

Sister School Resource Kit

For online publication

September 2022



Published by the Department of Education and Training

Melbourne August 2022

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CRICOS Provider Code: 00861K.

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About the resource

The Victorian Government is committed to enhancing international education experiences for Victorian school students, thereby preparing them for active participation in an interdependent, globalised world, providing them with 21st century skills, so that they can think critically, embrace technology and value diversity. Effective sister school partnerships can provide an ideal vehicle for this international engagement.

This resource is aimed at supporting Victorian schools at different stages of their sister school partnerships. This includes schools wishing to take the first steps to establish a partnership, those with established partnerships, as well as those with strong and effective sister school partnerships. No matter where your school is on the partnership journey, it is envisaged that you will find useful material in this resource for building or enhancing your partnership(s).

This resource is informed by the sister school research commissioned by the Department in 2012 on effective practices in sister school partnerships (hereafter referred to as Departmental sister school research). It also draws upon the experience of schools which have been successful in building and maintaining meaningful and sustainable partnerships as a school improvement strategy. It includes short case studies of schools which include not only the success stories but which also highlight some of the obstacles encountered in establishing partnerships and strategies employed to overcome these obstacles.

In this resource you will find information about effective sister school partnerships and how they can contribute to preparing your students for life as active and engaged citizens with a global outlook.

NO MATTER WHERE YOUR SCHOOL IS ON THE PARTNERSHIP JOURNEY, IT IS ENVISAGED THAT YOU WILL FIND USEFUL MATERIAL IN THIS RESOURCE FOR BUILDING OR ENHANCING YOUR PARTNERSHIP(S).



Section 1: About sister school partnerships

1. DEFINITION OF A SISTER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

A sister school partnership is a meaningful, reciprocal and sustainable long-term partnership between two schools, aimed at fulfilling a range of purposes as determined by the school communities. Sister school partnerships can be intrastate, interstate or international and are based on the principles of mutual benefit and reciprocity.

Sister school partnerships can be aimed at:

- broadening students' perspectives
- developing students' intercultural understanding
- enhancing student language learning
- contributing to a whole school program of internationalisation
- building teacher capacity

The opportunity to develop a sister school partnership is open to any school.

While much of the material in this resource focuses on international sister school partnerships, the general principles remain the same for interstate and intrastate partnerships.

2. WHY ENGAGE IN A SISTER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP

Government policy underpinnings

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA 2008), ratified by all State and territory education Ministers, set the goals for Australian education to develop young Australians into "... active and informed citizens, who are able to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia, and are responsible global and local citizens."

The development and successful implementation of sister school partnerships is an excellent mechanism for building intercultural understanding and a sense of global citizenship in students and school staff.

Government is committed to priorities languages education in Victorian schools. Sister school partnerships can enhance the language program in your school, if your sister school's language is the native language of your sister school.

Benefits of sister school partnerships

The key findings from Departmental sister school research indicate that sister school programs have a significant positive effect on the global awareness and attitudes of school students. The benefits are of greatest significance during the third year of partnerships, once they are well established.

Effective sister school partnerships can have profound and positive impact on a range of areas of school education, including:

- Student learning
- Teacher capability
- Curriculum, including language learning and intercultural understanding
- Whole school improvement
- Community engagement

The most commonly reported benefit of sister school partnerships from principals and teachers surveyed in the Department's sister school research was the contributions made to intercultural understanding within the school community, followed by an increased understanding of one's own culture and country.

For students, benefits include:

- development of intercultural understanding and sensitivity, and an appreciation of different points of view;
- development of 21st century skills to enable critical thinking, cross-cultural collaboration and a positive attitude to diversity;
- greater competency and confidence in language learning and communication skills and renewed enthusiasm for language learning;
- enhanced information communication and technology skills as students interact through wikis, blogs and Skype;
- tangible illustration of the concept of global interconnectedness incorporating authentic collaborative learning activities;
- opportunities for students to locate and explore common ground, bringing a unique intercultural element to collaborative learning;
- development of cross-cultural communication and diplomacy skills and a deeper understanding of international issues;
- development of international friendships and networks;
- increasing awareness of and comfort level with different styles of teaching.

For School staff, benefits include:

- opportunities to benchmark practice against other school systems;
- development of intercultural understanding and sensitivity, and an appreciation of different points of view;
- increased awareness of different education systems, including pedagogies and curriculum;
- greater competency and confidence in language learning and communication skills;
- strengthened Information and Communication Technology skills.

For the school community, benefits include:

- Development of global networks and perspectives, with the flow-on effect of internationalising the ethos of the whole school community
- Raising the profile of language learning across the school community.

3. TYPES OF SISTER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

There are many different types of sister school partnerships, aimed at fulfilling a range of purposes determined by local needs. The examples below may be useful to inform the possible activities developed under a sister school partnership.

Language-based partnerships

The primary aim of the sister school partnership is to improve language learning among students.

Community link programs

The sister school partnership is developed out of a community link program, for example an existing 'sister city' program

Topic-specific partnerships

The link between schools is planned around a particular area of work for students to engage in and collaborate on.

Structured programs

Some sister school partnerships are based around a structured program – these partnerships are generally formalised and involve a portfolio of activities, e.g. The Australia-Asia BRIDGE program (Building Relationships through Intercultural Dialogue and Growing Engagement)

ICT-based links

Some sister school partnerships are driven from an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) perspective. These partnerships are suitable for all ages, can be easily set up, managed and moderated. For example, the Australian [AsiaConnexions](#) video conferences; the British Council provides information on ['ePal'](#) programs for developing emailing links between students.

Social justice-based partnerships

The sister school partnership focuses on a deep and meaningful collaborative project that has an explicit shared purpose on a social responsibility project.

For more information on how to choose the right social-justice based partnership, see: Smart Volunteering Guidelines [Link <http://dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/volunteers/Pages/smart-volunteering.aspx>]

Professional development programs

The focus of the sister school partnership is on sharing pedagogy, curriculum ideas and resources among teachers and other school staff.

Cultural-based partnerships

The focus of the partnership is on the intercultural understanding.

Region-specific programs

Some sister school partnerships are region-specific, with schools specifically targeting partnerships with a particular area or country. For example, the former Eastern Metropolitan Region's partnership with Suzhou Education Bureau in China saw over 40 schools in the region partnering with schools in Suzhou.

Networked programs

Some sister school partnerships may involve a networked group of schools (and potentially other organisations) which come together for a particular aim, for example, shared collaborative projects, promotion of intercultural understanding, social justice etc. For example, Team Bendigo China Sister School Project involves 14 primary schools in the area. Each school has a sister school, but they work together as a network.

Whole-school partnerships

This involves a partnership where staff and students get to know one another on a deeper level, work together and potentially undertake reciprocal visits. The impact of the partnership permeates the school, with influence on multiple student age groups and/or disciplines.



Section 2: What makes a successful sister school partnership

1. FACTORS FOR SUCCESSFUL SISTER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

The success factors highlighted by the Department's sister school research are outlined below:

- **Link to school policy/vision** - Ensure that the type of partnership you plan is clearly linked to the school's vision, e.g. If your school aims to build the number of students studying Indonesian to Year 12 level, then it would be wise to plan a sister school partnership based on language, with an Indonesian-speaking school. It would be necessary to communicate this aim clearly to any potential partner school to ensure that this will align with their school vision, e.g. the Indonesian – speaking school may have a goal of improving the language capabilities of their students in English. For sustainability of the program it is advisable to have it documented in your school's policy/vision framework.
- **Commitment** - As with all partnerships, it is important to nurture your sister school partnership and be realistic about what can be achieved in the short term. Before starting a partnership, ensure that you are clear about the time commitment and level of activity involved. Findings from the Department's sister school research indicate that the best outcomes occur only after partnerships are well established, most notably in the third year. Making the partnership a documented priority within the school helps ensure the necessary resources and commitment to the partnership in a long term.

- **Shared vision/Common interest** - In order to ensure a successful partnership, it is critical that the schools are well matched in terms of shared vision and common interest. If your goal is to improve teacher capability by having teachers engage in shared curriculum planning with the sister school, then this needs to be communicated clearly early in the "matching process" to ensure a match with a school which is happy to share curriculum, rather than a school which is concentrating on language, or cultural exchange. Ideally schools planning a partnership should be very clear about what they hope to gain from the partnership before engaging with a potential partner school. Some questions to consider are:
 - » What do you hope to get from the partnership?
 - » What is the main focus of the partnership, e.g. curriculum sharing, language learning, cultural exchange etc.
 - » What activities do you want to undertake as part of the partnership?
 - » How do these activities contribute to student learning outcomes?
 - » How flexible are you about adjusting your focus if the other school has a different aim?
 - » How will you communicate your aims to your partner school?
- **Reciprocity** - Ensure the learning goals of the partner school/ collaborating teachers are being met by the collaboration - be flexible and open to learning about other ways of doing things. Reciprocity also extends to organising visits to and from a sister school, for example, itinerary planning, cost and accommodation arrangements, etc. Equal level of commitment between partner schools to ensure reciprocal benefits for both schools.

