

OPENING THE SCHOOL GATE

Engaging migrant and refugee families



A resource for Victorian Schools

OPENING THE SCHOOL GATE: ENGAGING MIGRANT AND REFUGEE FAMILIES. A RESOURCE FOR VICTORIAN SCHOOLS

Acknowledgements

Opening the School Gate provides schools with a range of strategies to specifically encourage migrant and refugee families to fully participate in the educational experience of their children at school. The trialed and documented approaches outlined in this resource were originally developed in 2006 following a partnership pilot project, Connecting CLD Parents, involving the Centre for Multicultural Youth, Reconnect Services and two Victorian secondary schools.

Opening the School Gate was initially developed to support government secondary schools but is also applicable to primary settings and other education systems.

Opening the School Gate A Resource for NSW Public Schools was developed by CMY in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) following a request to develop a NSW specific edition of this resource that can foster engagement by migrant and refugee families in NSW public schools.

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Centre for Multicultural Youth

CMY is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia.

Our purpose is to ensure that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds have every opportunity to succeed in Australia.

CMY was the first organisation in Australia to work exclusively with migrant and refugee young people who can encounter significant barriers as they try to settle in Australia. Alongside the challenges of growing up, they are figuring out how things are done and adjusting to unfamiliar cultural, academic and social expectations.

Despite these complex issues we know that young people have the enterprise, resilience and optimism to contribute to the continued prosperity of Australia. By engaging them as experts in their own lives and focusing on their strengths, they can be empowered to adapt and thrive.

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DEFINITIONS AND ACRONYMS

Asylum seeker

An asylum seeker is someone who is making a claim for protection as a refugee. They may be seeking safety and protection from persecution and harm, but their request for refugee status has not been heard or processed. It is not illegal under international law to seek asylum and refugee protection.

Australian-born young people

This term refers to young people from any cultural background born in Australia. The term includes young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Indigenous young people.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) (CLD)

In popular usage, this term refers to communities whose members identify as having cultural connections to countries other than Australia or linguistic affiliations to languages other than English, by virtue of their place of birth, ancestry or ethnic origin, religion, preferred language or language spoken at home. The term includes people who were born overseas or in Australia and has generally replaced the term Non-English Speaking Background (NESB).

Department of Education and Training

The Victorian Department of Education and Training offers learning and development support services and resources for all Victorians, from birth to adulthood.

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

This term is used to refer to students whose main language spoken at home is a language other than standard Australian English and who require additional support to assist them to develop proficiency in English. EAL has generally replaced the term English as a Second Language (ESL).

English Language Schools (ELS) and English Language Centres (ELC)

Newly arrived students from language backgrounds other than English who meet eligibility criteria are able to access EAL support through the New Arrivals Program within the Victorian Government education system. English language schools and centres are located in Melbourne metropolitan areas, as well as Mildura, Geelong and Shepparton. Students who meet the eligibility criteria are able to attend for between six and twelve months.

Interpreter

A professionally accredited person who converts information from one language into another language accurately and objectively to enable verbal communication between two parties who use different languages. On-site interpreters facilitate communication between two parties in person. A telephone interpreter delivers a service over the phone to establish three-way communication. A professionally qualified interpreter is bound by a confidentiality agreement and professional ethics.

Language background other than English (LBOTE)

This term is used to refer to students who speak a language other than English at home, or who have a mother, father or guardian/carer who speaks a language other than English in the home.

Migrant

A person who leaves their country of origin voluntarily to seek a better life for a range of personal and economic reasons. They have made the choice to leave, had the chance to plan and prepare for migration and generally can return at any time if they wish.

Multicultural

This term refers to many cultures and is often used to describe a society that is culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse.

Multicultural Education Aide (MEA)

MEAs are funded in government schools to provide classroom assistance to students for whom English is an additional language and to assist with communication between the school and parents/carers from language backgrounds other than English.

New arrival

This term is used to describe a student who has recently arrived in Australia, whose first language is not English and who requires intensive English language support to enable them to fully participate in school.

Newly arrived young person

This term refers to a young person who was born overseas and has lived in Australia for a relatively short time. The Australian Government defines 'newly arrived' as someone who has arrived in Australia in the previous five years. Other definitions vary according to the length of time it is considered to take to effectively resettle (up to 10 years). In the Victorian education context, a newly arrived EAL student is one who has been enrolled in an Australian school for less than 12 months.

New and emerging community

This term refers to any ethnic community that has experienced a significant percentage increase in the number of people arriving in Australia in the past fifteen years. These communities are relatively small and may face challenges during settlement including difficulties accessing stable employment, English language barriers, low-income status or other social factors that could be defined as special needs.

Refugee

The 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Australia is a signatory, defines refugees as people who are outside their country of nationality or their usual country of residence and are unable or unwilling to return or to seek the protection of that country due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Many refugee young people come to Australia with their immediate or extended family while others come as unaccompanied minors.

Second generation Australian

This term is used to refer to a person born in Australia who has at least one parent born overseas. Many second generation young people are born and raised in families that are culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse.

Young person/youth

The United Nations defines 'youth' as people aged between 15 and 24 years inclusive. In Australia, government and non-government services commonly expand the definition to include 12 to 25 year olds. The concept of youth is understood differently across cultures as it relates to life stages, roles within the family and other social expectations.

INTRODUCTION

What is Opening the School Gate?

Opening the School Gate is a resource kit that provides teachers and school staff with a range of strategies to encourage parents and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds to fully participate in the educational experience of their children at school.

This resource was originally developed following a pilot project funded by the federal Department of Family and Community Services through the Reconnect program in 2006.

This edition of Opening the School Gate will be most relevant to government schools in Victoria, but can easily be applied to schools in the Catholic education system, independent schools, as well as schools in other states and overseas education systems.

Why engage migrant and refugee families in school?

Studies have shown that the active involvement of parents in their child's education has a significant positive effect on students. Research indicates that parental engagement can lead to higher academic success, improved attendance, more time spent on homework, increased school retention and fewer discipline problems (Victorian Parenting Centre, 2005).

Aside from the important educational outcomes for students, schools can play a vital role in the settlement process for those born overseas, supporting students and their families to feel like they belong and can make a meaningful contribution to Australian society. Parental involvement in schooling can also bridge the gap in family and cultural values between home and school life for EAL students and may ease any intergenerational conflict that may arise between young people and their parents, improving the level of family connectedness. Once families are connected with schools, they can receive assistance with their child's educational and social development. Feelings of connectedness to family, friends, community and school have been shown to be the most significant factors underpinning an individual's resilience (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001).

Most schools actively seek input from parents and recognise the benefits of such involvement. Schools have a particular interest in making connections with marginalised families, which often include those from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Equally, findings from the Connecting CALD Parents project suggest that migrant and refugee parents often want more information from schools and guidance on how to support their children's education (CMYI, 2006a).

Despite the strong desire to build connections with

culturally diverse communities, schools can often find it difficult to engage migrant and refugee parents. Some of the complex factors that can impede the formation of positive connections are discussed below. For a more in depth discussion about the context of migrant and refugee families and schools, see A Three-Way Partnership? Exploring the experiences of CALD families in schools (CMYI, 2006b).

Issues for migrant and refugee families

There are a number of contributing factors that impact on the involvement of migrant and refugee families in schools. These include:

Stigma: Research from the Connecting CLD Parents project indicated that parental contact with schools was largely crisis-focused and often related to discipline issues. Families often associated any contact with school with some trouble, and the fear and stigma associated with school contact frequently prevented a more positive relationship from forming.

Expectations of school involvement: Within the Australian education system, a three-way relationship between students, families and schools is seen as ideal. Expectations of school involvement in other countries however can be quite different. How parents interact with schools will often reflect their own experiences of schooling overseas. For example, some parents may be used to a more strict separation between home and school life, where parents are not expected to have much of a role in the school unless a problem arises.

Family roles: Family roles often change significantly due to migration. Young people may be more confident in English and take on a new role as advocate for the family, providing assistance with settlement needs and interpreting. This can lead to a power shift within families with children taking on a great deal of responsibility. Parents may feel dependent and powerless and thus less confident in approaching the school directly. Young people may also be protective of their parents and reluctant to involve them in school activities.

Practical considerations: Migrant and refugee parents/carers may have limited time for school involvement due to family size, having young dependent children or being constrained because of work commitments. Financial pressures may be severe in migrant and refugee families. Families may be paying off overseas debts or sending money to assist relatives in need. Refugees usually arrive in Australia with no possessions or financial assets and have to rebuild their lives. Despite the availability of some government assistance and schools offering support to reduce financial disadvantage, the costs associated with

education remain a heavy burden for many families. Financial difficulties may affect the family's ability to purchase uniforms and books, contribute to school levies or pay for school activities, excursions and camps.

Language barriers: Newly arrived family members often feel very uncertain about communicating with schools and can be concerned about their English language skills in the absence of interpreters (Migrant Information Centre 2002:12). Parents with stronger English skills will find it easier to understand information and are also likely to feel more connected with the school.

