

SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Schools and community agencies can work together to provide families with a solid foundation that fosters social inclusion within the school community. There are particular services that schools can access that have been developed to provide links between schools and community agencies.

Many community agencies are funded to provide specific services that deliver advocacy, support and advice to families that may be part of the makeup of your school community. Many local governments provide community referral guides that can provide schools with an extensive list of all the services and contact details in the local area.

The following section contains:

- Some suggestions as to how community agencies can assist schools.
- Case studies and questions for consideration as a school community continues to develop its policies and strategies with respect to the needs of low income families. The case studies that are provided can be used when schools and community agencies meet to develop links with each other.
- A proforma that may be used to analyze appropriate school and community agency responses to the case studies. Alternatively, each case study contains some focus questions that may be used as a guide to discussion.

How Community agencies can assist schools

Community agencies may:

- Talk to staff about the issues affecting families who present at their agencies
- Explain how they can assist through support services
- Provide detail about school based issues that impact on student's education.
- Offer to run an information session with parents on issues that affect a family's income and expenditure e.g. utility payment plans, hardship policies, no interest loan programs etc
- Provide direct case-work at the school
- Ensure families are receiving their entitlements e.g. youth allowance, carer's allowance
- Assist with filling out forms for youth allowance, carer's allowance, utility relief grants, capital grants etc., perhaps at lunchtimes with senior students.
- Inform schools when there are Centrelink changes which may lessen a family's income
- Work with the school to maintain an up-to-date and relevant directory of local and state-wide services that can provide assistance to families experiencing social and financial difficulties.

The following is an example of a completed proforma that can be used when considering issues that result in exclusion of a student from a school based activity. A blank copy of the proforma is available at the end of this section for use when analyzing an appropriate school response to the case studies that follow.

<i>What is the presenting issue?</i>	<i>Who is likely to find out first?</i>	<i>How can we work together to assist this student?</i>	<i>What impact does this have on how we can work together in an on-going way?</i>
<p>Student did not attend Year 10 camp.</p>	<p>Teacher -student did not return the permission form.</p> <p>Community worker – parent presented at agency with financial difficulties – was distressed when she spoke of her daughter missing the camp because she could not afford it.</p>	<p>Discreetly find out the reasons why she didn't attend. Apply to community agency for financial assistance.</p> <p>Contact the school with the parent's authorization, inquire if the school can subsidize some or all of the cost of the camp; offer to apply for individual brokerage for the student.</p>	<p>Meet together, at the school well- being meeting and/or agency network meetings, to share what assistance is available for families experiencing financial or social difficulties.</p> <p>Invite the community worker to the school support group meetings.</p> <p>Develop or build on an existing, relevant service directory.</p>

Case Study 1: Voices from the Community

Email received at Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service.

Subject: Please help me keep my kids in school! I need to be pointed in the right direction.

Hi, my name is Fiona (name has been changed), I am a disability pensioner with three children. My youngest is in grade six this year and the school has allowed me to sign over my E.M.A cheque to pay for books etc...and I will only have to pay AN EXTRA \$20 which I can afford but my 13 year old son is going into year 8 at High Road College and they inform me that they don't do anything of the sort and his books will cost me over \$200 that I can't afford. My 16 year old daughter is due to go into year 11 this year and her books are very costly, I simply can't afford to pay for them. The learning for life group in Footscray have informed me they have no places left and I would hate for my daughter to drop out because I can't afford to send her. She spent a lot of time in a adolescent psychiatric hospital "origin" in Footscray last year for being suicidal and attempting suicide and I am worried about this to inform her that I can't afford her books. I have spilt a lot of tears and suffered a lot of heart ache over this matter and I was wondering if you could point me in the right direction for help on this matter. I am terribly hurt over this matter and have become very confused as to how I can get help to pay for there books. All I can think about is "Free education" huh! I am sorry for winging but I am in need of being pointed in the right direction for help and I hope you can help me. The kids are meant to return to school this week but with no books the older two look like staying home a bit longer. Kind regards Fiona. (I am using a friends computer and will be back again in the morning to check my mail)

Some Focus Questions

1. Is this a family of a student in your class?
2. Do you think you have families in similar situations at your school?
3. What evidence do you have of this?
4. How do you ensure that this student receives the same opportunities as other students?
5. What can you do as an individual that would make a difference?
6. What dilemmas might you face?
7. How do your current school policies and practices support the social and economic circumstances of families?
8. What is the outcome if nothing is done?

Case Study 2: Reflections of a Community Agency Worker

To have someone sitting in an interview room with you and telling you how they spend their money is a sobering experience. Sobering because the look in their eyes is a mixture of embarrassment, humiliation and desperation. They have heard that they may get some assistance for their kids' education, so they'll do whatever it takes.

