

Opening the digital school gate

Engaging migrant and refugee families

A resource
for Victorian
Schools



Education
and Training



Opening the digital school gate: Engaging migrant and refugee families

Acknowledgements

Opening the Digital School Gate provides schools with a range of considerations and practical strategies to assist in establishing a culturally inclusive digital presence. This resource is an extension of work produced in the original Opening the School Gate resource. The approaches of Opening the School Gate 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 Digital School Gate has been developed by CMY's MY Education program which is generously supported by the Victorian Government.

Centre for Multicultural Youth

CMY is a not-for-profit organisation based in Victoria, providing specialist knowledge and support to young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Our purpose is to create a society where multicultural young people live life where they are connected and can fully reach their potential.

CMY was the first organisation in Australia to work exclusively with migrant and refugee young people. We've come a long way since 1988 but there are still significant challenges and much work to be done.

Young people 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 either 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)

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).

>> Definitions and Acronyms continue over page

Definitions and Acronyms

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

This term is used to refer to students whose first language 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)

Students who meet eligibility criteria can attend an English language school, campus or centre for between two to four terms. The small class sizes and high number of contact hours enable qualified EAL teachers to deliver an intensive English language program tailored to the differing needs of students. This helps them to adapt as quickly as possible to the Australian education system and society. English Language Schools cater for both primary and secondary students up to the equivalent of Year 10. Some English language schools also have campuses off site.

English Language Centres (ELC)

Attached to mainstream primary and secondary schools, English Language Centres (ELC) provide programs to meet the needs of students at their schools.

Interpreter

A professionally qualified 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.

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 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 at 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).

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 15 years. These communities are relatively small and may experience high levels of unemployment, 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, define 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 Digital School Gate?

Opening the Digital School Gate provides schools with a range of considerations and practical strategies to assist in establishing a culturally inclusive digital presence. By doing so, schools can contribute to improving the engagement of migrant and refugee families in the educational experience of their children.

This resource supplements the existing Opening the School Gate resource by specifically considering strategies for engaging migrant and refugee families in the digital presence of schools. It must be acknowledged that full participation in a modern Australian educational experience requires digital engagement, including the use of digital resources for learning and digital communication with families. Opening the Digital School Gate has developed from lessons learned through a review of recent research and previous attempts by schools to improve digital engagement with families. This resource provides specific strategies for teachers and school staff to extend their engagement of refugee and migrant families into digital spaces.

This resource will be most relevant to government schools in Victoria but can be adapted and applied to schools in the Catholic education system, independent schools, as well as schools in other states and overseas education systems.

Why is it important to maintain inclusive digital spaces?

Having an inclusive digital presence is one way a school can reach out into its community to establish new connections with families and open its doors to enhance existing connections. Increasingly, schools rely on digital engagement with students and families. It is important to consider how this engagement can include migrant and refugee families. Digital platforms can be used to provide learning resources for students to access at home, deliver important information to families, and help create and maintain community links between families and the school. The Department of Education and Training already recognises its importance and actively supports schools to strategically plan for the use of ICT. Policies provided by the department related to personal devices, digital learning in schools, social media use, and the responsible use of digital technologies are all intended to support schools in managing their approach.¹

However, migrant and refugee families often face additional challenges and barriers which limit their ability to benefit from existing digital engagement.²

1. Department of Education and Training. "Policy and Advisory Library." Accessed February 15 2021. <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal>.
2. Edmee Kenny, *Settlement in the digital age: Digital inclusion and newly arrived young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds*, (Carlton, Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2016).

Different needs for digital engagement

When planning for digital engagement, it is essential to recognise the different needs of families. It is worth considering the common barriers often faced by migrant and refugee families, including:

- Being more likely to use English as an Additional Language.
- Being more likely to have limited access to time, hardware, internet or other resources.
- Having different cultural values and expectations of school contact.
- Having different experiences of using digital technology, including levels of familiarity with the digital platforms used by Australian schools.

