

# Educational Supports and Experiences in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program

Findings from a Descriptive Study | March 2021

OPRE Report 2021-37

# Educational Supports and Experiences in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program: Findings from a Descriptive Study

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## Overview

The Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) Program serves refugees and other eligible youth within the United States who do not have a parent or relative available to care for them. Entering the program with a variety of needs and long-term goals, URM youth all rely on their URM provider and local education system to gain the skills, support networks, and credentials they need in pursuit of self-sufficiency. While current research points to the importance of education for vulnerable populations including refugees, immigrants, and youth in foster care, there are gaps in the field's understanding on how to best support URM youth, specifically in education settings. There is little research documenting educational experiences and outcomes of youth served through the URM Program, including experiences of URM youth in school settings, services provided to the youth, and challenges and successes in providing these services.

This report summarizes findings related to education services and experiences in educational settings from the Descriptive Study of the URM Program, as understood from the perspectives of service providers, foster parents, and URM youth. These findings are relevant to those involved in operating the URM Program and others who serve youth who are recent immigrants, in the foster care system, or youth who have experienced disruptions to their formal education.

Throughout this study, the research team consulted with federal staff, URM programs, academic researchers, and national refugee resettlement agencies to identify topics and questions of high importance related to serving URM youth. All stakeholders pointed to education services as a high priority in the field, as these services impact youth's ability to gain English language skills, pursue employment, and integrate into local communities.

### Key Findings

- **Youth enter the URM Program with a variety of past educational experiences and high levels of need.** The most common and pressing needs include English Language Learning (ELL) services and support navigating the structure and rules of U.S. schools. Many URM youth face challenges graduating high school before aging out of eligibility for public high school in their state.
- **Education is a priority for many URM youth, but some prioritize employment instead.** URM case managers encourage and support youth in working toward long-term education and career goals. URM program staff, community partners, and foster parents described URM youth as highly motivated and resilient in their pursuit of education. However, some URM youth prioritize employment over school because they are eager to provide financial support to family in their home countries.

## *Key Findings, Continued*

- **Public schools vary in their ability to tailor services to URM youth.** All public schools offer some form of ELL services to students who need them, but the quality of ELL programs and capacity for additional supportive services varies throughout communities and districts. Some URM youth enroll in schools that offer newcomer programs, which are designed to support students who have recently immigrated to the United States and may have needs beyond language proficiency. URM case managers said that the quality of ELL supports is one of the most important factors they consider when selecting schools for URM youth to attend.
- **Many URM youth reported positive social experiences in school.** Across sites visited by the research team, URM youth described school environments as welcoming and supportive. URM youth said they enjoyed many aspects of school, including making friends and participating in extracurricular activities and sports.
- **URM case managers employ creative solutions that leverage local resources and URM youth's strengths.** URM programs identified a number of promising approaches for providing tailored education services to URM youth, including hiring staff who share lived experience and languages with URM youth, providing opportunities for URM youth to mentor and socialize with others who share similar experiences, and enlisting support from foster parents and community-based organizations.

## **Methods**

The report draws from qualitative data collected through site visits to six URM programs, in which the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with URM program staff and community partners and focus groups with URM youth and URM foster parents. This report also incorporates findings from our analysis of administrative data and surveys of URM program directors, State Refugee Coordinators, and child welfare administrators.

# 1. Introduction

The Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) Program serves refugees and other eligible youth within the United States who do not have a parent or relative available to care for them. URM youth are a diverse group, entering the Program from a wide range of countries, speaking a variety of languages, and bringing a diverse array of experiences and trauma. URM youth also have a variety of long-term goals and rely on their URM provider and local education system to gain the skills, support networks, and credentials they need in pursuit of self-sufficiency. Existing research points to the importance of education for vulnerable populations whose needs overlap with those of URM youth, including refugees, immigrants, and youth in foster care. However, there is a gap in the field's understanding of how to best support URM youth specifically in education settings. To contribute to addressing this research gap, this report describes educational experiences and outcomes of youth served through the URM Program, including experiences of URM youth in school settings, services provided to the youth, and challenges and successes in providing these services. These findings are relevant to programs serving URM youth in education settings and those working with students who may have similar needs, including English Language Learners (ELLs) and students who have experienced disruptions in formal education.

