



Podcast: Supporting Newcomer Youth in School

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Guest speakers: Rob Callus and Madina Masumi, Training Officers, Switchboard

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Introduction

Selina Máté: Welcome to The Switchboard Podcast. Switchboard is a one-stop resource hub for refugee service providers in the U.S., funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). We provide resources, trainings, communities of practice, and programmatic assistance for programs funded by the ORR. My name is Selina Máté, and I will be your host. Today, I will be talking with Rob Callus and Madina Masumi, two of Switchboard's Training Officers with a focus on community integration and cultural awareness respectively. Both Rob and Madina have extensive backgrounds in the classroom working to welcome newcomer youth into the school system. Welcome Rob and Madina, thank you for joining today.

Would you care to give us a quick rundown of your background with newcomer youth?

Rob Callus: My name is Rob Callus, I'm a Training Officer. Like Selina said, my focus is on community integration, so looking at the barriers that newcomers are facing when integrating into the community and also at the barriers within the community that do not promote integration successfully. So, my history working with youth goes back to teaching overseas. I volunteered in Tanzania where I was an educator for writing, and that was when I fell in love with education as a practice and as a career in a life path. When I came back to the U.S. after that time, I was looking for jobs that kept me working with youth, kept me working with the education sector. And working at a Refugee Resettlement Agency in Durham, North Carolina, where I live currently, was where I ended up. And that felt like the best fit—where I managed a youth services program that was catering to the needs of refugee and immigrant youth in the Durham Public School System. I worked there for about almost four years, had a really great time, and then transitioned to my position here at Switchboard. So happy to be here. Let me kick it over to Madina.

Madina Masumi: Thank you, Rob and Selina. My name is Madina Masumi, and I'm a Training Officer with Switchboard. And my focus would Switchboard really comes in the area of cultural awareness and cultural humility. And as part of that, what I have focused on also with some of my projects is working to make sure that students were feeling open and welcome in their classroom environments and that it's a culturally safe environment for them. I'm excited to be here with you guys today. My background with newcomer youth comes really from my own personal and lived experiences. Growing up as the daughter of Afghan refugees, a lot of my personal childhood experiences are memories of my family members and I sort of learning to navigate life in a brand-new country and a new environment, and in an environment that is completely foreign to my family. Learning to find a balance between the Eastern and the Western cultures was a big part of my upbringing. I also worked for over 13 years as a professional school counselor for Fairfax County public schools, and I spent a lot of my time working in elementary schools with marginalized populations which, obviously, included a lot of students who are new to the country.

SM: Thank you both for sharing that. And a little fun fact about Rob's program as well in Durham is that I used to work with Rob in our youth mentorship program, and so I'm so excited to have both of you here today to share your wealth of knowledge, personal experience, and lived experience. Let's dive in.

What are some of the core stressors that newcomer youth face when entering the U.S. school system?

MM: Newcome youth have so many strengths and they are so resilient. That's one of the things that really drew me to working in schools with larger migrant populations. It really helped me keep grounded throughout my career as a school counselor because I would witness how they would respond to all these stressors. But I think one of the main things that I worked on with students was really making sure that they felt welcome and accepted by their peers. We can already assume that students and their families are facing lots of barriers when it comes to language or possibly financial barriers or housing, but one of the things that really stresses children out when they are in school is that potential feeling of social isolation, because they're facing school alone. Their family is not with them, they don't have that support there. It's so important to make sure that that school community becomes their support. It's really, really essential for schools to have good programming that helps students feel connected.

RC: Yeah, Madina, I super agree with this idea of creating welcoming spaces in terms of where youth can feel seen, and where they have connection with other people who are sort of seeing them in their struggles and those sorts of things.

There are a lot of ways to break down some of those complex and compounded stressors. You have your resettlement stressors of just integrating in general, you have your cultural adjustment stressors, you have this trauma stress because of all the migratory trauma that youth are experiencing and internalizing in an incredibly important developmental stage for them as well. But I think one of the things that has really been sticking with me in terms of thinking of core stressors for youth actually comes from a resource that someone in our newcomer education and youth services community of practice shared.

