

.....  
WELCOMING

*Refugees*

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



What are the key ingredients of a Welcoming school?

- Parent liaison
- Language support
- Educating the other students
- Cultural activities
- Bilingual parent liaisons
- Interpreters available
- Front-line staff who feel prepared for and not intimidated by newly-arrived families
- Knowledgeable front desk staff
- A peer program from the native state
- Linguistic competence; teachers or teacher aides who understand their cultures
- Language capacity; diversity of staff and other students
- Interpreters
- Quality ESL/ELL programs/teachers
- The school showing interest in the refugee student, asking questions, doing outreach to refugee services in the community
- Interpreters or translated materials
- Enough ESOL/EL support
- Teacher's own feelings about immigration come into play. If they feel very negatively about immigration, I see that come out with students
- Strong two-way communication, having a point person for all students so parents always know whom to contact understanding faculty and staff
- Explicit identification and instruction of school behaviors and expectations
- Caring teachers that go the extra mile to help the students and families
- Teachers' awareness
- Interpretation services
- Maybe "clubs" that can welcome new students
- Educators who value their student's backgrounds and experiences and know their students' families well
- Teachers' patience
- Community involvement, adequate ESOL programs
- Bilingual parent liaisons
- Parent teacher meetings
- Communicate a friendly and supportive attitude
- Connection to PTA
- Interested in child's background, story, people group
- Awareness of cultural backgrounds of new students
- Easily visible entrance, quick entrance to office, welcoming front desk staff, signs translated into languages of parents and students present in schools

- Contracting interpreters in students' languages, and not having students/youths bear the burdens of interpreting for their parents
- Welcoming staff
- Welcoming schools include teacher who are knowledgeable about refugees
- First language support in some fashion
- Embracing of cultures and languages. Incorporation of multiple cultures in the school curriculum. Some language learning from very early on, demonstrating and modeling that linguistic diversity is a benefit and something that is valued
- A welcoming school helps the student with daily routines, lunches, etc. to help them feel comfortable. Classmates help students
- Having a diverse staff is the biggest
- Plan for interpretation
- Direct liaison with resettlement agency
- From a secondary context: opportunities to attend school activities. Education about US school culture. Friendly faces =)

How do you engage students?

- School tours for families
- Culturally aware students and staff/faculty
- Match the student to other students who have arrived recently and are settling in well
- Diversity training for all staff and faculty so they can be sensitive to New Americans' needs
- Good signs – preferably non-textual to make is easy for people to understand
- There must be caring ESL teachers to support and advocate for new students with little or no English and educational gaps
- Non-judgemental atmosphere and welcoming images and intentional recognition/celebration of human/cultural differences
- Culturally diverse staff with access to multilingual resources
- Interest from the staff as far as learning about the cultures. Students can tell!
- For administrators to promote learning scenarios for the school staff
- Take them to play soccer
- Providing parent/child tours upon school enrollment
- Help them access special afterschool activities
- Create dialog: make them feel welcome
- Having reading material available in native languages, willing to work/coordinate with resettlement caseworkers, having a contact from the school that speaks English and refugee's native language
- Invite them to create a club focusing on their home culture/heritage language
- Opportunities for cultural exchange
- Involve English speaking students in the school

- Reading books about immigration and cultures represented in the classroom (as well as those not represented)
- Artistic expression, e.g. students, present theater that express their cultural heritage
- Encourage students to share their culture through dances and food
- Express a genuine interest in who they are and their experiences without being intrusive
- Get new students involved in after school activities with help of other students
- Partnering newcomers and their families with students who are not newcomers, two-way immersion programs where children learn in two languages
- Body language, shaking hands, smiling and speaking to them and trying to help them communicate
- Starting a history club at our high school where students learn about the history of immigration into Florida/Jacksonville
- Lunch and learns for higher grades to let all other students know who this new person is, where he or she is coming from, what their background is etc, so they are aware and reduce conflicts
- To engage multicultural students it is important to give translated materials
- The teachers actually use my services in getting to know the students as they enter from other countries. I meet with them and have them tell me a bit about themselves in their language. They open up quite a bit and I provide an instant connection
- The schools in our communities have organized refugee panel discussions which has increased awareness about them, teachers got to ask directly how we can help/support your family and there were some really good insights from the families for the teachers
- Have advisory programs that meet regularly where all participants are encouraged to engage...circling up, having some fun, one boy who arrived in September with almost no English told us yesterday that he threw snowballs during the snow day. This was the first full sentence he has said. It was a breakthrough. Today he talked about vacation next week.
- Lunch and learns
- Refugee panel discussions

How do you engage students?

- Provide PD workshops on incoming populations of refugees
- Brown-bag lunch series
- Have food/culture themes for prof. dev.
- Provide the language bridge between families and teachers
- Provide information: present humanity of child and situation
- Requesting to be a part of in service days
- Making them aware of the students' backgrounds
- Professional developments with presentations about culture by case managers from refugee communities
- Easy access to cultural liaisons
- Refugee backgrounders!

