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WELCOMING

*Refugees*

Promoting a Culture of Welcome for  
Refugees in Schools: Approaches and  
Opportunities  
Webinar Transcript



### 1. Opening Slide

- Welcome everyone. I'm Susan Downs-Karkos with Welcoming America, and we're so pleased that you have joined us today to learn about and discuss *Promoting a Culture of Welcome for Refugees in Schools: Approaches and Opportunities*.
- We're delighted to be partnering with the Center for Applied Linguistics on today's webinar. CAL's mission is to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture, and it has earned a national and international reputation for its contributions regarding refugee orientation, the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children, English as a second language, bilingual education, foreign language education, literacy, dialect studies and language policy.
- I'd also like to extend a deep appreciation to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, whose funding for Welcoming America's technical assistance program to foster greater community support for refugees has made today's webinar possible.

### 2. Welcoming Schools Slide

- So why focus a webinar on promoting a culture of welcome in schools? Schools clearly play a critical role in refugee reception and integration. In so many ways they set the stage for what comes next for newcomer families. They are one of the first community institutions where refugee families interact with the long-term, receiving community, and the degree of welcome and inclusion students feel will significantly impact their longer-term educational success.
- Conversely, schools can be a flashpoint in the community when new arrivals come with limited English, interrupted education and unfamiliar cultures. Sometimes educators question their ability to meet student needs and have broader concerns around standardized test scores and the implications for school ratings.
- Today we'll learn how schools and communities are working together to meet the challenges demographic change can bring and create greater welcome and opportunity for all children. We'll be learning about and exploring concrete ways in which to influence the sense of belonging for all students, how to engage parents of different backgrounds with their children's learning and with each other, and how to bring the community into the classroom and the classroom into the community.

### 3. Agenda Slide –

- To help us explore these approaches and opportunities today, we're lucky to have some key experts with us, all of whom bring a different and interesting perspective to creating welcoming school climates for refugees.

- And, while our speakers will be covering a significant amount of content today, our goal is to make this interactive, and to give you the participants an opportunity to weigh in on the conversation. Feel free to use the chat box, and please participate with us during the interactive exercises.
- So as you'll see from our agenda, we'll begin today's with Sanja, who will discuss key ingredients of welcoming environments. For a school district perspective, we'll hear from Sharin Herman from Houston. Then Anne Marie Kuclatz will discuss how refugee resettlement agencies can support welcoming schools, and we'll wrap up with remarks from a refugee student, Paw Spai Moo, who will talk about her personal experiences and recommendations. After our speakers, we'll begin a moderated discussion, and look forward to hearing not only your questions but also learning from your experiences in creating greater welcome.

So with that, we will begin with Sanja Bebic. Sanja is the director of CAL's Refugee and Immigrant Integration programs. In this capacity, she manages all refugee and immigrant integration program activities, including national technical assistance on overseas and domestic refugee orientation, development of curricula, production of videos and publicaitons, and design and delivery of capacity building trainings and presentations for partner programs in the US and around the world.

#### 4. *Recognizing the Challenge...and the Opportunity*

#### 5. *Why build welcoming schools?*

- As a result of attending a welcoming school, students:
  - Have higher self-confidence
  - Have better overall well-being
  - Achieve at higher rates academically
- And schools:
  - Achieve better attendance rates
  - Lower dropout rates
  - Improve rates of parental involvement

#### 6. *Overseas Context*

- Diversity of contexts
  - Educational backgrounds
  - Access to education in countries of asylum
  - Cultural orientation programs for U.S. resettlement
    - Adults
    - Children and youth

#### 7. *What are the key ingredients of a Welcoming School*

#### 8. *Ways to Engage Students*

- How do we help students feel at home in their school? Examples:
  - Host after school clubs (Around the World Club)

- Train students to offer tours of the school to newcomers
- Have students take pictures of school routines and locations and prepare an orientation binder for new students
- Have students label parts of the classroom in English and their home language, if possible
- Have students share about their home cultures and languages across the content subjects
- Have bilingual students work with newcomers; provide bilingual dictionaries

**9. *How do you engage students?***

**10. *Engaging Educators***

- School Personnel are critical for establishing a culture of welcome.