It was a resource of the findings from a conference of a study that was conducted with 25 refugee youth, where folks asked what the most stressful parts of their integration were. I really appreciated that sort of youth-centered, student-centered approach. The highest reported stressors were English language learning, educational success, cultural adjustment, and discrimination and bullying is that last one. And I think those hit on facets of all those other big jargon words, but in a way that feels really core and central and authentic to the newcomer youth's experience. This hits on some of the things that Madina was talking about too. Sort of having to reconcile the different kinds of cultural experiences and education experiences as well.

MM: Rob, I'm glad you brought up the point about bullying. That's actually something that I was thinking of as well, because a lot of times we hear stories through some of the technical assistance we provide at Switchboard of newly arrived Afghans, for example, that are being resettled sometimes into communities that have a little ethnic diversity. And so as a result they are faced with bullying because other students might not understand their culture or some of the differences that they have. Having that awareness as a school district of who your population is, and making sure that there's programs in place that celebrate diversity, is so important too.

SM: Thanks for sharing that resource, Rob. I definitely like to highlight youth input when doing any programs. The best way to relate to your kids is to ask them what they want to do.

What are some of the ways that you have helped alleviate some of the stress from newcomer families in your own programs and in your work?

MM: I think as a school counselor, one of the things that I've always focused on is making sure to get to know my students—taking that time to establish trust and build that relationship. That can be in really small ways. As

a counselor, a lot of times we have lunch with the students or run small groups, and reach out to the families to make sure that they have relevant resources to help them feel that they are part of their child's learning, that they're feeling empowered because they're a partner. And you definitely, as a school, want to find ways to partner with families to make sure that they also feel involved. But it's really a village approach, Selina. And I think in terms of helping to alleviate some of the core stressors you have to involve everyone. Administrators and parent liaisons have to really be part of that, teachers as well.

I know for me personally, growing up as a child of refugees, I struggled so much in my first year because my parents didn't know certain tools or ways of how the school system worked, even things like the public library being free. That was something that they had to learn along the way. Or the fact that sometimes there's programs that offer free tutoring after school to help you learn to read, or the concept of a parent-teacher conference—this was something that was new to my family. It's just more of a proactive check-in of, *here's how your child is progressing*, not that *your child is necessarily in trouble*. So really just working through some of those differences and nuances and making sure that parents feel empowered, whether you're a counselor or a teacher or an administrator, is so important. And obviously, teachers really are on that forefront. They spend the most time with the students, so taking time to build some type of a strength-based approach with their students is important.

One thing that's amazing about children that I always love is they're so—they can see the world through a different lens and they know who's really invested in them, genuinely, and who's not. So as a teacher, if you just take a little bit of time to see a strength in a child or notice something that they did well, I think that goes such a long way because it really allows them to be seen and heard. Everybody plays a little small part to make sure to help if they can alleviate some of those stressors. As a counselor, one of the special things that I got to do is really work with all of those people to help that. I would contact the teachers and the parents and the school social workers and you're sort of like a bridge that helps connect everybody.

RC: One of the first ways I can think of really beating some of the stressors comes from that initial arrival period and during those first 90 days of arrival in the reception and placement program. And so that's normally when our youth services department would do enrollments at school. And something we always reflected on is that the enrollment form and registration forms for the public schools in an area. We can do them in probably 10 minutes if we really needed to just by ourselves. But what we thought was really important was spending time going to the family's home, sitting with them, and actually going through the application and registration process with them, and doing so with an interpreter who can speak the same language and comes from the same cultural background or context as that family. By taking that time, it might take more like an hour, sometimes an hour and a half, depending on how many kids there are. But in that process, it would give space for families to ask questions. When we get to the great placement question that's a great time to provide some cultural orientation and say, "Here's how the education system looks in the U.S."

We'd also accompanied them for school entry. So, the first day of school is a big one. And it's often really hard for the parents, for the students, so we would offer support on that first day and make sure they met all the right people, provide an interpreter for those first meetings with the teachers, and that would help the students sort of start off strong knowing that they had that sort of support that Madina was talking about. Knowing that everyone was there to support them. The last thing I'll share about reducing and mitigating the stress of those core stressors is about building cross-cultural community within the school. So often in different public school districts based on affordable housing, so on and so forth, there will be a couple of schools, we'll have quite a few refugee learners. In those schools one of the most successful things that we did was provide these after school spaces for refugees and other newcomers to gather, and we'd have our interpreters there to help out with the different languages.