- **Involvement of a team/succession planning** - It is important to have support for the sister school partnership from within the school leadership team. Having a champion on the leadership team ensures that no individual staff member has overall responsibility for the program. For longevity and stability of the partnership it is vital that responsibility for the program is shared across the team. Ideally, the school should form a team, including the key contact or champion from the leadership group, to form a working party to keep the partnership active and vital. This group can co-opt other school staff or community members as appropriate and can advocate for the sister school partnership during the whole school planning process. This approach allows for succession planning as team members change or take on different responsibilities. Full support from leadership team and school council.
- **Communication** - Work with your sister school to determine the most flexible methods of communication that will work for both parties. For example a number of Victorian schools have learned that using smart phones to text with partner schools in some countries is much more effective and timely than using email. It is also worth investigating other communication methods such as the Chinese social media site, QQ. Regularity of contact is also important to maintain the momentum of your partnership. In planning your sister school activities, consider having some scheduled contact points every term to keep the partnership flourishing. Ideally face-to-face communication between school staff early on in the relationship should be arranged.
- **Involving the school community** - Communicate clearly the nature and benefits of your sister school partnership to members of your school community to elicit support and understanding. You can do this by using newsletters, the school website or intranet, school assemblies and other events. By promoting the partnership, you may find that members of your school community can offer assistance and expertise to the program. For example, parents may be able to join in Skype sessions where they assist with translation or offer cultural insights.

2. HOW TO LINK SISTER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS WITH TEACHING AND LEARNING

Sister school partnerships create many opportunities for authentic learning and teaching, and can make your curriculum come alive! By linking sister school partnership with the teaching and learning in your school, your sister school partnership is more likely to be sustained.

Ongoing and positive communication with a school from another country provides staff and students with the opportunity to reflect on their own culture and that of their partner country, time to reflect on the differences and the reasons for such differences. The partnership can provide challenges for students to consider difficult questions which arise from the differences. This reflection builds higher order thinking skills and can result in a more globalised outlook and depth of intercultural understanding about their partner country. It can also build the appetite for further knowledge and understanding leading to better student preparedness for success in the interconnected world of the 21st century.

Sister school partnerships provide the perfect opportunity to teach intercultural understanding, one of the general capabilities of the [Australian Curriculum](#), as well as Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, one of the cross curriculum priorities in the Australian Curriculum.

While some activities undertaken within a sister school partnership will have a natural teaching and learning focus, others may not be so obvious. Reciprocal visits can be seen as an engaging cultural awareness activity. But like all excursions, careful planning is needed to ensure that students get the most out of these experiences. Go to "Part 2 Planning, Implementation and Follow-up" of the [Overseas Learning Experiences for Students](#) to see how to plan teaching and learning around either visiting sister schools or hosting a visit from sister schools.

Embedding sister school partnerships in teaching and learning

The strategic approach includes consideration of links to school policy and goals, setting of priorities and linking the partnership to the school curriculum across year levels and learning domains. It includes a cohesive approach to planning, implementation and review.

Many schools start by auditing the curriculum to identify existing content that would build students' knowledge base and content that would facilitate the development of intercultural understanding of students. Most schools find the auditing and the subsequent adding of relevant content not only streamline the curriculum across the year levels, but also create an authentic opportunity to discuss issues and reach a common understanding of what intercultural understanding is and what sister schools can do to enhance student learning.

Many schools also use sister school partnership as an impetus to review language provision in the school.

When reviewing curriculum, it is valuable to use the lens of the sister school partnership to identify content and resources which are relevant or complementary.

There are a wide range of valuable and practical resources available on the [Asia Education Foundation](#) website to illustrate how to include multiple perspectives in the curriculum. Some examples are provided below as to how this could be done across a range of curriculum areas:

Year 3	Year 7
History	Physical Education
English	Science
Maths	

Teacher collaboration

Some schools choose to focus on teacher collaboration before venturing into full scale sister school activities. Effective teacher collaboration paves the way for student collaboration.

Classroom observation virtual or actual can be a good starting point for professional dialogues that can lead to in-depth discussion on various aspects of teaching and learning, including

- Curriculum and curriculum planning
- Assessment
- Pedagogy

It is beneficial to involve all year level teachers, or all faculty teachers in a lesson observation, so that common language and understanding can be developed in the post observation discussion. Common language and understanding is critical to ensure the success of curriculum collaboration and collaborative projects.

During the collaboration, sometimes there will be exchange of information about curriculum, school policy and school events, curriculum, teaching resources, course materials and teaching strategies. For related intellectual property issues, please refer to [School Policy and Advisory Library \(PAL\)](#) for further advice.

Student collaborative projects

Projects can be specifically created for sister school collaboration or classroom curriculum can be integrated into the collaboration. Using a topic that students are already working on and expanding it into a global collaboration with sister school makes the work more engaging and authentic for students. Collaborating on the work with sister school provides the advantage of giving students access to differing points of view. This is a valuable experience and can help to build the intercultural understanding of students. This can be particularly effective when teachers provide scaffolding for students to reflect about their values and opinions and those of others.

When exchanging student work, emails, letters, photos and student newspaper, check [PAL](#) for related intellectual property and privacy issues.



3. HOW A SISTER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP CAN SUPPORT SCHOOL LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

An effective sister school partnership can afford many opportunities to support your school's language program. Learning about another cultural group, whether it is from another country or within your own can provide context for language learning. (For example, when a student of Vietnamese language understands the social status and relationship indicated by the numerous kinship terms used in Vietnamese language, the reasons for the many different forms of address become clearer and more meaningful.)

It is practical to partner with a school where the language spoken is the language taught in your school. To further augment the language study, an interdisciplinary approach can also be undertaken, where the school includes aspects of the language studied and its culture in other domains such as The Humanities (History, Geography, Economics), English, Science, Mathematics and The Arts. This increases the depth and breadth of the language study, allowing for an integrated approach to enrich and expand student learning, and to increase student engagement and understanding. A shared project could be undertaken with students from the sister school that may be part of the learning program of any of the domains, rather than just Languages. This encourages the support of the whole school in the sister school partnership.

Be clear about what you hope to gain from your partnership in terms of language learning and remember that your sister school may wish to apply their language learning of English when collaborating with you. It is advisable to make a clear arrangement about how each language will be used during your collaboration. For example, if you are working on a one hour Skype session with a sister school in China, then negotiate that the first half hour of the session will be conducted in Mandarin, and the second half hour in English. This ensures that the language learning needs of both parties are addressed.

Effective sister school partnerships can support language programs of both participating schools in the following ways:

- engaging the whole school in the relationship with a school in a country where the language spoken is the language taught in your school
- sparking students' interest in another place, country, culture and language, and thereby engaging them more strongly in learning the language
- providing opportunities for students to develop interpersonal relationships, intercultural understanding and a more global outlook
- providing opportunities for students to use the language they are learning for authentic, meaningful communication, to practise speaking and listening in real time conversations with native speakers of the language, and to learn nuances of the language
- increasing student motivation to continue with language studies by providing a concrete purpose and use for the language they are learning
- supplementing the school's language program by connecting virtually via ICT and web 2.0 tools such as Skype, wikis etc.
- providing opportunities for (reciprocal) sister school visits and to apply the language in real-life, face to face situations
- illustrating the benefits of language learning to the school community, thereby engaging their support for the language program. This is more likely to happen when parents see their children engaged in purposeful language learning.

Students

1. Learn and utilise language and culture skills in an immersed and engaging environment.
2. Develop awareness and appreciation of cultures and people beyond the boundaries of their community, country, and language.
3. Acquire the disposition and skills to collaborate with overseas students, in their native language, to find solutions to common problems and in the process improve accent and pronunciation and improve understanding of language nuances.
4. Critically seek and evaluate information and make sense of it within the context of their community and that of their overseas peers' community.
5. Gain improved understanding of the importance of language learning and increased motivation to continue with language studies.