Importantly, while many migrant and refugee families may share similar experiences and needs, they will also have significant differences. Wealth, English literacy, literacy in additional languages, educational background, and professional experience, are just some common factors likely to change a family's needs concerning digital engagement. Maintaining close contact and ongoing relationships with migrant and refugee families will be important for understanding these needs. The existing strategies and considerations in the Opening the School Gate resource are a good place to start.

Data on rates of digital access in Victoria is not comprehensive. Data which includes a focus on the digital access of migrant and refugee families is not consistently gathered.

During the 2020 period of remote learning, CMY conducted a survey of 350+ young Victorians about their experiences during the first COVID-19 lockdown period (March-April 2020). The survey highlighted some key challenges for digital access:

- 46% of respondents faced difficulties accessing the internet from home.
- 79% of respondents faced difficulties accessing the support they needed from their teachers or educators.
- 67% of respondents faced difficulties accessing the support they needed from their parents or family.³

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index found that across Australia CALD migrants had a higher than average level of digital inclusion. However, a follow up survey with 146 recently-arrived CALD migrants living in Shepparton noted below average digital inclusion with affordability and literacy being key issues.⁴

That migrant and refugee students and their families are more likely to face particular challenges aligns with anecdotal accounts from schools and other institutions during 2020.

Using the resource

The practical considerations presented in this resource can provide a starting point for schools aiming to increase their digital engagement with migrant and refugee families. This document is intended to be a "dip-in" resource to support schools in meeting particular needs, rather than prescribing a set of staged requirements.

Many schools will already have developed strategies for digital engagement, as well as other ways to engage migrant and refugee families. This resource may offer additional ideas and suggestions as well as considerations for how strategies for digital engagement and the engagement of migrant and refugee families may complement one another.

Opening the Digital School Gate is best used as a supplement to Opening the School Gate. Many of the strategies presented in that resource continue to be relevant in digital spaces.

3. CMY, *COVID-19 Insights: Key Issues and recommendations from CMY's work with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria*, (Carlton, Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2020)
4. Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index*, (RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, 2019).

1. Building on the strengths of families and communities



Throughout the process of digital engagement, it is important to recognise the experiences of migrant and refugee families as potentially different from Australian born families, rather than as universally deficient.¹ Migrant and refugee families are able to draw on their unique experiences, values, and circumstances as particular strengths for digital engagement.

What you can do:

- Look for existing community groups that already take advantage of digital platforms to maintain regular contact amongst families.
- Be aware that with adequate access to their school, migrant and refugee families are well placed to describe their own needs and suggest strategies for meeting these needs.
- Be aware that migrant and refugee families are often well placed to advocate for, and manage the learning of, their own children, if able to access the platforms to do so.
- Remember that the school and families form a partnership to overcome challenges and support students.

Working with the families during the 2020 lockdown period, MEAs, teachers and principals regularly referred to the particular strengths that migrant and refugee families employed to navigate challenges successfully.

In one case, three schools in Metro Melbourne aimed to work with migrant community groups, to improve digital engagement. Each school employed workers directly from migrant communities to engage families around digital learning. By drawing on the existing strength of the community schools were able to quickly renew engagement, provide targeted resources, keep families updated and provide families with devices. In each case, engagement was done in language appropriate for the group of families being supported, which included using Arabic, Dinka, Burmese, Hakha Chin and Vietnamese.

In two of the schools this work was facilitated in partnership with a not-for-profit community organisation who provided seed funding to start work after recognising that refugee and migrant families were facing common challenges with remote and digital learning.



