

Social Inclusion at School

How to help low-income families



A good education at school can greatly improve children's opportunities in later life. But many children from poorer families are unable to participate fully in school life, significantly reducing the effectiveness of their education.

"School should be a place where each young person is known and cared for and a place which is inclusive and open, regardless of personal or family circumstance. If young people don't feel included because of poverty-related reasons, they are very much at risk of severe, lifelong disadvantage."

Gerard Stafford,
Former School Principal

This booklet aims to help teachers, parent groups, welfare workers and other people involved with schools to ensure that school activities and procedures are sensitive to the circumstances of low-income families.

It identifies some difficulties which those activities and procedures can cause and it provides an **Inclusion Checklist** of ways in which school communities can help to remove or reduce them.

Whatever the background of most of the students at your school, and whatever steps are currently taken to help low-income families, please take time to read this booklet and ask whether there is more that could be done.

An Inclusion Checklist

This Checklist could be used in your school to ensure that its policies, practices, and activities don't adversely affect low-income families.

Your school could consider:

- Setting time aside at meetings of staff, the school council and parent association to discuss some points on the Checklist.
- Choosing points from the Checklist as a focus for discussion and action in the school community over the following year.
- Using the Checklist to conduct an Inclusion Review every two years (see 'Inclusion Reviews').

1 Administration

- ✓ Ensure staff members are regularly informed and reminded about the needs of low-income families and students.
- ✓ Ensure you always provide information in brief simple inclusive language that all parents can readily understand, relate to and act upon.
- ✓ Be sensitive to the needs of families whose original language is not English and publicise free translation and interpreter services.
- ✓ Ensure all parents know the name and contact details of a person in the school office who they can communicate by phone, email and in person about problems arising from their financial situation or related difficulties.

Make a special effort to make this kind of contact seem a normal and common occurrence.

- ✓ Keep a confidential list of families who may be at risk of these difficulties (eg, because their enrolment forms show they are on very low incomes, their child is missing excursions, or they have problems paying for uniforms or books).
- ✓ Take the initiative in tactfully exploring with these families whether they are having difficulties and ways in which the school might be able to help.
- ✓ Ensure the school budget includes money which can be drawn on to assist low-income families meet costs associated with schooling.

2 Fees and Fundraising

- ✓ Government schools cannot charge compulsory fees. Non-government schools should actively encourage low-income families to request discounts, waivers or other relief from compulsory fees if in difficulty.
- ✓ Voluntary fees or other contributions should not be sought for services or activities which are part of a standard educational program. They should not be set at levels which place undue pressure on low-income families, and discounts, waivers or payments by instalment should be readily available.

- ✓ Students must not be punished or embarrassed by their parents' non-payment of fees or other contributions. For example, they should not be denied copies of annual school magazines or reports.
- ✓ Avoid having fundraising activities (including requests for voluntary contributions to the school) unless they are really necessary and are done in ways which do not pressure or embarrass low-income families in any way.

"People who really need help often lack the opportunity and confidence to ask for it successfully."

3 Uniforms

- ✓ Ensure that mandatory and optional items of uniform are designed to avoid unnecessary costs (eg, on embroidery, monograms, accessories) and are not changed without good reason.
- ✓ Ensure that uniforms are available through more than one supplier and as many items as possible can be obtained from low-cost suppliers.
- ✓ Provide patterns and access to material so that families can make their own uniform items.
- ✓ Set up a school clothing pool so that outgrown uniforms or items from students leaving school can be donated or sold back and then made available for resale at affordable prices for low-income families.
- ✓ Publicise that uniforms are available at little or no cost for families who cannot afford them and discreetly approach particular families who may need this help. Arrange for suppliers to help with these arrangements.
- ✓ Approach local traders and businesses to provide discounts for low income students on school-related purchases (eg, shoes, stationery, etc.).

Some causes for concern

- Parents worry that their children will stand out as being poor or different because they can't afford a uniform, books or stationery.
- Parents keep children at home when there is an excursion which requires payment.
- Children don't attend socials because they can't afford the entrance fee or suitable clothing.
- Parents can't pay fees and worry that their children will have to leave school.
- Families feel embarrassed because they cannot afford to take part in fundraising activities.
- Children have to stay home or walk very long distances to school because there is not enough money for transport.
- Children have health problems that may suggest parents can't afford proper medical treatment.
- Parents can't afford to provide children with breakfast or a lunch to eat at school.
- Children are embarrassed at wearing second-hand clothes which are shabby or don't fit them properly.
- Families can't pay power bills or rent because the money has been used to buy school books, materials and uniforms.