Knowledge of school systems: Recently arrived parents/carers are likely to have varied knowledge of Australian school systems and may have significant gaps in information or understanding, often about essentials such as uniforms, assessment and textbooks. Parents' understanding or expectations regarding different educational pathways may also impact on their interaction with the school. For example, some migrant or refugee parents have set ideas about their child's education and employment options and may be reluctant to discuss alternative educational pathways with the school.

Fears: Some families feel their children are less physically safe in Australia than when they were overseas, where there was a perception that the community would intervene to protect their children. Anxiety levels can be high for refugee families who have experienced traumatic periods in which their children may have been lost or endangered. Families' fears about the Westernisation of their children and the loss of culture and values can also be great. These fears can affect parents' willingness to allow their children to participate in extracurricular activities.

Issues for schools

Forming strong relationships with all families, in particular migrant and refugee families, is a major objective common among schools. While schools want to support families and have a vested interest in each student's progress, there can be a number of factors impeding a school's capacity to successfully engage migrant and refugee families. These include:

New roles: Increased welfare expectations placed on schools can impact on the role that teaching staff play in supporting students and families. Teachers and other school staff are increasingly being asked to take on roles that may be new or unfamiliar, leading to anxiety.

Staff support and resourcing: Ensuring a school is culturally accessible requires a whole-of-school commitment to resourcing family and community engagement strategies and supporting staff in effectively working with migrant and refugee parents/carers. In some cases, insufficient time and resources are allocated to ensure that successful

engagement strategies are achievable.

Cultural diversity: Schools with students from many different cultural backgrounds may find it difficult to engage with such diversity. While some schools have large, clearly defined cultural groups, such as large Greek or Vietnamese communities, others have small clusters of different cultural groups within their school community. This makes meetings more complicated to organise and more work is involved in reaching such a diverse population.

Complex needs of student population: Staff often need to address a range of complex needs within their school communities. Recently arrived and refugee families may be in need of extra assistance as may a range of other marginalised groups. Schools in areas of high refugee intake are often involved in supporting students and families who are highly traumatised or may have pre or low literacy levels.

Relationships with communities: Staff may be unsure of how to start the process of relationship-building with diverse communities, which can feel quite complex and daunting at first. Schools may not have established connections with ethnic communities or organisations that could help with making initial contact. Some staff are confused by the complexity of extended families and don't know who to approach to talk to about a student.

Using this resource

Opening the School Gate is designed to provide schools with a range of practical strategies to assist in the process of engaging migrant and refugee families and creating a culturally inclusive school environment .

Many schools will already have developed strategies to engage migrant and refugee parents/carers, in which case this resource may offer additional ideas and suggestions. Schools where recently arrived or refugee families are entering or where the engagement of parents has been difficult in the past, may find it useful to work through the resource following the processes outlined.

Most schools will find that Opening the School Gate is best used as a "dip-in" resource to support them in areas they are not sure about or haven't really thought about before. The resource is designed to be used by schools to meet their particular needs and is not intended to be prescriptive.

PLANNING FOR GREATER ENGAGEMENT

This section outlines the essential elements of a whole-school strategy for engaging migrant and refugee families and communities:

- Involving key staff
- Identifying the target groups
- Working in partnership
- Setting objectives
- Allocating resources



Involving key staff

When planning a strategy, find out who has the capacity, skills and interest in engaging migrant and refugee families in your school. You may have staff with particular expertise or experience who should be involved. Coordination of parent support activities is vital and this may involve some out-of-hours activities and administration. You might consider appointing a community liaison officer (bilingual if possible) to implement some of the initiatives outlined in this resource.

You will need to provide support to all staff involved and share the workload so that issues are not marginalised within the school. Broad support from all staff is crucial for the success of the strategies you put in place. Professional development may be required to allow all staff to reach a shared understanding about the needs of culturally diverse families.

The attendance of the school principal and coordinators at meetings sends an important message to parents/carers about the value of their involvement. All teachers, welfare staff, school counsellors and EAL specialists have a significant role to play. The school environment should encourage teacher interest and involvement.

Multicultural Education Aides (MEA)

One of the roles of the MEA is to assist with communication between the school and migrant or refugee parents. MEAs who are bilingual can provide support to parents from particular language backgrounds. They can also provide important information to staff in relation to the cultural practices and concerns of some communities.

It is important to note that MEAs are sometimes placed in a difficult position within the school. Some parents rely on the MEA for information about their child's individual situation, which may or may not be part of their role. It is important to advise parents of the role of the MEA and the way they can be an effective conduit for communication between the school and its community. Professional interpreting services should be used when important or detailed information is being conveyed. More information about MEAs is provided in The MEA Handbook.

What you can do:

- Involve all staff in creating a targeted family engagement policy and related strategies.
- Support staff through professional development.
- Use existing models and resources to support a whole-school approach to engaging migrant and refugee communities.
- Appoint a coordinator and/or group of staff to assist with engaging migrant or refugee families.
- Inform all staff about the strategies the school is using.
- Delegate key staff, including MEAs, to make contact with family members.
- Promote the availability of interpreting services, for example by displaying the interpreter symbol at your school's reception area and on printed documents.

Identifying the target groups

Whatever strategy you select for engaging parents/carers, whether formalised meetings or social events, you will be more successful if you carefully consider their needs and motives. Preliminary questions to consider are:

- Who do you want to reach?
- What is the main objective in engaging parents/carers?
- What patterns of behaviour do you want to change?

It may be appropriate to bring together families with a common interest, such as a cross-cultural group of Muslim families or recently arrived families. Be aware of the differences and similarities within and between groups in terms of culture, religion, language and migration history.

Student data will help you to answer the following questions:

- How many people do you wish to target?
- Will this be a small or large group?
- Do you want to engage a number of communities in a culturally diverse environment, or target parents/carers from a few key language groups?

Creating a school environment where all young people feel safe, valued, engaged and motivated will be accomplished more effectively if working in partnership with parents, adult family, friends, teachers and community members (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001).

Is this discrimination?

Some schools are worried about targeting specific groups because they feel this is an exclusive or unfair approach. Targeting parents/carers from particular cultural, linguistic or religious groups, and/or particular families at risk, is not about excluding others, but about recognising that some families have extra barriers to involvement in their child's education than Australian-born parents, such as lack of confidence with English or lack of knowledge about the Australian school system.

Experience has shown that inviting targeted communities to general parent meetings in the first instance is often not successful. However once you have successfully engaged with under-represented groups you can then move towards a more inclusive approach, so that groups from all cultural backgrounds are welcomed in a generalist whole-school environment. Your migrant or refugee family engagement strategy should fit within your school's overall parent engagement strategies and should supplement what already exists.

The most important thing to remember is to do what works!

Which cultural group?

If you are part of a large, culturally diverse school, you may not be able to work with all the migrant and refugee families at

once. You might need to work with one group first. You could start with:

- those most in need or 'at risk' or under-represented in school activities
- the largest cultural group in the school
- groups that you have previously contacted successfully
- established communities
- new and emerging communities in the school.

It can be difficult to decide which groups are most in need or at risk to work with in your school. It is worth looking at any data or anecdotal evidence you have around social indicators or participation rates of students such as academic achievement, retention rates, absenteeism and welfare concerns as well as your previous experience in engaging particular student or parent groups.

Who to involve?

Not all family structures are the same. For many overseas-born communities, extended family relationships are very important. Many young people arrive in Australia without their biological parents and may be in the care of relatives or a sponsor who is known to the family.

At enrolment, find out who should be contacted in relation to the student. For some families it is important that the head of the family (such as an uncle who may not be the legal guardian) is involved in important decisions relating to a student. Others may expect an older sibling to attend meetings as an advocate on their behalf. Family roles may shift over time as relationships change. Rather than discourage different types of support, involve significant family members in a way that meets the needs of the family and primary carers and the legal requirements of the school.

What you can do:

- Avoid referring to 'parents' only. Make sure you talk about 'families' and/or 'parents and carers'.
- Acknowledge the diversity of family structures in your school and the important role that grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings and other family members can play in a student's wellbeing.
- Ask for the assistance of family members to record the immediate family or guardianship roles on student records and clarify living arrangements.
- In consultation with families, design a coordinated strategy for engaging families where there is a complexity of roles and relationships.
- When in doubt about the best person to speak to in a family, you may invite a number of family members who represent the student's interests to discuss concerns or issues.
- Use interpreters where needed so parents/carers can communicate effectively with the school and advocate for their own needs.

Working in partnership

The next step is to investigate whether there are community organisations that could offer support. A school working as a single service provider cannot effectively respond to the range of complex issues impacting on students and families. Collaborative partnerships between schools, community organisations and ethnic communities are critical in successfully engaging migrant or refugee families.

Schools have reported increased success when bicultural workers from local migrant community organisations or services are part of the process of engaging families. However, the role of a bilingual community worker is not to provide free translation and interpreting. It is important to clarify roles in bicultural work, especially if there is a Multicultural Education Aide already working in the school.

