



Partnering with Schools to Provide Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments for Refugee Students

This short information guide provides recommendations for refugee service providers (resettlement agency staff and others) on how to collaborate with local school systems to provide safe and inclusive learning environments for refugee students. It is intended for staff with all levels of experience in this area.

Hate and Bias Incidents

All students in the U.S. have the right to a safe, supportive, and inclusive school environment. However, hate and bias incidents in schools are pervasive. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) defines **hate and bias incidents** as actions—verbal, written, or physical—that target someone on the basis of identity or group membership.

A recent SPLC report analyzed 3,265 hate and bias incidents that took place in schools in the fall of 2018, as reported by educators. Of these incidents, **18% were directed towards immigrants**. The perpetrators went undisciplined in 57% of these

hate and bias incidents and in 90% of cases, administrators failed to denounce bias or reaffirm school values.¹ Such incidents are on the rise: FBI data show that hate crimes in schools and colleges increased by about 25% from 2016 to 2017.²

The SPLC recommends two courses of action to combat hate and bias: “To ensure students are safe from harm, educators must **take vigorous, proactive measures** to counter prejudice and to promote equity and inclusiveness. And they must **act swiftly and decisively to address all incidents of hate and bias** when they happen, with a model that emphasizes communication,

¹ Southern Poverty Law Center (2019). “Hate at School”. Retrieved from: <https://www.splcenter.org/20190502/hate-school>.

² U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Criminal Justice Information Services Division, “2017 Hate Crime Statistics,” Retrieved from: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2017>.

Program Spotlight: Kentucky Refugee Ministries – Family & Youth Services

Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM) [Family and Youth Services](#) programs partner with [Jefferson County Public Schools](#) in several ways to provide safe and inclusive learning environments for refugee students. For example, Kentucky Refugee Ministries provides **training** on resettlement-related topics to educators, both in the KRM office and in schools. When training takes place in schools, staff other than teachers, such as security guards, can also be included.

The partnership also includes **community-building** activities. In recent years, KRM has collaborated with Jefferson County Public Schools to develop the “In Project,” a program that pairs newly arrived refugee students with those who have been in the U.S. for longer. The program is based in two schools and focuses on team building, increasing self-esteem, and developing healthy relationships.

empathy, reconciliation, and support to those who are harmed.”³ Refugee service providers can partner with educators in both of these areas.

Proactive Measures

How can you proactively partner with school districts to promote safety and inclusiveness?

Training

Teachers, counselors, and other school staff are often unaware of the backgrounds of refugee students and how they might help refugee students feel welcome and safe. Consider offering trainings on these topics to educators.

Training efforts may be funded through Refugee School Impact Grant funding or through funding under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which includes funds for schools to train teachers on working with various populations of English Learners, including refugees. To access the latter type of training funds, resettlement agencies may consider registering as vendors with local school systems.

You can also share online training resources with educators, such as Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services (BRYCS)’s 70-minute e-learning course [Discrimination & Bullying of Refugee Youth](#). This course, designed for teachers, shares statistics

and stories on bullying and discrimination among diverse refugee youth, contextualized within a wider discussion on psychological and sociological concerns that this population may experience. It also shares best practices and recommendations for individuals, families, schools, and the wider community on meeting these challenges.

Above, the *Program Spotlight* box shares examples of training and community-building efforts implemented in a real program. Also see *Resources* at the end of this guide for additional training materials designed for both educators and refugee service providers.

Communicating with Families

Refugee service providers are crucial partners of school districts in reaching refugee families. Resettlement agencies often have the trust of families and community leaders as well as the language capacity needed for communication.

Refugee service providers can collaborate with school district staff (particularly school family and community engagement departments) to reassure students and families that schools are safe places and that every student has a right to a safe, supportive, and inclusive school environment. They can also disseminate information to students and families on what to do in the case of bullying, bias incidents, or hate incidents.

³ Southern Poverty Law Center, 5.

Program Spotlight: Refugee Center & Community School at Reynolds Middle School

The [Refugee Center & Community School at Reynolds Middle School](#) (RCCSR) in Lancaster, PA may be the only community school in the U.S. with a focus on refugees. A [community school](#) is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources.

RCCSR is led by [Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13 \(IU13\) Community Education](#) and engages families and community members in opportunities for education, cultural integration, and wellness. Through its strategic community partnerships, RCCSR works within the School District of Lancaster to engage refugee and immigrant families in their children's education and to build relationships between school staff, community members, and newly arrived families.

RCCSR programming includes cultural navigation, extended day programming for students, health services, parent workshops, ESL and citizenship classes, and more.

Community Building

Many schools, particularly community schools,⁴ use their buildings as places for community building where students and families from all walks of life can get to know one another.

As immigrant and refugee students integrate into their new communities and countries, it is critical that they can access pro-social activities that bring together American-born students and families with immigrant and refugee students and families.

Service providers can partner with schools to offer valuable insight into the types of community-building activities and initiatives that could work well for particular populations.

For specific ideas, see the *Program Spotlight* box at left, which describes real examples of community-building activities. Resettlement agency staff can seek out school districts' family and community engagement staff as partners for these efforts.

Issuing Public Statements

It is important that school districts set a welcoming tone from the top down. A number of school districts have issued public statements on their support for immigrant and refugee students and families. Examples include [Baltimore City Schools](#), [Des Moines Public Schools](#), and [Portland Public Schools](#). Resettlement agencies can partner with school districts to release joint statements or contribute to those released by school districts.

