

## Organising support for local community schools

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May 2022

Here are some suggestions for what an individual, a mainstream school, a council or other organisations can do to assist the whole of their local community schools for bilingual children. They are based on my experience in starting a school and subsequent interactions with other local community schools over many years.

### **A list of local community schools**

This is from where everything starts: A list with the names, languages and contact data of local community schools is the single and most essential tool to have.

Further useful information to put on the list is the number and age of students, when and where schools run, their fees and whether/how much they pay their teachers.

To 'find' community schools, you can google using different variations of complementary/supplementary/Sunday/Saturday/weekend/community/heritage school etc. Also check the websites of local cultural and religious associations and write to them. Many languages have their own national or even international umbrella groups and you can find local groups through them. A rule of thumb is that the smaller the community, the better they are supported by their home governments, and the schools may even appear on embassy websites.

But in the end, to hear about the most elusive schools it is word of mouth, word of mouth, word of mouth.

In addition it is very useful to write to the council and make a freedom of information request for the number of children that are registered for each additional language, sorted by nursery/ primary/ secondary school. This helps you knowi which languages especially to look out for.

## **Networking meetings**

Getting the managers/headteachers of the community schools into one room and letting them talk to each other is the simplest and most powerful support you can offer. The people who are running community schools are normally parents, i.e. lonely amateurs who greatly cherish the opportunity to be able to speak to others in a similar position.

Anyone can organise networking meetings, even without any particular background. Since normally there is a mix of experienced and less experienced people in the room, someone will have the answer or volunteer to find out. It is useful to have some kind of (flexible) agenda with points of common interest on such as 'insurance', 'finding rooms', 'setting fees', 'safeguarding' etc. and to invite the schools to submit items to discuss. Make sure to take notes and send them out to all schools including those who couldn't take part.

Networking meetings for managers are an excellent way of spreading good practice between schools, raising standards and improving operational systems.

## **Rooms for community schools (and storage space!)**

Community schools need a space to meet and teach, so finding affordable or even free rooms is one of their top concerns. Depending on the age group they work with and their activities, they will need a sufficient number of rooms with appropriately sized chairs and desks, access to toilets and sometimes a hall regularly or for one-off events.

Other facilities a community school may want, or need, to use are access to water, internet, whiteboards/smartboards/projectors and a playground or other secured area to spend break time, and perhaps even a room for a parent cafe. Community schools often start a library – which in practice is a big box or two with books and other media in their home language – and are most grateful if they can store this and perhaps some other resources securely on the premises.

## **Rooms for meetings and training events**

Community schools normally operate on a very tight budget, so any offer that keeps their expenses down is helpful. A networking meeting can be held on a zero budget and training events become cheaper if rooms can be accessed for free or at a reduced rate.

For a networking meeting all that is needed are chairs, ideally also a table and perhaps access to a kitchen/water to have some drinks.

For training events chairs, desks and a projector are needed. As always access to a kitchen/water to have some drinks can help with creating a nice, relaxed atmosphere.

## **GCSE preparation and access**

Children who attend a community school most likely have the oral and written skills to take the GCSE a year or even two early. Their community school teachers can advise on this.

Mainstream schools can help with this in many ways, by

- informing families early (i.e from Year 7 on) and continually that an exam in their language exists and that their child can take it at their mainstream school
- encouraging families and students to read and write in their own language and develop advanced vocabulary at home
- encouraging families to join a local community school for their language (or start an after-school club)
- offering and enrolling students free of charge for GCSEs in Year 9 or 10
- running one or more information events for all bilingual children who enrolled for GCSEs and their parents on how to find past papers and how to use them
- running one or more teacher training events for teachers in local community schools on how GCSEs work, how to prepare their students, how to find past papers and how to use them

### **Teacher training**

As the average teacher in a community school has limited or no professional background, the organisation of teacher training is another impactful activity.

Popular session topics are on behaviour management/dealing with challenging behaviour, lesson planning, differentiation and, recently, online teaching. When organising a session on SEND it is good to ascertain beforehand which conditions are of particular interest (usually autism and dyslexia) and to focus on these. 'Teaching through creativity' such as drama and music is sought after and can be offered, interspersed with sessions on technical aspects such as how to teach reading or writing with a purpose.

Other topics can be age-related: phonics and teaching different scripts; GCSE preparation; an introduction into the English curriculum/developing your own curriculum. The last one can generate a lot of impact when teachers cleverly build on concepts the children know already (nouns, capitalisation, what is a sentence) rather than trying to introduce a difficult concept themselves (adverbs or syllables).

A session on assessment can be useful if it focusses on using assessment for improvement of teaching/lesson planning.

### **Safeguarding/First Aid training**

For operating a community school in a sufficiently professional way it is paramount that managers and teachers know about safeguarding, and it is also good for the schools to have some trained first aiders.

The main obstacles to overcome with First Aid training are costs (since you will need to hire an official provider) and time (since the provider will probably have to deliver on a weekend).

Mainstream schools may be in a position to open their training sessions to some participants from the local community schools.

In contrast, it is not necessary for the community schools to hold any 'official' certificate on safeguarding training, and teachers and managers could attend any training that is offered by any organisation like the CVS.

