



Parents and the learning of Asian languages in schools

St Columba's College, Victoria

The school and its language programme

St Columba's College is a 7-12 Catholic girls' school in Melbourne's northwest (Essendon) with an above-average ICSEA value.

According to the ABS, a large proportion of the local residents are Catholics and Australian born. A relatively large group of residents—in contrast to the Australian average—are of Italian ancestry and speak Italian at home.

St Columba's offers three languages—French, Italian and Japanese—across all year levels. Each student has to study at least one language until the end of Year 9. The College's website highlights its authentic approach to learning a language, claiming that 'language learning comes alive ... through the use of learning technologies and materials acquired from the country whose language is being taught.' Language units often focus on themes students are interested in, such as fashion, food or shopping.

St Columba's has partner schools in Italy (Istituto Mazzotti in Treviso) and Japan (Shin-Ai Girls' High School in Kumamoto) and runs annual study tours to Italy, France and Japan (one per year on a rotating cycle). Students on the Japan study tour are hosted by fellow students from Shin-Ai, and every year, in March, Japanese students come to St Columba's and stay with host families from the school community.

The College actively promotes the value of learning languages in addition to English as a vehicle for personal growth and transformation and supporting social justice. Its website underscores the value of language learning—such as its potential intercultural, educational and career-related benefits—and does so by referring to the Australian Curriculum.

St Columba's website also highlights the particular advantages of studying Italian, French and Japanese. For Japanese, the school lists a range of economic and cultural reasons. These include the economic and cultural ties between Australia and Japan, tourism, popular culture and the opportunities for students to engage with Japanese people in Melbourne (e.g. Box Hill Japanese Festival and the Melbourne Japanese Summer Festival).

What works and how?

School leaders at St Columba's emphasise the school's commitment to working closely with the school community to support student learning. This commitment is mentioned explicitly in the College Mission Statement on learning.

Nathan Lane, Languages Domain Leader at St Columba's, cites two major initiatives held regularly at the College to engage parents in their daughters' language learning. Both initiatives seek to raise the profile of language learning at the College among parents and students, and encourage students to continue language study past Year 9.

The first initiative is the Year 7 Language Evening for parents, who get to experience a taste of how their daughters typically study a language at the College. For Japanese, the evening starts informally with Japanese snacks, after which parents participate in a small workshop that introduces them to some of the language taught in Year 7. Parents are also provided with material—developed by the College in response to parents' requests—on how to support their daughters' language learning. Nathan sees

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this initiative as a great way to start engaging parents with the Japanese programme, especially as many parents may be unfamiliar with contemporary languages pedagogy.

The Language Evening is held strategically at Year 7 in order to inspire students to study a language and to continue doing so. According to Nathan, this event has received positive feedback from parents over the years. For example, one parent commented, 'The mini lesson for parents was wonderful. I went home with strategies on how to help my daughter, and also [a better understanding of] the complexity of the language. My daughter and I continued to discuss Japanese at home.'

The second initiative is the annual Language and Career Dinner, which seeks to promote the value of language learning to both parents and students, and encourages more students to continue their language study beyond Year 9. The dinner brings together Year 9 students, parents and teachers with St Columba's languages alumni who have continued their language study to university level and/or utilise their language abilities in their professional life. Alumni share their language learning experiences with dinner guests and illustrate the benefits of language learning. The dinner takes place once a year around the time when Year 9 students are selecting their electives for Year 10.

School leaders at St Columba's affirm how these dinners have placed a spotlight on language learning, providing opportunities for parents and students to hear from people other than teachers about the value of learning a language. In their effort to help improve parent-student communications, Nathan and his colleagues hope the dinners provide 'a springboard for conversations at home regarding the importance of learning languages and continuing with language study past the compulsory years.' Importantly,

the college is still able to offer senior classes (Years 11-12) for all of its language programmes.

Why it works

In both its formal policies and practice, St Columba's has committed to engaging the whole-school community, especially parents, to achieve positive learning outcomes with students. Schools with a formalised parental engagement policy, prioritised in and integrated into their strategic plans, typically fare better in parental engagement than those where this engagement is an afterthought (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Kim, 2009; Family-School & Community Partnership Bureau, 2011). Further, parents are more likely to be engaged when they feel that school leadership encourages and supports their engagement (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). Such leadership commitment signals to both parents and teachers that parental engagement is sought and encouraged.

The parental engagement activities at St Columba's facilitate parents' active as well as passive contributions to their children's language learning (Gardner, Masgoret & Tremblay, 1999). Passive approaches typically involve modelling attitudes and behaviour with respect to the target language and culture (Gardner, Masgoret & Tremblay, 1999). Children are more likely to achieve successful language learning outcomes when parents communicate to them positive attitudes about languages (Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002; Foard, 2000, cited in Prescott & Orton, 2012). This assertion generally applies to all students, regardless of gender, age and school type (Prescott & Orton, 2012). Examples of passive approaches at St Columba's include the Language and Career Dinners and statements about the benefits of language learning on the College website.

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Active approaches refer to parents' efforts and capacity to support and monitor their children's language learning activities (Gardner, Masgoret & Trembaly, 1999). St Columba's Year 7 Language Evening seeks to do just that by introducing parents to basic language pedagogy and some of the content their daughters have been learning. This initiative sends the message to parents that they, too, can be supportive and influential partners in their daughters' language learning, which is a key ingredient for building active parental engagement (Kim, 2009; 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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