But some of the best parts, we're watching the kids from different countries, from different cultures, from really different migratory backgrounds coming together and connecting over their different but shared experiences. And I think that was really helpful for those kids to feel less alone, to know that they were not the only kids in that school who arrived to the U.S. in a really challenging and a different way than their peers. To know that in

that way, the next day they might see their friends in the hallway and they don't have to be like, "hey, you're a refugee too," but they might say, "hey, there's a part of you that sees a part of me." And that's really valuable.

MM: The after-school programming is so important because it also supports families in a direct way. Because you have families who are sometimes working one, two, three jobs to get by, and so it really provides a safe environment where their child is thriving. So, there are really multiple layers of support there.

RC: Absolutely. Often what I would say is, obviously, we care about the education and the academic growth, but what I'm really caring about are the social and emotional bonds that are happening and that sort of growth. We'd have time dedicated to finishing their homework assignments that they wanted to finish before getting home, but then we'd also have activities where we would read through stories that had more of a social-emotional component and different morals or opportunities to talk about some of those stressors in ways that felt approachable and accessible for these youth as well. It's a space for them to be like, "yeah, it's really hard for me to do this. Isn't it weird that you have to do that in the school system? And I didn't really know how this worked, and I was scared to ask to use bathroom." Things like that, where they can voice those things without feeling afraid of how that will be received because there are at least four or five other kids in the room who might share the same experience.

MM: And even to add another layer to that, I'm thinking about how we had similar programming at a school I worked with, and in the evenings there would be certain events to bring all the families back in in that safe space. They would either do a diversity day, where everybody would bring in a meal from their country, or a day to watch a movie together in the cafeteria. You'd bring in the family as well into that space where children are connecting socially, and then you'd have the families who are able to connect as well. A lot can be done with that within the safe environment of a school or a community center.

How can school systems integrate student-focused practices in their day-to-day operations to help newcomer families?

RC: I love this question and I love to brag about the Durham Public Schools in this space. We worked closely with the Durham Public Schools and we are partnered directly with the English as a Second Language department, which is now the English Language Learner Services department. When we were first approached by the Durham Public Schools, they identified this need of wanting to address the issue of language justice in the school system and the lack of culturally responsive appropriate services provided for refugee and the other immigrant learners. Basically, anyone who wasn't speaking English at home, growing up, they were trying to improve their services. The head of ESL shared a really important story that really stuck with us in terms of trying to illustrate the need. She said there was a family who came to the Durham Public School system and the kid came for his first day of school, and he was sent home that morning. The family wasn't really told why they were just called and told, "You need to come pick-up your student, he's broken a rule." They did not receive context on why. Later on, they were told it was because the student had brought a knife to school.

Now, the family was really upset and they went back to the school and they said, "Well, how else was he supposed to sharpen his pencils if he didn't have the knife?" That was a really interesting moment of cultural dissonance where that family probably hadn't received information around what is appropriate and what's not appropriate for the schools, but also the school did not have necessarily the culturally responsive mindset of saying that maybe this kid isn't bringing this as a weapon, maybe this has some sort of cultural significance or has some sort of social significance or is just a difference in a view of that sort of thing. So that disconnect led to that kid missing some formative initial days with school, and also created that dissonant relationship with education in the first place. He didn't feel welcome. He was sent home for something that he thought was important for his education. So that was why ESL came to us at that time, and they said, "We need to do better by our refugee and immigrant learners." The Durham Public School system has done a lot in the past couple of years to improve their services.

They introduced a multilingual resource center where they have interpreters available in most of the common immigrant and newcomer languages that are in the Durham Public School system, they partnered with us at

our agency to provide multilingual services, we partner directly even in funding, they had some extra funding for giving to our agency too. They acknowledged that we had the capacity and the institutional knowledge, and they said, "Let's leverage that, and then let's bring in folks from the communities that we're serving, right into the school." We had, like I said, a fleet of bilingual assistants, so folks who were sort of interpreters, but were there to sort of act as cultural brokers and to also provide in-school and after-school support.