School staff

1. Develop professional knowledge about the overseas country (people, politics, geography, economy, science and technology, art, literature, history, etc.) to integrate into their own discipline and curriculum or to provide more effective language and culture instruction.
2. Conceptualize and develop collaborative projects to engage students of both schools (e.g. joint curriculum, units, seminars, debates, media projects, and lab experiments).
3. Participate in a community of global learners to acquire and share best practices in education, including content, use of technology, methodology, assessment tools, etc.

School Community

1. Understand the value of language and intercultural education, and foster stronger support for such opportunities for students and the school community.
2. Encourage and engage the community to develop interactions with the partner school's community.
3. By exploring and appreciating the systems and challenges of the partner's education system, gain a deeper understanding of those factors in their own system, and adopt best practices to improve all aspects of school management, curriculum instruction, funding, parental and community relations, etc.

Case study: Heathmont Secondary College- video

Heathmont Secondary College has developed a sister school partnership with Indonesia through the BRIDGE program. They are also involved in mentoring beginning teachers in other Victorian schools and have developed a cluster model with their local feeder primary schools to provide continuity in Indonesian language learning. This inspirational video captures some of the impressive work being undertaken at the school.

<http://vimeo.com/52984037>

4. THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Sister school partnerships provide an ideal opportunity to engage students in using Web 2.0 technology in authentic learning experiences. However it is important to do so in a safe environment for students where risk is minimised.

Duty of care and student wellbeing online

The Victorian Government strongly believes that children and young people have the right to participate in an education system which values and promotes safe and respectful attitudes and behaviours and prepares them for successful relationships and interactions in their adult lives.

Creating and maintaining respectful, safe, secure and stimulating learning environments is an essential characteristic of a school that is engaging and inclusive of a diverse range of learners.

A school therefore has a duty of care to identify known and foreseeable risks to students and to take reasonable steps to minimise these risks and to support students in their care. This includes online and digital environments, particularly those that are created and/or owned by the school and its teaching staff. This duty of care extends to all activities undertaken as part of a sister school partnership. Therefore, it is important to undertake lessons on safety in a digital environment well in advance of engaging online with the partner school.

Check [PAL](#) for cyber safety related advice.



The importance of Netiquette

It is important to spend some time prior to engaging in online collaboration by teaching “netiquette” to students to prepare them for successful collaboration. Develop protocols for online collaboration with the staff from your sister school and ensure that your students understand the expectations and protocols before beginning any online session. Ideally your partner school will have undertaken a similar lesson with their students to ensure all participants are aware of protocols to ensure smooth interaction.

This preparation will stand them in good stead for the sister school partnership activities as well as for other online interactions.

Technical and internet capacity

In the case of using technology such as Skype, issues with broadband capabilities, video cameras, and time zone differences can complicate its use for connecting schools. Schools with unreliable or limited internet access, or with older equipment, may be at a disadvantage in the use of this technology. It is important to have contingency plans for occasions when technology fails. Discussions about technical capacity should take place in the planning stages of the partnership and ways sought to minimise these obstacles.

Time zone differences

Schools with significant variation in time zones may have difficulties in scheduling mutually convenient technology link-ups. Some schools have overcome this difficulty by scheduling web conferencing sessions in the evening during other school events such as parent teacher conference evenings, which are during school hours for the sister school. As with many aspects of sister school partnerships, flexibility and contingency planning are the key to successful interactions.

Below are some examples of technologies which can be used in your sister school partnership:

Blogs	www.edublogs.org
QQ (China)	http://www.imqq.com/
Skype	http://www.skype.com/en/
Text messaging	various
Videoconferencing, such as Polycom	various
Voicethread	http://voicethread.com/
Webchat translator	various





Section 3: How to establish a sister school partnership

1. STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO ESTABLISHING A SISTER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP WITH AN OVERSEAS SCHOOL

Research has shown that careful consideration and planning is fundamental to a successful and sustained sister school partnerships.

Before setting out to source a sister school partnership, it is important to think through what you want from a sister school partnership. Your thinking will evolve, so will the partnership, but you do need some clear objectives to begin. Ideally you would gain consensus from the staff and school council for such a partnership before you commence these first steps.

The following charts will guide you through the four steps of initial thinking and planning, the identification of a right partner, the initial contact and the establishment of the partnership.

YOUR THINKING WILL EVOLVE, SO WILL THE PARTNERSHIP, BUT YOU DO NEED SOME CLEAR OBJECTIVES TO BEGIN.

Action overview

Guiding principles: reciprocity, mutual benefits, respect, perseverance

Step 1 assess the need and plan	Step 2 find the right partner	Step 3 make contact	Step 4 establish the partnership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - goals and objectives - Implementation - staffing and funding - evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search the Department's sister school database to research potential school • Seek other connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce yourself • Establish regular communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiate an agreement/MOU • Obtain appropriate approval to ensure compliance with Australian Government Foreign Relations Act • Formalise the partnership

Step 1: Assess the need and plan

Your question	Advice/tips
We want our staff and students to develop cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding.	<p>A sister school partnership is a great vehicle for this. It is most effective and sustainable when fully embedded in the school policy and practice. Schools can start the process by auditing the school curriculum to ensure that international content and perspectives are included and embedded.</p> <p>You may find that most overseas schools will have similar intentions. Ways of achieving the goals however are varied and can be the focus of the negotiation when you find the right school to partner with.</p>
We want the sister school partnership to enhance the language learning of our students.	<p>Looking for a sister school in the country that speaks the language that is taught in your school is the obvious choice. However, sister school partnerships shouldn't be the responsibility of languages teachers only. It needs the leadership support and a team approach.</p> <p>If language is not a key outcome, you may wish to consider the school population mix to decide on the country of the sister school. A sister school partnership can be very powerful in acknowledging the diverse cultures of the students in your school.</p>
We want to provide our students and staff with opportunities to interact with people from other cultures.	<p>Interactions can be virtual and actual. The opportunities are endless, ranging from classroom collaboration, such as pen pal and joint projects; to teacher collaboration through team teaching, class observation, discussion and resource sharing; to reciprocal cultural visits by both teachers and students.</p> <p>Be clear about what you want to achieve first. The interactions and activities are means to achieve your goals.</p>
We have a staff member who will lead the work.	<p>One staff member is not enough. A team approach with support from the leadership is critical to ensure shared responsibility and sustainability.</p>
We have funding and resources that will support the program.	<p>Great! Funding is not essential during the establishment phase. However, limited funding will limit the range and extent of activities.</p> <p>Some schools budget funds for sister school related activities and engage the community in fundraising to support the program.</p> <p>You may have to rely heavily on technology. Your partner's ICT capability will be an important factor.</p>
Sister school program will be reflected in the school strategic plan and the Annual Implementation Plan (for Victorian schools).	<p>Excellent! The finding from the 2013 mid-year census indicated that "schools that had the partnership in their Strategic Plan were significantly more likely to have had teacher and student activities."</p> <p>The inclusion of sister school partnership in the school Strategic Plan will demonstrate to both your school community and the overseas partner your commitment to the partnership. Some schools acquire the school council approval at this stage too.</p>
We have thought about what we will do if the partnership doesn't work. We also have an evaluation plan.	<p>You need to be mindful of the fact that partnerships take time and effort to establish and maintain. When facing various issues and challenges, respect and perseverance is the answer.</p> <p>Documenting and tracking the development of the partnership will make the reporting much easier. A three year stock take and evaluation of the impact of the partnership will also be helpful to reassess the objectives of the partnership.</p>

Step 2: Find the right partner

Your question	Advice/tips
What makes a good partner school?	<p>Mutual expectations and objectives for the partnership are the crucial criteria. Commitment from the leadership is another key factor that will contribute to the success of a partnership.</p> <p>Flexibility is required as a right school may not necessarily mean it is very similar to yours.</p> <p>If your school is small, you may want to cluster with neighbouring schools to share a sister school. Experience has shown that smaller schools tend to miss out on the range of activities that bigger schools can afford.</p>
How can I find a sister school?	<p>You can search the Department's sister school website for a school that matches your expectations. The Department receives expressions of interest from overseas schools and the list of schools are posted on the website and updated regularly. However, the range of countries and type of schools are limited.</p> <p>You can also seek a sister school through:</p> <p>Local councils: some local councils have sister cities or municipalities overseas and may be able to leverage these networks to locate a partner school</p> <p>Community groups and organisations: some community groups or organisations have ties to schools in particular regions of the world. Local cultural associations, universities and non-profit organisations may be able to connect classes or schools with a school overseas</p> <p>Internet matching sites: a wide array of internet sites are available that connect educators and students from around the world. Many of these are created by non-profit organisations and are free to use</p> <p>Professional networks: networking with other educators at conferences and professional development workshops help to communicate an interest in a sister school partnership.</p> <p>Always keep a look out for possible links that can lead to a sister school partnership. It can be from overseas travel, or friends or parents of the school community. Hosting international delegations or student study tour groups can sometimes lead to a fruitful sister school partnership. (Contact International Education Division if you are interested in hosting.) Participation in global projects such as ePals, or AEF's BRIDGE project can lead to sister school partnerships as well.</p>

