

Welcoming Refugee Students

Strategies for School Administrators



Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA)
New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

Refugees

A refugee is someone who flees their native country because of *fear of persecution* based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion.

Some refugee children have witnessed terrible violence, and have lost friends and family.

They may have been living in the middle of

- war
- political oppression
- constant violence
- torture
- famine
- religious persecution.

“An immigrant leaves his homeland to find greener grass. A refugee leaves his homeland because the grass is burning under his feet.”

Refugees have managed to escape, but often without family members and personal belongings. They have gone through several levels of approval before gaining permission to resettle in the United States.

School leaders are in a key position to create an environment that welcomes refugee students from countries such as Burma, Nepal, Somalia, Iraq, and Sudan. As students resettle in their new communities they will need assistance in learning English and adapting to school procedures.

Teachers and other staff will need professional development and support as they strive to meet the needs of refugee students.

Partnerships with parents, refugee centers, and community groups will be essential in helping refugee students acclimate to their new schools.

This brochure suggests strategies for school administrators as they respond to the challenge of educating refugee students.



Previous Education

- Previous schooling for refugee students can range from no education at all to disruption of a rigorous education. Even if refugee students have attended school, it may have been in a refugee camp, where resources can be extremely limited.
- Although there may be some information about the background of the refugee students, it may be difficult to determine their academic knowledge and abilities.
- Teachers of English language learners (ESL or ELL), with assistance from Refugee Resettlement Case Managers and school counselors, assess the capabilities of students, determine grade placement, and do their best to meet social and academic needs of refugee students. They also have to follow school policies and state regulations to ensure that the students can complete testing and graduation requirements. This can be very challenging and requires administrative support.
- Refugee students are often scared and confused when they first attend school. Until they can adjust to the demands of their new school environment (even if they have interpreters and help from ESL/ELL teachers), they will have difficulty absorbing academic information.

“Many of our refugee students come from countries where education is a scarce commodity, and where they receive truncated or no formal education.”

But their adaptation is often surprisingly swift. As refugee students become comfortable, they have a better chance of learning. Keep in mind that some refugee students are experiencing for the first time:

- freedom to express opinions in public
- access to textbooks, literature and art supplies
- teachers, counselors, and administrators who are engaging and supportive
- in-depth presentation of subject matter
- access to a wide range of activities.

“I want the refugee students in my building to know that they are *contributing* to our school, not just *adapting* to it.”

Tips from Administrators

■ Refugee children have left behind:

- all of their belongings
- family members
- friends and neighbors
- familiar weather, foods, and traditions.

“Every newcomer should immediately have a buddy or peer mentor for the first few weeks. Everybody wins.”

They are torn between maintaining family cultural traditions and “fitting in” to the new culture. Give them time and encouragement as they find their way. Consult frequently with the ESL/ELL teachers, Refugee Resettlement Case Managers, and school counselors, to monitor adjustment.

“The biggest concerns we have observed with refugee students in our school are: personal hygiene, purchasing lunch, appropriate clothing that fits, use of restrooms, and finding classrooms. Tackle these issues immediately and you will see refugee children relax and begin to enjoy themselves in school.”



- It may take a while for some refugee students to grasp the concept of time. Many have never experienced schedules, clocks, and required school attendance. Review expectations with parents and students, but understand that it will take a few weeks for routines to be established.

“We made a point of greeting each refugee student every day by name, making it clear that we wanted them to join us.”

- It is not advisable to ask refugee students about their past history. They may be grieving, or experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. Help them concentrate on their new school activities and making friends.

Tips from Administrators

Communication

- Before they learn English, many refugee students will remain silent or nod “yes” to any question. Draw pictures or demonstrate to make sure they understand.
- Post signs in many languages around the school. This is a great way for every student to learn about another language!

“Locate “allies” who recognize the needs of refugee children.”

(Refugee Children in U.S. Schools: A Toolkit for Teachers and School Personnel (<http://www.brycs.org>))

- Find out immediately how you can engage interpreters at your school. Begin with the school district administration office and ask if they have a list of qualified interpreters. Then consult community groups that have refugees who are bilingual. Interpreters can also be located through refugee resettlement centers, social service and community-based organizations that serve refugees, health care agencies such as hospitals, and organizations that provide interpreters on-site or telephonically. (It is not recommended that children interpret for their peers under any circumstances.)

- Refugee students may not trust adults, particularly law enforcement officials, who attempt to speak to them in the hallways. Explain school rules to the refugee students and demonstrate appropriate responses.

“We added pictures to our multilingual signs, since some refugee students are not literate in their own language.”

- School calendars are very confusing. Half days? Holidays? Vacation breaks? Make sure teachers remind refugee students about changes in the routine. Too many refugee students have shown up for school on a snow day! (Alert parents, the school nurse, or the refugee resettlement center if a student is not appropriately dressed for the weather.)