When choosing a partner organisation, aim to work with an organisation with common objectives and interests. Ask a prospective partner:

- What is the focus of your work? e.g. family support, youth work.
- Who do you support? e.g. specific cultural or religious groups.
- Do you have experience in working with schools?
- Would you be interested in working with refugee or migrant families in our school?

Protocols

Many schools have found that guidelines and formal agreements need to be set down before organisations can work together effectively. The arrangement may be fairly informal initially, but may move on to a more structured and sophisticated agreement in the form of a protocol which outlines plans and details the roles and expectations of the partnership. This means you are less likely to work on an ad-hoc basis and any potential misunderstandings and conflict are more likely to be avoided. It is also important to meet regularly and maintain contact with partner organisations.

Working relationships between staff from the school and external community organisations should be formalised. This is especially important where staff work on a part-time basis and meet rarely. School and agency responsibilities and boundaries should be defined especially when following up an individual family's concerns.

What you can do

- Understand the differences between organisations that work with migrant communities. Migrant resource centres and other organisations can help you negotiate the multicultural service sector more effectively.
- Find ethno-specific community organisations with an understanding of both family perspectives and youth issues.
- Develop relationships with community or religious leaders.
- Approach a community language school that operates in your area.
- Work with other agencies to develop partnerships which support the specific needs of migrant and refugee families.

Developing an effective partnership

In 2008, the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) published the Family-School Partnerships Framework – A guide for schools and families. This national framework identifies seven key dimensions for planning partnership activities including:

- communicating
- connecting learning at home and at school
- building community and identity
- recognising the role of the family
- consultative decision making
- collaborating beyond the school
- participating.

In 2011, DEEWR developed the Strengthening Family and Community Engagement in Student Learning resource to assist school communities to set priorities for action and evaluate their progress in each of the seven dimensions. The resource assists schools to encourage the participation and involvement of their school communities, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The resource incorporates a School Assessment Tool (Reflection Matrix) to support school planning processes (see Resources Section).

Setting objectives

Teachers who want to promote family-school partnerships may want to explore the following questions to begin with:

- What do we know about our students' families, their daily lives and environment?
- What fears and barriers do they experience?
- What channels of communication do they respond to?

Selecting the right approach

Once you have answered these questions you will be able to choose appropriate strategies. Running meetings for parents has proved to be the most effective engagement strategy, but shared activities such as family picnics can also build relationships. Using bilingual workers and community leaders provides an opportunity to discuss significant underlying issues that parents/carers are most concerned about.

Determine whose needs you are trying to meet. The most effective approach is to address issues at the top of parents' hierarchy of needs, rather than the peripheral issues. See Appendix 1 for suggestions of issues parents may be interested in.

Allocating resources

The resources required for greater engagement with migrant and refugee families in your school will depend on the strategies you choose. Many strategies are not particularly costly. For example, interpreting services which fall within DET guidelines are provided free of charge to Victorian public schools. As well as this, many of the documents which provide parents/carers with important school information are available in community language on the DET website. Take the time to see what translated documents are available and download any relevant information in the required language. Newly arrived parents will probably not have the resources to do this for themselves.

More intensive, longer-term strategies may need to be separately funded. Estimate the financial cost of the activities or meetings you are planning. Make sure you budget for things such as catering, childcare, transport and staff time.

Consider:

- What financial assistance can the school provide?
- Can a partner organisation provide other resources such as a worker's time?
- Does the school need to source additional funding?

Multicultural festivals

Some schools hold multicultural festivals, music and dancing events, or art and craft displays to attract families and community members from culturally diverse backgrounds to the school and acknowledge its cultural diversity. Although these activities may promote cultural pride and harmony, they can become tokenistic, failing to address the core underlying concerns and barriers families face with regard to their children's education.

If selected as a strategy, multicultural festivals should not be used in isolation to engage families (or students). Multicultural festivals are best used as a first step towards developing purposeful relationships and an entry point into deeper discussions or activities about cultural diversity and intercultural understanding.

PLANNING A PARENT MEETING

This section sets out some practical considerations to help you plan a meeting with parents, carers and other family members from migrant and refugee communities; a strategy that has been found to be particularly successful in engaging migrant and refugee families in schools. The following elements should be considered when planning a meeting:

- Deciding on a meeting format
- Setting the agenda
- Seeking parent and student input
- Choosing an appropriate time
- Finding a suitable location
- Arranging childcare
- Arranging catering
- Arranging transport
- Inviting families
- Translating information
- Arranging interpreters



Deciding on a meeting format

To begin with you will have to decide whether you want to hold a meeting for parents/carers from diverse language groups or focus on one language group at a time.

Language or culture-specific meetings are effective if you have a few large cultural groups in the school. Separate meetings will reduce complex cross-cultural communication, address the particular needs of each community and make parents feel more at ease.

Multilingual formats can be effective when there are small groups from a number of language backgrounds, or when the issue you want to discuss is relevant for many groups. However if holding a meeting with more than two or three language groups, consider the challenges placed on interpreters particularly if several are required to interpret at the same time. The length of the meeting may take longer and noise levels may be a real problem when several people are speaking at the same time.

Generalist meetings including with Australian-born and migrant or refugee parents tend not to be successful in the first instance, but adopting a more generalised approach once families are engaged, will prevent groups from being marginalised in school.

Options for language or culture-specific parent meetings

- Invite each language group to a specific meeting. Have guests present in English with an interpreter. This can be useful if there is one main language group in the school other than English speakers.
- When bilingual staff members are available, hold the meeting in a language other than English and use an interpreter for English speakers such as teachers.

Setting the agenda

Plan and advertise a meeting or activity with a definite purpose or topic in mind. Research shows that parents are more likely to attend a meeting for a specific purpose rather than a general 'get to know you', which is often not seen as critical by busy parents who are juggling many needs within the family. Send invitations to attend the meeting in the home language. Parents will appreciate the effort. An interactive bilingual 'General Invitation' note is available in community languages on the DET website. Where possible, involve parents in setting priorities for meetings or activities beforehand.

Remember to allow time in the meeting agenda for interpreting. You may only cover half the content in the same amount of time compared with English-speaking audiences.

Non school-related sessions

Some schools offer sessions that may not be strictly school-related, but motivate parents to build relationships with the school (such as running classes on sewing, computers, English literacy or providing Centrelink or immigration information sessions). You may be able to combine these events with some discussion about school-based issues or rotate sessions so that school issues are covered every few meetings. As well as enhancing parents' skills and giving them a positive experience of school engagement, schools that use creative channels to engage parents also redefine themselves as community resources.

Engaging fathers

Mothers and female carers tend to come to school meetings more readily. It is also important to encourage fathers and male carers to attend.

The Children's Protection Society ran a series of very successful workshops to engage Arabic speaking men, which although community based rather than at the school, were of great relevance to the school environment. They advertised in Arabic, using community radio, local mosques and churches. They engaged male bicultural workers, who presented on topics that fathers were interested in, such as discipline, and parents'/children's rights (Elali, F, Mourad, S et al, 2001).

What you can do:

- Write an agenda to give structure to the meeting (see Appendix 2 – Suggested Agenda).
- Strike a balance between the school's agenda and the agenda parents bring to meetings.
- Start with a topic that will engage parents such as homework or assessment.
- Provide parents with information about issues they are concerned about including current teaching methods and learning English as an additional language.
- Allow time to explore parents' and the school's perspectives on the topic/s or discuss questions in small groups.
- Provide opportunities in the agenda for parents to raise any issues of their own and share their opinions. This can be useful in planning for future meetings.
- Accommodate varied concepts of time-keeping when setting your start time.
- Allow extra time for interpreting.
- Offer skills based workshops or evening meetings on topics that will encourage both male and female parents/carers to attend.

Seeking parent input

Parents are unlikely to remain engaged with your school if their current concerns are not addressed. One-way information flow from staff can leave parents feeling frustrated and powerless, so it is important to seek some input into what issues are of concern to your target group.

What you can do:

- Ask for input from families when you are starting an initiative, to make sure it is in keeping with their ideas and concerns.
- Ask parents/carers what issues they would like to discuss (see Appendix 1). If your school is beginning a whole school strategy for parent involvement it may be worthwhile having Appendix 1 translated into the school's largest language groups. For details about DET funding for translations see www.education.vic.gov.au. For guidance on preparation of documents for translation email translations@vits.com.au or call 9280 1941.
- Discuss your intentions with the school's parent association to gain their support for multicultural initiatives in the school.
- Ask for feedback on what worked well and what should be changed after you have engaged a number of families.

Seeking student input

Involving students will enhance the success of initiatives. A student's active approval or disapproval can influence family members. Students can feel a sense of stigma if their parents are contacted or appear at school without their knowledge. If you are focusing on a particular cultural group, or a few different groups, it is important to explain why they have been chosen, to avoid perceptions of racism.