Step 3: Make contact

Your question	Advice/tips
Who should make the first contact?	<p>It is ultimately your judgement to decide who to make the initial contact. However, if you make the initial contact. An introductory letter from the Principal can be sent accompanied by an information package including your school profile.</p> <p>It is recommended that you include the contact details for your school, and ask for a contact person from your partner school, as well as clear actions and timelines.</p> <p>Observe appropriate cultural protocols, including naming conventions and be courteous. Be formal rather than informal at this initial stage.</p>
How often should I communicate with my partner school?	<p>Once the initial communication is exchanged, you need to agree on the frequency of communication, whether it's by email, or other online form. Detailed information sharing around ICT capabilities and time tables can also take place here, particularly if you are partnering with a school in a different time zone.</p> <p>Keep to the agreed arrangement and be respectful always. It is important at this trust building stage.</p> <p>While it is important to keep the momentum going, it is also important to be realistic and considerate about the turn-around time, especially when the term dates, public holidays and exam times are different.</p>

Step 4: Establish the partnership

Your question	Advice/tips
Is a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) necessary?	<p>Some schools choose to arrange a fact finding trip to the partner school before a formal agreement is negotiated, or to negotiate the formal agreement while visiting. Others choose to reach a formal agreement first. Whether you want to start small or big, it is useful to have a written agreement or a MOU. The finding from the Department's 2013 mid-year census indicated that "schools that had an MOU with their partnership school were significantly more likely to have had teacher and student activities".</p> <p>The written agreement should be simple but specific, with key outcomes and timelines. It is recommended to keep the agreement to a 3-5 year life, to allow revision to accommodate changed needs and expectations.</p> <p>Some schools find it useful to have a high level agreement, but develop an action plan annually.</p> <p>When negotiating the agreement, make it fair and remember it is an equal partnership where each can learn and contribute.</p> <p>You should read the Department's Sister School Policy on PAL so you understand the relevant legal and policy requirements including the compliance with the Australian Government Foreign Relations Act.</p>
Do I have to have a ceremony for MOU signing?	<p>In consultation with your partner school, you may wish to conduct a formal signing ceremony. The signing provides the perfect opportunity to either visit your partner school or host a visit from your partner school. The ceremony has great symbolic value and holds both parties to account. Some schools include a tree planting or other event to commemorate the occasion.</p> <p>The signing ceremony can also be done via <i>Skype</i> or other video conferencing facilities.</p>
How do I start organising visits to my sister school or host visits from my sister school?	<p>As the relationship develops, you might consider reciprocal visits by students from both schools. For advice on hosting student visits or taking students to visit your sister school, please go to Section 4.</p>

2. CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Thinking strategically about your sister school partnership

Participation in a sister school partnership requires a commitment of resources, (time, staff and finances), energy, enthusiasm and organisation. As the partnership has implications for resourcing at your school, it is important to approach it as strategically as you would any other program decision. This includes building in a review process to ensure the partnership is achieving goals and included in school planning in a coherent way.

The following guiding questions may be useful in ensuring that your sister school partnership is implemented in a cohesive and strategic manner:

Guiding questions

- Why does our school want to start a sister school partnership?
- Are we embarking on a partnership because another school has approached us? If so, does it align with our school goals? Are we doing it just because we were asked?
- What do we hope to gain from the partnership? How will we achieve these goals?
- What are our educational objectives? How will the partnership contribute to student learning outcomes?
- Who will form the sister school partnerships team? How often will they meet? What plans are in place for succession planning?
- How will we ensure that our partner school's goals are also met by the partnership?
- How will resources be allocated to the program? Over what time period? From which budget?
- What form will our partnership take? Using ICT, visits, collaborative curriculum etc.?
- How will both partners be involved in reviewing the program to ensure it is meeting its goals? Who will initiate this review? How often? What will success look like?

These questions can form the basis of a whole staff discussion and will highlight some of the issues to consider before initiating a sister school partnership.

For best results, ensure that the nature of the partnership supports your school's local context. It would be ideal if your partnership aligned with your school's language program and, if possible, with those of your feeder schools and of the local community. Bearing these factors in mind means that your partnership has a better chance of gaining community support and of being successful.

Considerations when planning an Overseas Learning Experience

When planning your overseas learning program, it is important to consider the potential impact of your group's program. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has developed smart volunteering guidelines to advise schools of their responsibilities when travelling overseas. This is a very valuable resource and should form part of your planning process. Find the guidelines here: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/smart-volunteering-brochure.pdf>

Managing multiple partnerships

Some schools are involved in multiple sister school partnerships and do it very successfully, however this is not always the case. Consideration must be given as to how you will allocate limited resources. You may decide that one of your partnerships is highly relevant and valuable to your school and warrants the resources required to facilitate overseas visits, while another may not add as much value to your schools' programs and only requires online collaboration to ensure it is sustainable. Decisions need to be made as to how much you can afford to resource multiple partnerships and how you will communicate these decisions to the school community.



Section 4: Reciprocal visits

Reciprocal visits is a common element of a sister school partnership. The Department's Sister School Policy on [PAL](#) provides advice to Victorian government schools on a range of issues concerning overseas travel and hosting visits from overseas sister schools. It is important that schools are fully aware of this advice.

Schools in the non-government sector should consult with the Independent Schools Victoria and or the relevant diocesan Catholic Education Office for relevant advice.

Costs associated with sister school partnerships

Victorian government schools must not enter into any commercial arrangements with their sister schools. Costs involved in sister school activities such as student visits should be negotiated between schools based on the principles of mutual benefit and reciprocity. It is reasonable to ask for sister schools to cover costs associated with the visits (and vice versa), but fees charged are only to recover actual costs incurred.

1. VISITING SISTER SCHOOLS

According to Department policy an excursion is an activity organised by a school (not including work experience) during which students leave the school grounds to engage in educational activities. The activity of students participating in a sister school reciprocal visit would therefore be considered an excursion.

The planning and provision of excursions, including overseas excursions, must comply with Departmental guidelines, policies and procedures. For more information, see: [Excursion and Activities](#)

Schools are also advised to read through the relevant policy for sister school partnerships on [PAL](#) and take appropriate action to comply with the advice. See: [Sister School Partnerships](#)

1.1 Duty of care

School staff has a duty of care to their students to take reasonable steps to protect them from any injury that should have been reasonably foreseen. This duty can extend beyond school grounds, and includes school approved activities. It is important to note that this duty of care cannot be delegated to third parties.

Schools must ensure that they take reasonable steps to ensure that they meet their duty of care to their students when organising and travelling to their sister-school as part of their sister-school partnership.

Risk management

Schools must carefully consider all of the risks associated with the excursion and prepare a Risk Management Plan. The responsibility for risk management lies with the principal and the school council. This will include consideration of all matters including the transportation, the venue, the activities, supervision, and medical conditions of the students. It will also involve the following assessments and considerations:

- Identifying the risks
- Assessing the risks
- Managing and treating the risks
- Reviewing the risks

In particular the Department has developed specific Overseas Travel Risk Management Guidelines. It is important that schools have conducted a risk assessment in line with these Guidelines. For more information, see: [Overseas Travel Risk Management Guidelines](#)

Approval of Excursion by the School Council

The [PAL](#) requires all overseas excursions to be approved by the School Council. For more information, see: [Planning and Approvals](#)

Visas and passports

Schools must also ensure that students have valid passports and the necessary visas to enable them to travel to the host country and to re-enter Australia. Such information should be communicated to parents/guardians with sufficient time for these documents to be processed.

Registration of the travel with Government agencies

Schools must register the overseas excursion with the following agencies:

- The Department's Security Services Unit (formerly Emergency and Security Management Unit). This should be done at least 3 weeks before the activity
- The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)– this will ensure that DFAT will assist in ensuring the safety and security of staff and students whilst they are overseas
- The Department's [Student Activity Locator](#)

For more information, see: [Safety, Emergency and Risk Management](#)

Suitability of host country

Schools must take steps to ensure that all venues that are to be used by the students are suitable and appropriate.

