



School's In for Refugees: A Whole School Guide to Refugee Readiness

Foundation House, the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, Brunswick, Victoria

This project also relates to:

-  Families
-  Youth
-  Health

School's In for Refugees: A Whole School Guide to Refugee Readiness provides a range of tools and strategies to strengthen the capacity of school communities to support refugee background students and their schooling experience in Australia. *School's In for Refugees* aims to give teachers, support staff and administrators strategies to provide a supportive school environment that promotes the mental health and well being of refugee background students and enhances their educational outcomes.

Foundation House conducts workshops and offers consultancy support to assist schools implement a whole school approach to supporting refugees. International research has found that such an approach is needed to achieve meaningful education, health and wellbeing outcomes for students.

School's In for Refugees adopts a whole school approach by focusing on all five aspects of school management, which are divided into five chapters, namely:

- school policies and practices
- school curriculum and programs
- school organisation, ethos and environment
- partnerships with parents
- partnerships with agencies.

These five areas represent the components used in the internationally accepted Health Promoting School approach, a model that is applied in *MindMatters*, the National Mental Health Strategy to introduce a whole school approach to mental health promotion in secondary schools.

School's In for Refugees is designed to be a resource for school staff that provides a range

of tools and strategies for working with refugee background students and complements the best practice standards and procedures teachers currently use for all Victorian school students. Ideally, *School's In for Refugees* should be used alongside other educational resources to guide those providing an education to refugee background students.

Identifying a need through consultation with schools

This resource was developed over many years as Foundation House worked with school staff who expressed a need for guidance to support and meet the special needs of refugee background students.

At the end of 2001, Foundation House implemented the *Pathways to Resilience* project in partnership with Noble Park English Language School, Brunswick English Language Centre and Brunswick Secondary School. In developing the project, Foundation House worked in partnership with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to share strategies and approaches that strengthened services offered to schools. Programs and resources were produced and piloted at Preston Girls College, Northcote High School and Collingwood College.

In 2004, Foundation House produced *School's In for Refugees* based on the knowledge developed through the *Pathways to Resilience* project. Foundation House became a partner in the Refugee Education Partnership Project, which it now manages. Other project partners are the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, Debney Park Secondary College, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, VicHealth and the Department of Planning and Community Development.

Funding from the project enabled Foundation House to expand its school support work to provide professional development and specialised support throughout Victoria.

It has led to improvement in the quality and provision of Out of School Hours Learning Support Programs (OSHLSPs), with production of resources to support the running of quality programs and the training of staff. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood funded a 12 month pilot of regionally coordinated OSHLSPs in the Western region of Melbourne in March 2008.

There has been an emphasis on working collaboratively across government and non-government sectors and advocating for greater systemic support for young people of refugee background in schools.

Addressing the needs of refugee background students

Refugee background students need time and support to negotiate a range of challenges on resettlement in Australia that may include trauma, a disrupted education, adapting to a new culture and learning a new language.

Refugee background children are distinguished by their experiences of violence and other traumatic events prior to their arrival in Australia. They may have been separated from, or may have lost, close family members as a result of conflict. *School's In for Refugees* explains how refugee background students may have personally been subjected to, or witnessed, horrifying events such as:

- war, bombing or shelling
- destruction of homes and schools
- violent death or injury of family or friends
- separation from family members
- sudden disappearances of family members or friends
- physical injury and limited medical attention
- deprivation of food, safe water and other resources
- fear of discovery or arrest
- arrest, detention or torture
- forced conscription into armies or militias
- rape or sexual assault
- lack of opportunities for play.

The trauma that arises from these experiences often affects children's capacity for learning and

gives rise to issues unique in the experience of many teachers. School staff may need guidance to create a safe and predictable environment and address these barriers to learning.

Refugee background children have often lived through years of conflict and their education has been limited, disrupted or non-existent. Many children have spent long periods in refugee camps or a first country of asylum where only basic or even no education is available to them. Some may have had some schooling, but not in their first language.