Students can offer practical advice on the most effective approach to take with their families and what may be appropriate for their community or religion. It is also important to give students an opportunity to discuss school issues. For some groups, it may be regarded as culturally inappropriate for young people to voice opinions or challenge the ideas of their parents or other adults in public. This reaction to student involvement has to be handled sensitively. It may not be appropriate for students to attend meetings at the same time as adults, but it is worth exploring other avenues for their involvement.

What you can do:

- Explain your strategy to students and why you are focusing on particular groups.
- Ask advice from students and bicultural workers about what families may find culturally appropriate before launching into your strategy.
- Work separately with students to support them in exploring issues.
- Seek ways to include students' ideas in the parent session.
- Invite students to speak at meetings to represent students' ideas or views.
- Structure a dialogue between parents, students and teachers in a non-confrontational atmosphere of sharing.

Choosing an appropriate time

For some cultural or religious groups there are important times in the day or week (such as prayer times) when it would be inappropriate to call a meeting or hold an event. You might provide meeting times during the evening and some during the day to suit different groups, such as working parents and those who work shifts.

Be aware of different cultural attitudes to time-keeping. To allow for late arrivals, you could advertise an earlier start time rather than your actual start time.

Religious commitments

It is important to recognise that religious commitments may be central in the lives of some migrant or refugee families and that they may inhibit the ability of parents to attend activities. For example, during a period of reflection or fasting (such as Lent or Ramadan) or celebrations (like Chinese New Year), families will be busier and may be less likely to be able to attend school activities.

What you can do:

- While being careful not to clash with religious or cultural celebrations, consider how you might acknowledge their importance in planning activities and events. Holding an event with parents/carers close to a key time of celebration can add a sense of cultural inclusivity.
- Ask parents' advice about appropriate times for meetings.

Finding a suitable location

It is important to find a meeting location where parents feel comfortable and which allows for effective participation in discussions. The school library often leads to better engagement with families, rather than using an auditorium

with stadium seating where people can't see each other or talk easily. Avoid any venue in the school that is intimidating or overly formal. Consider holding meetings off-campus at a location familiar to families to encourage involvement.

Meeting venues and spaces

Many schools run programs, forums and workshops to assist migrant and refugee families in their settlement to Australia and in supporting their children's learning. These programs are often delivered in collaboration with other government or non-government agencies and may be held either on or off the school premises.

Some schools provide a designated space for parents to meet either formally or informally on the school grounds. Many schools with identified community meeting spaces report higher levels of engagement by parents and carers, in particular by newly arrived migrant and refugee families who may otherwise be reluctant to get involved at school.

Arranging childcare

A significant barrier to parent attendance at meetings can be the lack of availability of appropriate childcare. While some migrant or refugee families may be uncomfortable leaving their children with strangers, others are happy to access childcare services. If parents have young children, look at what childcare options are available or can be offered to coincide with the meeting time.

What you can do:

- Find a local childcare agency that can provide occasional childcare.
- Fund a worker from the same cultural community as parents/carers to provide specialist childcare.
- Encourage parents to bring their small children to the meeting by holding meetings in a child-friendly environment and at a convenient time, e.g. late morning when the older children are in school.
- Ask staff to advertise the availability of culturally appropriate childcare when calling families and seek information about any particular childcare needs.
- Seek input from families about other solutions.

Arranging catering

Providing food and drink at a meeting will make families feel welcome. Make sure the food choice is appropriate and be aware of dietary restrictions. Consult Multicultural Education Aides or community representatives about providing culturally appropriate food.

What you can do:

- Organise culturally appropriate food through a local caterer or shop. Some schools have found it beneficial to employ parent caterers.
- Be aware of dietary restrictions and label meat, keeping it separate from other food.
- Provide vegetarian food or sweets as they are suitable options for people from most cultures.
- Locate diverse dishes or snacks. This will be appreciated by families.
- Encourage parents who offer to bring food to share, or provide a multicultural buffet. This is something you could discuss once you have established a stronger relationship with families.
- Don't assume people understand that to 'bring a plate' means bring some food to share. Guests supplying food is seen as rude in some cultures.

Arranging transport

Lack of transport is often a significant barrier to parents/carers who rely on public transport or who have no access to a car during the day to attend meetings.

Consider:

- providing information about local transport options
- hiring a minibus to collect parents for the meeting. A local service may be able to help pick up parents from home or a key location
- liaising with community organisations and local government agencies about the possibility of accessing community transport
- encouraging families to arrange car-pooling for parents who are more isolated
- providing taxi vouchers, bus fares or transport tickets to encourage meeting attendance.

Inviting families

Once you have sought input and decided on the focus for your meeting, think of the best way to communicate your message to parents in invitations, telephone conversations and during meetings. Link your 'marketing message' to factors that motivate parents, such as their child's educational progress or safety.

Calling and sending out invitations in first language

Written notices about a meeting are necessary, however the most effective strategy is to invite families by phone a week or two before you need to meet them using an interpreter or bilingual worker. A reminder call on the morning of the activity or the day before is also very useful (see Appendix 3

– Model Telephone Conversation). You can use the Telephone Interpreter Service to invite parents to a meeting.

Why call families?

Schools that rely on fliers only, even when translated, often find that parents don't turn up. Oral contact in the parent's first language is essential for a number of reasons:

- You know the parent has received the information.
- Parents may be competent speaking in their own language, but may not be literate in the same language.
- Many communities are largely oral communicators.
- The fear some parents associate with attending school meetings may be alleviated if they have spoken to someone personally as they understand what the meeting is about and can ask questions.
- Schools demonstrate that they are making an effort to cater for language needs if parents/carers are contacted in their first language.
- The personal contact creates a direct relationship with the family, which reduces anxiety.

Invitations to meetings/events

Step one:

Use translated material to invite families to a meeting. While oral communication is often much more likely to lead to success in engaging migrant and refugee families, written information gives families notice of your proposed activity. An interactive bilingual invitation to a meeting is available in community languages on the DET website.

Step two:

Phone each family individually, or speak to them in person in their first or preferred language. This is critical for parental attendance. You may be able to rely on bilingual staff for this contact or use telephone interpreters. Some ethno-specific workers in community agencies can also assist schools in engaging parents. Ensure that student/parent information remains confidential and that contact details are not available to agencies for any other purpose, unless parents have given permission.

Distributing written information

Send invitations by mail directly to parents or hand them out in person. Avoid handing notices to students, especially in secondary school. Adolescent students are less likely to hand notices to their parents and families may miss out on the information.

If you have to hand out information to students, brief all staff distributing information about the purpose of the meeting. If students know the purpose of the meeting and are told that



the meeting is important, they are more likely to hand the information on.

Translating information

Providing all information in the primary language of the family, as well as in English, is a significant factor in the successful engagement of migrant families in schools. Many Victorian school documents and school notes are available for schools to use free of charge from the DET website. School-specific translations need to be paid for by schools, however if dates and times are left blank and filled in as required, individual school translations can be used over again for future meetings on the same topic.

Translations

A large number of DET publications and documents have been translated into languages other than English. Parents and school staff can access these on the DET website by document name or by language name. See Resources Section.

Arranging interpreters

Interpreting services which meet DET guidelines are available free to Victorian government schools to ensure that parents/carers who cannot speak English well or who have a hearing or speech impairment can access information and communicate with schools.

Both onsite and telephone interpreting can be used depending on availability. Some regional schools may not be able to access onsite interpreters but will be able to access

telephone interpreters and they can be pre-booked to ensure availability. For detailed information on interpreting and how to access services visit the DET website (see Resources Section).

Do I need an interpreter?

In some cases it will be obvious that an interpreter is required to communicate with a family member. In other cases, this may be more difficult to assess. The ability to communicate in English does not always mean the person can understand complex conversations. The best thing to do is ask the family member if they would like an interpreter. Bilingual staff members should not be used as interpreters unless they are conveying low risk information.

Why not use family members or friends as interpreters?

Families may want a family member or friend to interpret for them. However it should be noted that there may be emotional involvement in these instances leading to a lack of impartiality and/or possible misunderstandings when interpreting is not provided by an accredited interpreter.

Interpreting is a specialist skill that is not possessed by everyone who is bilingual. It requires a high level of fluency in both languages and the ability to quickly, accurately and appropriately convey the whole message from one language to another. Qualified and accredited interpreters are bound by the Australian Institute of Translators and Interpreters Code of Ethics which requires them to practise impartiality,

confidentiality and accuracy.

It is not appropriate to use students or relatives to interpret. They may not be familiar with the specialist terminology used, the cultural nuances involved or be sufficiently fluent in both languages to accurately convey the message. It is particularly important that schools do not use students to interpret in matters relating to student welfare, counselling or attendance. Students may not have the knowledge or maturity to adequately convey the message. In addition, using students to interpret for parents may affect family relationships.

