



Supporting Immigrant Students and Families in Politically Uncertain Times

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First- and second-generation immigrants comprise a large and growing segment of the U.S. student population. It is estimated that approximately 4.7 million foreign-born students are enrolled

in preschool, K-12, and postsecondary programs in the United States, representing 6% of the total student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Almost 5 times that number are second-generation immigrants whose parents were born outside the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). While research suggests that immigrant students often academically outperform socioeconomically matched U.S.-born peers (e.g., McDonnell & Hill, 1993), they may also face challenges related to acculturation and English language acquisition that can hinder academic and social success. Undocumented immigrants and refugees, who comprise small subsets of the immigrant student population, may face additional challenges and needs related to their previous experiences and immigration status.

Undocumented Immigrants

Individuals are considered undocumented immigrants if they have either entered the country without legal authorization or initially entered the country legally (e.g., on a temporary nonimmigrant visa) but stayed beyond the legal entry period. Approximately 1.4% of the K-12 student population are undocumented immigrants, and 6.9% of K-12 students have at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant (Passel & Cohn, 2014). While most undocumented immigrant students reside with their families, hundreds of thousands have journeyed to the United States on their

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own; during fiscal year 2016 alone, almost 60,000 unaccompanied minors were apprehended entering the United States via its southern border (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2016). In addition to acculturative and linguistic challenges, undocumented immigrants may face additional hardships, including stress related to their and/or their family members' undocumented status, as well as socioeconomic challenges due to reduced employment opportunities.

Refugees

Section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act defines a refugee as "any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality . . . because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." Approximately 3 million refugees have been admitted to the United States since the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980 (Krogstad & Radford, 2017). The specific number admitted annually fluctuates in response to geopolitical conditions and governmental policies but unsurprisingly tends to be highest in times of global unrest; in FY 2016, 84,995 refugees were admitted to the United States via the federal Refugee Resettlement Program, the highest number since the Kosovo crisis in the mid- to late 1990s (Krogstad &

Radford, 2017). Of this group, 3,219 refugees were resettled in Pennsylvania during FY 2016 (Krogstad & Radford, 2017), which represents the ninth-highest total nationwide. It is estimated that 35%–40% of all refugees resettled in the United States are children (Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services, 2017). These numbers do not include individuals who seek asylum after arriving in the United States (in contrast to refugees, who must undergo vetting and approval through the Refugee Resettlement Program before arriving in the country). Students who are refugees or asylum seekers are much more likely than their peers to have experienced significant traumatic events, including separation from family members; deprivation of food, water, and other basic needs; and indirect and/or direct experience with violence (NASP, 2015; Ruiz, Kabler, & Sugarman, 2011). These experiences place them at increased risk for mental and behavioral health issues. Additionally, refugee students are likely to have experienced gaps in their education due to infrastructure breakdown in their communities of origin and/or lack of access to schooling during the migration process, which can lead to postresettlement academic difficulties (NASP, 2015).

Considerations for School-Based Practitioners

U.S. policies and procedures related to immigration and refugee resettlement have received much attention from politicians and the public in recent months. Heated public policy debates and high-profile incidents of violence and intimidation have caused many immigrants, refugees, and their families to feel vulnerable and uncertain about the future, potentially exacerbating the stressors described above. While school-based practitioners have little control over the external political climate, there is much that they can do to make the



schools in which they work safe, supportive, and welcoming settings for students and families. In addition to more general strategies designed to facilitate positive school climate, several suggestions for enhancing service provision to this population are provided below.

- **Decreasing linguistic barriers:** Immigrant and refugee students may require English Language Learners (ELL) program supports, and their need for these services should be assessed as soon as possible after enrollment. Additionally, parents/guardians of ELLs are likely to require language support themselves to effectively communicate with school personnel. The use of trained interpreters and translators—preferably those who are not only fluent in the language spoken by the family but also familiar with their cultural background—to facilitate oral and written communication between school staff and families is recommended.
- **Understanding and respecting cultural differences:** Immigrant and refugee families may hold beliefs regarding education and mental health that differ from those held by majority-culture individuals. Understanding families' perspectives on these issues and addressing differences in a respectful manner can help to facilitate communication and build rapport between families and school staff.
- **Increasing cultural competence:** Learning about students' and

families' cultures of origin can help to increase the quality of services provided to students and families. Cultivating links with culturally diverse community members who are willing to serve as school and community liaisons can help school staff to increase not only their cultural awareness but also their ability to connect families with supportive community members and organizations. Actions that increase multicultural visibility in schools (e.g., routinely displaying objects and images associated with different cultures; discussing and celebrating diverse cultural events) may help students and families to feel that differences are accepted and valued.

- **Addressing the impact of trauma:** Because immigrant and refugee students are more likely to have experienced trauma than their classmates, it is important for school staff to be able to recognize symptoms of trauma in children and adolescents, including behavioral manifestations and cognitive symptoms, and to provide appropriate assessments and/or psychological services to address students' needs in this area (and/or referrals to community-based providers who specialize in the treatment of trauma).
- **Adhering to laws and regulations that protect the rights of immigrant and refugee students:** Regardless of one's personal political beliefs regarding immigration, it is important for school personnel to be aware of

and affirm current laws and policies that protect the rights of immigrant and refugee students and families. (While a comprehensive overview of relevant laws and regulations is beyond the scope of this article, readers are encouraged to access the *U.S. Department of Education Resource Guide*. See "Useful Resources.")

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Useful Resources

U.S. Department of Education Resource Guide: Supporting Undocumented Youth. This Department of Education publication summarizes K–12 and postsecondary schools' legal obligations toward undocumented immigrant students and families; provides tips that schools can use to create safe and welcoming environments for all students and their families, including those who are undocumented immigrants; and contains extensive links to other resources. It is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf>.

Pennsylvania Department of Education Refugee Education Program. This program helps schools provide comprehensive school-based and community supports to refugee students and families. Grants to support these initiatives are also available. More information can be found at <http://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Refugee%20Education/Pages/default.aspx>.