switchboard
connecting resettlement experts



Guidance for Educators Supporting Newcomer Students and Their Families

This guide is intended for educators who support newcomer students and families, including students participating in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) program. This includes teachers, school counselors, enrollment staff, English language learning staff, special education staff, behavioral support staff, McKinney-Vento liaisons, and other school-based professionals.

Learn Who is in Your Classroom

When a newcomer student enrolls in your school, you may unintentionally assume they arrived with family and that the foundations of care and support are already in place. As a result, your attention may naturally focus on immediate school-related priorities such as schedules, classes, and academic needs. While these are important, understanding the broader context of resettlement and adjustment can help you and your school effectively support the student and their family.

Resettlement Context

Each newcomer student's circumstances are unique. Factors such as family responsibilities, housing stability, and access to resources do not define a student or family, but they may influence how students and families engage with school and access support.

Newcomer students may live in a variety of caregiving arrangements. Some may live with parents, relatives, or caregivers they traveled with during migration. Others may have reunited with family after arrival, live with non-relatives, reside in URM foster care, or live in group care settings with other youth. You can review Switchboard's Program of Initial Resettlement (PIR): Minor Codes tip sheet to learn more about minors' living arrangements.

Learn about experiences that may affect refugee and newcomer students and families, including:

- The impacts of trauma, including war, loss, or forced displacement
- Adjusting to a new culture and education system
- Changes in family dynamics and responsibilities
- Pressures related to employment, housing, language learning, and finances

Alongside these challenges, newcomer students and families bring resilience, skills, and knowledge that schools can build on.

Education Context

Newcomers' educational experiences vary widely, ranging from interrupted education or little or no formal schooling to consistent, high-quality education—with varying levels of familiarity with U.S. academic content and expectations. Also keep in mind that students' literacy skills in their home language can shape how they learn a new language and access grade-level academic content.

In addition to school, **older newcomer youth may be balancing employment, financial obligations, and family responsibilities**. While some may be focused on completing their education, others may feel urgency to begin working. For many, adjustment involves navigating unfamiliar classroom expectations after taking on significant responsibilities and enduring traumatic life experiences.

Look for behaviors such as limited participation, avoiding eye contact, or prioritizing work, which may reflect adjustment, cultural differences, or competing demands rather than a lack of interest in school.

Understanding these circumstances can help you more effectively support newcomer students' adjustment to school expectations.

Enrollment Challenges Newcomers May Face

- Transcripts, school records, or other documentation commonly requested during enrollment may not be available
- Transferring credits earned elsewhere may also be difficult or impossible
- Older youth may be nearing age limits for public high school enrollment while still seeking educational opportunities

These challenges can cause additional stress and worry for students and caregivers. Schools can reduce this stress by adopting flexible enrollment and placement practices.

Build Partnerships with Students and Families

School Navigation

Approach school orientation as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Share information with newcomer students on:

- Reading and understanding a school day schedule
- Finding important locations, like bathrooms and counselors' offices
- Knowing what to do if they become lost

- Taking the bus
- Using a calendar and planner
- Tracking assignments, tests, and deadlines

These routines may be familiar to you, but they are not always intuitive for students who are learning how a new school system operates. Providing opportunities for students to practice these skills and ask questions can help build their confidence over time.

Check out the resources below to see how a URM program used virtual reality (VR) to help URMs understand the complex landscape of American education. These resources can be viewed on any smartphone or tablet, making them an accessible tool for supporting orientation, engagement, and learning without the need for a VR headset.

- Taking a School Bus VR 360 Video
- Parent Pickup VR 360 Video
- Going to High School VR 360 Video
- Exploring Secondary Education Pathways VR 360 Video

Family Engagement

Learning directly from students can help you better understand their experiences, support systems, and needs. **Consider asking:**

- *Which adult family member or caregiver should I contact if I want to discuss your education or needs?*
- *What would you like me to understand about your caregiving or living arrangement?*
- *Who is supporting you and your family outside of school?*
- *What languages do you and your caregivers speak?*
- *How are you and your family adjusting to your new community and school system?*

Partnering with Students in Practice

During co-design of a Switchboard school orientation video, newcomer students identified a gap adults had missed: how to ask to use the restroom.

One student explained that raising their hand, finding the right words, and navigating an unfamiliar classroom made this task feel intimidating. Based on that feedback, the video was updated to include a scene showing a student raising their hand and asking to use the restroom. Without student input, that scene would not have been included.

When you invite students to share their perspectives and help shape solutions, they can identify crucial information gaps that adults may not recognize.