Examples:

- Professional development on cultural awareness and instruction of diverse learners
- Provide texts and other resources in the various student languages and about the cultures in the school
- Promote the use of online translators or language liaisons to translate documents and orally communicate with families
- Encourage content teachers to communicate with ESL teachers, counselors and other support staff

**11. *How do you engage educators?***

**12. *Engaging Parents***

- Many refugee parents have little school interaction and may not engage with more established parents
  - Hire parent and family liaisons
  - Offer on-site ESL classes
  - Conduct an orientation
  - Prepare translated packet
  - Show video about the school
  - Conduct parent tours and classroom walk-throughs
  - Host bilingual parent meetings
  - Invite community speakers (nurse, librarian, resettlement worker)
  - Train parent volunteers to welcome new families and provide new information

**13. *How do you engage parents?***

**14. *Engaging the Broader Community***

- Schools can help connect refugee families with the rest of the community
  - Bring the community into the school (health services, job fairs, ESL classes for adults, etc)
  - Develop robust volunteer programs that engage diverse people in the community

- Develop partnerships with other community services to provide programming and supports
- Participate in community service projects initiated by the school, students, and/or families that bring people together to work on a shared interest

**15. *How do you engage the receiving community?***

**16. *Education Impact Grant for Refugee Students***

- **Shirin Herman** works as an academic trainer in the multilingual programs department for the Houston Independent School District. She is a certified ESL teacher and has been working with the Refugee Impact Grant for 12 years. She speaks five languages and has lived in Kenya, Bangladesh, Italy and the United States.

**17. *Houston's Refugee Outreach Workers***

- Starts with the orientation which is done with an interpreter and the family so they understand some of the underlying policies of American education system.
- School supplies and dictionaries are given to the family.
- Information to the other family members about ESL classes, GED classes and other continuing education institutions so that the family feels they are well taken care of.
- If there are any issues with health, food stamps, the apt. or the leasing office the agency case worker is notified and often with the school personnel at the orientation so they can help resolve the issue.
- The date for the registration at the school is set up by the case worker.
- Houston School District has a video to orientate the family with the main school offices, clinics etc
- High schools have an 'ambassador program' where the child is assigned a junior or senior to help them navigate the class schedule, the cafeteria and handle the introductions to the new teachers.
- The children are tested for the level of English and even though they are in ESL classes the other subjects are with regular students so they are not separated all day. PE, lunch and other classes are with the rest of the students.
- A parent guide in several languages with detailed explanations about how their child will graduate.
- Cohort program which follows students grade and attendance and if there is a problem the outreach workers or myself visit with the child and the teachers to see if there is a problem.
- Many organization like PAIR and CIS help the students and have assigned mentors, field trips and tutor sessions.

