



Building Demand - What Works For Studies of Asia

Building Demand: providing students with purpose

Sister schools: findings from research in Victoria

The report about sister schools commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) was written for an internal departmental audience, but key aspects relating to student demand for Asian languages are summarised here, as several of its research objectives relate to this directly:

- >> to capture the contribution that sister schools make to languages learning;
- >> to define and document the benefits of sister school partnerships to individual schools and the school education system more broadly;
- >> to identify effective practice in sister school partnerships, including in other states and overseas, in order to be able to inform and advise future partnership arrangements;
- >> to capture the contribution that sister schools make to the internationalisation of school education;
- >> to encourage more schools to enter into sister school partnerships.

Researchers used a combination of qualitative approaches (interviews with people involved) and quantitative approaches (online surveys) and also delivered a set of nine detailed case studies. Most sister school partnerships were found to exist with schools in Japan or China. One in five partnerships were established within the last year, but almost half had been established for more than five years.



General benefits for students

The report finds intercultural understanding to be the most commonly reported general benefit of sister school partnerships, followed by a range of personal development and awareness benefits. As one principal put it:

'When the Chinese kids come out here they are embraced as part of the culture and provide a kind of richness to our school. The main thing is that it centres on development of the kids as a whole; being able to appreciate other cultures, to be able to talk and meet with people from other countries, learn about life in other places.'

Motivation for students to learn languages

DEECD's guidelines for sister school partnerships include increased enthusiasm to learn a language, among a range of expected benefits for students, and the report confirms this outcome. It is reported in two-thirds of cases that benefits for students include:

Sister school relationships motivate students to learn languages

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development commissioned comprehensive research about sister school relationships across Victorian schools. The research report was delivered in March 2012 and found a range of benefits, including in the area of student motivation and demand for Asian languages.

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A school principal, VIC

- >> increased understanding of the importance of learning languages;
- >> increased motivation/enthusiasm to learn a language;
- >> support for language learning.

One principal said that:

'The relationships are really motivating for learning a language; students will continue a language until Year 12 having had that sort of experience, travelling to the other country, really enjoying it, feeling like they could communicate. However, when they travel over to us it probably has an even greater effect on the quality of the language skills of our students ...'

Conditions for success

Challenges noted about sister school partnerships included costs of travel between countries and being able to devote the necessary time to making the partnership work.

Importantly, the report also points to the necessity of having the right people involved.

One principal commented:

'I cannot make a teacher have a relationship with another school, they have to want to do it.'

This dovetails with another finding, which is that having a champion of the sister school relationship on staff is a very positive indicator of likely success. At the same time, however, it is suggested that the loss of a champion from staff is a risk to the relationship. A consequent recommendation of the report is that the role of 'sister school champion' be promoted as a leadership opportunity.

The report notes a number of key elements for the success of sister school relationships. It is not suggested that all of these are necessary, but rather that all should be considered when setting up a relationship:

- >> the program is a documented priority within the school;
- >> full support from leadership team and school council;
- >> a champion with the support of the leadership team/team of champions to drive the program;
- >> succession planning within the Victorian school and their sister school in the event that critical staff members move on;
- >> matched expectations and objectives for the partnership. These may change and develop. However, they should be mutually agreed upon/acknowledged;
- >> reciprocal benefits for both schools;
- >> relatively equal level of commitment between schools;
- >> regular, yet flexible and accommodating communication;
- >> face-to-face communication between school staff early in the partnership.

Conclusion

The report makes a substantial contribution to describing what works in sister school partnerships and why. In particular, it confirms the positive contribution of well-run sister school partnerships in creating student demand for Asian languages.

Related links

- >> DEECD Victoria sister schools policy

Contact Asia Education Foundation P: +61 3 8344 4800 E: aef-support@asialink.unimelb.edu.au