Tips from Administrators

School Building

- What might frighten refugee students?
 - Fire and lockdown drills
 - Health examinations
 - Changing clothes for physical education
 - Police officers in schools
 - School transportation
 - Crowded cafeterias

Prepare refugee students for these school activities and make sure that they are assisted by peer mentors and faculty as they become familiar with them.

- Restrooms should be clearly marked with pictures. Go *in* them during school tours. Refugee students identify this problem as their biggest concern about navigating a new school. Explain when students are allowed to have access to restrooms.
- Analyze your school policies and programs, the environment and culture, professional development, and how you partner with parents and other agencies. Do you have a culturally competent school?

“Loud noises, alarms, and yelling may mean *danger* to a refugee student.”

A culturally competent school is one that values diversity in philosophy and practice, where teaching and learning are made relevant and meaningful to students of various cultures, and student cultural contributions are recognized.



DO YOU HAVE:

- a welcoming front office?
- signs in many languages?
- personal outreach to refugee families?
- a friendly, familiar face?

“Our building is old and worn out. But we try to make it cheerful and welcoming, and make sure that adults are available. Refugee students don’t always know that adults are there to help them.”

Tips from Administrators

Traditions

- Research the native countries of refugee students, as well as religious traditions. Find out about climate, terrain, food, and history. But avoid personal questions about family and friends, political issues, and personal experiences during resettlement. And remember that every child is unique.

Although it is important for American students to learn about different cultures, do not assume that refugee students are familiar with the traditions of their native countries. Many have grown up in a refugee camp outside their country. Or they may have experienced life in the middle of war or famine.



“We celebrate multiculturalism with school events and classroom activities, but focus on the cultural traditions of *everyone* without stressing specific countries or ethnic groups. We have asked: What is your family’s favorite food? What dances do you know? How do you celebrate holidays?”

Safety

- Introduce refugee students to school personnel who will be in the hallways, the cafeteria, and on the playground. Keep repeating that adults in schools are there to *help* students.
- Refugee students can be targets for bullies. All students should be informed about where to go for help if they are afraid or bullied in school. Refugee students need to know who they can trust. See *Welcome to Our Schools, Module 15 - Staying Safe* for resources on refugees and bullying (<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>)
- Be very clear about what Zero Tolerance means. Review what is allowed in school.
- Invite health care personnel and counselors to explain to older students that in the United States there are laws pertaining to sexual assault, domestic violence, and hate crime. Refer to *Welcome to Our Schools – Module 6 – Hate Crime*. Provide copies of the brochure *Domestic Abuse and Refugees: Strategies for Building Healthy Relationships* to counselors. (<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>)

Tips from Administrators

Parents

- Take parents on tours of the school and introduce them to *all* staff so that the parents can feel comfortable in the school. Keep in mind that many refugee parents have never been in *any* kind of school before, but they are anxious for their children to have an education.
- Refugee parents may not understand that they are *allowed* to talk to teachers. Reach out to the parents and members of the community who can explain that teachers want to connect with parents and work together to ensure a successful educational experience.
- Set the expectation, especially in middle school, that every student must participate in at least one extracurricular activity. Most refugee parents have no idea that there are school clubs, sports, after-school activities, and school-wide events such as assemblies and theater productions. Invite parents personally to attend school events. Talk to them about options for their children. Explain that one of the best ways for students to make friends and stay safe is to join a school-based activity.

Classroom

- Refugee students who have been in the United States for a while are a wonderful source of information and support for newcomers and teachers.

Invite older refugee students to meet with new refugee students and speak at professional development programs. This has been a huge success in helping the entire school to welcome refugee students.

- Many teachers are not prepared for students who do not speak English. They may have refugee students in their classes who are older than their classmates. A free PowerPoint presentation (with script) is available in the *Welcome to Our Schools* curriculum – *Professional Development* (<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>).

“Reassure teachers that refugee students with a low level of English literacy can use other forms of expression in the classroom such as drawing and flash cards. The children *want* to learn English, so just give them time.”

“Our refugee students tell us that when they were learning English they were also observing, practicing, translating, copying, and learning - all at the same time.”

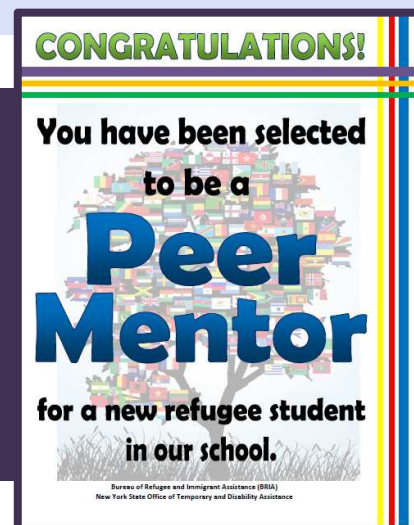
Tips from Administrators

“As the school administrator, I have to make sure that my teachers know that I understand the challenges of teaching refugee students.”