Once in Australia refugee background students must confront the challenge of mastering a new language, negotiating unfamiliar customs and different expectations, and understanding new and complex health, legal and education services and systems.

The Guide

Flexibility has been built into *School's In for Refugees* to allow it to be used successfully in a variety of school settings by staff with a range of experience in teaching refugee background students. Schools are thus able to identify and implement the most appropriate policies and strategies for their own particular environment.

School staff are advised to first read *School's In for Refugees* and then conduct an assessment of their refugee readiness by completing an audit at the end of each chapter. Schools are then advised to identify the changes needed, form working groups of relevant stakeholders to plan for change, and to implement and document those changes. The audit should be completed again after a year or so to reflect on the outcomes of the changes and identify further areas for improvement.

School's In for Refugees provides schools with information about the lives of refugee background students before coming to Australia and some context about the reasons for their forced migration. It also explains their experiences and feelings when first settling in Australia.

Some of the major source countries of refugees are listed as well as the different visa subclasses on which the refugees may have arrived. *School's In for Refugees* helps administrators establish a student's background by providing unobtrusive questions that will help identify their needs.

School's In for Refugees provides:

- background information on refugee students' lives and the effects their experiences can have on their transition to school life
- suggestions for introducing enrolment procedures that help identify refugee students and their needs
- suggestions for adapting the school environment and curriculum to better meet refugee background students' needs
- suggestions for better transition procedures for refugee students moving between intensive language schools and centres and mainstream school environments
- strategies to develop partnerships with parents/guardians
- information on working with agencies that support young refugees.

School's In for Refugees documents the impact trauma can have on children's wellbeing and development, and the additional stress of resettlement factors. It explains in some detail the ways trauma and stress can manifest itself, including:

- anxiety and fear
- re-experiencing traumatic events through nightmares and flashbacks
- withdrawal and emotional numbing
- disconnection from others, over self-sufficiency and avoidance of close relationships
- anxious attachment where children remain fearful of losing people who are important to them
- sensitivity to failure and a diminishing sense of self-efficacy and self-worth
- loss of feelings of safety, a loss of trust in others, anger and a negative view of the future
- unjustified feelings of shame and guilt as a result of exposure to violence by others.

School's In for Refugees discusses learning difficulties refugee background students may confront as a result of trauma, migration and the challenges of resettlement. It highlights health issues that may arise for newly arrived refugees due to poor nutrition and poor health care

experienced in refugee camps, or when living in the community in their country of first asylum. With this detailed background, schools are far better equipped to understand students' needs and behaviour.

Supporting refugee background students

School's In for Refugees provides teachers with a range of teaching strategies and curriculum ideas to support refugee background students. One section highlights typical emotional blocks to learning for those who have experienced trauma with corresponding support strategies. The curriculum section identifies a range of strategies for both refugee and non-refugee background students. Schools are advised to:

- encourage refugee students to express their thoughts and feelings in written forms such as through diary writing
- teach students about cultural diversity and cross-cultural harmony
- teach refugee students about their new country and its culture
- provide opportunities for refugee background students to process what has happened through visual art, story telling, drama and role play
- include modules on human rights and refugees within the school curriculum
- provide students with an age-appropriate political understanding of the causes of war and refugee experiences to allay misconceptions and provide a framework for events in their own lives
- develop links with community agencies and undertake joint activities, such as peer support programs, *Kaleidoscope* and *Rainbow* programs (programs that Foundation House has developed for refugee background students)
- include modules that teach refugee students about health and wellbeing by using Foundation House's *HealthWize* literacy resource for the classroom
- enable students with a low level of English literacy to have other forms of expression in the classroom such as drama, drawing and painting.

Foundation House has developed a number of resources for use in the general classroom as well as with refugee background students. These are free to download from www.foundationhouse.org.au/publications.

Supporting school staff

There is a need to support staff who are teaching or working with students from refugee backgrounds by providing them with professional development, internal organisational assistance and peer support. *School's In for Refugees* lists the range of reactions among those working with refugees and how they can influence ways of responding to students, as well as affecting staff's personal lives. It provides ways of appropriately dealing with these reactions, coping with stress and debriefing staff.

