

GUIDANCE FOR EDUCATORS

Supportive School Systems for Newcomer Immigrant Youth

Kelly Edyburn, Jennifer Johnson, and Kelli Scardina
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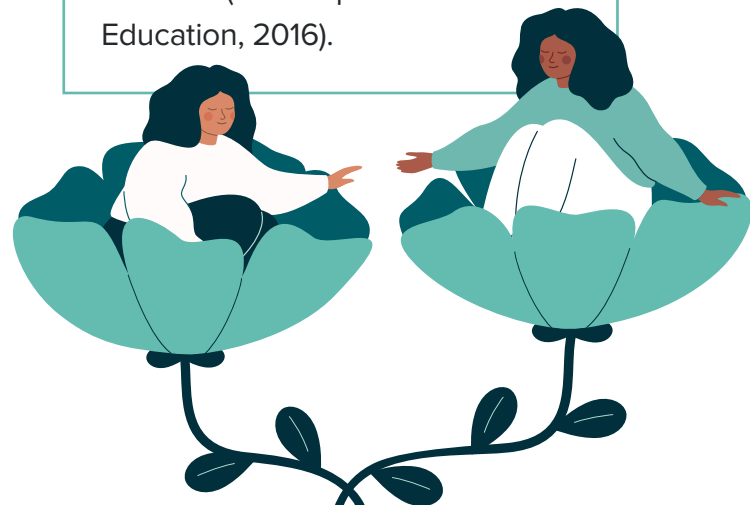
School districts across the United States are enrolling growing numbers of newly arrived immigrant students (Culbertson et al., 2021). Newcomers are incredibly diverse in country of origin, cultural identity, and language. Students identified as newcomers by school systems also reflect significant diversity in socioeconomic and legal status and may include refugees, asylees or asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, undocumented youth, and others.

Newcomer students and families bring a wealth of strengths and assets to recognize and draw upon in a school setting. Schools have the potential to create safety and belonging while supporting student and family access to effective educational experiences and community resources. Educators can foster equitable and collaborative relationships with families and students as they navigate new cultural and educational contexts, while honoring autonomy and family-based decision making.

This brief provides strategies and resources to help educators make systems-level changes to promote development, learning, and well-being among newcomer immigrant youth.

Defining newcomer youth

Newcomer is an umbrella term encompassing a heterogeneous population of immigrant children and youth who were born outside the U.S. and have recently arrived in the country. There is no federal definition of a newcomer, although the definition of “immigrant children and youth” in Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) specifies less than three full academic years of attendance in U.S. schools. Newcomers may or may not be identified as English learners and require additional language instruction and supports to succeed in English instructional contexts (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).



Systems-level strategies for supporting newcomer students

Create a safe and welcoming environment

District commitment to fostering welcoming environments for students and families is critical. School staff members can be trained to greet families warmly and respectfully. Registrars and office staff members can provide language identification posters or easily accessible handouts so families may indicate their translation or interpretation needs. Schools can post welcome messages and school information in multiple languages, displaying art, photos, or artifacts from cultures or countries represented in the school community. Schools can also ensure the availability of staff members who are trained in multilingual and multicultural communication.

To support a sense of safety for newcomer and undocumented immigrant youth and families, districts can train registrars and school administrative staff members about the information that may be collected or shared during registration. Schools cannot require a social security number for registration, to ask about students' or family members' immigration or documentation status, or to release information about student immigration status to anyone, including U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, without parental consent, judicial order, or subpoena.

Hire multilingual staff members and plan for interpreters

Districts must ensure equitable language access for students and caregivers, including oral and written communication in a parent or guardian's preferred language (U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Education, 2015). Youth should never be asked to interpret for their family or school staff members. Colorín Colorado's article "[Equity Through Language Access: Best Practices for Collaborating with Interpreters](#)" contains helpful information on language access requirements, equity considerations, and strategies for ensuring appropriate translation and interpretation.

Designate a newcomer coordinator or team

Districts with large newcomer populations may hire at least one newcomer liaison or coordinator, who ideally shares an immigrant or cultural background with student populations and is fluent in at least one of the home languages spoken among the immigrant student body. This individual can help establish newcomer-specific policies and procedures across the system, collaborate with school leaders to facilitate staff training, provide student referrals to external service providers and case management, and promote advocacy efforts.

