

Welcoming Refugee Students

Strategies for Classroom Teachers



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.

A boy from Burma enrolled in my math class mid-year. He was very quiet and didn't speak a word of English. I wanted to teach him but had no idea where to begin.

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.

Refugee students are usually enrolled in an English language learners program until it is determined that they are able to start attending classes. Language and academic support is still provided, but refugee students pick up English and start building friendships a lot faster if they can interact with their peers.

Past Education

Past 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. Grade placement can be a challenge, especially if an older refugee student has had minimal education.

Teachers of English language learners, with assistance from Refugee Resettlement Case Managers and interpreters, assess the capabilities of students and do their best to meet social and academic needs. They also have to follow school policies and State regulations to ensure that the students can complete testing and graduation requirements.

This can mean that refugee students often find themselves in classes that are overwhelming. They may appear scared and confused when they first attend classes. Until they can adjust to the demands of their new school environment (even if they have interpreters), they may have difficulty absorbing academic information.

But their adaptation and development are often surprisingly swift. If students are not participating in class and don't appear to comprehend the subject matter, it doesn't mean that they are not learning. Some refugee students are observing for the first time:

- freedom to express opinions in public
- access to textbooks, literature, art supplies
- group activities with supportive teachers
- in-depth presentation of subject matter
- teachers who are engaging and supportive
- access to school activities for students with a wide range of abilities and interests.

At first I thought Khin would never know what was going on in class. He looked so lost. But the class pitched in and a few months later he gave a presentation in front of everyone - in English.

Not only did Zaytun eventually begin to understand geometry, she discovered a love of mathematics. She had never had the opportunity to explore any type of math before.

As the refugee students become comfortable, they have a better chance of learning.

A Welcoming Classroom

It's already challenging for teachers to cover subject matter, differentiate instruction, manage classroom behavior, and prepare students for tests.

The challenges can increase when a new student arrives who does not understand English and is unfamiliar with how things work in an American school.

I don't have time to teach the English language let alone teach a new student how to sharpen a pencil or use a calculator. But I discovered that refugee students are keen observers because they want to fit in. I make sure that I take a few extra seconds to demonstrate, and I encourage my students to help out.

But classroom teachers can create a welcoming environment so that refugee students feel comfortable and prepared to learn.

Don't make assumptions based on the appearance or cultural background of the student. Find out their level of English comprehension and educational background and the academic goals of the student.

Remember that for the first few weeks in America, refugee students are not only learning how to navigate a new school, they are trying to adjust to new:

- housing
- transportation
- foods
- clothing
- weather

They are often excited about the opportunities and choices, but can be easily overwhelmed and intimidated. Some American students may not be very welcoming, so refugee students have to figure out how to build quality friendships and protect themselves from bullying.

View the classroom experience as social immersion. Focus on helping refugee students learn school rules and procedures, meet fellow students, and become comfortable with teachers and administrators. Once they start to adapt to their new American school, they can tackle academic work, grades and tests.



WELCOME!

- Identify students in the class who are respected by their peers and would be interested in assisting a refugee student. (A **Peer Mentor** guide can be found in the Welcome to Our Schools curriculum.)
- Explain to the class that English is a complicated language. One of the best ways to learn a new language is through immersion. Stop periodically and define key words. Involve the class in teaching English.
- Refugee students may not know school rules and procedures, even those that are basic such as walking in the halls, raising hands, or arriving at class on time. Review every rule and educate before disciplining.
- Encourage refugee students to participate in group work, recognizing that many refugee students have never experienced group discussions or projects in school.
- Many students need help in organizational skills. Refugee students may not know about supplies and systems that can help students stay organized. They may need assistance in keeping track of papers and homework assignments.
- Develop the “whole” child by looking for unique skills and talents, encouraging interests, and exposing refugee students to subjects and activities that they may never have experienced before.

Our new fourth grade refugee student initially had difficulty switching subjects several times a day. He would get pretty stressed. We worked on a system that made him feel more in control of his day and he visibly relaxed.

It's pretty amazing to watch new refugee students experience music and art classes for the first time in their lives.



WELCOME!

- Stress the advantages of having students from around the world in classrooms. Show on a map where the students are originally from and how far they have traveled.

It's not a good idea to ask refugee students about the conditions in their native country or what they have experienced before resettling. Eventually they may volunteer the information, but it can often be stressful to review the past. Some students may have post-traumatic stress disorder and are suffering from the loss of family and friends.

- Distribute the same classroom materials to all students, even if the refugee students cannot read English. If possible, differentiate instruction so that the refugee student can be successful in learning new information. Teachers of English language learners and tutors may be able to help refugee students with assignments.

It's important that refugee students become familiar with textbooks and other instructional materials even if they can't use them at first.

- Testing students has become routine in American schools. Some refugee students will experience test-taking before they even understand how to fill in the answer sheet. Guidance counselors, teachers of English language learners, and interpreters should be involved in determining when and how refugee students should be tested.

I am in constant touch with the ESL teacher. She helps the student with assignments - and I help the teacher prepare the student for what I am going to be covering in class.



Tips for Administrators

- Engage students in welcoming refugee students. (A **Peer Mentor** guide is included in the Welcome to Our Schools curriculum.)
- For many refugees, parents were not expected to communicate with teachers and school leaders. In fact, any communication may have been discouraged. Reach out to parents and invite them personally to participate in school events. If possible, arrange for interpreters to assist.
- Encourage refugee students to share information with family members, and stress that parents and guardians are welcome to call, e-mail, and attend school events.
- Introduce refugee students to school district personnel who will be in the hallways, cafeteria, library, and playground.
- Some refugee students may be nervous around law enforcement assigned to the school. Make a point of introducing the student and explaining that police officers are there for the protection and safety of all of the students.
- Refugee students will adjust more quickly if they have developed friendships. Encourage them to participate in clubs, after-school activities, sports, and school functions.
- Work with classroom teachers to provide support when a refugee student is enrolled in their class. It is difficult to instruct a student who cannot speak English and does not understand the rules and procedures of a classroom.
- Recognize that testing students is already a demanding process in American schools. It can be especially challenging when refugee students have to take school tests. Discuss the policies and regulations with classroom and ESL teachers to determine how to best prepare students.
- Keep an eye out for signals that refugee students are floundering, experiencing bullying, or developing unhealthy relationships. Many refugee students will not talk to anyone about these problems.

I understand that some teachers are frustrated when they are responsible for teaching refugee students, especially if the class requires a lot of reading and writing. We work as a team with the ESL teachers, learning lab, guidance, and tutors to facilitate learning and ease the pressure on the teacher. It's not always easy, but it really does take a village!