There is always a need to encourage parents to become more involved in school activities, but language is a barrier for many newly arrived migrant parents. I started an English conversation class that focused on relevant topics such as helping children at school and life in Australia. The classes were held on a weekly basis and were relaxed and informal. Before long, there were 20 parents attending the class. Parent participants now feel more confident in talking to teachers and other staff members and are more willing to participate in other school activities. The regular English class, which is now supported by teacher volunteers, provides a great forum for consulting and communicating with new parents and family members and allows parents/carers to raise issues with the school.

School Community Liaison Officer

RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE PARENT MEETING

This section outlines practical considerations for running an effective meeting with migrant or refugee parents which include:

- Arranging seating
- Preparing and managing interpreters
- Greeting parents
- Keeping the discussion on track
- Building trust
- Exploring expectations about school involvement
- Explaining practical systems and roles
- Seeking feedback from parents
- Evaluating your strategy
- Sustaining parent involvement



Arranging seating

When running a parent meeting, consider the seating arrangements in the room as this will impact on how comfortable parents feel, how parents interact with each other and school staff, and your ability to create an environment conducive to constructive dialogue.

Seating options for multiple language groups:

- Seat parents around tables according to their language group. You will need more than one table and interpreter for large groups, allowing for two to three people and an interpreter at each table.
- Seat parents in clusters around an interpreter in auditorium seating (in rows). This style is less preferable and should only be used if no other options are available. People might not be able to hear well if there are multiple languages being spoken at the same time. Latecomers are often too far away from their interpreter, and this style of seating is hierarchical and discourages parents from active engagement.

Seating options for single language groups:

- Arrange seating so that the interpreter and speaker(s) are located at the front of the room facing the parents.

Preparing and managing interpreters

It is important that staff know how to use interpreters effectively. Tips on using interpreters are available on the DET website (see Resource Section).

Connecting parents with interpreters:

- Arrange seating so that people can hear their interpreter.
- Match parents to the right interpreter. Put up signs for each language so that people know where to go and make sure that anyone arriving late is directed to the right language.

Briefing interpreters, speakers and audience:

- Brief interpreters before the session. Discuss the purpose of meeting, its content and the procedure.
- We recommend that interpreting occurs after every few sentences, so the interpreter is not simply summarising ideas.

- Ask the interpreter to communicate all issues and questions raised by parents without filtering information or summarising. If there is a sensitive issue, let the interpreter know (e.g. you want to use the term 'drug use' rather than 'drug abuse').
- Brief all guest speakers on how you will work with the interpreters. Ask them to avoid any jargon or acronyms and to explain the full meaning of important terms.
- Explain the interpreting process to the audience. Make sure participants know they can speak in their first language at any stage, but that they need to give the interpreter time to translate.

Intervene if necessary

- Don't allow speakers to talk at length without any interpreting.
- Don't allow questions to be asked before the interpreter has finished. Intervene early if this occurs.

Working with interpreters in a predominantly English-speaking audience

All parents should be encouraged to attend school events by providing interpreters as standard practice. Arranging interpreters for use in predominantly English-speaking audiences can be more complicated, but still effective. Families who require interpreters can be seated to one side of the bigger group so they can hear the interpreter. It is also important to explain to parents why you are using interpreters and the school's inclusive approach.

Greeting parents

When holding your meeting, make sure there are people present to welcome parents as they arrive. If parents are unfamiliar with the school they will need assistance in finding the meeting room. Use students who speak the parents' language to assist with this or put up signs. You can provide name tags and an attendance list, but have someone available to write down names and up-to-date phone numbers in a sensitive way.

We've learnt two things. First, you've got to give parents something they really want, as well as introduce your agenda, otherwise they don't turn up. Second, if you talk to parents about issues without allowing them to respond, or raise other concerns they have, they are turned off.

Migrant Youth and Family Worker

Keeping the discussion on track

Explain to the audience what will happen during the meeting, so they know when it is appropriate to speak. Follow the agenda you have set, but allow time for discussion. Remember to accommodate varied concepts of time-keeping when setting your start time. Maintain some degree of flexibility to allow issues of concern to parents' to be dealt with.

Addressing stigma

During meetings, it is useful to talk openly about the fact that some families feel there is a problem if the school contacts them to arrange a meeting or participate in an activity. Let parents know the reasons for your interest in their children and in forming better links with families. After a few sessions parents may be more open to discuss concerns the school has without feeling blamed or singled out because of their cultural background.

What you can do:

- Discuss positive and neutral topics at first to build positive relationships and shared understanding.
- Give parents positive feedback about their role and attendance.
- When discussing difficult issues, give positive feedback and provide solutions where possible.
- Give families the opportunity to voice their opinions on issues so that you gain a more holistic understanding of the problem.

Building trust

Schools sometimes make contact with parents because there are particular patterns of behaviour amongst parents or students that they would like to change. This is completely legitimate, but the danger in discussing problems too early is that parents can easily feel shamed or persecuted. The experience may reinforce their fears that contact with school only happens when there are problems.

What you can do:

- Start with a topic that will engage parents such as homework or assessment.
- Explore parents' and the school's perspectives on the topic.
- Allow time to discuss questions in small groups.
- Keep discussions on track.
- Encourage parents to explore personal concerns about their family in private later.

The first meeting

Here's an example of what you could say at the first meeting:

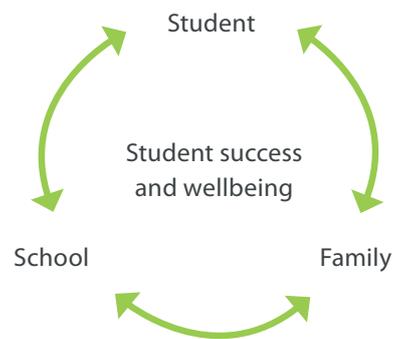
We know that the Australian education system can be difficult and confusing for many recently arrived parents and families. Some parents say they are worried about coming to school, because they feel that there might be a problem with their child, but that's not why we have invited you here today. We would like to make parents feel more comfortable, welcome and confident to ask questions now and in the future.

The school would love to see more parents involved, but we know that the idea of getting involved in a school may not be familiar to some parents. We want to talk about that today. This is also an opportunity to talk about things that are important in the education of your children, and for you to advise the school how we could do better.

Exploring expectations about school involvement

Ask parents about their previous school involvement, both in Australia and in their home country, so they can talk about their own expectations for involvement in the school. This is often a very new concept for family members born overseas. Share with parents/carers what you hope to achieve from their involvement and why it is important to the school.

Figure 1: Three-way partnership between student, school and family



You may need to introduce the idea of a three-way partnership between student, home and school.

The aim is not to overwhelm parents with the school's expectations, but to exchange ideas and develop a deeper understanding of shared goals and parents' concerns. Once families have had their overseas experience acknowledged, they are more likely to be able to accept the difference in philosophical approach in Australia, as well as its potential benefits.

What you can do:

- Explain that your intention in inviting parents is to establish a stronger partnership between the school and parents.
- Explore the idea of parent involvement as it may be an unfamiliar concept.
- Use a diagram to demonstrate the three-way relationship you want to achieve.
- Discuss parents' overseas experiences with schools.

Explaining practical systems and roles

It is important to explain school policies and procedures to parents and to use key staff to build relationships. There are often misunderstandings about school guidelines on basic concepts like uniforms, homework and buying books. Families may want to check the information they have received from their child or other families against school policy written in their first language. Using visual aids and practical demonstrations also helps to overcome language barriers.

What you can do:

- Arrange a tour of the school.
- Introduce key staff and explain their roles in the school.
- Include information on school policy and procedures.
- Bring examples of forms or reports to show parents how they are filled out, providing translated copies of documents where they are available.
- Give demonstrations of activities that you are trying to encourage.
- Use photos or videos of past activities.
- Draw pictures or diagrams or use other visual images to illustrate a point.
- Use stories, culturally relevant analogies and real-life examples or role-plays.

Seeking feedback from parents

At the end of the meeting, seek feedback from parents/carers on how they thought the session went. You could try brainstorming with the aid of interpreters so that the whole group can contribute. If you are after more formal feedback, ask parents to work in small groups with interpreters, who will run through a set of evaluation questions. The interpreter or a bicultural worker can note down comments from parents or work through the responses on a feedback form.

Evaluating your strategy

The process of encouraging migrant or refugee families to be more involved with the school is sometimes a gradual one and not necessarily about attracting high numbers in the first instance. If only a few migrant or refugee parents have shown up at your first meeting and you are disappointed with the low turnout, perhaps you need to re-assess success in terms of what you can provide for those who do attend.

Have you got feedback from them about their level of satisfaction? Can they offer suggestions about what other parents want?

Some schools find that although the numbers are low at meetings specifically set up for migrant or refugee parents, they are attracting parents who have never been inside the school before. This is a really significant step for those families.

Checklist

- Have you made phone contact with families?
- Have you used interpreters and translated materials?
- Is the time chosen for meetings convenient for the parents you are targeting?
- Are there other practical barriers that haven't been addressed? e.g. childcare or transport difficulties.
- Have you sought input from parents/students to check what some of these barriers are?
- Are you selecting topics parents want to discuss or that are in line with their concerns?
- Have you reassessed the strategies you tried and issues you faced with the support of a community agency or bicultural worker?