Responding to Incidents

Developing proactive partnerships between schools and resettlement agencies is only one step towards safe and inclusive learning environments for refugee students. It's also important to consider how you can partner with school districts to respond to incidents of bullying, harassment, hate, and bias.

Formally Report Incidents

Most states require school districts to put in place policies and procedures for reporting bullying and harassment, including timelines for investigating such reports. Incidents can typically be reported through a form, either on paper or online on the school's website.

Translated forms may be lacking, but examples can be found from the [State of Maine Department of Education](#), which provides its reporting form in eight languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese), and

⁴ The Coalition for Community Schools describes community schools as those that "bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities." Using public schools as hubs, they serve as centers of the community and are open to the community all day, every day, including on evenings and weekends. For more information, see: www.communityschools.org.

from [Guilford County Schools in Greensboro, NC](#), which provides its form in five languages (Arabic, Burmese, English, French and Spanish).

School districts are required to provide parents with interpretation assistance to fill out these forms, if needed. But if they do not and if the matter is time-sensitive, refugee service providers may help parents complete the forms.

Always remember: school districts cannot address bullying and harassment if they do not know it is happening! For a minor incident, it may be appropriate to help the refugee student and parent speak informally with a teacher or school counselor. In most cases, however, it is advised that you involve an administrator and formally report the incident.

Follow Up with School Administrators

Refugee service providers should learn their local school districts' timelines for investigating reports of bullying and harassment. If this timeline is not clearly marked online, try checking student code of conduct documentation, student handbooks, or similar resources.

After reporting an incident, if you or the parent do not hear back from a school administrator within the allowable number of days, follow up with a phone call. If you do not hear back from the school principal, call the school district's central office and ask to speak with whoever is in charge of bullying complaints. If you still do not hear back from anyone, ask to speak with someone in the Superintendent's office.

The *Case Study* box at right explores the fictional case of a young Congolese client experiencing bullying. It provides an example of how resettlement agency staff might support the process of formally reporting incidents and following up with school administrators.

Afterwards

If a student (or students) are found to have engaged in bullying or harassment, they typically receive the consequences outlined in the district's student handbook, which usually vary based on the degree of the offense.

Case Study: Responding to Incidents

Imagine Marie is a Congolese client who has been in the U.S. for three months. Not long after she starts a job at a local restaurant, Marie begins to miss shifts. Her case manager speaks with Marie and finds out that she has been needing to stay home with her eight-year-old daughter, Aline, who has been crying and begging not to go to school. After discussing further with Marie, the case manager learns that Aline's classmates are making fun of her clothes and accent and telling her to go back to Africa.

The case manager meets with Marie and Aline to discuss what's been happening. They decide to formally report the incidents to the school. The case manager helps Marie fill out the form on the school district's website where parents can report bullying and harassment.

A few days later, the school principal calls Marie without an interpreter. Marie doesn't understand what the principal says. The case manager follows up with the principal and advocates for Marie to have an in-person meeting with the principal with an interpreter present. At this meeting, the case manager will encourage the school not only to respond to the specific incident, but to explore the underlying cause of the conflict, with the goal that Aline feels safe and welcome in her school going forward.

This case study is fictional.

Some districts utilize **restorative practices** or **restorative justice**.⁵ These practices involve bringing together the person who was harmed with the person who did the harm, holding offenders accountable, and repairing the harm that was caused, with the goal of preventing similar actions in the future. Note that this approach is the opposite of the “zero tolerance” policies of recent decades where schools simply suspended bullies, who then returned to school without the underlying cause of the conflict ever addressed.

Refugee service providers may assist with restorative practices in several ways. For example, they may engage by offering safe spaces for students and families to meet during the restorative justice process; by explaining the concept of restorative practices to refugee families and community leaders, in order to encourage their participation; or by participating in the actual meetings (typically known as restorative conferences).

Conclusion

With the rise in hate and bias incidents in schools, including those directed at immigrants and refugees, it is crucial that refugee service providers partner with school districts to support safe and inclusive environments for refugee students and families. This requires both taking proactive measures and responding to incidents in a way that ensures students are held accountable and steps are taken to prevent future incidents.

Resources

[Discrimination & Bullying of Refugee Youth](#) – This 70-minute online course was developed by Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services (BRYCS). It is recommended for teachers, social workers, counselors, psychologists, and other human services and behavioral health professionals seeking knowledge about bullying and discrimination among diverse refugee youth.


[Muslim Refugee Youth: Stories & Strategies Addressing Discrimination & Bullying](#) – This post was written by BRYCS and International Cultural Center (ICC). It shares stories, statistics, and recommendations for supporting refugee students.

[Refugee and Immigrant Youth and Bullying: Frequently Asked Questions](#) – This resource from BRYCS is part of a toolkit for teachers and school personnel. The six-part toolkit aims to facilitate information-sharing among school personnel and others working with refugee children in schools.

[Creating a Refuge from Bullying](#) – This five-minute video was developed by the African Community Center and Mind’s Eye Productions.

[Anti-Bullying Instructional Resources](#) – This toolkit was developed by the New York Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance. It contains background information on refugees and bullying, guidance on possible warning signs, an explanation of when bullying may be a civil rights violation, and several handouts for use with refugee students.

[National Bullying Prevention Center](#) – This Pacer Center site offers bullying prevention resources including curricula, activities, videos, stories, campaign materials, and more. These resources include some materials in [Spanish](#) and [Somali](#).



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

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⁵ For more information, see: Mthethwa-Sommers, S. & Kisiara, O. (2015). Listening to Students from Refugee Backgrounds: Lessons for Education Professionals. *Perspectives on Urban Education* (12) (1). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1056671.pdf>.