The goal is not to gather every detail but to understand students' circumstances well enough to build effective partnerships with the students and their families.

Newcomer families may engage with their children's schools in different ways and at different times. Some may initially focus on meeting basic needs and adjusting to their new community, while others may feel more comfortable participating in school activities and supporting other families.

Consider these stages of family engagement:

1. **Survivor:** Immediate needs such as housing, employment, transportation, or school enrollment may take priority over school involvement.

2. **Learner:** A family begins asking questions about school expectations or available supports to help their child succeed in the classroom.
3. **Connector:** A parent who has become comfortable navigating the school system helps newer families understand school routines or processes.
4. **Leader:** Family members take on visible leadership roles and serve as trusted voices within their community. They may speak on behalf of other families or help organize events.

Newcomer families are co-creators, supporters, encouragers, monitors, advocates, and role models. Schools can strengthen these partnerships by recognizing the expertise families bring regarding their children and creating meaningful opportunities for collaboration. Engage families as partners by inviting their input and incorporating their perspectives into educational planning and decision-making.

Language Access

Provide information in languages families understand so they can participate fully in educational programs and decision-making processes. Key information to translate may include enrollment materials, school communications, report cards, and permission forms. Translate these items into families' **preferred languages and dialects** by following your school's translation procedures or by using available translation resources.

Avoid relying on children to relay important school information. **Review information directly with caregivers** and allow time for questions. Check for their comprehension rather than assume they understand. During meetings or follow-up conversations, consider asking questions such as, *"What questions do you have about what we discussed today?"* or *"Just so I know I explained it clearly, can you share your understanding of the next steps?"* These open-ended questions can help identify misunderstandings and clarify expectations.

Note that translating written documents into a family's spoken language is not always sufficient because some parents may not read and/or write in that language. Make sure interpretation is available during meetings and school events.

School-Wide Initiatives

Create a welcoming school environment beyond the classroom. Recognize students' cultural and religious traditions, provide cross-cultural and trauma-informed professional development, maintain a staff that reflects a range of cultures when possible, and limit the use of unfamiliar educational jargon and acronyms.

School counselors and social workers can help foster belonging through groups and activities that build peer connections and social-emotional skills. You can also help families understand available resources and the roles of school-based support staff, which may be unfamiliar to some newcomer families.

Schools can further strengthen connections through student ambassador programs, peer mentoring, multilingual family engagement activities, parent coffee talks, and multicultural events.

Support Student Success

Newcomer students are often resourceful and resilient, but while they're adjusting to a new language and culture, they may not see these qualities as transferable skills. **Help students recognize and name the strengths they already bring.**

Helping raise younger siblings may demonstrate leadership. Fixing things around the house may reflect problem-solving skills. Working in a market may demonstrate organization and interpersonal skills. Teaching students to recognize these strengths can support confidence and help them connect real-life experiences to future educational and employment opportunities.

Connect your students to opportunities that build skills for future independence. For example, encourage them to participate in community job fairs. You can also include information on **life skills** in your lesson plans or newsletters shared with caregivers. Consider topics such as writing resumes, preparing for job interviews, navigating public transportation, managing money, understanding taxes, and learning workplace expectations.

Community Partnerships and Real-World Learning

Youth benefit from opportunities to practice skills in real-world settings and build connections beyond the classroom. **Learn about the community partnerships and youth opportunities already available in your area.** Schools, mentors, tutors, public libraries, community organizations, faith groups, and local programs can all contribute to a broader network of support for newcomer students.

Conclusion

While resettlement may involve a common set of challenges, every newcomer student and family brings unique experiences, strengths, responsibilities, and support systems.

Take time to learn about each student as an individual, and approach them with curiosity rather than assumptions. This will help you better understand what your newcomer students may be navigating, both inside and outside the classroom, and the needs that shape each student's journey.

Resources

- Archived Webinar: Increasing Family Engagement within Schools to Support Refugee Students (2024)
- Toolkit: Welcoming Refugee Students – Guides for Classroom Teachers, School Nurses, School Administrators, School Counselors, Peer Mentors, and Parents (2013)
- Blog: Fostering Resilience for Refugee Students (2024)
- Guide: School Enrollment for Students in Temporary Housing (2022)

Settle In newcomer-facing resources:

- Education in the U.S.
- Tips for Getting Children Ready for the School Year
- The Benefits of Enrolling Your Child in School
- After-School Activities in the U.S.
- Cultural Adjustment

To learn more about Switchboard, visit **www.SwitchboardTA.org**

The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.