For an overseas excursion, this would include:

- Consideration of specific country information from the Smart Traveller website (<http://www.smarttraveller.gov.au>). This would include ascertaining whether there are any travel advice that have been issues in relation to the host country.
- Consideration of any laws that significantly differ from those in Australia that may influence students' behaviour. For example, lowered drinking or driving ages, legality of drugs that are illegal in Australia
- Consideration of any significant cultural differences between Australia and the host country.

Suitability of host school

Schools must also take reasonable steps to ensure that the host school is suitable for the students. This may include:

- Obtaining translated copies of school policies and rules and considering any significant differences in the school environment between the host school and the local school
- Ensuring that the host school's curriculum does not contain material that would be considered inappropriate, offensive or obscene for Victorian students, and consideration of any controversial material which may form part of the school curriculum. For more information, see:
 - » [Suitable Teaching and Learning Resources](#)
 - » [Selecting Teaching and Learning Resources](#)

For more information, see: [Venue Selection](#)

Suitability of host families and homestays

Victorian schools must also take steps to ensure that the home stay families' place of residence is suitable and appropriate given that they will be responsible for the supervision and care of students.

Careful consideration must also be given to the suitability of all persons who will be in the host family's household for the duration of the student's stay (see below). This may include:

- Arranging for criminal record checks to be performed on the residents of the host family home.
- Obtaining references from the host school in relation to each host family selected.
- Have a representative from the host school visit the host families residences to assess suitability of living arrangements. For instance sleeping arrangements, food to be provided, study facilities available to the student, pets, smoking or alcohol consumption habits.
- The Victorian school should ensure that the host school's assessment of the home stay and host family is clearly communicated to the Victorian school. Based on the information received, the Victorian school staff should satisfy themselves that these arrangements are safe and suitable for their students prior to departure.
- Ensuring that the host school informs the host families of any significant cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings.
- Providing students and their families with as much information about their host families prior to departure. For example sleeping arrangements, how student will travel to and from school.
- Ensuring that the levels of supervision provided by the host family are appropriate, including supervision to and from school and outside school hours
- Ensuring that the host family has appropriate training and experience to be able to manage the Victorian students' medical conditions.

For more information, see: [Venue Selection](#)

Informed consent

The School must ensure that parents/guardians have provided informed consent for their children to participate in the excursion. This means providing the parents with sufficient information about the overseas excursion. This should include the following:

- Dates of travel
- Mode of travel to and from and within the sister school country
- Accommodation arrangements – this should include information about the checks and balances that have been undertaken to determine the appropriateness of the host families. This may include the following:
 - » police checks of all people who are living in the household
 - » type of accommodation
 - » facilities to be provided to the student eg. separate bedroom, bathroom etc.
 - » food and other amenities to be provided to the students and whether these will meet the individual requirements of the student (eg allergies),
 - » provision of transport to and from school and other activities,
 - » the level of supervision to be provided to the students whilst they remain with the host family
 - » the parents should be provided with the host families contact details
- School arrangements – this should include:
 - » Supervision arrangements at the host school
 - » School policies, including any significant differences in the host school environment compared with that of the local school
 - » Parents should be provided with the host school's contact details, including an emergency contact number at the school

- » Medical and other emergency procedures and management plans for the duration of the time overseas. This should be comprehensive and include plans for all emergencies that may occur and in all locations including at school, while with the host family, on the airplane etc.
- » The level and type of supervision to be provided at all times, including whether students will be accompanied by staff on the flight to and from the sister school country
- » Additional expenses that may be incurred, including whether their child will require pocket money in the host country for personal expenses.
- » Recommendation that students organise travel and health insurance. Parents should be made aware that Department does not ordinarily cover student medical expenses. For more information, see:
 - » [Student Medical Expenses](#)
 - » [Negligence Claims Process](#)
- » Country information, including any differences in the laws of the host country and any significant cultural differences
- » Passport and Visa requirements
- » Relevant immunisations or vaccinations that should be obtained prior to the travel
- It would also be necessary to obtain parental/guardian consent to disclose student health information to both the host school and host family

It is important to note that under sections 65Y and 65Z of the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) where there is a parenting order or a pending application for a parenting order, it is an offence for a person to take or send a child outside Australia unless it is with the written consent of each person with parental responsibility. PAL reiterates this position. See: [Decision Making Responsibilities for Students](#)

Accordingly if schools are aware that a family is subject to family law orders or there are family law proceedings in place or pending, then it should obtain the written consent of both parents in order for the student to participate in the overseas excursion.

For more information, see: [Parent and Carer Consent](#)

Supervision

Schools must also ensure that the issue of student supervision is carefully considered. The Department has guidelines about the minimum staff-student ratios that are required. These guidelines state that in overseas tours, there should be at least one staff member to 10 students.

In any event school must determine the appropriate level of supervision for the students dependent on the following factors:

- the experience, qualification and skills of the staff
- the age, maturity, physical characteristics and gender of the students
- the ability and experience of the student
- the size of the group
- the nature and location of the excursion
- the activities to be undertaken

As part of overseas excursions to visit sister schools may involve students staying with host families and that during this time a staff member will not be with students. Consequently, these parts of the overseas excursions may be considered unsupervised. The Departmental guidelines state that unsupervised excursions should be approved only in a small number of instances and only with secondary aged students. In addition the school principal must ensure that prior to excursion proceeding the following are undertaken:

- A risk assessment of the activity is completed and
- The decision and the reasons for allowing the activity to proceed are documented.

For further information on excursion staffing, please see: [Staffing and Supervision](#)

It is also important that the specific roles and responsibilities of each person supervising the students is clarified and understood by all supervisors and students prior to the commencement of the overseas excursion.

Medical information

When planning an excursion, and especially an overseas excursion, it is imperative that Victorian schools obtain all up to date and relevant information about the student's medical conditions, medication and other medical requirements.

A Medical Information Form must be completed by parents prior to the overseas excursion so that the medical information is up to date and relevant for the overseas excursions.

Schools must then ensure that

- The teacher in charge of the overseas excursion has a copy of each student's Medical Information Form with them for the duration of the overseas excursion
- In addition, the medical information forms should be made available to all people who will be supervising the children for the duration of the overseas excursion. For this overseas excursion, this will include the host family and the school in which the students will attend.
- Copies of the medical information forms should also be kept at the local school.

For more information, see: [Student Medical Information](#)

Medical insurance

The cost of medical and hospital treatment is high in some countries. Consequently, all staff and students must obtain travel and medical insurance for the entire overseas excursion.

Immunisations

School staff must take reasonable steps to inform students and their parents that there might be immunisations that are required. Such measures would include:

- Advising the student and their family to seek medical advice from their doctor
- Directing the student and their family to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Smart Traveller website for travel advice.

Emergency management plan

Schools must also develop an Emergency Management Plan that is specific for the overseas excursion. This should include:

- Procedures in the event of an emergency at the different venues in which the students will be located
- Procedures in the event of a medical emergency including the details of emergency services, the local doctors, and the local hospitals that are located at the different venues in which the students will be located
- Procedures for students to report any problems at the sister school, including staff members. Such procedures should be communicated to staff and students prior to departing.
- Procedures for student to report any problems at their homestay. Such procedures should be communicated to staff and students prior to departing.
- A person should be nominated to be responsible for responding to critical incidents. Students and staff should be made aware of the responsible persons prior to departing.

For more information, see: [Emergency Management Planning](#)

1.2 Planning the visit

The '[Overseas Learning Experience Resource](#)' provides detailed information on how to organise an overseas learning experience for students, including visits to sister schools overseas.

Be mindful that "... effective planning and organisation requires around 12 months" for an overseas learning experience. (P16, Overseas Learning Experience for Students – A Resource for Schools)

The "action overview" below provides the shortcut to the various stages of the planning of an overseas learning experience.