**18. *Challenges that Impact Parent Involvement***

- Acculturation Stress on the Family
  - Access to the Family
  - Self Sufficiency Timeline
19. *School personnel can help refugee students by:*
- Observing to see if additional services are needed
  - Protecting students from teasing or bullying
  - Teaching students about rules of acceptable behavior before disciplining
  - Identifying students who demonstrate chronic negative behaviors
20. *Nebraska: Bringing the Classroom to the Community*
- **Ann Marie Kudlacz** is the Executive Director of the Southern Sudan Community Association (SSCA Omaha), a refugee resettlement agency. Ann Marie has over thirteen years of experience in non-profit management and has worked at SSCA Omaha for nearly seven. Ann Marie serves as Co-Chair for the Omaha Refugee Task Force. She is a graduate of the Nonprofit Association of the Midlands Nonprofit Executive Institute and has degrees in business administration and accounting.
  - Thank you so much for this opportunity to share information about SSCA and our Omaha community. We hope you will find useful information and ideas that you can take to your local community.
  - Our role in this webinar is the perspective of the Resettlement Agency. We are very fortunate as before we became a resettlement agency, the Southern Sudan Community Association was founded in the late 1990's as a Sudanese community center. The agency began to assist Sudanese who were moving to Omaha from other Cities and States as secondary migrants. With the help of volunteers and local community members programming began to help Sudanese learn English, obtain employment and also to help educate the community about who are refugees, what is their legal status, why are they coming to Omaha. The Omaha Refugee Task Force was formed which brought in local service providers to provide collaborative education and information sessions – they began with programming on women's health and parenting as those were the issues raised by the incoming refugee populations. We were the Sudanese community center – the one stop resource for not only refugees but community members and local agencies as well.
  - We became a resettlement affiliate of the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) through Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC) – our National Office in FY 2000, thus allowing refugees to be resettled directly to Omaha. As the populations of the refugees we assisted changed over the years and refugees began arriving from Somalia, Burma, Bhutan, we

maintained the community center atmosphere. The majority of our front-line caseworkers are refugees themselves who can speak the language and better understand the cultural adjustment and challenges that newly arrived refugees face.

- SSCA is very fortunate to be an agency created by refugees, for refugees. The refugees who come to our agency feel welcome as they are able to directly communicate with someone from their own country who speaks their language. We offer full day curriculum of 4 levels of English classes in the morning and in the afternoon we have employment readiness, cultural orientation, driving class, fair housing education & financial literacy/ money management classes, job club. We have many local college groups and students that come to our office to learn about refugees and assist weekly with English tutoring, employment readiness, citizenship studying.
- We have maintained ties to the refugee community leaders over the years, and our refugee caseworkers assist with this. We have continued to hold listening sessions in the refugee communities – what are the needs in the communities – how can we help fill those needs with collaborative programs, and such. Refugee community members understand that our agency can act as a liaison to the local social service providers. We work hard to continue to be a student of our community, and learn what social service agencies, programs, and resources are out there. Then we assist to link refugees to appropriate services and programming.

## **21. *Community Partners and Collaborations***

- As I mentioned, the Omaha Refugee Task Force
- The Mission of the Omaha Refugee Task Force is “to advocate for the empowerment of all refugees and asylees to become self-sustaining and integrated members of the community”.
- The Omaha Refugee Task Force is a collaborative effort among community representatives and service providers in Omaha whose purpose is to address the refugee and resettlement issues in the greater Omaha Metropolitan Area.
- The objectives of the Omaha Refugee Task Force are to:
  - Share information and resources to better address the refugee issues in the Omaha metropolitan area; and
  - Strengthen existing links between local service providers to better serve the refugees and asylees of the community.
  - The task force meets every other month to share information – the work plans and action takes place at the ORTF committee meetings:

- The Omaha Refugee Task Force includes five standing committees: - Housing, Health, Education, Employment and World Refugee Day – Omaha has a very large WWD event!
- For our Education Committee - We are extremely fortunate to have such an engaged Omaha Public School System through the assistance of the ESL, Migrant and Refugee Education programming office, Susan Mayberger, and her staff. Our communication and collaborations with our school system have grown tremendously over the years. There are bi-lingual liaisons who can assist refugee parents with school enrollment, home visits, helping students and parents understand the responsibilities and expectations of school in Omaha.