Sustaining parent involvement

In order to sustain parent and carer involvement, identify the strengths and skills of participating parents/carers and create opportunities for them to use these skills on an ongoing basis in your school.

Some parents will become more involved if they know it is important to their children and they can perform a meaningful role. Others may be interested in being a contact person for an ethno-specific parents' group (e.g. a Cambodian parent group) and liaising with the school. Some schools have migrant or refugee parents on the school council who represent the interests of a cultural group or community. Many parents/carers just want to attend parent meetings and perhaps encourage other to come along. It is important to assist and support parents/carers in these roles.

Some parents may be prepared to take on more responsibility for meetings over time. This process of fostering leadership is likely to happen slowly and may require some support and encouragement. It is not always possible to set up self-management of parent associations.

What you can do:

- Provide support and resources for parents who are emerging as future leaders of an ongoing group or who already play a significant leadership role.
- Identify key parent leaders to encourage others to attend events.
- Encourage culturally specific parent groups if parents are interested in managing them.

bread
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fern shirt worm fur
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saw door
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cow house
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coin toy
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SUPPORTING CULTURALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES IN YOUR SCHOOL

This section outlines general strategies for making your school more accessible and inclusive of the needs of families from migrant and refugee backgrounds:

- Creating a welcoming environment
- Seeking consent
- Addressing families' concerns about camps
- Catering for dietary needs
- Discussing welfare concerns with parents
- Addressing discipline issues
- Reporting on student progress
- Holding parent-teacher meetings
- Creating opportunities for meaningful parent involvement

Creating a welcoming environment

Schools that are welcoming, positive, respectful and supportive of parents from all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to experience the successful engagement of migrant and refugee families in school activities and thus achieve positive outcomes for students.

Schools that have 'welcome' signs and directions in key languages spoken by students and families not only provide practical assistance, but give the message that the school is inclusive and welcomes diversity. Posters depicting diversity and traditional artwork in public areas can also make people feel comfortable and accepted. Student artwork and school photos on display can be a talking point for families and a source of pride.

What you can do:

Provide multilingual, written information about your school, including school policies, support and orientation programs and multicultural initiatives to prospective students and their families. Secondary schools may wish to provide information about their schools and secondary education in feeder primary schools and English Language Centres and Schools. Written translations are especially useful for orientation meetings.

Seeking consent

Many schools find that parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds may be reluctant to give consent to their child participating in extracurricular or out-of-school activities and often do not return permission forms. There are a number of strategies that can be implemented to resolve this situation:

- Provide information in the first language of parents/carers and seek informed consent.
- Use translated permission forms and other materials. This is critical to ensure that parents/carers can access information about the purpose of the activity, what is being asked of them and what their child will be doing.
- Acknowledge parental fears and develop an understanding of their perspectives.
- Make personal approaches to families with the aid of an interpreter, bilingual member of staff or community worker when the student feels permission may be an issue. This allows for open dialogue and exploration of concerns.
- Seek practical solutions to address concerns. Teachers may be able to provide schoolwork in advance for students who miss out during an out-of-school event. Transport arrangements can be modified to provide a greater sense of security for the family.

What you can do:

- At enrolment, collect information about the student's needs and convene a meeting between the year advisor and parents, using an interpreter where necessary. This is an opportunity to discuss issues such as academic history, health, parents' perceptions of their child's academic progress, homework, family views regarding education and parental involvement in the school.
- Support new parents by establishing and supporting a 'buddy' system, pairing new parents with existing parents.
- Provide a description of the program for parents.

Addressing families' concerns about camps

Many migrant or refugee parents fear for their child's physical and emotional safety when they are away from home. They are concerned about students missing class to participate in other learning environments, attending culturally inappropriate activities and the safety of girls in particular. While schools may want to adopt a holistic approach to developing children's social, physical and academic skills, this may not be understood by parents in the same way.

School camps are often of particular concern to parents. Some schools have tackled the problem by sharing more information with parents.

What you can do:

- Show a video or photos so families can see what the camp site looks like.
- Outline the learning that will occur at the camp.
- Ask students from similar cultural backgrounds who have previously attended the camp or their parents/carers to contribute information about their experiences. They could be invited as a guest speakers at a parent meeting or could write an article for the school newsletter.
- Talk about staff supervision of students while they are away from home.
- Talk about how you address students' religious, cultural and dietary needs at camp.
- Consider allowing some parents to attend camps and activities. Some groups feel more comfortable if a respected family member attends on behalf of a group of families.
- Adopt a flexible approach to overnight stays. Some parents may not want their child to sleep away from home, but after discussion, they may be prepared to transport them to the camp site for the day.
- Evaluate your camp strategy. Is a day trip more appropriate for your school community?

In marketing camps to parents we highlighted the educational benefits. Rather than simply talking about students making friends, doing physical exercise and forming better relationships with teachers, we thought of ways to include these messages within the context of educational attainment, which addressed parents' key motivations.

We said that it was up to each family to decide what was best for their child, but wanted to provide more information for them to make up their minds. A well-respected student spoke to parents about the benefits of attending the camp, safety and culturally appropriate activities."

School Welfare Coordinator

Catering for dietary needs

Parents need to be reassured that their child's religious and cultural needs, including their dietary requirements, will be met at school and during extracurricular activities. It can be straightforward to discuss and cater for these needs, allaying parents' fears and making them more likely to allow their children to participate in school activities.

What you can do:

- List a selection of dietary requirements (for example, 'Halal, Kosher, Vegetarian, and Other') on consent forms. This will give parents the feeling that the school is aware of their needs and will respond to them.
- Take a school canteen list to a parent meeting and ask for ideas, or work on a school canteen policy together. Families are happy to provide advice if the school is struggling to adapt meals and wants to make sure food is culturally appropriate.
- Consider asking a parent to provide advice to canteen staff on culturally appropriate dishes and the possibility of some part-time work for parents who are interested.

Discussing welfare concerns with parents

Many parents who have not developed a relationship with teachers fear the worst when a teacher makes contact and this can cause problems in communication about welfare concerns. Schools need to develop effective and supportive ways to assist families with the issues their children face and be able to recommend solutions that parents are happy with. Issues handled ineffectively can have a devastating effect on relationships at home and exacerbate issues at school.

Family conflict, teenage pregnancy, truancy, mental illness, homelessness and drug use are highly taboo subjects in some communities. Where possible, seek advice from a migrant or refugee youth and family worker about how to talk to a family before contacting parents. Approach problem-solving sensitively with family members to reduce negative consequences for the student. Always use accredited interpreters when dealing with these issues. Interpreters are impartial and bound by ethics and confidentiality where MEAs may be seen as part of the community.

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture has produced a useful guide, *Schools In For Refugees* (see Resources section), which outlines a range of strategies schools can use to ensure they are meeting the needs of refugee students and their families with regard to curriculum, welfare and other important aspects of school life. Many of the suggestions can be adapted to meet the needs of non-refugee students from culturally diverse backgrounds.



Addressing discipline issues

Student suspension or expulsion require careful and supportive handling to minimise the impact on family relationships. Families may need information on options for their child and help in understanding policies and procedures around discipline issues. Schools that have integrated welfare and disciplinary procedures often report successful outcomes in discipline matters for students, families and staff alike.

Involving youth and community workers who are able to offer assistance around these issues is often useful. Those who specialise in support for migrant and refugee young people are often very skilled in this area and can assist school staff to negotiate positive outcomes.

What you can do:

- Provide opportunities for parents to get to know teachers, welfare coordinators and the principal before any issues arise, so that trust is established.
- At enrolment, provide a translated leaflet about the welfare team and support offered by the school.
- When a student has difficulties, involve families as soon as possible to prevent a crisis response.
- Develop a contact list of organisations and bicultural workers who can provide advice on cross-cultural approaches to discipline. Remember not to provide details about the student or the situation if you don't have the family's consent.
- Seek student and parent permission to involve youth or community workers in the matter, including workers from the same cultural background as the family. Remember that some families may be too ashamed to involve members of their own community in personal or family affairs.
- Review disciplinary, welfare and academic progress policies in the school to ensure that they are complementary and integrated where appropriate.
- Work with interpreters when discussing welfare and discipline issues. They are vital for complex matters where family members must fully understand the situation or provide informed consent, and where English language ability may be diminished in a crisis.



Reporting on student progress

One of the difficulties for parents reading reports is deciphering the Australian grading system and assessment methods. Due to a lack of information in their first language, parents from migrant or refugee backgrounds often rely on verbal feedback from their children about their progress at school, which may not provide an accurate description of progress. This situation can lead to family conflict. Schools may need to explain the reporting system to parents at meetings. DET has provided a simple pamphlet about Victoria's Essential Learning Standards translated in common languages (see Resource Section).

English literacy can often be a common barrier for parents. Schools should offer interpreter assisted parent-teacher meetings as a strategy for parents/carers to access information out about their child's progress.

