end, perhaps we did that in a smaller and more human way than we'd imagined.

By listening to each other. By sharing what we'd learned. By helping each other unpack the hard stuff. And by reminding one another that none of us has to figure all of this out alone.

To everyone who showed up, shared openly, presented your work, offered an introduction, challenged an idea or simply listened - thank you.

The formal series might be finishing, but I hope the relationships and conversations continue. Because sometimes building a stronger sector starts with something as simple as finding your people.