2. Establishing an inclusive whole school approach

Understanding the purpose of digital engagement for schools

When considering a whole school approach to digital engagement which is going to be inclusive of migrant and refugee families, the first step is to define a clear purpose which meets an existing need. The Victorian Department of Education and Training already mandates that schools have a digital policy, and the department supports related strategic planning. By acknowledging the needs of migrant and refugee families, a school's digital policy may reflect a whole school approach to digital engagement which aims to:

- Increase involvement of migrant and refugee families in a school community.
- Maintain more regular contact with migrant and refugee families.
- Provide more accessible learning resources for migrant and refugee families to use at home.
- Make relevant school information more readily accessible for migrant and refugee families.

Considering basic problems and core needs

When considering the needs of refugee and migrant families, it is especially useful to reflect on what problems lie at the heart of a particular need. As an example, families may express a need for better access to the school website, but this may arise out of a primary problem accessing information about the school. One solution may be to make the school website more easily navigable but considering the primary need for accessible information, another may be to directly email families with translated school information upon enrolment. Striving to understand the core problems and underlying needs of families will help generate ideas for effective digital solutions.

Planning for the capacity of families

Effective digital engagement is based on meeting need and is suited to the existing capacity of families. It is not useful to identify a need and create a digital response that families do not have the capacity to engage with. As an example, migrant and refugee families in a school may have a need for regularly accessible, updated, and translated information regarding school policy, but hosting translated documents on the school website would not be useful if families already struggle to access or navigate that website.

The capacity for migrant and refugee families to access digital engagement efforts may be limited by:

- English language proficiency.
- First-language literacy.
- Experience using digital platforms used by Australian schools.
- Access to hardware at home.
- Regular and/or high-quality internet access.
- Trust in specific digital platforms and concerns over privacy or legitimacy.
- Poverty.
- Time constraints.

It is important to avoid an approach to digital engagement which is driven primarily by aesthetics, staff interest, or the available technological possibilities. Each of these will be valuable in meeting the needs of families, but only if they are applied selectively with a primary focus on engaging with existing capacity and meeting an existing need. Some questions to consider include:

- Is this making it easier for families to engage with their child's school experience?
- Is this adding significant value for families?
- Is this prioritising the needs or capacity of some families over others?
- Is this creating an expectation of families or staff that they are able and willing to meet?
- What assumptions does this approach make about families, their values, and circumstances?

It is worth acknowledging and considering that the appropriate strategy for a school seeking to promote meaningful and equitable digital engagement, may be to limit the use of digital platforms in the short term and instead provide support to accessing existing digital content.

Understanding the needs of migrant and refugee families

A school may have to employ multiple strategies for identifying needs amongst families. The best place to begin understanding the communication needs of migrant and refugee families is to ask those families. Common questions to begin with include:

- How often do you expect to hear from the school about your child?
- Would you like information about... (community events, school requirements, assessment schedules, etc.)?
- What information is most important to your family?
- Are you familiar with available translation services?

Any single strategy for identifying needs is likely to only provide some of the information required. A systematic approach to identifying need that is regularly revised and updated is necessary to gain reliable information.

Entering 2020, a school in Melbourne's east with over 1,700 enrolments, identified that 90% of their students spoke a language other than English at home. Staying abreast of the needs of such a large student body and associated community was a significant challenge. This was made even more difficult, but all the more important, by the sudden transition to remote learning in 2020.

The school was able to readily identify need for digital access thanks to the existing school structure. The school is divided into several smaller "houses". The houses are used as the basis of all student and family experience at the school. Each house has an admin officer, wellbeing officer and specific refugee liaison officer. The well-established structure and dedicated staff were able to regularly check in on students and families while remaining aware of the particular needs of migrant and refugee families.

The school's house structure and dedicated wellbeing, admin, and refugee liaison staff are suited to their particular context as such a large school with a high proportion of refugee and migrant students. However, any school could draw inspiration from the deliberate structuring of this school to facilitate regular interaction with dedicated staff who can build relationships and who have specific responsibilities for identifying need. This example shows how identifying need can go beyond a single event to encompass the very structure of the school. Also, it shows how existing strategies can be turned to identifying need for digital access.