It makes sense though to organise bespoke safeguarding training for community schools. Weekend timing again can be an issue, as can the English knowledge of the audience. A bespoke training furthermore would allow to meet the needs of the participants better, i.e. buying in support for the general idea of safeguarding, explanations around the DBS, using relevant examples and case studies.

### **Instructors who are willing to adapt to their audience**

To run a training event of any kind for bilingual schools, suitable instructors are needed. These can be teachers from mainstream schools, academics, council employees, anyone with any relevant specialist knowledge (e.g. on insurance, bookkeeping...).

It is really important though to select, and work with, instructors carefully. Not everybody who has the expertise is suitable. For example, instructors need to speak slowly and avoid jargon or very technical language (a 'statutory requirement' will mean nothing to some participants, but they will understand 'law').

The crucial point however is that instructors for teacher training need to grasp the nature of students in community schools. The children do not learn their home language as a foreign language, nor like a first language. Most important, they are not 'EAL', but they are bilingual. This means that some of them will be extremely competent in their home language while others will have very limited skills. Instructors need to understand that community schools are as much about culture and identity as they are about language, and finally that children (and teachers) can build on what they learn in mainstream schools in English.

To help with developing this understanding it is always useful for instructors to visit one or more of the community schools in advance to see how they work and to talk to the teachers, children and parents.

### **1:1 support of managers**

Sometimes schools reach a point of crisis, often when key people leave the school, when a head or chair feels held back by their board or wider community, or the school needs to take a big next step such as registering or incorporating. Even if you don't know anything about the particular school and cannot offer any solution, it can be very helpful for the manager to be able to speak to an outsider, voice their concerns and frustrations and generally just have a sounding board. Just offer a 1:1 if you sense someone could use it!

### **Kickstarting new schools**

Giving help with starting a new school and seeing them growing is one of the most satisfying things one can do and may require only one meeting. Sometimes a single meeting, involving the newbies in the local set of community schools and a bit of signposting, may be all that is required. You can talk them through any area you are confident about (which might be finances, advertising, policies,

governance, safeguarding, working online or file sharing) buddy them up with an existing school and signpost.

Going back to the freedom of information request above, you might try and get in touch with large local communities that have no community school and entice them to start one. Mainstream schools could even start some provision themselves, such as an after-school club for a particular language and open it to external participants from other schools.

### **Signposting**

There are many organisations that support community groups/voluntary groups, some of them national, some local. Finding the local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) is a good place to start. CVS offer everything from finance, safeguarding and trustee training to help with finding grant funding, writing policies and deciding on an appropriate organisational framework.

National or even international umbrella groups for community groups are not uncommon, and an existing school in another city may be happy to assist as well. These connections are especially useful for the exchange of language specific information such as teaching resources and curricula.

### **Social media and newsletters**

Closed and managed WhatsApp groups are an excellent way for keeping a group of community schools connected between meetings and training sessions. They offer an opportunity for individuals to ask a quick question or let people know about that latest discovery. It may make sense to have separate groups for teachers, managers, safeguarding leads etc.

A Facebook page or similar is an excellent way to publish local events that are of interest to the community schools and families, to run adverts on behalf of the schools (for students, teachers, ...) and generally any piece of information that does not need to remain static.

Items of interest can come from newsletters and Twitter feed from relevant sources (CVS, NCVO, charity commission, bilingualism, some news outlets and science channels). For biggest impact it is helpful to ensure that items are on target and relevant.

### **Networking and representation**

To the general public, community schools are invisible and not well understood. Even where a school rents room from a mainstream school, teachers at this very same school may not be aware of the community school.

You should contact any individual, organisation or institution that might be of interest to the community schools (or vice versa) and try to find common ground, for example academics/a university department, (international) private or mainstream schools, organisations for immigrants and refugees, the council, the CVS, language schools, businesses with a special interest, ... You never know where and in what shape you might receive support. or be able to offer it.

### **Marketing and advertising**

While each school on their own cannot do a lot in terms of making themselves known within their locality, you can generate some economy of scale by getting people together and creating a shared poster or email campaign. The schools can be involved in getting physical copies of the poster out into as many places as possible, i.e. libraries, supermarkets, places of worship, community centres etc., and a letter to nurseries and mainstream schools accompanying the poster may increase impact and their willingness to display.

Social media channels that are open to the public can be used by the schools for advertising for teachers, families, special events, and they should request inclusion in directories on relevant local websites.

### **Parent event 'How to raise your bilingual child'**

The main focus of parent events normally is on strategies for helping children acquire their home language. Although such an event does not directly benefit the community schools, it can be very useful when the speaker uses it to signpost parents towards attending a school as one of those strategies.

Teachers and managers can also indirectly benefit from such an event if it gives the message that children learn their heritage language primarily in the families, and that schools can only enhance this exposure, not make up for it where it is lacking.

Where there is no speaker available locally, the event can be run as a café with a short introduction followed by an invitation for participants to form groups and exchange their thoughts and experiences.

### **Funding/Start-up funding**

A community school can be run on a very low budget and many communities fund them through parental contributions. There are some start-up costs though before parental contributions can be taken. Insurance for an unregistered group comes at about £150 and one enhanced CRB check is £40 plus £13 for the update service.

Further funding can be sought by less-well off communities for example for rent, to pay teachers, buy teaching resources or access training.

Another article from Anke '**Supporting bilingual children**' can be found in the section called 'Guest blogs' on this webpage.