



## Reaching out to families

### The hub of the community

Sacred Heart Primary School's Acting Principal, Mary Lawrey, admits her school is extraordinary, or, as she puts it, "different". With 98 percent of its 145 students coming mainly from Asian or African backgrounds, the school is a vital and energetic hub in a community with many and varied needs.

The Catholic school is located in the inner-city Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy on the edge of Atherton Gardens Estate, a concrete high-rise public housing block that almost 2,500 people call home, including most of Sacred Heart's students. The estate, which was constructed in the 1960s as part of a 'slum clearance' program, and its surrounding area are often noted for visible drug use, high levels of unemployment and pockets of social dysfunction. Within all of this, however, lies a community eager to find solutions for a more hopeful future.

### Making school a safe place for kids

Mindful of the school's role in a community facing many challenges, former Principal Frances Ford, saw KidsMatter as a way of helping children build resilience and learn how to handle daily life issues that, for some, were very difficult. Mary says the school is mindful of the many challenges facing refugee families as they begin to settle into life in this inner-city high-rise public housing estate after living in refugee camps. One of the aims for Sacred Heart was to make the school a safe place to be.

The school also knows that children learn best and feel safer when there are clear rules and consequences, and where positive behaviours are modelled. To support this and as part of their KidsMatter work, the school adopted the Bounceback program. For the first two weeks of the year, the curriculum for the whole school focused solely on the core values of support, acceptance, respect, cooperation, friendliness and integrity.

"During this time, rules for each class were developed. By embedding the core values in the school, it set the basis for how we are going to operate. It makes everything so much easier as with every digression we go back to the question of 'What is the rule here?'" Mary said. "It's all about restorative practices. What do I do now and how do I fix it? It is clearly spelled out to the children that if they break the rules, they are immediately taken from the yard or out of the classroom, and when they go back they have to apologise."

### Focussing on kids' social and emotional well-being

Welfare Coordinator, Brian McVeigh, believes social and emotional learning is crucial for all children and says teachers need to get that right first. "It's all about the time needed to develop relationships with the kids. You won't get to the actual teaching of reading and writing if you don't take the time to develop the bond with the child," Brian said.

Brian has just started trialling an exercise called "circle time" as a way of developing emotional literacy with the children. "Once a week we sit in a circle and the kids have a chance to talk and interact about a certain feeling or emotion," Brian said. "We might look at something like 'I like it best when I feel...' and everyone has a chance to respond in the circle. We have rules for this, too: no put-downs, no laughing and only one person can speak at a time. KidsMatter has given me a framework of how to look at well-being. The four components give you direction and make you realise that every part is important, from the classroom to the parents."

To create a supportive environment so children can calm down before they begin to learn, the school ensures all students practise stillness meditation three times a week. "Kids need time to stop, not think, and let their brains recharge," Brian added.

The school recognised that the children were starting to flag by lunchtime, which was originally at 1pm. Now that lunch is between 11am and noon, behavioural incidences have dropped and the children's energy has increased. There is also 30 minutes of organised play for children in Years 3 – 6 during their lunch break. "We found that we needed to help the kids learn how to play more cooperatively in large groups. We did this by working with them and modelling the behaviour that we wanted them to learn. Now the kids are virtually running the games themselves and they require less supervision from us," Brian said.

### Engaging parents in school activities

Sacred Heart places a strong emphasis on parent participation in the school and proactively seeks activities and strategies to engage parents. This can be a difficult task for many schools; it is especially challenging to engage a parent community already dealing with issues of displacement and resettlement, trauma, unemployment and social isolation. The lack of teaching staff who speak languages other than English also makes it difficult for parents and staff to communicate. The school provides translators in Dinka, Arabic, Vietnamese, Mandarin and Cantonese for all parent meetings and has found that face-to-face conversations and phone calls are much more effective than letters or other written communications.

The school runs regular forums and information nights for parents and invites a variety of speakers, including community police, covering diverse issues of community concern. A recently-celebrated Sacred Heart Feast Day, involving Vietnamese parents, was a great success. "It was fantastic. It made us see that we need to provide social opportunities for the parents to come into the school to chat and to feel welcome," Mary said.

The school is constantly looking for a range of ways to help parents feel welcomed and included in the school, and to provide opportunities, such as the feast day celebrations, to which parents can contribute. As part of KidsMatter, the school has set up a parents' room with facilities for parents to come and have a coffee and relax, with the school encouraging parents to stay awhile after they drop off their children.

### Connecting with support networks

Being in such a diverse community also ensures the school is part of a wide network of support from government, community agencies and corporations. Partnerships include the Brotherhood of St Laurence's daily Breakfast Club at the estate, which many of the children attend, and its HIPPY program - Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters – which works with disadvantaged families by providing home tutors to foster a love of learning in young children and increase their school readiness. The Smith Family provides some of the Vietnamese mums with one-on-one oral language classes, while combined agencies run a homework club. Agencies such as Foundation House also provide the school with specialist services, including trauma counselling for newly-arrived and refugee children and families. These are only a few examples of the support available to the school.

"It is incredible here. It is like a village – there is so much networking across the agencies. I know that if I need help for a child or a family, I can go to one of these agencies. The HIPPY program, for example, has provided vital support for many of our prep kids," Mary said. "We can't do everything ourselves, but there are so many people outside of the school that can and do help us. All of the community is involved in looking after the kids."

Sacred Heart Primary School is an oasis for the children who love being there and for the parents who value its role in the future health and prosperity of their families. "Our school is different – the staff are very well aware of the kids in their charge and the responsibility it entails. What some of our children have seen or where they have been has been very traumatic for them. One of the things we can do as a school is to help build connections and these connections can help build resilience. Connections are vital for the well-being of the kids and the community," Mary said.



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