What you can do:

- Use enrolment processes to identify needs and capacity for digital engagement amongst families, including migrant and refugee families.
- Make specific staff responsible for understanding the needs of families, including migrant and refugee families.
- Schedule regular updates for records and checks for digital access.
- Use digital tools like online surveys for identifying needs but be aware of their limits including not reaching those who may most need adjustments for digital engagement.
- Consider how the absence of response through digital platforms can also be informative.
- Speak to students to gain insight into digital accessibility at home. Students may have different perceptions to their families about digital access at home.
- Be aware that prioritising the voices of students can work to disrupt already fragile family dynamics around expertise and control of digital engagement with school.
- Analyse usage data from existing digital platforms used by the school to understand how families engage with the school's existing digital presence.
- Involve families in conversations about the data relating to digital access. Use these conversations to identify and discuss trends in data and potential causes.

Using different platforms to engage migrant and refugee families

There are many different platforms that can be used as part of a school's digital engagement. A single platform or a single approach to digital engagement is unlikely to meet all the needs of all families in a school. As an example, direct messaging platforms may help communicate simple regular updates directly to families of VCE students who can self-manage study but face tight deadlines and strict assessment structures. Whereas less frequent updates through an email list may be more useful for families looking for more detailed information about how to support younger children at home with a specific unit. Recent U.S. based research demonstrated that different groups of parents were more likely to respond to some platforms than others and that this had substantial impacts on student outcomes.⁵

What you can do:

- Try to be consistent across the school with which platforms are used and how they are used.
- Speak to families, including migrant and refugee families, about whether they prefer one platform over others and why.
- Speak to families about how regularly they would expect what kinds of school communication through different platforms.
- Establish clear norms around the frequency and style of digital communication used by teachers for different year levels, subjects, and purposes.

5. Benjamin N. York and Susanna Loeb, *"One Step at a Time: The effects of an early literacy text messaging program for parents of pre-schoolers"*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 20659. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20659>.

3. Supporting families with limited digital access

Photo Sourced from unsplash.com

Families with limited digital access

It is important for schools to be aware that digital access is not guaranteed to be universal amongst all the families in a school. Schools operating with this assumption can leave many families to fall through the gaps, including many migrant and refugee families.

What you can do:

- Conduct regular audits of at home digital accessibility but be aware of doing so sensitively.
- Incorporate an audit of at home digital accessibility into enrolment processes.
- Analyse usage data of existing digital platforms and services.
- Incorporate informal surveys of at home digital access during information sessions, parent evenings, or community events.
- Survey students in classes about their digital access at home.
- When gathering information, consider not just digital access at home but also the quality of this access, for example, the difference between internet access from a mobile phone compared to unlimited broadband across multiple devices in a home.
- Recognise there may be stigma around acknowledging limited digital access and any effort to understand digital access should begin with meaningful relationships with families.

The 2020 period of remote learning clearly demonstrated the need for schools to consider families' access to devices and internet. The Department of Education and Training alone distributed 96,000 computer and internet devices to schools. It also demonstrated the ability of schools to act as community hubs for organising assistance for families.

Some schools were able to use existing devices within the school to create loan programs for families in the school community who didn't have access to devices. As one example, a school in central Melbourne was able to do this with the laptops and tablets from a 1-1 program the school had already established.

Other schools partnered with local charities or not-for profit organisations to provide devices, Wi-Fi modems and data cards for families. Many local organisations were closely attuned to the needs of their communities and were able to provide this support very quickly.

Planning for limited hardware at home

Recognising that migrant and refugee families may be more likely to have limited access to necessary hardware at home, schools can respond by planning for digital engagement with this in mind. Limitations to hardware may include limits to the number of devices available in a household or limits to the quality of the devices.