## *22. Nebraska Partners and Collaborations*

- As there was an increased need for English classes, one local Omaha Public school, the Yates Community Center began migrant and refugee educational programming. There are preschool classes, and parent and child learning class, as well as English classes, sewing room, computer lab. They have created culturally proficient books for the refugee community. Much like our agency, it is a refugee service “hub” located 5 blocks from our office both of which are within 3 miles from where the majority of the newly arrived refugees live.
- Through our listening sessions in the refugee communities a few years ago, we learned that Sudanese refugee parents needed more assistance on how to communicate with their schools, and follow up with student expectations, etc. (as some parents are less literate than their quick-learning children – they felt they were not on the same page) SSCA assisted to coordinate a community meeting. The Sudanese community members determined the best day and time of day to hold the meeting, OPS presented cultural adjustment information on the School system, with interpreters for those limited English parents.
- Another quick example – there was concern raised with some Karen youth from Burma who were showing signs and symptoms of potential gang activity on Facebook. Several agencies came together with OPS, Omaha police department – we each pitched in a couple hundred dollars and put on the Citizen Youth academy. These potential at-risk youth learned about the dangers of gangs, how to avoid them, and warning signs for parents. Large family picnic at the end of the week. Some youth didn’t even realize the “selfies” they were taking could be displayed or viewed as potential gang signs or activity.

- This successful program was somewhat of a precursor to the current THRIVE program. The THRIVE program is now held in 5 OP Schools. It is focused on: Leadership, Knowledge, Service, Relationships and Vision. There are now over 140 students in this program. THRIVE consists of refugees and traditional students who work on team building, encouraging each other, showing leadership to others, and community service. One of their first projects last year was a needs assessment of over 500 refugee students and adults. The assessment determined that the priority needs of refugee communities were: learning English, furthering education, maintaining culture, connecting to others, desire and interest in connecting with the general population in Omaha
- The THRIVE youth now set up Service projects to meet some these needs: The student officers created proposals and will now receive some funding from The South Omaha Community Care Council for specific projects: Produce a video of refugee students and their parents adjustment, purchase books for a local elementary and read with them weekly, going to be putting on a cultural event for high school staff, parents and students that will have 2 main elements: booths that highlight language and dance to recreate their home environments and a formal dinner and several cultural presentations put on by students
- THRIVE is a Way to engage the local community and for youth to be engaged and give back to the local as well as refugee community.
- Lastly the Quilted Conscience This was somewhat of a documentary on the quilting project that took place between Sudanese youth and local community members in Nebraska – SSCA’s role - This stemmed from our relationship with Christa who was working at the polling place during the historic Out of County vote that took place in Omaha, when Sudanese were voting on the separation or unity of Sudan from South Sudan. I was able to obtain credentials from South Sudan to visit the polling place, document and witness many Sudanese casting their votes. SSCA has been very fortunate to continue to build on this relationship with Christa Yoakum who is now with Nebraska Appleseed as the coordinator for the Nebraska is Home campaign. We continued to learn more about her programming and initiatives and she continued to learn more about our agency, clients, programming, and initiatives. She became a valuable resource to our agency

and refugee friends, and we became a resource to her and her programming efforts.

- We have collaborated on a few events, including the You're Welcome in Omaha Campaign and the Quilted Conscience Film Screening.
- We utilized our ties with the refugee community leaders, Omaha Public Schools, Omaha Public Library, and local community members. We assisted to plan and coordinate a film screening at Aksarben Theater in Omaha, provided a reception and food, bus transportation to refugees to attend the film screening, and spread the word about the event through our networks and the Omaha Refugee Task Force.
- Again, a successful, engaging collaborative event where each partner provided a few hundred dollars. We feel that the Quilted Conscience film really assists to show the welcoming communities in America, as well as brings out common ground among refugees and native born. Arts, crafts, film, music, dance – these venues assist to inform even more community members about refugees and the welcoming Omaha community. Many times, we work with the same social service agencies, caseworkers, programming, and our circles are somewhat limited. Through reaching out to these broader audiences – we can really reach and engage more people and share the work, peoples and cultures that we are all a part of.
- In closing – I would say that any take aways would be - We don't always need to find new funding to start up a whole new program. We are a resettlement agency with support programming – but we also are a community center to help learn what is out there – then provide appropriate linkages and collaborations.
- Also – It always starts with listening to the needs of the refugees – then become a student of your community, create relationships, assess current social service agencies, providers and programming. With the input from the refugee leaders and community members, and through collaborations we can provide a more informed, welcoming community.