Action overview

Stage	Activity	Refer to...	Outline
Before the visit	Forward planning	Aims and purpose of sister school visit	Linking the experience to school policy and programs and the School Strategic Plan
		Building teachers' knowledge base	Determining current knowledge and accessing resources to build on this
	Pre-departure organisation	Developing a proposal	Key components of a proposal
		School council approval	Links to Departmental approval process and proforma
		Departmental approval (for Government schools)	Regional Director approval and Emergency and Security Management Unit notification Emergency and risk management plan
		Liaison/planning with sister school	Planning and communication procedure and protocols
		Accommodation arrangements	Consideration of homestay accommodation
		Engagement of travel agent	Services provided by a travel agent
		Fundraising/sponsorship	Options of reducing travel costs
		Information for teachers, students and parents	Seeking interest and keeping the community informed
		Selection of staff and students	Processes and criteria
		Final details and preparation	Pre-departure information: checklists and consent forms
		Registering with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)	Links to relevant DFAT resources
	Pre-departure learning and teaching	Planning curriculum programs and activities	Embedding the overseas learning experience in the curriculum, focus questions for teachers, and examples from Victorian schools
		Developing intercultural understanding and students' knowledge base pre-departure learning activities	Pre-departure activities to build intercultural understanding and students' knowledge base
		Engaging with the overseas learning experience: examples from Victorian schools	Pre-departure activities to engage students with the study program

Stage	Activity	Refer to...	Outline
During the visit	In-country organisation Daily	Daily organisation and planning	Planning for a satisfying and rewarding experience for all
		Engagement	Communicating with school and home
	In-country learning and teaching	Developing intercultural understanding and students' knowledge base	In-country activities for developing intercultural understanding and students' knowledge base and reflecting on the experience
		Personal reflection: graphic organisers	Alternative ways for participants to record their experiences
Post visit	Post visit learning and teaching	Curriculum programs and activities	In-country activities planned or commenced prior to departure
		Developing intercultural understanding and students' knowledge base	Activities to enable students to reflect on intercultural experiences and their knowledge base and revisit pre-departure expectations
	Incorporation into school programs	Students returning from overseas share their learning with classmates (and in-country partners)	
	Sharing experience	Sharing information and key learning	Sharing the experience with the school community
		Professional learning for educators	Building wider educator awareness of the overseas learning experience and its place in the school curriculum
	Maintaining partnerships	Encouraging relationships with international partners to grow	
Reflecting on and evaluating the experience	Reflection and evaluation	Choosing appropriate ways to reflect on, evaluate and report on overseas learning experiences	

2. HOSTING VISITS FROM SISTER SCHOOLS

While undertaking visits to an overseas sister school is a high impact experience for those participating, hosting visitors from sister schools can also be a rewarding and valuable learning experience, and is generally perceived as “an opportunity to show our hospitality to repay the hospitality we have received while visiting the sister school.”

Whilst the planning for hosting visits takes less time than planning a visit to sister schools, you shouldn't feel pressured to host if the timing is not right and if you don't think you have adequate time to organise hosting. Politely communicate your situation and concerns to your sister school and offer an alternative date.

Schools are advised to check the [legal advice](#) on SPAG (and/or relevant sectoral guidelines) about the implications of hosting visits from overseas sister schools.

2.1 Duty of care

Schools have a duty of care for visiting overseas students, and must ensure their safety and wellbeing, including after hours and weekends. Schools must ensure that the overseas visitors (students and teachers) have appropriate medical insurance while in Victoria. Schools also need to ensure that they develop an emergency/risk management plan when planning for visits from their sister schools.

Risk management

Schools must carefully consider all of the risks associated with hosting sister school students and prepare a Risk Management Plan. The responsibility for risk management lies with the principal and the school council.

For more information, see: [Risk Management](#)

Emergency management

Schools must also extend their Emergency Management Plan to include the sister school students. This should include:

- Procedures in the event of an emergency involving the sister school students
- Procedures for sister school students to report any problems at school
- Procedures for students to report any problems in relation to their homestay
- A person/s nominated to be responsible for responding to critical incidents.

Information about emergency procedures and contacts should be communicated to sister school staff and students.

For more information, see: [Emergency Management Planning](#)

Student information

Schools must ensure that they collect adequate information from the sister school students and retain such information on the schools' file in case it is required, for instance, in an emergency situation. Such information should include:

- Student's name and date of birth
- Identification eg. copy of passport and visas
- Parents/guardians' names and contact details
- Emergency contacts
- Information on medical conditions and consent to provide this information to the student's homestay family

Student Medical Information

Schools must also ensure that they have received the sister school students' medical information. The host family should be provided with a copy of this medical information with the student and their parent/guardians signed consent.

Suitability of host families and homestays

Schools must give careful consideration to the suitability of any homestay residences where sister school students will stay. This should include:

- Consideration of the suitability of all persons who will be in the host family's household for the duration of the student's stay.
- Consideration of the age, maturity, physical characteristics and gender of the sister school student.
- Requirement that current Working With Children Checks be provided to the school
- Having a school representative visit the host families' residences to assess suitability of living arrangements. For instance sleeping arrangements, food to be provided, study facilities available to the student, pets, smoking or alcohol consumption habits.
- Ensuring that the Victorian school informs the host families of any significant cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings.
- Ensuring that the levels of supervision provided by the host family are appropriate, including supervision to and from school and outside school hours
- Ensuring that the host family has appropriate training and experience to be able to manage the sister school students' medical conditions.
- For more information see: [Homestay guidelines for hosting sister school students](#)

Providing information to sister school students and their families

In preparation for sister-school students to travel to Victoria, it would be prudent for Victorian Schools to provide the sister school students and their families with relevant information prior to their departure. This would include:

- General information about the school, communication of school policies and expectations
- General information about Australia, including any significant cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings.
- As much information about the students' host families. For example levels of parental supervision, sleeping arrangements, and how the student will travel to and from school.



2.2 Planning the visit - Action overview

Stage	Activity	Refer to...	Outline
Before hosting	Pre-hosting organisation	Liaising/planning with sister school	Establish communication procedures and protocols Contribute to the design of the itinerary, particularly the in-school program
		Liaising with travel agents	Services provided by travel agents
		Information for teachers, students and parents	Seeking interest and keeping the community informed
		Identification of home stay families	Guidelines for the identification of home stay families
		Duty of care for visiting students	Departmental policies
	Pre-hosting teaching and learning	Planning curriculum program and activities	Embedding the sister school visit in the curriculum
		Developing intercultural understanding and student knowledge base	Activities to build intercultural understanding and students' knowledge base
During sister school visit	Arrival	Airport pick up	Involvement of host families
	In-school activities	Welcome Classroom placement	Considerations for classroom placement to continue the teaching and learning as planned
	Departing	Gifts Certificate Farewell party	Cultural protocols associated with gift giving
After hosting sister school visit	Post hosting learning and teaching Sharing experience	Developing intercultural understanding and students' knowledge base	Activities that enable students to reflect on the hosting experience and their knowledge base and revisit the pre-hosting teaching and learning goals
	Reflection and evaluation	Reflection and evaluation	Choosing appropriate ways to reflect on, evaluate and report on the hosting experience

2.3 Before hosting the visit

Pre-hosting organisation

Liaising/planning with sister school

Careful and adequate planning will ensure the success of reciprocal visits. Hosting visits is no exception. If you have planned visits **to** your sister school with homestay arrangements, reverse the thinking when getting ready for hosting the visit **from** your sister school.

In some instances, your sister school will rely on you for advice about arrangements such as visa, in-country travel. Communication is the key.

If communication procedures and protocols haven't been established, it is essential that it is established at this point to ensure the free flow of information. A working committee headed by a sister school champion is highly desirable to facilitate the planning and decision making.

Find out the details about the impending visit by your sister school as soon as possible, including the number of students, accompanying teachers, number of days in school and accommodation requirements. Be respectful but value-add where possible to the itinerary. You could offer to design the in-school program as the host. Here is a [sample in-school program](#).

Very often, you will be asked to issue an invitation letter to facilitate the visa application. The letter should specify the exact time of visit, length of stay and in-country activities. Click here for a [sample invitation letter](#).

Liaising with travel agents

Some elements of your partnership may involve collaboration with third parties such as travel agents. This may be the case if you are hosting a visit from your sister school. It is essential to communicate your expectations to the agent and to the visiting school to ensure a smooth program.

If this is your first experience of hosting a visit from your sister school you may be comfortable with having the agent arrange many of the logistics of the program for the visit. Or you may wish them only to take control of the travel arrangements and leave the rest of the program organisation to your school. Either of these options is acceptable but be clear about your school's roles and responsibilities and those of the third party such as the travel agent. By being clear and up front in your communication, you can alleviate any concerns the agent has about the handover of responsibility and duty of care during the visit.

Information for teachers, students and parents

It is essential that you keep your school community informed of the visit from your sister school. This can be done either via school newsletter or a special letter home. Effective and transparent communication at all stages of the visit will ensure the smooth hosting, including soliciting support such as securing host families.

Identification of home stay families

Homestay provides visitors an excellent opportunity to improve their English (if English is not their first language) and to learn more about Australian culture. Host families benefit from hosting visitors as well. The children and adults in the host families have the opportunity to develop their language skills, social skills and intercultural understanding.

If a homestay arrangement is preferred by your sister school, it is important, at this stage of planning, that the host school starts to ascertain interest from their school community as potential host families. Host family information is required as part of the visa application for some countries.