What you can do:

- Make school-owned devices regularly accessible for families to use on school campus.
- Work towards having websites and online platforms with both desktop and mobile functionality.
- When planning any digital engagement, consider hardware requirements of digital platforms and services.
- Plan for activities which are not limited by brief access to internet or devices. As an example, digital platforms may be used to deliver content which can be acted on away from a device or access to the internet before responding via a digital platform.
- Work within the school or with partner organisations to provide devices to families with limited access.

Planning for limited internet access at home

Recognising that migrant and refugee families may be more likely to have limited internet access at home, schools can respond by planning for digital engagement with this in mind.

What you can do:

- Work towards having websites and online platforms with both desktop and mobile functionality.
- Routinely test access to new school platforms and content using a range of devices and internet set-ups, including mobile devices and data.
- Consider the data requirements of engaging with specific platforms and services like video conferences.
- Work within the school or with partner organisations to provide assistance to families with limited internet access at home, for example, through the provision of modems or data.
- Be judicious about the digital content that is provided and mandated.
- Provide small file alternatives by compressing files, as well as removing unessential images, videos, or formatting.
- Provide access for students and families to take copies of larger files, like video resources, on portable storage devices.
- Recognise that the cost of reading through optional materials to make judgements about their use is not equal amongst families with varying internet access or levels of English literacy.
- Give clear descriptions of digital material in "plain" English including whether it is essential or complimentary, and whether there are alternatives.

4. Providing families with access to digital resources

Choosing digital resources

When providing digital resources for families to access, an important question is whether the resources are adding value to learning that cannot otherwise be added. Although digital platforms create the potential to provide an enormous variety of resources at a very low cost, every online resource should be chosen with a specific purpose. Digital resources may be provided for families because they are providing additional content or examples for students to study at home, additional opportunities for at home practice of skills, or a learning resource for families hoping to gain insight into teaching strategies used at the school.

Classroom teachers and other school staff play an important role curating meaningful resources and should be wary of providing an overwhelming amount of options. Many migrant and refugee families who use English as an Additional Language or Dialect may find it difficult to read through a large amount of resources to determine for themselves what is most relevant. Providing a limited selection of resources, seeking feedback on these, and then reconsidering the resources provided, is a better strategy than providing all potential resources at once.

There are many ways to reduce file sizes so that families with lower access to quality internet can still access them.

Digital content that is not contributing meaningfully to learning can be removed entirely.

Excessive content can be reduced to what is necessary. Images within documents and presentations can be made smaller or videos can be cut down to focus on specific parts.

An internet search can reveal the smallest file types as well as free converters that will convert a file from one format to another. Using video files as an example, some formats are more easily edited (like .MOV), some keep a high enough quality to be played on large screens (like .AVCHD), and others create small file sizes (like .MP4). If students are simply expected to watch a video on a portable device, a format that prioritises file size will work well.

An internet search can reveal free applications that compress file sizes at the cost of some quality. As a general rule, images should be compressed first, then video, then audio. Image file sizes can be compressed more easily while retaining quality than video, and video more easily than audio.

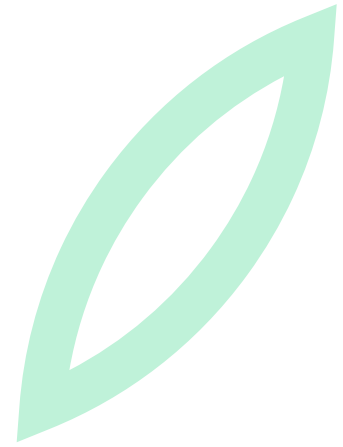
Presentations can be reduced by removing unnecessary images, transitions and embedded videos. They can also be printed as a minimum size PDF to make the file size smaller.

Video files created by teachers and school staff can be reduced by compressing audio, changing frame rates, and reducing video dimensions based on the intended purpose of the video.

Free guides with more tips for reducing file sizes can be found easily online.