Districts with limited resources or smaller newcomer student populations can consider a team-based approach. A team can help schools assign roles and responsibilities to meet various newcomer needs. This team may begin by conducting a newcomer needs assessment, which can help a district identify local needs and assets to inform the development of systems of support for newly arriving immigrant students.

Determine newcomer-specific screening procedures

Systematic collection and use of data is essential to promoting equitable educational experiences for newcomer students. Some groups of newcomers, particularly refugee and asylum-seeking youth, may arrive with a range of unidentified or unmet health needs that can impact learning, including injuries, infectious diseases, chronic health conditions, pregnancy, and traumatic stress symptoms. Schools can provide initial screenings and connections to appropriate school and community-based services.

In the absence of screening instruments available in the languages spoken by immigrant youth and families, school staff members can conduct student and/or family intake interviews. Such interviews should focus on building relationships with families and eliciting newcomer students' strengths and prior experiences while also seeking to understand their future goals. Data from initial screenings may not provide a complete representation of a given student's history, academic experience, or abilities. Therefore, ongoing screening and progress monitoring are important. Recommended universal screenings include:

- **Screen for basic needs.** School staff members can conduct a basic needs screening to determine whether the student is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and McKinney-Vento services. Upon enrollment, families should be notified of these services to ensure students are connected to appropriate supports.
- **Screen for health-related needs.** Families should be asked upon enrollment if their child has applied for public health insurance or other coverage and whether they have established primary care access. Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) equivalent coverage has been extended for some undocumented immigrant children under state replacement programs in several states. Refer to your state's health insurance website for additional information about coverage eligibility for immigrant children. If newcomer students or families have not yet applied for coverage or established primary care access, refer them to a safety net clinic or hospital near the district to establish care and/or have a well-child visit where they can also provide free support to families in signing up for public health insurance. For students with chronic health conditions or other significant health concerns, school social workers or other student support professionals may initially need to help coordinate care and/or make referrals to a community health worker.

- **Screen for social and emotional health.** Schools can screen all newcomer immigrant students for psychological well-being, trauma symptoms, and other mental health needs at school entry and on an ongoing basis. This task may be the responsibility of licensed or credentialed school-based mental health providers such as school social workers or school psychologists, if available. Screening may include:
 - Psychological strengths
 - Depression/anxiety symptoms
 - Exposure to traumatic events
 - Substance use symptoms
- **Screen for limited or interrupted formal education.** During the enrollment process, newcomer students and families are asked to share their educational backgrounds and histories through an interview. If students are found to have experienced interruptions to educational access they may need follow-up or ongoing support by an appropriate staff member. Newcomer students with limited or interrupted formal education may require extended support, personalized academic planning, and regular review of related needs.
- **Screen for disabilities.** All schools are required by federal law to ensure and document their compliance with the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This includes appropriate screening for disabilities (as indicated by documentation from prior schools/providers). For newcomers, the lack of prior documentation of a disability is not sufficient to exempt schools from their obligations to provide required services for students with disabilities.

If not already in place, districts should develop a data system for tracking universal screening results and community-based referrals. Such systems can help district and school personnel monitor ongoing student needs and support services.

Build relationships with community-based organizations to establish a robust community network

Newcomers, particularly refugee and asylum-seeking youth and families, arrive in the U.S. with unique and complex needs. Schools will not be able to meet all these needs but can serve as important hubs for cross-system leadership, collaboration, and access. School–community partnerships can be an effective way to meet newcomer families’ holistic needs in an accessible and streamlined manner. Establishing sustainable multisystem partnerships will require funding and time, but the foundational work to begin forging relationships with key partners can happen any time.

Ensuring a warm, welcoming, and supporting environment for immigrant and newcomer youth and their families at the school’s door supports them as they establish themselves in the U.S. Through development of systems and processes for screening for additional needs, schools can more effectively provide access to appropriate wraparound supports, resulting in greater readiness for learning.

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