

Humming Hubs connect parents to school

It took 18 years for Michelle Chapman to become involved in her local school community. Although all of her seven children had attended Dallas Primary School and Kindergarten, she had never really interacted with other parents or formed social networks. As Michelle recalls: “I felt really isolated as a mother, but I didn’t know how to connect, and get out there and do things for myself.”

That all changed in late 2007 when the Dallas Primary School and Kindergarten set up its Community Hub. Located in a building in the school grounds, the Hub provides a place where parents can drop in for advice, support and educational opportunities. The idea behind this Victorian Government initiative is that primary schools have two functions: to teach children, and to act as a community resource and support for their families.

By looking after the needs of parents, the Dallas Community Hub is creating stronger families in which children can thrive. As Hub Coordinator Marilyn Parker says: “We empower parents. Many of our children come from low-income, immigrant or disadvantaged backgrounds. We provide them with practical support as well as social opportunities to create a sense of community.”

The Dallas Community Hub is humming. It offers adult English language classes for parents, many of whom are from Arabic and Turkish backgrounds, as well as parenting courses. This is done in partnership with the Hume Early Years Partnership, which includes 21 agencies working to improve services and make them more responsive to the local community. The Hub hosts two playgroups each week that enables parents and young children to engage in social learning experiences. The Hub also hosts the local University of the Third Age. The Hub provides programs to re-skill parents for employment. In 2008 it offered a Certificate II course in Community Support Services, and this year a book-keeping course will be available.

Michelle is proud of completing her Certificate II, which she hopes will lead to employment in the aged care sector. She remembers the first day of classes: “Everyone was a bit nervous about our cultural differences, but now we are really close.”

Since finishing the course, that group has become a vibrant social network and meets for lunch every week. “We even ended up being a huge part of the school fete last year,” says Michelle.

Hub programs increase parents’ self-confidence and this has a positive effect on their family lives. “The Hub slowly brings them back into the world. It leads on to a lot of things,” says Marilyn.

Trust is a key factor in the success of the hub. As Michelle explains: “You trust the school with your children every day, so you can trust them with yourself.”

The Hub acts as a safe space for parents, particularly those from immigrant and non-English speaking backgrounds who sometimes struggle to get the support they need elsewhere. Part of Marilyn’s job is offering one-to-on support.

“We’ve had people who’ve come in about domestic violence and gambling problems,” she says. “We refer them to other services, and they may say no, but at least they are talking.” In one instance, a child needed a speech therapist, but the family didn’t even know that speech therapists existed. “Fortunately a speech therapist works at the Hub, so we linked them in.”

The Dallas Community Hub plays a vital role in strengthening local families. For Michelle, it's about using the resources of the school to get parents heading in the right direction. "The Hub is the bridge between the school and the community," she says. "There are some people here who would be lost without it."

FACT BOX: About the *Best Start* program

Best Start is a Victorian Government place-based initiative that aims to improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of Victorian children aged 0-8. The program has a particular focus on engaging disadvantaged children and their families in early years services. There are 30 project sites across the state. Each site establishes a *Best Start* partnership that brings together parents and service providers in local communities to improve access to and coordination of universal early years services so they are more responsive to local needs.

The Broadmeadows *Best Start* project, which targeted a number of neighbourhoods including Dallas, was one of the original *Best Start* sites. In December 2002, it received initial *Best Start* funding of \$600,000 over three years. At the end of this period, the Broadmeadows *Best Start* Partnership evolved into the Hume Early Years Partnership.

The Victorian Government continues to support the partnership with annual funding of \$40,000 a year. The partnership involves 28 agencies including health and family services and schools working on programs to support and strengthen children and families. There are currently 'Humming Hubs' at five primary schools in the Broadmeadows area. On Wednesday 22 October 2008, Universal Children's Day, the *Schools as Community Hubs in Broadmeadows* project was highly commended in the Victorian Government Early Years Awards for improved access to early years services.

The evidence suggests that Schools as Community Hubs generate improved participation in early childhood education and care programs, playgroups, maternal and child health and library services by parents and children; and improved levels of social connectedness between parents and between children that are viewed as statistically significant.

The Victorian Government has committed more than \$20 million to the *Best Start* program state-wide between July 2002 and June 2009.