- Provide all faculty with a copy of the *Welcoming Refugee Students: Strategies for Classroom Teachers* brochure on the website of the New York State Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance. Additional brochures are available on the site for school counselors, school nurses, Peer Mentors, and ESL/ELL teachers. (<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>)
- Provide teachers with information about the cultural background of refugee students. Inform them about Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services (www.brycs.org), a valuable source of instructional materials.
- Support alternative instructional strategies for refugee students, including the use of cultural frames of reference, differentiated instruction, and social immersion.
- Explain to teachers that a non-English-speaking student who is sitting in the classroom and not participating is still learning a great deal. Refugee students are observing student-teacher interactions, the use of textbooks and school supplies, social interactions, and routines.
- Recognize that teachers may be frustrated and occasionally uncomfortable when responsible for teaching refugee students, especially in subject areas that require considerable amounts of reading and writing. Make sure instructional support, ESL assistance, tutors, and other arrangements are not only available to the students, but providing support to faculty.
- Watch attendance records closely. Fear can cause refugee students to stay home. They may be afraid of being teased or looking foolish, or something basic like confusion about using the restroom or buying lunch.

Peer mentors provide assistance to new refugee students for as long as necessary. Select students who can be trusted to provide information and support, and serve as a positive role model. The Peer Mentor brochure explains what students can do to help refugee students feel welcome and comfortable in their new school.

<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>



Tips from Administrators

“For any assessments, start by finding out exactly what language the refugee student speaks and then engage an interpreter. A student who is from Burma, for example, could speak Karen, Karenni, Thai, or other languages.”

Testing

- In general, testing requirements are challenging for school districts. Consult with colleagues and other districts about the testing process for newly arrived refugee students, use of interpreters during testing, and expectations for completion of tests. Keep up to date on any changes in testing requirements for students with special needs.
- Know the school district policy on the placement and grading of refugee students. Consult with ESL/ELL teachers to develop procedures based on the cultural context and experiences of refugee students. View each child as unique. Do not make decisions based on assumptions about the cultural or educational background of refugee newcomers.
- Assess skills that may not be readily apparent because of language deficits. Conduct interim assessments as the children learn English, to determine if original placements should be reconsidered.
- Keep in mind that some refugee students are not literate in their own languages and some may have undiagnosed learning disabilities. Engage ESL/ELL and Special Education teachers in planning for students, but don't make final decisions about educational programming until the students have had the chance to learn basic English. The picture changes completely when the students can communicate in English.
- Students can be confused about the many varieties of tests (e.g., exams, quizzes, multiple-choice questions, midterms, finals). Make sure that teachers demonstrate how tests are completed, especially assessments with bubble answer sheets.
- It is also important to inform students and parents about the importance of tests, but not by stressing achievement. Explain that teachers administer tests to determine what the students have learned, and what else needs to be taught. The tests will help teachers plan for the student's education.

“Some refugee students arrive at a time when we are taking State exams or standardized tests. Get a qualified interpreter to help the students complete any required tests. Keep stressing that the tests are for determining the best educational program for the student.”

“Refugee students will need to be informed about test-taking protocols, such as: no talking; never copy answers; come prepared with supplies that might be needed; and tests may be timed.”

Tips from Administrators

Technology

- Refugee students quickly become aware of the use of technology by American students and teachers. Many refugee students are highly motivated to learn about technology (e.g., cell phones, internet, iPads) not only because they can participate in social media, but because they can also explore websites that inform them about their native countries.
- Translation sites are especially useful in school as refugee students are learning English. Make sure they are guided toward accessible computers and receive instruction about basic computer skills. They catch on very quickly!
- Cyberbullying is an issue that requires vigilance on the part of parents and educators. Refugee parents need information about the safe use of computers and how to monitor their child's activity on the internet. Refer to the *Welcome to Our Schools* curriculum - *Module 15 Staying Safe* for specific anti-bullying strategies for refugees.

<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/documents/WtOS-Curriculum.pdf>

“Refugee students often can’t afford cell phones when they first arrive. Once they do own a phone, make sure they understand the rules about cell phones in school, and safe texting.”

Resources for School Administrators

Helping Immigrant and Refugee Students Succeed: It's Not Just What Happens in the Classroom: Welcoming and Orienting Newcomer Students to U.S. Schools

www.brycs.org

New York State Education Department: *Educating the Whole Child – Engaging the Whole School: Guidelines and Resources for Social and Emotional Development and Learning (SEDL) in New York State*, 2011.

www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/sedl/SEDLguidelines.pdf

A Guide for the Placement of Students Presenting Foreign Transcripts

www.healthinschools.org