Providing digital lesson content

Digital platforms make it possible for school staff and teachers to provide families with insight and access to classroom learning. For later year classes, teachers and school staff may upload digital presentations or audio recordings. For primary school and earlier years, teachers and school staff may upload lesson packs that include small tasks, video or audio resources, and notes for families. Lesson content may be provided for families to gain an insight into lessons, review lessons with students, or access lessons for students who cannot physically attend a school site.



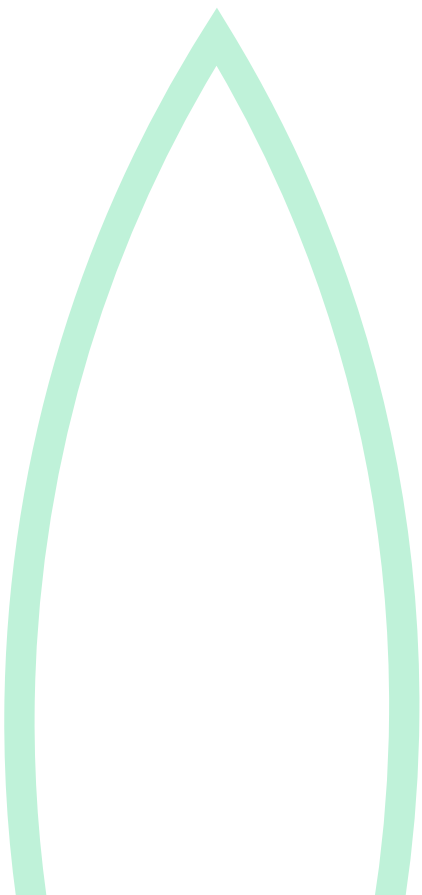
What you can do:

- Provide clear descriptions of content and purpose to help families quickly make informed decisions about what to access.
- Clearly communicate expectations for how families should engage with lesson content provided, and whether any responses or actions are required of them.

Technical limitations of digital resources

The technical aspects of resources can also limit their use for some migrant and refugee families. Some technical questions to ask about resources include:

- Do video or audio files include translated captions or transcriptions?
- Do video and audio resources allow adjustments to playback speed?
- Would file size prevent families with limited internet access from using the resource?
- Does the format make it difficult for those who use English as an Additional Language or Dialect to access the resource? As an example, is audio quality low, are fonts clear, is text easily scannable, is formatting clear, is the resource easy to navigate?
- Do formats like PDFs allow for text recognition that can be used with translation or text-to-speech tools?
- Can content be simplified for upload by removing unnecessary images, videos, or formatting?
- Is it possible to arrange for the translation of resources?
- Do families have access to the devices and internet required to engage with the resource or with lesson content?





5. Communicating regularly with families

The importance of digital communication

It is valuable for a school to maintain regular communication with families. Digital platforms can help to improve this communication. Recent research has highlighted improvements to student outcomes following regular digital communication with families.⁶

In several Victorian schools, staff have begun recording audio messages of important updates and distributing them to families via digital platforms. This has been done in direct response to a need from families who struggled to access written messages because of low levels of first-language literacy.

In contrast, in other cases migrant and refugee families have reported disengaging with school platforms because of receiving excessive communication without clear purpose or explanation.

Ideally, communication from schools should meet the needs of families both in the kinds of information and how it is delivered.

Delivering essential information to migrant and refugee families

Digital platforms can be used by a school to deliver essential information quickly and effectively to all families. However, the reach of these platforms will be limited if the needs of migrant and refugee families are not considered. Some starting points to consider include:

- What barriers currently exist to delivering essential information to the school's families? English literacy? First language literacy? Digital access? Time constraints?
- Can essential information be sent directly to families rather than solely hosted on a school website or in school newsletters?

- Can common forms of essential information be translated and the messages sent out quickly and consistently?
- Is it possible to pre-record audio of translated information so that it can be shared with families digitally?
- What can the school do to ensure that basic emergency messages are translated and recorded in the major languages of families in the school?
- Can the school benefit from allowing families to register the contact details of family members beyond two parents?