So through the growth of those sorts of partnerships and things like that I think of one of our partner schools was a great model for this. They relied on us a lot at first, but after a while they became a lot more culturally responsive, so before we would say, "oh, we noticed there's something on the calendar, it may be good to send in bilingual assistants," but it got to the point later on where they no longer were asking us and they were saying, "Hey, we've already got these interpreters lined up, they're coming. Do you have any ideas or any other considerations, is there anything you can do to help us get kids to the schools, including with their families for a multi-cultural night or a back-to school night?" Or something like that.

During that time of partnership, we were able to move from a space of not really knowing how to meet the needs to better anticipating the needs and knowing where to ask for help, and that was where I think looking at where the school-based and community-based approach is really important. And saying that these agencies, we don't want to be the end all be all for all these families, but we do want to be a resource that's empowering the school system to meet the needs in and of itself.

MM: Rob, thanks for sharing your story. Your example is sort of like a program-wide systemic approach a school district used, and some of the experiences I wanted to share or sort of things that I've seen in my 13 years of working through different schools within Fairfax County in terms of sort of day-to-day practices where you can help support newcomer students. And one of the things that always—a program that I loved was the school that I had where they had a student ambassador program, and it really goes back to what we were talking about earlier, of finding ways to empower students to support each other. So it's sort of that peer mentoring support and in this program, they would select students for I think it was a month-long type of a deal, where they would help new students, newcomer students come in and integrate to the school. So they were sitting with them at lunch, they would show them how to buy their lunch, how to go through the lunch line. They would hang out with them at recess, they would sort of be a support system within the school and within the classroom for that child. And the empowering part of this program is that then, once that student, that newly arrived student—a month or two would pass by and let's say another student would come. Then they would get to go be that person, that student ambassador for the new child.

It's a program that kept on empowering and giving students the opportunity to help and support each other. And another with that, in addition to that, I think programs like mentoring programs, where even if you can get individuals who come in from outside the school to provide support to students—but it's even more empowering when you have staff members who are in the school who can buddy up and mentor with newly arrived students to spend some time with them—even if it's something once a month or once every couple of weeks, you have to build those relationships and really make sure that they are feeling a sense of belonging and safety that they all deserve. And you need specific programming for this. Fairfax County is one of the largest school districts in the country. You'll see that every school has different programs running throughout, but having some type of programming to support the day-to-day focused practices is very important.

Can you share one of your favorite stories from your time working with newcomer students?

MM: I have a favorite story that I can share, and Selina, mine is not about my experiences as a counselor working with a student, it's actually from my own personal experience growing up as the daughter of Afghan refugees. Even though I was born in the U.S., it was really difficult to navigate between the two cultures. But back when I was in second grade—I won't mention what year that was—it was a really long time ago.

Many decades ago, there was a student who arrived from Afghanistan. Her name was Malika. She was orphaned from the war and she was brought to the U.S. and sponsored by an American family. She had a metal prosthetic leg because she had lost one of her legs from a landmine, and they put her in my class in second grade because we spoke the same language and we're both from the same country. At the time, I was really struggling with my own identity and really trying to fit in as an Afghan-American in a predominantly white school. I watched her come in, she didn't know the language and she made friends faster than I did. She wasn't trying so hard to fit in, she was herself, and I felt that story has stayed with me throughout a lot of my life. In that year of second grade, there was a moment before she came in the class and the teacher was going around asking everyone where they were from and I didn't say that I was from Afghanistan. I didn't feel comfortable or safe in my environment to say it.

[Malika] came in and she just had a different attitude, and I learned an important lesson from her. It was really about self-acceptance and staying true to yourself, and I think it goes back to the point I made at the beginning of this podcast. Newcomers are so resilient, and we just have to give them the opportunity and the space to feel welcome so that they can thrive in that environment. It was harder for me as someone who was born in this country with that third culture identity to fit in than it was for her someone who had experienced so much trauma, loss. And she just smiled and persevered through it, and it's just stayed with me my entire life, and I often think back and I hope that she's continuing to thrive and is as successful as she was in second grade.