### **23. A Student Perspective**

- Paw Spai Moo is a refugee from Burma who spent most of her childhood in a refugee camp in Thailand. She's been in the U.S. four years and is now a senior at Lincoln High School in Lincoln, Nebraska. Her goals are to become a nurse and to study human rights.

- My name is Paw Spai Moo. I came from Thailand refugee camp. I was born in Burma. When I was one year old, Karen people were sufferers for the war and they were killed. Many houses were burned down and people were injured. My parents could not live there anymore. They moved to refugee camp. Now, I lived in Lincoln Nebraska. I was a student at Lincoln high school.
- I had a lot of experience to doing the quilted conscience project. When quilted lady asked students to draw a picture about what was their memory in the past and what was their dream in the future then I felt excited about it. The reason is because I had a chance that I can share my story about what is my life in the past, my memories and my dream. In the project, I saw all the students were glad to share their dream and memory.. People have different opinion and knowledge. So I saw each student shared their different memory and different dream. Before I never knew about what's their dream but when I did this project I realized all of it. It's because I saw and learned it with my own eyes. Some parents were weaving thread. It's because Karen people used to make cloths and a bag for weaving thread. Also, we has quilted lady who worked with us to sewing the fabrics and they were all really nice and kind.
- When I was sewing the fabrics, it made me think of when I lived in the refugee camp and sitting in the class with my friend. My school made with bamboo. We studied four languages such as Karen, Thailand, Burmese and English. An education is the most important everywhere you lived. I went to school everyday but education was not higher than United State. Some student didn't have a shoe and they went to the school with bare foot. I remembered there's not enough food or clothing. There's no control. We didn't have air conditioning or heat. My parent didn't have a job. We didn't like to live in the refugee camp but we didn't have a choice. I remembered all of us still alive and survival because of United Nation support our Karen in the refugee camp. I will never forget it and I appreciated that so much.
- In 2008 United Nation helped support our Karen people at the refugee camp again that we could immigrant to the United State. At the same time, my parent applied to come in the United States. In 2009 December, my family immigrant to third country at the United States. I was really delighted when I arrived in here Lincoln Nebraska. I saw different kind of foods when I open the refrigerator. My parent went to get free clothing at the Free People Help Center. Then, we had enough cloths or other material stuff.

- The first day when I went to school I felt unhappy because I didn't know how to speak English. I was eighth grade and it was a second semester. I didn't understand when the teacher talked and taught. My friend always had to translate for me. It's sort of embarrassed to me because they were younger than me and they had to help me. I'm older than them but I didn't know anything. When I finished my second semester in eighth grade at middle school then I moved to Lincoln High school. I was taking ELL and choir class for my freshman year. I met a new friend at the choir class and I start speak English a little bit. All the students were so nice to me.
- Others things my school has done to make me feel welcome because the teacher were so nice to me. They always able to help me anytime when I asked them for help. My teacher picked me up anytime when I needed aride to perform at the concert in the school. I also had been involved in many program such as Cross Culture Ambassador, Karen club, dance club and the quilted conscience project. For Cross culture Ambassador we helped a new student and parent engagement meetings to translate for them. Also we helped our own school for the parents teacher conference. There were a lot of speaker for the Cross Culture Ambassador such as, Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese etc.. I felt very delighted to help people. For dance club we used to dance and perform in the school. It's African American dance and I met a lot of friend that came from African. I was really happy that I had learn how to dance for other culture.
- In Lincoln High school we had a special ELL advocate that helped students for other culture. Sometime I used to go there when I needed a help. I felt more comfortable and happy to see it. Also, we had a special consular for ELL students. The consular helped what class we have to take for all of the student who from different county and English is not there first language. This years on January forth, we were celebrated Karen New Years at Lincoln High School. I saw my school really make me feel welcome that they allowed my people our Karen Culture to celebrate New Year. We did have a greatful time.
- I do have a dream that after I graduate high school, I will go to college. I want to have my degree for college and help my people who still live in the refugee camp and Burma. I hope one day Karen and Burmese will have an equal right. Right now our Karen people still doesn't have a country. I want to have democracy between Karen and Burmese. I would like

to thank you so much to my teacher and all other that invited me for this project and the webinar.

