



Parents and the learning of Asian languages in schools

Essendon North Primary School, Victoria

The school and its language programme

Essendon North Primary School is a government school (F-6) with an above-average ICSEA value and is located in Melbourne's north. According to the ABS, Essendon North is home to a sizeable Italian community, with around seven per cent of the population living in an Italian-speaking household.

Essendon North is a candidate school for the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Program (PYP) and has a strong teaching and learning focus on intercultural understanding and global citizenship. For many years and up until 2014, the school taught Italian. In 2012, following community and School Council consultations, the decision was made to switch to Asian Studies, phase out Italian and replace it with Chinese. In 2014, the last cohort of students completed Italian. All F-6 students now attend one hour of Asian Studies/Chinese per week. In March 2015, a Chinese Teacher Assistant commenced working alongside the Asian Studies/Chinese teacher at the school, Amanda Kingsley.

What works and how?

In his welcome message on the school's website, Principal Scott Mullen underscores Essendon North's commitment to have staff, students and parents working collaboratively towards recognising diversity and achieving high-quality learning outcomes. The school's commitment to engaging parents in school life and their children's learning has been translated into practice in a variety of ways.

For example, the school's leadership team has encouraged parents to have a say—through an online survey—in the drafting of the school's new Vision and

Mission document. The school newsletter occasionally contains practical advice for parents on how they can actively assist their children's learning and personal development. Moreover, the school runs parent education forums, such as Coffee and Chat sessions, parent information sessions and workshops with external speakers, which parents are encouraged to attend.

After switching from Italian to Chinese, Essendon North has initiated various activities to enable all staff and parents to support students' learning of Chinese. Some of these activities seek to make Chinese language more visible within the school, such as using Chinese words and characters in signage around the school. A new section called 'Mandarin Words of the Week' has now been included in the school's fortnightly newsletter. This section chooses a particular theme, for example telling the time, to encourage and enable parents to practice some Chinese with their children at home. Furthermore, the school has started using the Rosetta Stone (Mandarin) app as part of the Years 3-6 iPad programme, to assist students' language learning at school and enable parents to support their children's learning of Chinese at home.

Essendon North also runs special events to celebrate the cultural diversity of Asia. Parents are invited to these events. As part of its 'Asian Cultural Celebration Calendar', the school organised a special assembly performance by the 'Hong De Lion' dancers to celebrate the Lunar New Year in early 2015. In addition, students performed a dragon dance with a dragon they had made as part of a lunch-time Arts Club. Approximately 80 parents attended the

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Kate Barletta,
Assistant Principal
Essendon North Primary School, VIC

event. For a school that has just initiated its Chinese language programme, this was an ideal demand building activity.

Even though these parental engagement initiatives specific to Chinese language and cultural learning are very recent, Essendon North plans to continuously strengthen its language and intercultural learning focus. In 2014, the school developed the basis for a school-wide 'Engage with Asia Strategy'. As part of this strategy, the school is currently developing a Chinese language programme specifically for parents and other community members. As Kate Barletta, Assistant Principal at Essendon North, explained, 'Our aim is to provide an entry point for all community members (including staff) in learning the language.'

Parents need tools and information to actively support and monitor their children's language learning at home. The use of the Rosetta Stone app at Essendon North and the 'Mandarin Words of the Week' in the school newsletter are examples. When equipped with the right tools and information, parents can help facilitate successful language learning for their children (Gardner, Masgoret & Trembaly, 1999).

Schools can use cultural celebrations to build and sustain parents' interest in language and intercultural learning. Such activities provide stimuli for parent-child conversations around the target language and culture. These conversations are an important aspect of successful parental engagement (Houtenville & Conway, 2008). Parents who are personally interested in the target language and culture are likely to communicate their interest to their children (Gardner, Masgoret & Trembaly 1999).

About AEF

The Asia Education Foundation provides teachers, education leaders and school communities with innovative programmes, curriculum resources and networks to support the achievement of Asia literacy for every young Australian.

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Why it works

Leadership support is crucial to the success of any strategy to enhance parental engagement in school life and student learning (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). This has been demonstrated powerfully at Essendon North, through parents' involvement in redrafting the school's Vision and Mission statement, the transition to teaching Chinese language, parent education forums and the crafting of a comprehensive Engage with Asia Strategy. These initiatives signal to parents that their contribution to learning is welcomed and acknowledged, which, in turn, strengthens parents' self-perceptions of their role as co-educators alongside the school (Emerson et al., 2012).

What Works 8

>> This illustration was taken from *What Works 8: Parents and the learning of Asian languages in schools*, which can be found on AEF's Web portal at: www.asiaeducation.edu.au/whatworks8

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