This report is one of many publications from the Descriptive Study of the URM Program. Throughout this study, the research team consulted with federal staff, URM programs, academic researchers, and national refugee resettlement agencies to identify topics and questions of high importance related to serving URM youth. All stakeholders pointed to education services as a priority in the field, as the services impact youth's ability to gain English language skills, pursue employment, and integrate into local communities.

## 1.A. About the URM Program

The URM Program is funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The URM Program has served more than 13,000 minors since the federal program was founded in 1980. As of 2020, there were 22 local URM provider agencies in 15 states throughout the country, some operating in multiple locations throughout their state. Local providers operate URM programs<sup>1</sup> and are expected to provide the same range of services to URM youth as provided to youth in the domestic foster care system in the state. URM programs provide out-of-home placements (e.g., foster care, group homes) and other child welfare services to promote youth's well-being. URM programs also include services focused on integrating the youth into their new communities while preserving the youth's ethnic and religious heritage.

### About the Descriptive Study of the URM Program

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) awarded MEF Associates and its subcontractor, Child Trends, a contract to conduct a descriptive study of the URM Program to better understand the range of child welfare services and benefits provided through the URM Program. Please see our [study overview](#) for more information on the study, including the study's research questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this report uses "URM Program" with an uppercase "P" to denote the federally administered program. It uses "URM program" with a lowercase "p" to denote local providers of services to youth in the URM Program.

## 1.B. Youth in the URM Program

Youth can enter the URM Program through multiple pathways. Many URM youth come from abroad, where the U.S. State Department identifies youth who are refugees who are under 18, and unaccompanied (i.e., without an adult to care for them). These youth are placed in the URM Program once they are resettled in the United States. Others are identified by ORR after arrival in the United States; these youth are often first identified as unaccompanied alien children (UACs) and

### URM youth are a diverse group



50+ Countries of origin  
100+ Ethnicities  
80+ Languages spoken

referred to the URM Program after an eligibility determination. Currently, eligible youth include refugees, asylees, victims of trafficking, Cuban and Haitian entrants, youth with Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) classification, and youth with U-status.<sup>2</sup> The majority of youth currently in the URM Program are refugees. The next-largest group is youth with SIJ classification.

Of youth who entered the URM Program from Fiscal Year 2014 to Fiscal Year 2018, over half entered the URM Program at age 17. The age distribution of youth in the URM Program is heavily skewed toward older youth, which means that the majority of education providers serving URM youth are high schools. Regardless of the age at which youth enter the URM Program, they can receive services including foster placement until they reach the age of emancipation in their state (typically age 21), and may be eligible to receive services to support the transition to adulthood and other education/training benefits beyond (i.e., up to age 23 or 26).

Data analysis and interviews with URM case managers confirm that URM youth tend to graduate later than average high school students and may require more years in school to progress through ELL classes and meet other graduation requirements. According to data on URM youth who entered the URM Program from FY 2014 to FY 2018, nearly 30 percent of the youth who were 20 years old were still in high school.

## 1.C. Data sources and methods

To understand how the implementation of these services and youth's experiences differ from program to program, the study utilized three research components: (1) surveys of URM Program Directors, State Refugee Coordinators, and child welfare administrators; (2) analysis of existing program data from ORR; and (3) site visits to six URM programs.

This report relies heavily on qualitative data collected on site visits to six URM programs, selected by the research team and ACF to highlight promising practices and services available to URM youth across diverse programs. During each site visit, the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with URM program staff, community partners, and education service providers. The research team also facilitated focus groups with URM youth and URM foster parents on their experiences with the URM program. While the six selected sites are not representative of all URM

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<sup>2</sup> There were no U-status recipients in the URM Program at the time of data collection for this study. U-status may be granted to victims of crimes who have suffered abuse while in the United States and who are willing to assist in the investigation or prosecution of the criminal activity.

programs, the site visits provided perspectives on the variety of experiences and challenges URM youth and the programs that serve them face in relation to education.