Importantly, clear guidelines should be set for what constitutes essential information. Migrant and refugee families may have different priorities for information. If digital platforms are used too often to flood families with information they deem unessential, they may stop engaging with those platforms.

6. Peter Bergman and Eric W. Chan, "Leveraging Parents through Low-Cost Technology: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement", *Journal of Human Resources* 55 no.4 (2020).

A school in central Melbourne was able to increase digital access amongst families by running 1:1 tutorials on how to use devices and how to use the school's digital platforms. The school also established wellbeing check-ins for vulnerable families, using Education Support staff. These weekly online check-ins enabled the school to monitor how students and their families were coping during the 2020 period of remote learning.

Several other Victorian schools have begun planning for ongoing tutorial sessions for CALD families with MEAs working as facilitators and potentially including translators.

Strategies for school-wide and Department-mandated platforms

School-wide digital platforms and digital platforms mandated by the Department of Education and Training must be navigable by all families in a school.

What you can do:

- Provide translated guides of how and where to access key features of these platforms.
- Provide translated or transcribed screen capture videos of how to access key features of these programs.
- Hold in-person information sessions in the school for families on how to engage with these platforms.
- Be aware of what engagement with these platforms requires from families in terms of hardware and data, for example, can these platforms be accessed with mobile devices or with limited data?
- Be selective and considerate about how platforms are used and how they mandate engagement from families.

Strategies for school websites

School websites, and other platforms controlled by the school, offer staff more of an opportunity to adjust these platforms to provide an inclusive experience for families.

What you can do:

- Ensure that websites have a clear, uncluttered home page with options for navigation in "plain" English.
- Avoid only using symbols for navigating websites. Interpreting symbols relies on previous experience and cultural assumptions about meaning. As an example, the "≡" symbol commonly used for indicating menus, may not be interpreted that way by all families.
- Avoid cluttering home pages with announcements, document previews, and other features that can be difficult to scan through.
- Take advantage of website translators built into web browsers. These can be used to place a translate button on a website or to prompt a user to translate the website. However, these translators are limited and work best at translating single words and common phrases written in "plain" English.

Many large websites encounter problems when launching in new countries and languages. In one case, the search function of a large website failed to reach users when first launched in India because few associated the magnifying glass symbol with a search. Many mistook the symbol for a frying pan and simply did not click it. To remedy this, the company only needed to add a label in Hindi that read "Search".

The layout of many websites is often reversed in Arabic speaking countries. So, the placement of images or the organisation of important text will flip. This is because unlike English, Arabic is read from right to left. The different layout reflects a different understanding of what people will read first and where important information should be.

Schools are unlikely to have the time and resources to make and support multiple formations of a school website. Yet, these examples do illustrate the unseen challenges of communicating digitally across languages and cultural backgrounds. Simple translation may not be enough. Maintaining regular communication with families will help schools adapt digital platforms, practices, and content in nuanced ways.

Providing feedback to families through digital platforms

Feedback can be provided through digital platforms to keep families informed about the progress of students in the school and how they can support this progress. Digital platforms can help increase the regularity or quality of feedback provided to families, including ongoing assessment results and feedback, end of unit reports, absences, or in-school behaviour. Some examples of digital platforms helping to provide feedback to families include:

- Automated messages regarding absences.
- Digital copies of assessment feedback being provided to families.
- Video conferences with families who cannot come into a school site.

In each case, the purpose of providing feedback and the purpose of using a particular platform should be communicated clearly to families. Different cultural values and experiences of education may limit shared understanding of the purpose of feedback. Some key questions to ask when using digital platforms to provide feedback to migrant and refugee families include:

- Does this address the learning needs of a particular student?
- Does this address the needs of a particular student's family?
- How does this platform improve the delivery of this feedback?
- Do families know why feedback is being provided? Do families know what response to feedback the school requires?

