

# MEDIA RELEASE



25 February 2009

## UN High Commissioner visits Bankstown Girls High School

Bankstown Girls High School today welcomed a visit by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees as a part of a brief tour of Australia.

The High Commissioner, Mr Antonio Guterres met with six refugee students from Somalia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq.

Director-General of the NSW Department of Education and Training, Michael Coutts-Trotter said the visit by the High Commissioner was a tremendous honour.

“Each year, NSW public schools enrol between 1,100 and 1,500 newly arrived refugee students. In 2009, there are approximately 12,000 refugee students in public schools across the State,” Mr Coutts-Trotter said.

“In NSW, our focus is on ensuring these students receive a quality education, with a strong focus on English literacy and numeracy.

“Through our schools, these students develop friendships and a sense of belonging,” he said.

“The High Commissioner wanted to connect with a number of refugee school students attending Bankstown Girls High School and hear their personal accounts and observe their learning environment.

“Mr Guterres wanted to gain a broad understanding of our school education programs and policies for refugee students.

“At Bankstown Girls High School, the students have settled in extremely well thanks to the support of the school and our programs— in fact many of their peers may not even be aware of their personal backgrounds,” he said.

Bankstown Girls High School is a comprehensive high school comprising of approximately 688 girls from diverse cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

95 percent of the girls are from language backgrounds other than English, predominantly Middle Eastern, South-East Asian, Pacific Islander, Chinese, and West African.

“In general, refugees have greater educational and support needs than most other newly arrived migrant students,” Mr Coutts-Trotter said.

“Refugees have usually escaped from war or civil unrest, have often experienced trauma, have lost family members and have often spent long periods in temporary refugee camps.

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“Most children and young people have had disrupted or no education prior to arrival in Australia, many have no literacy skills in their first language and in addition may have complex health problems,” Mr Coutts-Trotter said.

“School-aged refugee students, in particular high school students, generally require high levels of support to enable them to learn English, acquire literacy and participate in schooling.

“The NSW Department of Education and Training provides a range of programs and initiatives to support the education of refugee students.

“We offer intensive English support for students at school as well as professional learning for our teachers and support staff,” he said.

Programs include:

- Intensive English language support;
- After school homework tuition, with bilingual support for refugee students;
- School Learning Support Officers (Ethnic) to provide bilingual support to students in the classroom and assist schools in working with parents and community members;
- Interpreting and translation services for parents and carers;
- Specialist school counsellors for each of the Intensive English Centres to provide diagnostic, counselling, welfare and settlement support to students;
- Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) courses to assist in the settlement process for recently arrived parents and community members;
- The Refugee Student Assistance Scheme, a joint initiative of the NSW Department of Education and Training and NSW Teachers Federation, provides limited financial support to schools with significant enrolments of recently arrived refugee students.

“The department works in close partnership with a range of government and non-government agencies to support these students,” Mr Coutts-Trotter said.

“Teachers also undertake extensive training in meeting the needs of refugee students.

“Bankstown Girls High School has achieved some outstanding success in helping these students, with many completing the higher School Certificate and go on to university or TAFE,” he added.

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