He sits there with various papers in his hand to prove his eligibility for assistance - pay slips, school booklists, receipts etc. He tells me about his four children and his constant struggle to provide for them on his own. He tells me they never go to bed hungry - he makes sure of that at least.

He tells me what comes out of his wages in direct debit contributions for gas, electricity and other services. The hard part is when he begins to tell me about his kids and their schooling needs, and how he's been to the school to talk to them about payment plans and assistance, and the process he had to go through to prove he was a "genuine" case.

He indicates on the booklist which books he's been able to afford, which books he was able to get second-hand, the costs of new-editions and the graphics calculator which is mandatory for senior math's classes. The most difficult part of the interview was the pain in his eyes when he said: "Do you know how I feel when I know my son is passionate about some V.C.E. subjects, and he talks excitedly about them, and I know they will cost more than I can afford, and I'm going to have to say-sorry, but you can only choose one."

Then he tells me about the school camps his kids have missed because there simply was not enough money, and the excuses they gave their friends and teachers so they would not be labeled as "poor". He said that camps are like a reward for learning, and that they are a fun way to learn, and of course he wants what every other parent wants - for his kids to get the best chance to learn, and to become who they can be. He too wants his kids' individual differences to be valued and affirmed, and for school to be a place which is inclusive and open, regardless of family circumstance.

He tells me how difficult it has been for him to come today, and how grateful he is for the book vouchers he has received.

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Case Study 3: Voices from the School Community as told to Community Workers

About camps and excursions

She can be upset but she understands we don't have it {the money for the year 9 camp}.

No, I don't have the money - you can't go. I think they're getting used to it.

I'd love for him to go but you have to have money for rent, food shopping, and electricity bills - to provide for life.

You had to pay a deposit to save a place for your kid - I didn't have the money 'til next fortnight and he missed out. I felt terrible, like I had failed him.

I couldn't afford the camp, she felt so removed, put in a different class everyday.

If they ask me and I don't have it, they miss out.

I didn't say to the school I didn't have the money, I said she doesn't want to go. I was too ashamed.

Camps are a fun way to learn, they're a reward for learning. It's a punishment for kids if they can't afford to go.

My son didn't tell me about the camp because he knew I couldn't afford it and he didn't want to worry me.

I paid a \$20 deposit on the camp but couldn't afford the rest so she missed out.

I don't want my kids missing out on excursions and camps but I can't afford them. As an excuse I tell my kids that I would miss them too much for them to go, because they are very proud and would be hurt so much if they knew I couldn't afford it.

Choose some of the statements above. What implications do they have for:

- Our current school practices?
- Personal action I might take?
- Connections the school might need to make with some other agency?
- How we develop and provide contingencies within our school budget?
- Communication we make with our parents?
- New initiatives we might need to take?

Case Study 3: Voices from the School Community as told to Community Workers

About other school based issues

I try not to approach the school, I don't want kids to be labeled. I'm too ashamed.

I don't wash the uniform so often as she only has one and I can't get it dry.

I'm worried teachers will look down on us because we're poor.

I got teased because I didn't have the book.

I wish I didn't have to beg other girls to borrow their books.

Teachers say in class, 'Go get you books.' I would say I don't have the books, (my mum couldn't afford them and I don't want my friends to know). The teachers would then say, 'Don't you want to learn and study?'

Music lessons can really develop the person and strengthen their thinking and coordination. Like my kids, those that can't afford it lose out on that finesse and those benefits.

How can you say -don't do that subject because I can't afford it? Do you know how hard that is? I mean- this is their education!!

For her to do without things (books, camps, subjects she likes) makes it that little bit harder. I wish I could say - make a list- what do you want to do?

It's very heartbreaking to see her upset, she has special needs, you have to be careful what to say, I want her to finish school. I don't want her to have the same difficulties I had.

I try not to make them miss out on anything, sometimes rent is sacrificed but then it gets too hard.

Until I get to that wall and I can't go through it I'll do whatever it takes before I go knocking on anyone's door.

Choose some of the statements above. What implications do they have for:

- Our current school practices?
- Personal action I might take?
- Connections the school might need to make with some other agency?
- How we develop and provide contingencies within our school budget?
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Proforma to complete in considering how schools and community agencies might work together to promote inclusivity.

This proforma can be applied to the case studies contained within this section.

<i>What is the presenting issue?</i>	<i>Who is likely to find out first?</i>	<i>How can we work together to assist this student?</i>	<i>What impact does this have on how we can work together in an on-going way?</i>