Distributing reports

Some schools have reported that parents do not always receive their child's school report. Many schools send reports home with students, which is cost effective, however it is difficult to determine whether the family actually receives the report. Some migrant or refugee parents report that their child hides a report they are ashamed of when it has been given to the student directly. Parents sometimes don't know when a report is due and as a result don't know when to approach their child or the school about reports.

Schools that post reports home say they have more success with reports being received by parents. Some schools choose to distribute reports at parent-teacher meetings.

Holding parent-teacher meetings

Schools often report poor involvement of parents from migrant and refugee backgrounds in parent-teacher meetings (Migrant Information Centre, 2002:27). Low attendance at parent-teacher meetings is often an indicator of a lack of previous involvement with schools in Australia or overseas.

Those who are more familiar with parent-teacher interviews often fear their language skills are too limited and parents/carers may not know that interpreters are available. They may not have had any previous experience of interpreters being provided at the school or they may be afraid that if the school reports problems with their child, the interpreter will reveal this information to others in the community.

What you can do:

- Call parents to invite them to the parent-teacher meeting using the family's preferred language. Explain why you would like them to attend.
- Promote the availability of interpreters using the National Interpreter Symbol (see Resources Section).
- Use accredited interpreters. Explain to parents that interpreters must follow a professional code of ethics and that the information discussed is confidential.
- To develop staff confidence, support their training in the use of interpreters.
- Discuss the relevance of parent-teacher meetings at other parent meetings.
- Be sensitive to the language and approach used in meetings. Make sure you give context to comments made about a student's progress, ensuring you give positive feedback where the student is making good effort and achieving before discussing any concerns.

What has worked

A school with large numbers of newly arrived students distributes semester reports at parent-teacher nights as a way of encouraging parent attendance at these events. Interpreters are provided at the parent-teacher nights to assist as required. Parents/carers who do not attend are contacted by phone, using telephone interpreters where necessary, to discuss how they feel their child is going at school. The school reports a high rate of participation by newly arrived families with limited English.

Using an interpreter at a parent-teacher meeting:

- Brief the interpreter on what the conversation will be about before the interview.
- For on-site interpreting, position yourself so that you can speak directly to parents/carers (and students, if present) with maximum eye contact.
- Talk directly to parents/carers and use the first person when speaking (e.g. say 'Do you...' instead of 'Do they...').
- Use plain English, avoiding slang and colloquialisms with a normal tone and volume.
- Make one point at a time. Keep each question or statement short.
- Do not ask the interpreter to edit your information or to tell you about the family's cultural background. Ask the parents/carers directly for such information.
- More guidance about working with interpreters is available in the Department of Education and Training Resource "Talking in Tune" (see Resource Section).

Creating opportunities for meaningful involvement

Involving migrant or refugee parents in the initiatives you plan is vital to the success of your engagement strategy. A model which includes parents at every level is more successful long-term, sustainable and meaningful than programs in which parents are simply the recipients of information. Studies have found parents are more motivated and take more active leadership when they participate in decision-making roles.

Examples of meaningful activities for parents include:

- attending and assisting with school excursions or sports
- joining in social activities
- helping with development of culturally relevant policies e.g. establishing a prayer room
- providing advice on culturally appropriate food for the canteen
- fundraising
- participating on parent advisory and decision-making groups
- using specialist skills to support teaching and learning within or across subjects, e.g. individual or professional skills or cultural or linguistic knowledge and abilities
- inviting parents as guest speakers to share their professional knowledge
- being a student mentor, e.g. seeking work in a related industry
- participating in curriculum working groups, e.g. selection of community languages or culturally appropriate resources
- attending working bees.

RESOURCES FOR VICTORIAN SCHOOLS

A new life for refugees: Australia's Humanitarian Program – A resource for schools

This resource is produced by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection for Australian primary schools. It tells the story of refugee resettlement in Australia. Copies may be downloaded in three parts from Department of Immigration and Border Protection website. See: immi.gov.au/media/publications/general/new-life-ref.htm

English as an Additional Language Information and Resources

Program information and resources for teachers, families and students are available at: education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/eal/Pages/default.aspx

Families as Partners in Learning

A practical resource for early childhood services and schools to build and strengthen family partnerships. See: education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/partnerships/Pages/familypartnerships.aspx

Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau

The Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau has been set up to support Australian schools, families and communities build sustainable, collaborative, productive relationships. The web-site provides a framework and useful resources. See: familyschool.org.au/

Harmony Day

This website provides information on Harmony Day as well as a range of resources and ideas for Harmony Day events. Included are a range of educational resources designed for use by teachers and students. The website is managed by the Department of Social Services. See: harmony.gov.au

Interpreting and translating services

Information, guidelines and contact details for schools needing the assistance of interpreters and translation services in working with parents, carers and families with language backgrounds other than English. The services are free for Victorian government schools within specific guidelines. See: education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/management/Pages/translateservice.aspx and education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/translations/Pages/default.aspx

Parent Engagement in Children's Learning

This Federal Government Department of Education and Training website provides a range of resources, information and research for parents, carers, families and those interested in the benefits of family engagement in students' learning. See: education.gov.au/parent-engagement-children-s-learning

Racism. No way!

This website provides anti-racism education information and resources for Australian schools. It includes a comprehensive set of resources to assist schools, teachers and students to understand and counter racism in the school environment.

The website is managed by the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) on behalf of all Australian schools. See: racismnoway.com.au/

Racism. It stops with me

This Australian Human Rights Commission campaign invites all Australians to reflect on what they can do to counter racism wherever it happens. The campaign website provides information, resources, tips and case studies to support individuals and organisations can participate in the campaign. See: itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/

Reconciliation Australia

Reconciliation Australia is an independent, national not-for-profit organisation which aims to promote reconciliation by building relationships, respect and trust between the wider Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The website provides a range of resources and information that may be used by individuals, schools, workplaces and other organisations. See: reconciliation.org.au/

Schools and Families in Partnership: A Desktop Guide to Engaging Families from Refugee Backgrounds in their Children's Learning. This resource can be downloaded from the Foundation House website. See: foundationhouse.org.au/schools-support-program-resources/

School's In for Refugees

School's In for Refugees is a resource that supports schools and school-based professionals in their efforts to provide a high quality education to young people of refugee backgrounds. The resource may be downloaded in sections from the Foundation House, Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture website. See: foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees/

Talking in Tune: A guide to working with interpreters in schools

A guide to working with interpreters in the school setting. The resource consists of seven scenarios designed to highlight common pitfalls and effective strategies when working with interpreters. It suggests ways of avoiding these pitfalls to enable successful communication with parents or guardians. See: fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/View.aspx?pin=J5HJL4

Victorian Multicultural Commission National Interpreter Symbol

The National Interpreter Symbol helps people with low English proficiency identify where they can ask for language assistance when using a government service. See: multicultural.vic.gov.au/projects-and-initiatives/improving-language-services

USEFUL CONTACTS

Federal organisations

Australian Human Rights Commission

The Australian Human Rights Commission is an independent statutory organisation that reports to the Federal Parliament through the Attorney General. The Commission investigates complaints about discrimination and human rights breaches. The Commission has responsibility to monitor Australia's performance in meeting its international human rights standards.

Phone: (02) 9284 9600, Complaints Infoline: 1300 656 419
General enquiries and publications: 1300 369 711
TTY: 1800 620 241

Website: humanrights.gov.au

Refugee Council of Australia

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for refugees and the organisations and individuals who support them. It has more than 180 organisational and 700 individual members. RCOA promotes the adoption of flexible, humane and practical policies towards refugees and asylum seekers both within Australia and internationally through conducting research, advocacy, policy analysis and community education.

Phone: (02) 9211 9333

Website: refugeecouncil.org.au

Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN)

The Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) is the nationally recognised policy and advocacy body on multicultural youth issues. Auspiced by the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) in Victoria, the MYAN works in partnership with young people, government and non-government agencies at the state and national levels, to support a nationally consistent approach to addressing the needs of multicultural young people in policy and practice.

Phone (c/o CMY): (03) 9340 3700

Website: myan.org.au

Statewide bodies

Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY)

CMY is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia.

Phone: (03) 93540 3700

Website: cmy.net.au

Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria Inc.(ECCV)

The ECCV is the peak body for ethnic and multicultural

organisations in Victoria. It is a community based, member driven organisation committed to empowering people from diverse multicultural backgrounds.

Phone: (03) 9349 4122

Website: eccv.org.au/

The Ecumenical Migration Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence

The EMC has been at the forefront of the migrant rights movement in Australia for over 40 years. It pioneered the delivery of services to migrant communities and today continues to work with new and emerging communities to build their capacity and support their members.

Phone: (03) 8412 8700

Website: bsl.org.au/services/refugees-and-settlement/ecumenical-migration-centre-emc/

Foundation House (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.)

Foundation House is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1987 to meet the needs of people in Victoria who had been subjected to torture or other traumatic events in their country of origin, or while fleeing those countries. Foundation House provides professional development programs for schools and those working with refugee background students.