RC: That's really sweet Madina. I really appreciate hearing that and shout out to Malika, amazing for her authenticity. And so, I just can't imagine it. I think it's with all the pressures to, as a youth in general—forget about if you come from a different cultural context to fit in—I think that that is incredible, and I'm really glad you had a model like that in your life. When you ask about favorite stories, my mind just goes to 400 different moments. I think I felt really affirmed in the work that I was doing with newcomer youth because sure, yes, it's really challenging, but there are so many great moments of resilience and grace and those sorts of things that I'm always so moved by. I think some of the ones that come to mind the most are from our after-school programming and Selina, I think you know this one. We had rooms based on age groups and in each room, there would be kids from different countries, from different languages. Some age groups might have more Arabic speakers in one room, more Pashto speakers in another, but in our fifth-grade room, it was a really cool mix. We had two kids from Afghanistan, we had two from Central Africa. And then we also had, all of a sudden, our first arrival in a long time from Syria. This was back in, I think, 2019, 2020, when we weren't seeing a lot of newcomers from Syria, and we were so excited.

I was a little worried at first, I thought maybe she was going to feel a little isolated in that room if she was the only Arabic speaker. I thought, the rest of our Arabic speakers are a lot younger, she might not connect with them in quite the same way, but I was totally wrong. All of those sorts of doubts and fears and concerns were dashed immediately because that room rallied around this newcomer student. They would always check in as soon as she walked in the room. They'd be like, let's check on her homework, let's see if she needs any help. I would walk in the room sometimes and see them rallying around this newcomer and I'd be like, "Hey, guys, this is so cool of you to do this, this is so nice, I know you guys have your homework too, but it's really inspiring to see you supporting her." And they'd say, "we were like her." It almost sounds cheesy, but it was so pure in that way, and just seeing them sort of mobilize on her behalf was amazing, so we had this really big moment for her. With us, there was a time Selina and I were walking into the school, and the student comes running down the hallway, and she's accompanied by two of the other kids from the fifth-grade room.

One day she told us that her younger brother wouldn't be at after-school that day because he had a doctor's appointment and Selina and I barely even listened because we were like, "Oh my gosh, that was an incredible sentence." Good for you. You were able to communicate something really clearly, confidently, so on and so forth, and all the kids around her where there being her little cheerleaders, and it was so great. That's the kind of thing that I wish we could measure in these programs is what does that self-advocacy look like, what does building community look like, how do you measure those sorts of things because those were the real things that I felt were successes from that program.

MM: It's part of what she did, but then how, sort of like you said, everybody else rallied around her, and then you guys were there as a support. That's very sweet.

RC: It's the kind of thing that otherwise might be made fun of, the fact that she couldn't convey that her brother was going to a doctor's appointment because she forgot a verb or something like that, but we were sitting there just being like, "Way to go, That's so impressive." And that's my thing about language, especially for English language learners, is if you get your idea across, if I understand you, that's language, that's exchange, and that's something to celebrate, especially with these kids who are within their first year of arrival—to make those sorts of sentences thanks to the support from peers.

SM: Rob, as you were talking, I was reminded of one of my favorite moments. One day I was like, "Let's do a service opportunity that's not the typical." There were a lot of different service aspects in the program, but one came to mind and I went to our resettlement manager and I was like, "Hey, what families do we have arriving? Can we set up one of the new apartments?" And I think she was a little hesitant at first because I have a bunch of 15-, 16-year-old students that were about to build some furniture. But she let us. She said, "We have this one apartment that needs to be set up in so many weekends," and I took a lot of my students. There were probably about five or six of them throughout the day, and I remember this moment when we were eating dinner sitting in this near empty apartment, and a couple of students looked up and they were like, "Selina, somebody did this for us." And I was like, "Yeah, yeah. Family did this for you."

They're like, "No way, wow." It just kind of dawned on us that somebody had done this for us before we arrived as well, and now they're doing it for a new family. And they were just so excited to be able to feel that sense of agency, I think, of completing the circle almost of serving community in their own way. We were at this point once, so, let's help this family out. I know as a teacher it's a really cool moment when your student leans over and is like, "Hey, let me help you with your math." It's heart-warming for sure.