The URM Program does not currently track long-term education outcomes, largely because local URM providers do not have systems to track youth after they exit the URM program. URM providers are required to attempt to complete follow-up reports until youth reach the age of 21, which does not allow enough time to observe outcomes such as postsecondary education completion and employment. Therefore, this report does not present any such outcome findings.

### URM programs visited by the research team



- Catholic Charities Community Services (Phoenix, AZ)
- Crittenton Services for Children and Families (Fullerton, CA)
- Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains (Denver, CO)
- Bethany Christian Services (Grand Rapids, MI)
- Commonwealth Catholic Charities (Richmond, VA)
- Lutheran Community Services Northwest (Seattle, WA)

## 2. Educational characteristics of URM youth

As a diverse group, URM youth enter the URM Program with a wide range of prior experiences, needs, and goals. URM programs accommodate this diversity through recognizing youth’s specific circumstances and tailoring services to the extent possible. This section provides an overview of URM youth’s educational backgrounds, needs, and strengths, as described in interviews with URM program case managers and leadership, surveys of program directors, and reported through administrative program data.

### 2.A. Education backgrounds

**URM youth enter the program with an array of past educational experiences and levels of literacy, numeracy, and language, ranging from no formal education to high school level education.** Due to conditions in their home countries or the nature of their journey to the United States, many URM youth stop attending school at young ages, experience disruptions in formal education, and may not be literate in their native language(s). A few speak languages that are not traditionally written.

Although there is extreme variation in educational backgrounds, URM program provider staff described some patterns based on youth’s pathways into the URM program. Specifically, staff described differences between refugee youth resettled directly from overseas and youth who enter the United States as UACs and qualify for the URM program as SIJs, asylees, victims of trafficking, or Cuban/Haitian entrants.

In the six URM programs visited, staff said that many refugees’ most recent access to education was in the refugee camps or host communities they stayed in prior to entering the URM program. The quality of these services and duration of youth’s access varied substantially. Some may have received formal or non-formal education services from programs coordinated through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), international nongovernmental organizations, or local nonprofits and governments. While some youth attended school in their home countries, others

arrive in the United States without any formal education experience beyond what they receive at refugee camps or in host communities.

URM staff described UAC youth as having different education experiences than refugees, as many tend to stop attending school at a young age and do not access education during their migration to the United States. There are a variety of reasons they may have stopped attending school, including safety concerns due to community violence, as well as low family incomes that make it difficult to pay school fees and may push youth into the workforce at young ages. However, after arriving in the United States and while awaiting eligibility determination for the URM Program, these youth often spend time in ORR care facilities, which are required to provide education services. URM staff said that UACs who transition to the URM program may have learned some English while in ORR custody, but tend to have minimal experience with formal education in their home countries.

## *2.B. URM youth strengths and needs*

Given their experiences, **URM youth have distinct needs that affect their academic performance and experience in schools.** At the same time, URM program staff and education partners said that URM youth bring exceptional strength and motivation to pursue their goals in the U.S. Schools and community-based organizations play an important role in leveraging these strengths to help URM youth succeed in educational settings and promote their well-being more broadly.

During site visits, interviewees described youth as **resilient, goal-driven, and highly motivated to pursue education.** School staff across sites described URM youth as hard working and active members of school communities. One school administrator called URM youth “model students.” URM program staff said some youth are self-motivated to pursue education to become independent and self-sufficient, in line with what they described as the “American Dream.” Other youth—particularly those who enter the United States as UACs—were often described as more motivated to begin employment than to pursue education, as many youth want to earn money to support families in their home countries.