Creating digital dialogue between school and families

One of the most potent aspects of digital platforms is the ability to create more opportunity for families to participate in a dialogue with teachers and school staff.

What you can do:

Communicate what processes and expectations are in place for feedback through digital platforms.

- Be aware of the demands on time made by asking families to engage in dialogue.
- Maintain a school social media presence for families to access, that showcases and celebrates the school's diversity.
- Use digital surveys to seek family input and feedback.
- Use digital platforms to facilitate smaller community groups of families within the school who can discuss issues, organise events, and give feedback.
- Provide support using digital platforms for existing parent and community groups within the school.
- Be aware that families may be well placed to lead the process of establishing and maintaining digital dialogue.

The Department of Education and Training provides funding for telephone translation services and in-person translation for parent-teacher meetings. Department interpreting and translation policies are available online.

Translation services funded by the Department of Education and Training are not available for individual student reports. However, family members can be invited to bring student reports to parent-teacher sessions where department funded translators can be used as teachers talk through reports with families. A whole-school notice informing families of such sessions would also qualify for department funded translation.

Creating dialogue may not require Department funded translators and instead can draw from existing community connections, drawing on existing staff skills, working with community organisations, and taking time to be open and generous in communication.

Digital newsletters and community notices

Digital newsletters and other community notices can be an effective way for schools to maintain regular contact with families and promote a sense of community. Community newsletters and updates should be optional for families, should be delivered regularly and predictably, but should not be the primary method for delivering essential information.

Alongside translations, the formatting of newsletters and other community notices is also important for promoting engagement. Although English is read left to right and top to bottom, many other languages, like Arabic or Japanese, do not follow this convention. As well as translating text, it is common to alter formatting when trying to make a document easier to scan in other languages. Migrant and refugee families and community groups may be able to offer helpful feedback in this regard.

Using digital platforms can be an effective way to promote school events amongst migrant and refugee families, and encourage their involvement.

The promotion of school events can be based on fundamental assumptions about social values and protocols which may not be shared by all. It may be valuable for a school to seek input from their migrant and refugee families about how digital platforms are used to promote events. Some considerations when using digital platforms to promote events include:

- Is this platform used regularly by all families in the school, including migrant and refugee families?
- What social obligations are being elicited amongst families? Is this different amongst different groups of families?
- Is there any opportunity to have members of migrant or refugee communities provide feedback on this event or its promotion?



6. Partnering with other organisations and platforms



In promoting digital engagement, schools may find it valuable to partner with other organisations and platforms. External organisations may provide technical support, subject-specific content and skills practice, or extra-curricular activities. Some considerations when partnering with other organisations include:

- Does this organisation/platform promote inclusive content?
- Does this organisation/platform offer translated audio, transcripts or closed captions?
- Is this platform accessible by all families, including those limited by digital access or English proficiency?
- Does this organisation/platform include and promote a range of perspectives, world views, and/or identities?

Partnering with external organisations and using external platforms is an extension of a school's own digital presence. As such, it should reflect the general approach to digital engagement adopted by the school. A clear and purposeful digital policy adopted within a school can be a useful tool for reflecting on the value and process of partnering with external organisations and using external platforms.

During the 2020 period of remote learning, the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne noted that digital platforms led to a far greater reach for their educational programs. Although, originally very focused on in-person educational experiences, the centre found that transitioning to digital spaces had the potential to increase engagement. Digital forums, virtual tours of the museum space, and online workshops with survivors were all made possible with a greater focus on digital engagement. This case and others have brought more attention to the significance of digital engagement and learning experiences.

Teachers and school staff have a wide array of organisations and platforms to consider when curating digital learning experiences. The Australian War Memorial, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and the National Gallery of Victoria, amongst others, all offer supplementary digital resources, digital lesson packs and curriculum-based learning.

Find out more at

www.cmy.net.au/education

or contact

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