It is school's responsibility to identify suitable host families and undertake appropriate actions to comply with Departmental policy, including [Working With Children Check](#) (WWCC) for all adults over 18 years old who are regularly in the host family home. Check [PAL](#) for detailed advice.

Click here for [Guidelines for host families](#), which will cover advice on responsibilities of host schools, homestay families and visiting students, transport to and from schools, meals and after hour activities.

Pre-hosting teaching and learning

Ideally, the visiting students should have been collaborating with the host students long before the visit. The visit provides the opportunity for them to meet in person and is part of the learning.

It is important to provide visiting students some classroom time while visiting regardless of any prior collaboration, so they can experience our schooling and connect with our students in an authentic environment. Planning of classroom placement before the visit will ensure minimal disruption to the classes.

Once the host classes are identified, students can commence dialogue about the expectations and discuss logistics if appropriate, using technology. Enquiry-based learning projects can also be planned at this stage. Some possible topics for investigation include: comparison of the schooling experience, i.e. the subject offerings, school time, term time, similarities and differences of family structures, cities studies, i.e. population, land features, and tourist attractions. English language classes (English as an Additional Language) can be part of the in-school program.

Hosting visits from overseas can be great professional learning opportunities for teachers. Time to meet with and share with visiting teachers should be put aside to build relationships and to develop common understanding of issues of interest to both parties. Plan ahead and agree on topics for joint investigation and discussion.

Pre-hosting data collection is useful to establish a baseline of students' cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding for comparison post-hosting. This can be a learning activity led by students themselves.

Plan your publicity arrangements so the interactions can be captured and shared with your local community. Local newspapers, radio stations, can be engaged for publicity during and after the visits.

2.4 During sister school visit

Arrival

Airport pick up

Airport pick up sometimes can be done by the travel organisation/agent that the overseas sister school engages. Alternatively you could offer pick up from airport and drop off at school. Many schools ask the host families to meet with the visitors at the school and then take them home.

In-school activities

Welcome

Schools may wish to conduct a formal welcome during the school assembly, inviting host families where appropriate. Student and staff speakers sometimes can be invited as part of the ceremony. Try to identify a staff member, student, or parent who can speak the language of the visitors to act as an interpreter.

Class placement

The pre-planned teaching and learning activities can be followed through during class placement. It is reasonable to continue with your normal school program, but allow special time for visiting students.

It is sometimes relevant to plan an excursion for both host classes and visiting students, as part of the teaching and learning program or as a friendship building activity. A city experience is generally welcomed by visiting students.

A trip to some other primary and secondary schools could be considered to give your visitors even broader experience. You could also plan joint hosting activities with neighbouring schools.

Departing

Gift giving and certificate of participation

Farewell usually is combined with the presentation of the research projects and/or findings and learnings from both the host and visitors. It is also common to have a presentation of a "[certificate of participation](#)" for visiting students.

Some schools exchange gifts at the farewell function as a memento of friendship. Gifts should be culturally appropriate, and are similar in value of those received. Products that represent Australian culture are most popular, but do check labels to ensure that they are made in Australia. Gift ideas include: a product of student collaborative work, items representative of Australia/Victoria/Melbourne, eg. art and craft of Australian/Victorian motifs, including Aboriginal art, Australian football, a book about Melbourne. Observe appropriate cultural protocols when presenting and receiving gifts.

2.5 After hosting sister school visit

Post hosting teaching and learning

Like all teaching and learning activities, there is the need for assessment and evaluation of the learning outcomes. Plan activities that will enable students to reflect on the hosting experience and their knowledge base and revisit the pre-hosting teaching and learning goals.

Collaborative activities can also take place with visiting students to consolidate the learning outcomes and friendship bond.

Reflection and evaluation

No doubt during the hosting period, friendship will develop and tears will be shed when farewelling the visitors. Encourage students to continue the friendship after the visitors have left the school. At a class level, seize the opportunity to continue developing intercultural understanding through reflection, and exchange these reflection with sister school students.

As a school, it is important to take time to take stock, reflect on the experience, and adjust communication and processes for future hosting activities. A [host family survey](#) can be conducted to help identify issues and good practice.





Section 5: Towards a sustainable sister school partnership

1. WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

The Department's sister school research has identified the following factors as critical to the sustainability of sister school partnerships

- Mutual benefits to all schools participating
- Commitment to the partnership
- A team approach to supporting the relationship (not just an individual)
- Ongoing and regular communication
- Focus on planning of activities and collaborations
- Clear goals and objectives agreed upon upfront
- Ongoing evaluation and monitoring
- Focus on student outcomes
- Emphasis on learning process
- Documenting arrangements upfront via MOU
- Staying alert to the partner school's needs, issues and priorities
- Documenting evidence of impact in different forms for different audiences
- Keeping the school community informed so they can see evidence of outcomes
- Leveraging support provided by the government, and links to Australian Curriculum
- Seeking opportunities for professional development and resource from complementary projects such as the Leading 21st Century Schools: Engaging with Asia Victoria project
- Fostering ongoing contact between schools and participants in the same intake and across intakes so that early groups stay current and later groups build on earlier learning, avoiding wasted effort
- Ongoing tracking of what works and why
- Mapping outcomes for intended and unanticipated beneficiaries
- Providing ways for schools to easily contribute their experiences to build collective knowledge
- Ensuring that contributions to any forum are systematically analysed in order to draw out conclusions that can be generalised.

2. LEARNING FROM BEST PRACTICE

2.1 Case studies

School name	Country/Region of sister school	Program features
Bendigo Team China (14 primary schools)	China	Language and cultural program Reciprocal student visits Teacher exchange planned Connect with local secondary schools
Camberwell Grammar School	China	Language-based program Annual reciprocal visits Homestay arrangement
Christian College Geelong	Japan	Language-based program Reciprocal visits Long term student exchange
Delacombe Primary School	China	Language and cultural program Whole school partnership Reciprocal visits
Leongatha Primary School	China, Indonesia	Teacher exchange Student and community exchange Language and cultural learning
Loyola College	France, Italy, Indonesia	Reciprocal exchanges
Malvern Primary School	China	Whole school partnership Reciprocal visits Teacher professional learning
Mount Waverley Secondary College	Japan, Germany	Language-based program Reciprocal visits
Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School	China	Reciprocal study tours Themed visits Long-term teacher exchanges
Princes Hill Primary School	Hong Kong, China	Teacher professional learning Student research projects Reciprocal visits
Rowville Secondary College	Japan	Non-language based program Whole school partnership
St Kilda Primary School	Japan	Language-based program Reciprocal visits Involvement of local primary and high schools
St Monica's College Epping	Japan	Reciprocal visits Homestay arrangements

2.2 Showcasing your work

Once your sister school partnership is successfully established it is worth considering sharing your learning and showcasing your work. There are a number of possible options for doing this, including:

Local

Your own school community is a good place to start when showcasing your partnership. Parents and the wider community could be engaged in an evening presentation highlighting some of the work undertaken with your partner school. This can include your students presenting on their interactions with the partner school and illustrating some of their learning. This is a useful way to keep your parent community involved and interested in the partnership. This can form part of your promotional strategy to the school community and can be particularly useful when schools require greater support from their community. Consider using this event to promote the partnership to members of the business community who may be willing to sponsor the partnership in some way.

School cluster

Other schools in your area / region may be interested in knowing how you have managed the process of establishing a successful partnership. It is worth remembering that you needn't limit your presentation to only the successful elements of the partnership. Your colleagues will be interested in learning about the obstacles encountered and the strategies employed to deal with them. Sometimes this can form the most compelling part of a presentation because it highlights the fact that such ventures do not always run smoothly, but that with persistence and creative thinking, obstacles can often be managed. Your frank approach will have benefit to schools which are considering forming a partnership. Your honest appraisal of the process, including the difficulties, can serve as a guide to the "beginner" school as to some of the possible pitfalls.

Conferences

Consider delivering a presentation about your school's partnership at relevant conferences. This can provide a wider audience for your school's story and can assist in forming useful networks to further improve your partnership. In general, teachers and principals value advice from their own colleagues so go beyond your comfort zone and get your story out to a wider audience.

Departmental case studies

The case studies presented in section 5 of this guide are taken from Victorian schools with sister school partnerships. If you think your sister school partnership would be of interest to other schools please complete the following [template](#) and mail it to international@education.vic.gov.au. A member of the International Education Division team will contact you to discuss the development of a short case study.