4 Booklists and Equipment

- ✓ Monitor booklists to prevent unnecessary inclusion of expensive items and to ensure they are not unnecessarily changed from year to year.
- ✓ Develop a fair and accessible system for sale or exchange of second hand textbooks and equipment.
- ✓ Discreetly offer school-owned books or equipment such as calculators to children who may have difficulty paying for them.

5 Excursions and Activities

- ✓ Avoid excursions and other activities which involve unnecessarily substantial fees or costly clothing and equipment (eg, skiing trips, expensive venues and dress codes for socials).
- ✓ Ensure excursions don't include any "hidden" costs (eg. on meals) which could be unaffordable and embarrassing for some students.
- ✓ Monitor overall excursion costs each year to ensure that they are kept reasonably low.
- ✓ Publicise that fees may be reduced or waived for families who cannot afford them and discreetly approach particular families who may need this help.

6 Homework and Assignments

- ✓ Ensure that students are not disadvantaged by inability to afford a computer, colour printer, internet connection etc for doing homework and other assignments (eg. provide them for use at school, including after hours).
- ✓ Avoid setting homework and other assignments which assume that students may have quiet space and extended access to a computer at home or that parents will be able to provide help.
- ✓ Consider initiatives like homework clubs, volunteer tutor programs and special arrangements with local libraries in order to help address these problems.
- ✓ Try to minimise classroom activities which will highlight differences in families' incomes (eg, reports focusing on family holidays and possessions).

7 Meals

- ✓ Establish a "breakfast club" to provide basic breakfast food for students at nominal cost on a daily basis.
- ✓ Ensure the canteen has low-cost and nutritious food options which are reasonably attractive to students.

8 External Assistance

- ✓ Develop strong links with local services which can provide specialist support and assistance to students and families in financial crisis.
- ✓ Provide staff, parents and students with a list of organisations in the local community which can provide information or help (see box).
- ✓ Help families obtain information about social security, concessions and other assistance (eg. by information sessions, displays, visits by Centrelink staff).
- ✓ Help students and families to receive advice and support in over-payment situations involving Youth Allowance.
- ✓ Help students who are homeless to make contact with appropriate service providers.
- ✓ Consider arranging free deliveries of basic groceries and other necessities for families in special distress.

Some items for a directory of external assistance

- Education:** Assistance, Payments, Concessions
- Electricity, gas, water:** Concessions and hardship relief, Disconnections
- Finance:** Loans, Counselling
- Food and clothing:** Free or discount suppliers
- Free activities:** Sport, Music
- Health:** Concessions, Prescriptions, Dental
- Housing:** Public or emergency housing, Rent assistance, Bonds
- Telephone:** Concessions, Disconnections
- Transport:** Concessions
- Other help:** Legal, Local council, MPs

Inclusion Reviews

- School communities could decide to use the Checklist as the basis for regular Inclusion Reviews to be conducted every, say, two years.
- Inclusion Reviews could be conducted by a small team appointed from differing backgrounds (eg, a teacher, a parent and a welfare worker) by the principal, council and parents association.
- The Reviews could involve looking at every aspect of school life, including school newsletters, notices and procedures as well as asking for input from individual members of the school community.
- Their suggestions could then be considered by the principal and reported on to the school community.
- To be effective, the Reviews will need to be carried out in a constructive way, aimed at encouraging improvements where necessary, and avoid appearing adversarial or just cursory.

Poverty, hardship and education

- About 10% of Australian children (that is, about half a million children) live in a family which is suffering poverty or serious hardship.
- More than one quarter of all homeless people are families with children.
- Children from poorer families are six times more likely to go to school without breakfast than students from wealthier backgrounds.
- Families pay more of the total cost of their children's education than in most other developed countries.
- Social disadvantage is the main cause of differences between children's level of educational achievements (greater than in many other countries).
- Children from poorer families are twice as likely as those from wealthy families to have very low levels of literacy and numeracy.
- 40% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds leave school before year 12, but only 20% of students from high socio-economic backgrounds.
- Children who do not complete year 12 or its equivalent are twice as likely to become unemployed as those who do.



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The Checklist in that booklet is being tested in a number of western Melbourne schools as part of a Standpoint Project by Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service and Victoria University (see www.goodshepvc.com.au)