- Using cultural background info in study groups with staff
- We provide presentations to various schools on refugees and our services
- Introduced at beginning of year staff meeting, personal connections between families and teachers
- Regular trainings, attend webinars as these
- Professional development on refugees topics
- All teacher should receive ESL training – even if just preliminary
- Use food as a way to begin the conversation on culture
- Encouragement to teachers as well
- Trauma informed care training
- Engaging educators – lots and lots of one-on-one conversations or small groups where people feel comfortable to truly share how they feel. You've got to get at anti-immigrant sentiment because it's there

How do you engage parents?

- We have a translator who helps us communicate with parents. This is a tremendous asset!
- Bilingual TV shows and radio shows
- PTA's can also be more inclusive
- Have interpreters during meetings
- Take them to special afterschool activities, parent conferences
- Quarterly parent nights with translators and transport
- Personally invite parents to join the school activities
- Invite parents to teach about their home culture – or bring food/game from home country
- Parent nights
- Monthly parent meetings in specific language. We also do provide transportation for certain meetings
- WMRECC provides liaison services as well as parent workshops for them to learn further about school
- Eliminating anything that could be seen as a barrier to parents in their new schools
- I think the idea of making sure all communication that goes home is in their native language

How do you engage the receiving community?

- We provide a family literacy program. We work with local services that can assist our families.
- Create partnerships
- Partnerships with churches, schools, cultural centers
- Family support meetings in the high school
- International night
- Offer school building as location for cultural events
- Get involved in community projects – new roots for refugees – growing

- I make home visits with my translator and I believe it helps them know that our school cares enough about them and their children to come see them
- Speakers to schools

#### Other Chat:

- Chesterfield and Henrico Public Schools, Virginia had the “welcome” centers where the new arrivals’ English level was tested and & their placements were preferred. This school registration session was conducted with the presence of parents, school liaison, ESL teachers, and interpreter
- I'm curious about using term ESL when so often it is a third or even fourth language. I'm used to the term ELL (English Language Learner) which is more accurate
- How do you get all of the students who participate in the Thrive Program home after school? 141 is a lot of children. Is there a length of time that you service children (3 years or less)
- What do you suggest if you are not in a city/school system that is as engaged as Omaha?
- How does one advocate to school districts to direct more funds to refugee needs? For example, providing translators for parents.
- I have question for the Houston school presenter. She spoke about moving students up whenever they are ready. Is this transition difficult? Is it better to wait till a "natural" time of transition--say at the end of a school year? Are there many opinions about that?
- Our majority minority is Hispanic. This means that the percentage of Hispanic students in some classes prevails. How can we encourage these students to not speak to each other in Spanish during class or other educational activities?
- For the individuals in school districts, up to what age do you accept new refugee students? If you have a cut off before 21 years of age what do you do for the students that are between the cut off age and 21?
- The whole community will be invited to see the quilt in the Spring where more people will get to learn about Paw's home country and about her dreams for her future, as well as the other students who participated. Great opportunity for community members to learn about new neighbors!
- Regarding pulling the kids out all day or not, it doesn't work if the student takes the bus to school.
- How does HISD handle high school transcripts of refugee students? Are credits transferred?
- How does your coordinator reach out to ESL volunteer?
- How new refugees children take part on after school activities since they don't have their own transportation?
- What is more helpful to the children-- a push-in teacher which allows the children to be in a homeroom with their peers or a pull-out program which is geared specifically to their level? This is an issue that we are currently researching/exploring in San Diego
- Many school districts have an office dedicated to parent involvement / family engagement. If you're trying to get "in" to a school district, start there.

- The unveiling event for the finished quilt will be on March 23rd from 3-5pm at the Sheldon Museum of Art on the University of Nebraska - Lincoln Campus. This is open to the public and like Christa said, it is a great opportunity to see the collaboration of the Karen students from Lincoln High School and many of the Lincoln area quilters.
- I feel so lucky to be in the Lincoln community where such awesome collaborations are happening. Way to go Lincoln High School, Sheldon Museum of Art and all the others involved in the quilt project! Thank you, Paw, for the information!
- Hi Shirin. We work in two different counties, and find drastic differences with school engagement. I've tried to be proactive with the county we have had issues with, offering professional development, support, adjustment groups, etc...and they have said they have policies and procedures they need to follow and cannot accept help from outside agencies
- They have made it very difficult for us to provide any sort of support, and we're getting feedback from parents and students that they are really struggling. i've tried scheduling meetings with school principals and admins at ESOL office and they have said thanks but no thanks
- Have refugee parents speak at public budget hearings or board meetings (ours always have time for public comments)
- This has worked really well for us in Anne Arundel County Public Schools!
- Also, if people are more interested in the family engagement piece, take a look at the online training module I did when I was with BRYCS (and the national PTA):  
<http://www.brycs.org/modules.cfm>
- Any suggestions for resources (books or websites) for districts who are looking at changing their ELL program to better meet ELLs' needs and creating schools with more welcoming environments
- How are these collaboratives/programs funded? Do the school districts pay for them in part or in full?
- ELL advocates and bilingual liaison positions are very important to create a welcoming school . How do you ensure funding to create and retain these positions at the district?
- Here in Lincoln, Nebraska the bilingual liaison positions are regularly funded by the district and in the beginning, the ELL Advocate position was grant funded but has since become a position that is funded by the district as well.
- Thank you, Sanja. Faces of Resettlement is a wonderful video. I shared this with a Middle School staff during a training session. I recommend this for others.