Digital

Consider using digital communication as a way of sharing your sister school partnership experience with the education community. This could take the form of a blog or wikispace. Some schools use blogs when they are visiting their sister school but this practice could be extended to include other interactions. There are a number of excellent free computer applications available on [FUSE](#) (Find Teachers - My Desk - Share, for Government schools) resource portal which your school can make use of: <https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/MyDesk/About#Share>

Mentoring

If your school has a sustainable and successful sister school partnership, why not consider being a mentor school for one which is just embarking on a partnership. Your experience can set the mentee school on the path to success and your hands-on experience will be extremely valuable to them.

3. FAQs AND TROUBLE SHOOTING

3.1 FAQ

The following FAQs are largely based on the issues and challenges identified from actual sister school partnerships and cover the areas of

- Reciprocal visits (homestay)
- Communication
- Funding
- Cultural protocol/advice
- Technology
- Sustainability

Q: During my recent travel overseas, I was asked if my school is interested in a sister school partnership. What do I do with this information?

A: Take this information to your school leadership team. The leadership team should make a decision as to whether to pursue the relationship. Issues to consider include school readiness, resourcing, whether both schools have mutual objectives, and whether it is the right school for you. In most cases, further information from the overseas school is required in order to make an informed decision. You might need to act as the contact person during this phase to continue the discussion. If your leadership team supports developing a sister school relationship then the steps described in this guide (see Section 3) can be followed to formalise the partnership. If not, get back to your contact and politely decline the offer.

Q: My sister school is sending a group to visit our school. How do I go about hosting them?

A: Presumably the visit is an outcome of an extended discussion and part of the sister school agreement. If not, you need to make sure that it is discussed post visit to ensure that it is included in the agreement and that a process is in place for future visits.

When hosting a visit by teachers and students from your overseas sister school, you need to ensure that the relevant Departmental and sectoral policies are adhered to, including areas such as risk management, emergency management, medical insurance and homestay. Refer to the [Sister School Policy](#) in the School Policy and Advisory Library.

Schools might also want to discuss with their sister school prior to the visit about meal times, type, and amount, and the frequency of calling home, so they can provide consistent information and adequately inform the host families.

Some schools find it easier to provide visiting students with the same lunch from the canteen instead of asking host family to provide them. (refer to section 4 for more information.)

Q: Can we ask our sister school to help cover some of the costs of hosting visits from the school?

A: Sister school partnerships are reciprocal in nature. It is reasonable to ask your sister schools to assist with the costs of visits, on a not-for-profit, cost recovery basis only. Remember, whatever arrangement you put in place while hosting visits from your sister school, you would usually be expected to enter into the same arrangement when you visit your sister school overseas.

Q: My sister school doesn't have access to reliable ICT eg. Skype, which limits our collaboration online. What do I do?

A: Lack of ICT compatibility is an issue experienced by almost a third of those schools involved in the Department's sister school research. There are many other ways to conduct online collaboration. There will be trial and error using other applications. Always have a plan B. Learn from other schools in your networks. It is recommended that early in the relationship both parties agree on the media of communication and the platform for student collaboration.

Q: What gift should we prepare for incoming visits from and outgoing visits to sister schools?

A: Gifts that are authentic Australian and showcase Australian culture and heritage are generally popular overseas. It helps to check labels to make sure it is Australian made. In the spirit of reciprocity, buy gifts of similar value to those you have received from your sister school.

Q: We want to expand the sister school activities but are limited by lack of funding. Where can I get support?

A: Funding and costs associated with travelling is by far the biggest challenge identified by almost half of the respondents involved in the Department's sister school research.

The same research also discovers that schools with successful sister school partnerships very often have funds allocated in school budget for sister school purposes.

High cost is very often associated with travelling overseas to visit sister schools. Whilst face to face meeting is important in the initial stage of the relationship, if your school has limited funding, then perhaps negotiate travelling by students at a less frequent interval.

Encourage students to do fundraising to raise money prior to their travel. Many schools have had the experience of being successful in finding alternative avenues of funding. Known contributors include community and service organisations, philanthropic organisations and corporations.

Q: How do we ensure our partnership is sustained?

A: The Department's sister school research has identified the following factors being extremely important in maintaining sister school partnerships:

- mutual benefit to all schools participating
- commitment to the partnership
- a team approach to supporting the relationship
- ongoing and regular contact
- a focus on planning of activities and collaborations

Q: Our school has been contacted by a travel agent for hosting a group of overseas students. Should we agree because it might lead to a sister school partnership?

A: Hosting international visitors such as student study tour groups can sometimes lead to sister school partnerships. However, these requests should generally come from the Department, not private travel agents. If government schools are approached by travel agents for such arrangements, please consult the [School Policy and Advisory Guide](#) for information or contact the International Education Division for advice. (international@education.vic.gov.au)

Q: Can we organise student exchanges with our sister school?

A: You can organise student exchanges for less than 28 days in duration. Anything beyond 28 days will need to be referred to the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) which manages a Student Exchange Program for Victorian schools. Refer to [VRQA](#) for advice.

For questions related to sister schools in China, visit [AEF China sister school resource](#).



3.2 Troubleshooting

Q: Our sister school partnership has been dormant for a few years. What should we do to revive it?

A: Find out the reasons why the relationship has stalled. Try to resolve issues relating to your own school first before contacting your sister school. Below are possible causes and suggested ways of resolving them:

change of staff, change of principal, change of school priority: school leadership team needs to decide if they want to continue with the sister school program.

lack of response from sister school: attempt to renew communication with sister school again, if there is no response, politely explain to sister school and move on.

change of leadership in sister school: ascertain if the intent is still there with the change of leadership, if so, renew the agreement, with actions and timelines, building in a clause for regular review of the agreement.

Q: I am having trouble finding host families, what do I do?

A: It is a good practice to get a sense from your school community about willingness to host overseas visitors before agreeing to homestay arrangements with your sister school.

26% schools in the research conducted by Department into sister schools (2012) identified that finding host families as a challenge, so you are not alone. There are many reasons: the language barrier, homestay period is too long for families to cope, or the host families are not clear about the requirements, or simply, they have just hosted another group.

Don't despair! Explain to your community that the experience of providing homestay is most valuable to their children and provide useful tips to overcome the language barrier. Most host families will try to provide the visitors with the best experience they possibly can which can cause some anxiety. Organising outings as a school, rather than expecting host families to organise everything may help ease the anxiety.

Ask your neighbouring schools if they are willing to help out. You may find yourself a strong ally to expand your sister school partnership to.

Some schools have booked a "camp" for the period of visit, where both Victorian and overseas students stay for a few days with classes conducted at the camp.

If all fails, negotiate with your sister school for a shorter stay, or hotel/apartment accommodation, or postpone the visit. It is important to be truthful and realistic about your capacity earlier in the discussion. It will be a lot harder to try to fix such problems when flights are booked and visas are organised!

4. REFERENCES

This section provides a listing of useful references and links to support your sister school partnerships

1. **Department of Education and Training School Policy and Advisory Library:** <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal?Redirect=1>

This guide provides Victorian government schools with quick and easy access to governance and operational policies and advice.

2. **The Department's Overseas Learning Experience Resource:** <https://www.study.vic.gov.au/Shared%20Documents/en/Sister-Schools/OS-learning-exp-resource.pdf>

This resource provides support to schools in effective planning, implementation and integration of student overseas learning experiences into school programs. It draws upon the work of schools that have successfully incorporated such experiences into whole-school programs for international education.

3. **Asia Education Foundation guide to sister school partnerships with China:** <https://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/curriculum/details/sister-school-guide---china>
4. **Asia Education Foundation Australia-Asia BRIDGE School Partnerships site:** <http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/programmes/school-partnerships>

The Australia-Asia BRIDGE School Partnerships Project (Building Relationships through Intercultural Dialogue and Growing Engagement) supports:

- Increased intercultural understanding between Australian schools and their partner schools in Asia.
- Enhanced digital capability among teachers and students to use new technologies for collaboration.
- Increased quality of teaching and learning to support students' Asia capabilities.

5. **British Council's Schools Online portal**

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/school-resources/partner>

This site breaks down the various stages needed to find, establish, and maintain sister school relationships. It offer a rich set of guidelines and advice for each stage, including templates so that schools avoid potential pit-falls and to help cover important areas of consideration.

6. **ePals.com**

<http://www.epals.com/>

Recommended by the British Council as an alternative to their Schools Online Portal. Sponsors and partners of ePals.com include National Geographic and The Smithsonian. ePals has a number of tools to help find sister schools, establish joint projects between schools and a learning centre and teacher resource centre to help educators make the relationship more interactive. There is a strong emphasis on the use of Web 2.0 technologies. The site also has a number of successful collaboration stores on video.