Phone: (03) 9388 0022

Website: foundationhouse.org.au/

Languages and Multicultural Education Resource Centre

This specialist support centre provides resources and advice for teachers on languages, English as an Additional Language (EAL), human rights and multicultural education. Teachers may borrow reference materials, teaching materials and resources at no cost.

150 Palmerston Street, Carlton VIC 3053

Phone: (03) 9349 141

VICSEG New Futures

VICSEG New Futures is a not for profit, community organisation incorporating the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG Programs for Families, Children & Young People) and New Futures Training, providing support and training to newly arrived and recently settled migrant communities throughout the northern and western Melbourne regions.

Phone: (03) 9383 2533

Website: vicsegnewfutures.org.au/



APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: ISSUES PARENTS MAY BE INTERESTED IN

TOPICS	NO. INTERESTED
Supporting students with their studies at home and school	
Student assessment and reports, parent-teacher nights	
Uniforms, books, voluntary contributions – policy, process	
Subjects offered at school, what they mean, choices	
The Australian education system – primary, secondary, tertiary	
Education pathways from school	
Making appointments with teachers, introducing key staff roles	
Welcome and orientation to the school (tour of buildings)	
Transitions to school – Starting primary/high school/ELS to school	
What to do when there is a problem with your child	
Student wellbeing	
What to do when your child is sick (notifying the school)	
Homework (school's expectations and support options)	
Communication between parents and the school	
English as an Additional Language / Dialect Support	
Camps and excursions	
Raising teenagers in Australia, improving family relationships	
Bullying and racism	
Drug and alcohol issues	
Immigration issues	
Centrelink benefits	
The rights of parents, children and the law	
National or state-wide assessment programs such as NAPLAN, VELS	
Parent involvement in class and school activities	
Other ideas	

APPENDIX 2: SUGGESTED AGENDA – INITIAL MEETING WITH MIGRANT AND REFUGEE PARENTS

Time: 2 hours

1. Welcome to the school

2. Meeting introduction

- Introduce names and roles of staff, and ask parents' names.
- Discuss the purpose of the meeting and issues planned for the day. Let everyone know they can ask questions at any stage and explain how you will use interpreters. Talk about why you want to explore parental involvement in the school and thank parents for coming, reassuring them that the meeting is about forming positive relationships. Talk about the stigma parents can feel in attending the school, and how great it is they have come despite this possibility and their busy lives.

3. First group discussion

- How are parents involved in schools in your home country, or other countries where you've lived? Why would you visit the school in your home country?
- How have you been involved with schools in Australia? Are they the same?
- Facilitator to seek input from parents and write raised issues on the whiteboard.

4. The education system in Australia

- Some things you might expect in Australian schools.
- Presentation: Comparing Australian education system with the system in parents' country of origin.

5. Morning tea break

6. Second group discussion

- How could we help your children improve their participation at school?
- Are there any barriers we can help you overcome?
- Write issues on the whiteboard.

7. Consultation

- What issues would you be interested in discussing in the future?
- Read out a list of topics they may be interested in. To prioritise the most important issues, ask for a show of hands if they are interested in the suggested topics. Seek any other suggestions.

8. Evaluation

- What is something you thought was good about today?
- Is there anything you suggest we change for next time?

9. Closing comments

Thank parents for the time they have set aside and their input. Discuss date and time of next meeting after consultation with parents. Ask if anyone would be willing to be a contact person to help with ideas about the next meeting. Encourage parents to spread the word and bring other families they know to the next meeting.

APPENDIX 3: MODEL – INTERPRETER ASSISTED TELEPHONE CONVERSATION – INVITATION TO A MEETING

Introduction

State your name, your role, and that you are calling with an interpreter (check the language selected is OK if you are unsure). Indicate that you are not calling about a problem with their child and not to worry.

Reason for the meeting

Example: Have you heard there will be an important meeting for families and guardians at the school next week? We hope all families who have children in the school will come to the meeting. The school really wants to help your children to succeed at school and would like to hear from you about how the school could be doing better.

This is also an opportunity to provide parents with important information about the Australian education system, and for you to ask some questions about the school, or make some suggestions. It is a chance to tell the school about what you would like in the future for your child.

Sometimes parents can feel uncomfortable about coming to the school because of language or lack of confidence, but there will be an interpreter there, and some workers who also speak your language.

We would like fathers and mothers (or male and female guardians/carers) to be there.

Check the details:

Date: 12 July

Time: From 10.00 am to 12.00 noon.

Place: School library. Check they know how to get there.

Language:

We will arrange interpreters to be at the meeting. Can you tell us what language you would like for the interpreting?

Childcare:

There will be a childcare worker for younger children at the local community centre. Childcare is free. Do you think you will need childcare? If so, how many children will you bring? (If any, fill in your childcare form.)

Conclusion

We really hope you can come – is there anything we can do to help you to get there next week (transport, any other barriers)? Do you have any questions?

APPENDIX 4: CASE STUDY 1 – THE PATH TO SUCCESS: CAREER CONVERSATIONS AT BRUNSWICK SECONDARY COLLEGE

Brunswick Secondary College (BSC) has a very diverse student body. As part of the Refugee Education Support Program the school identified the needs of their students with refugee backgrounds centred around career and training pathways.

The need

Many families with refugee backgrounds are eager to discuss career plans with their children and are anxious to make good decisions. However, these families often lack the necessary familiarity with Victoria's complex education and training pathways. BSC found that students and their families often made decisions about schooling and career pathways that were not in line with their expectations for the future.

The response

BSC decided to run special, language-specific careers information workshops for families with refugee backgrounds. The school's EAL Coordinator and Careers Counsellor worked together to adapt and translate DET's Engaging Parents in Careers Conversations (EPICC) resource. Using the Victorian Interpreting and Translating Service the school created booklets and activities in Persian, Somali, Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin, translated presentations and booked interpreters for workshops. Parents and carers attended these workshops with their children, exploring career pathways and demystifying school and training systems.

The outcome

- Well-developed, tailored and translated careers resources in several languages.
- Positive experience using interpreters to deliver sessions.
- Confidence using interpreting services.
- A plan to continue these workshops in future.

Parents

Parents said that it was a very useful and informative session with great resources provided and that parents said they felt better informed and confident about their child's career pathway options. They were grateful the school held these workshops specially for them.

School

The school has reported more students from Somali and Persian speaking families are visiting the school's Career Centre.

Career Counsellor

"The EPICC framework was great to use because the slides, activities and resources could be modified to fit into the format and time the school allocated for the workshop." - Catherine, Careers Counsellor

This project is a Refugee Education Support Program (RESP) activity. RESP is a Department of Education and Training funded initiative in partnership with CMY and Foundation House, delivered in collaboration with Catholic Education Commission Victoria and Independent Schools Victoria.

APPENDIX 5: CASE STUDY 2 – CREATING CONNECTIONS TO IMPROVE LEARNING: PRESTON NORTH EAST PRIMARY SCHOOL (PNEPS) FAMILY LEARNING CLUB

To support children with refugee backgrounds, PNEPS created opportunities to engage with families through a Family Learning Club. This activity was initiated through the Refugee Education Support Program.

The need

Many students with refugee backgrounds lack the English language skills necessary to participate confidently in mainstream classes. A large number had not attended English Language School before enrolling at PNEPS and lacked access to educational support at home. Opportunities for school staff to engage with students' families were also rare.

The response

In consultation with CMY, PNEPS partnered with Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre to design and implement a weekly Family Learning Club which targeted students with refugee backgrounds. Spectrum MRC provide a paid facilitator to run the weekly after-school sessions and recruit volunteer tutors from the local community. Children bring specific learning goals which are set by their teachers and volunteer tutors work with children on these goals, either individually or in small groups. Spectrum MRC and the school work together to promote the program to families, encouraging parents and carers to attend with their children and learn practical strategies to support their child's learning at home.

The aim

- Increase students' English language proficiency, participation in classroom activities and optimism about their ability to succeed in school.
- Increase in families confidence to support child's learning at home, knowledge of the Australian education system and involvement in the school.
- Through contact with volunteers increase families connections with the wider community.

Community

Children and their families increase their connections with the wider-community through contact with volunteers from the community and Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre staff.

Parent/Carer

"I wish my family knew more English. My mum doesn't really know how to speak [it]" - Girl, 8 years old.

The Family Learning Club model recognises barriers that face families in supporting their child's learning and aim to assist them with language skills and confidence in being involved with the school.

Child

"The best thing – we love the tutors and they are so nice... We can do our homework and they help us. Our mum and dad can't help us at home because they have too many other things to do." - Girl, 8 years old

Other

"Schools don't have to do this alone. Partnerships lead to a whole community supporting a child and their school."
- Rosie, CMY Education Support Officer

This project is a Refugee Education Support Program (RESP) activity. RESP is a Department of Education and Training funded initiative in partnership with CMY and Foundation House, delivered in collaboration with Catholic Education Commission Victoria and Independent Schools Victoria.

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