Guidance

Alongside the training workshops to help implement a whole school approach to supporting refugees, Foundation House offers specialised consultancy and guidance. Five school refugee action networks have been established in Melbourne to give schools within a particular region the opportunity to support one another in implementing initiatives whilst receiving support from Foundation House.

Each refugee action network consists of six to 12 schools. Each member school commits to an 18 month implementation period. Regular refugee action network meetings convened by Foundation House bring together a core action team from each school to share good practice, consider examples of how other schools have used *School's In for Refugees*, and discuss challenges. The core action teams then lead developmental work in their school, supported by Foundation House.

Beaut Buddies program

Foundation House and the Western English Language School developed a transition program called *Beaut Buddies*. Mainstream students are trained in refugee issues and matched up with refugees leaving English Language Schools or Centres. Newly arrived students host the mainstream students at their Language School or Centre the first time they meet and then spend a day with their buddies at their future school. Later, when they have moved to their new mainstream school, both groups of students come together to work on a shared project over two terms.

The aim of these activities is to promote positive contact and cooperation across cultural groups, thus reducing discrimination, and increasing the new arrivals' connectedness to the school. VicHealth's *Building Bridges* project has provided funding to take this program to three Melbourne metropolitan regions over the next three years.

Achievements

Foundation House Schools Support Program Coordinator, Gillian Kerr, said the feedback from schools has been very positive. *School's In for Refugees* has been praised for its clear and logical writing and layout, and that makes it very usable and increases the take-up rate. Gillian added:

I recently had confirmation of what a useful document *Schools In* is when I observed a principal addressing a group of schools. She held up a tattered copy of *Schools In* with Post-it notes sticking out of it, opened it to the audit and said: 'It's all in here. We are working through the audit and gradually changing our policies and practices to better support our students of refugee background. It's a fantastic resource!'

A teacher using the material, Jane Wignell, said:

Schools In for Refugees has had a kick-start effect on those schools using it. We can respond to its flexibility. Its checklists, tips and ideas help us to generate our own momentum.

A number of schools have partnered with Foundation House to increase the involvement of parents and guardians by running a four-session program to share information about the Australian education system, their school and local community.

Schools have adapted the program to their community's needs. One school hired a bus and took families to local playgrounds and services and another school held barbecues. Several schools started regular parent meetings where the school newsletter was read in relevant languages. Parents subsequently felt more comfortable about visiting the school.

School's In for Refugees is currently being used across Australia. It has formed the basis of *Count me in!* produced by the Department of Education and Children's Services in South Australia, in conjunction with the Survivors of Torture and Trauma Assistance and Rehabilitation Service.

Challenges

Children from refugee backgrounds can have a wide range of needs. Schools often feel ill equipped to address these needs and can be reluctant to take the first step in what can be a daunting process.

As *School's In for Refugees* is free to download, there may be teachers using the Guide without being linked in to the other support Foundation House provides. While the flexibility to use the Guide in this way is positive, its effectiveness is greatly enhanced when accompanied by consultancy support. This support requires adequate ongoing funding.

Foundation House has been fortunate in attracting funding for this project until mid 2008.

Key factors in the project's success

One of the most significant factors in the success of *School's In for Refugees* is the consultancy support provided to teachers in implementing it.

School's In for Refugees fits into a broader framework of support and complementary projects that include *Health Promoting Schools*, the *National Safe Schools Framework* and the *Gatehouse Project*.

It is important to work closely with school principals through the implementation of *School's In for Refugees* because some of the suggestions it makes require the allocation of significant time and resources.

A key strength of *School's In for Refugees* is that it also includes strategies for engaging the broader school community in helping to educate and integrate refugee background students. Parent engagement strategies, after school homework groups and other activities outside normal school hours contribute to making a welcoming environment for refugee background young people, leading to a more positive experience in school and in the classroom.

Funding

Initial funding for the project came from the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

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