MM: You know, Selina, they're never going to forget that. I have had those moments in my own personal experiences, and I remember them, and they still affect me and influence me to this day—as an adult, with the decisions I make. And it's very empowering. It stays with children.

RC: Just thinking of that story, Selina, also makes me want to brag a little bit, but more on behalf of a particular client and a couple of clients who have since followed him. Something we started in my last position was a Youth Fellowship Program, sort of that same idea of those mentorship programs, clients participating in an apartment set-up. Our agency asked the question, "What are ways that we can involve former clients or current clients in our work more?" And we also had the need for hiring interns, all the time, so we said, "What if we created a fellowship program to make an internship more accessible for a former mentorship program client?" And so we piloted it a couple of years ago and it was a smashing success. It was awesome. Now that former client is a current staff member at our agency as a youth fellow, and he will be finishing his second year, and he's someone who I served as a mentor for and we stayed really close. Now that he's had this Youth Fellowship experience, he's really interested in continuing his involvement and career with refugee settlement in the long term, so we're having conversations about what kind of majors and what kind of classes will be helpful in college to help him continue on that track.

It's really cool to be able to say he is now able to provide support that he had received when he was a client. And who better to inform that process than someone who went through that process himself?

What is one sentence of advice that you would give to somebody on their first day working in a youth program?

MM: Don't take anything personally that a child tells you.

SM: That's a good one. Working with teenagers. That's a good one.

RC: I think for me, the one sentence—especially coming from a role where I was managing a lot of folks who were younger—is to check in with yourself often and to ask yourself repeatedly, "What is essential?" I worked

with a lot of case workers who, when working with youth, would internalize a lot and maybe take things personally, like Medina was talking about. And it's really important to say, "What is the value that we're adding and how can we do this sustainably?" I know it's sort of almost tired at this point, but it's so essential to be aware of your boundaries and to acknowledge that while youth who are running youth programs are really well situated because they are closest to those experiences, it's also really easy to sort of internalize those experiences as well, and to take on more than you should. So I would say it's not the most exciting thing. But check out what's in your grant, check out what you've actually promised to provide, and use that as a piece of accountability to ensure that you're staying within your scope and within your own personal boundaries, so that you can continue to be helpful and valuable and of service to your clients.

SM: This is a great advice from both of you, thank you so much for sharing. I cannot stress enough, listeners, if there's anyone out there that does want to have a conversation like this with any of our Switchboard team, please reach out, submit a technical assistance request and we can navigate that with you—whether that's walking through a program period with you, or just having a simple conversation about boundaries and case management and implementing some of these programs with your youth. So reach out please. That's what we're here for. In addition to those ways that you can get connected to Switchboard, Rob and Medina, would you mind sharing any of the [upcoming webinars](#) or [resources](#) that we have coming out?

RC: Yeah, absolutely, I'm happy to take this on and share some of the really cool opportunities that we've had and that are coming up. So last month, in March, we had an updated version of our [Federal Student Aid webinar](#), which provided some updates around federal student aid eligibility for Ukrainians, Afghans, Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans—trying to be more expansive in terms of which newcomers are eligible for, which kinds of student aid. Definitely check that out on our website with our subject matter expert, Lindsey Dusad, as well as folks from the Office of Post-Secondary Education providing guidance as well. I also want to plug that we have an ongoing community of practice, which is a social learning space for folks who work in newcomer education and youth services. So anyone who's funded by refugee school impact or refugee youth mentorship grants, you are most welcome to join for that. That happens on the second Wednesday of every month at 3:00 p.m. E.T. Last thing I'll plug, and this is coming up at the end of May: we'll be having a webinar on building supportive mentoring relationships with refugee students, so stay tuned for that. We'll be announcing it very soon.

SM: Thank you both for joining us today here.

MM: Thank you for having us here.

RC: Thanks so much, Selina. Great talking to you guys about this.

SM: If you're a resettlement service provider and are looking for new ways to improve your current programs or build new programs, please do not hesitate to reach out to the Switchboard team via our website. Please check out our resource library for all of the latest resources on refugee resettlement. We will publish one episode each month throughout the year. Thank you for tuning in. See you next month on the Switchboard podcast.

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