#### **24. Moderated Discussion**

What is the link between promoting a welcoming school environment and student graduation rates?

Shirin – School districts can be very harsh in attendance policy, but if you are engaged with family you can prevent some of these problems. You can also follow up and find out about the situation that is causing absences. For instance, one student was missing school due to work hours. It is very important to engage students like this and make sure they know that we want them in school.

Should students be in a class with other English speakers or should they be getting their own separate class time?

Shirin – The teachers have a time before school, after school, and during lunch time where they are available for extra tutorials. Students are also reminded regularly of these opportunities

Sanja's coworker Annie – Every state has different regulations about what services can be provided. There may be restrictions on who can be pulled out. It also depends on a lot of other issues such as whether or not they have attended formal school, etc. You can find more resources on CAL's website.

What is your advice for people who do not have the positive community support for these kinds of issues?

Ann Marie – I started by going to different social service providers and community meetings to find the key people who were interested in learning more. I started by creating those relationships and then going from there.

Shirin – The arts have been instrumental in making the community aware. For instance, the Houston Grand Opera created the East West Project, a set of operas about the refugee experience. This has created empathy and connection between the immigrant and refugee community and the receiving community. Engaging the community is always a challenge, but I ask people who are hesitant to join me at an orientation. After they meet a nice family that is very interested in education, they often become more open.

Do you have suggestions for enrolling students in schools that offer ESL, but whose administration is not as open to enrolling the students?

Shirin – Meet with the administration and reassure the administrators that there is support available for them in the future. Reassure them that there is support for teachers, parents, and students. This goes a long way towards changing the attitude.

What has worked with engaging parents?

Shirin – My colleagues and I pick up people from apartment complexes to bring them to schools. The schools are encouraged to do meeting at a variety of times. Meetings notices are sent out in advance. Interpreters are provided. There are meetings about the same issues in the mornings and evenings. We try to remove as many barriers as possible.

Could you talk a little bit about how you promote greater collaboration and understanding of refugees?

Ann Marie – The STRIVE club is held in 5 different Omaha high schools. We have learned that the push towards inclusion has come from within the schools themselves. You are tying in the parents and administrators to attend meetings and learn more about refugees. Try to engage the community and invite people to open houses. We have also had cultural events to reach out to the larger community.

Paw Spai Moo, when you first moved to the U.S., what were the three things that really helped you feel welcomed in your school?

Paw Spai Moo – The teachers were very nice and helped me a lot. There were also Karen students who understood English and helped me a lot. There were also opportunities for rides to participate in activities outside of school times.

Susan Hertzl (Paw Spai Moo's teacher) – There are bilingual liaisons that help community members, teachers, parents, and students.

Paw Spai Moo, what would suggest that people do to make refugee students feel more welcome?

Paw Spai Moo - The ELL program is very helpful.

Susan Hertzl – The ELL Advocates program helps students with issues that come along with moving to a new country. There is a full time staff member in the family resource center to support the students in getting their needs met.

## 25. Additional Resources

- BRYCS (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services):  
<http://www.brycs.org>
- I LEARN AMERICA: [www.ilearnamerica.com](http://www.ilearnamerica.com)
- Immigrant Integration Educator's Resource Guide:  
[www.coloradotrust.org](http://www.coloradotrust.org)
- Refugee School Impact Grant:  
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/school-impact>

**26. Secondary Newcomer Programs in the U.S. Database**

- CAL Resource

**27. CAL Resources**

- CAL Resources [www.culturalorientation.net](http://www.culturalorientation.net)

**28. Promising Practice: Bridging Cultures at West Fargo High School**

- [www.welcomingrefugees.org](http://www.welcomingrefugees.org)

**29. Contacts**

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