**However, URM youth also have acute needs,** some of which overlap with needs of other student groups (e.g., recent immigrants, youth in foster care), while others are more distinct and often tied to traumatic migration experiences. All six URM programs reported a high prevalence of mental health needs among URM youth, including post-traumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and depression.<sup>3</sup> These needs impact URM youth’s ability to learn and focus in school, build relationships with teachers and peers, and pursue long-term goals. In addition, after experiencing disruptions in education and arriving with limited proficiency in English, URM youth tend to require high levels of support to gain English language and literacy skills. To address these needs, URM program staff work intensively with youth through case management and seek to connect youth with supportive educational services.

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<sup>3</sup> For more detail on the Descriptive Study of the URM Program’s findings about youth’s mental health needs, see “Youth Mental Health in the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program” available on the OPRE website: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>.

### 3. Education placement practices in the URM program

URM programs weigh multiple considerations when determining which available education settings will be best for each youth. Programs also work with schools to place URM youth in appropriate grade levels. **The small size of the URM population means that communities rarely create services that specifically target URM youth, leading URM programs to leverage services designed for populations with similar needs to those of URM youth**, including ELLs and recent immigrants (“newcomers”). This section discusses how local URM programs navigate local school options to connect URM youth with education services.

URM programs and partners have found numerous ways to maneuver these challenges that could be of value to those supporting recent immigrants and ELLs more broadly. Some programs are able to enroll URM youth in schools with other students who share similar experiences, while others create networks of community partnerships to meet the distinct needs of URM youth.

#### Learn the Terms

**English Language Learner (ELL):** A student who is not fluent in English.

**Newcomer:** A student who has recently immigrated to or arrived in the United States.

**Disrupted formal education:** Extended gaps in schooling or other forms of education. For URM youth, these gaps are often a result of leaving school at a young age or lacking access to school during their journeys to the United States.

#### *3.A. Placing URM youth in educational settings*

URM programs operate in communities of varying sizes throughout the United States, with wide spectrums of educational options and school choice policies. Across URM programs, school enrollment options are often based on the local district in which the URM youth live with foster families or in group homes. URM programs aim to connect URM youth with programs that are most able to tailor services to similar populations, such as ELLs, refugees who are resettled in the United States with families, and youth in the foster care system.

For youth’s initial placement into a school, URM case managers select the most appropriate local option for each youth, often in partnership with URM foster parents. These teams work quickly and sometimes prior to youth’s entry to make educational plans and ensure URM youth are enrolled in school as soon as possible after their entry into the URM program. For later education placement decisions, such as transferring schools or pursuing postsecondary education, URM case managers discuss education goals and preferences with youth. However, initial school placement decisions usually rely on case managers’ assessment of best fit, based on the information they have about each youth and the options available in their area.

#### *3.B. Prioritizing school diversity and ELL language learning supports*

In multiple sites, URM staff said they felt that URM youth were more successful in racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse schools than in predominantly white and native English-speaking schools. In interviews, staff in multiple sites said that more diverse schools tend to have more services for youth with language and learning needs, as well as opportunities for socializing with students of similar cultures and religions. In addition, program staff said that URM youth placed in wealthy areas sometimes experience additional anxiety or disorientation when they encounter peers

with expensive cars, laptops, and phones. One URM program staff member said, “kids thrive learning from peers, so it helps to have a lot of ELL peers.”

**In multiple sites visited, URM program staff said that when school choice policies allow, they prioritize the quality of ELL services and racial diversity of a school’s student body over other factors,** such as school ranking or the proximity of a school to a youth’s foster family. For example, youth in the URM program run by Catholic Charities Community Services in Phoenix are often placed in large, diverse public high schools with larger ELL programs, even if youth live closer to other schools. Some youth may have access to charter schools or more highly ranked public schools, but staff said these schools are typically located in less diverse communities with small populations of ELLs and have less infrastructure to support URM youth. Although these schools may provide access to greater resources, staff said that URM youth tend to struggle to take advantage of the resources unless they have prior experience with formal schooling and skills in math, literacy, and technology. Staff said that it is not fair to label these schools as unfriendly to refugees; rather, they are less equipped to support them than schools more familiar with ELLs.

### *3.C. Challenges to finding optimal schools*

Some school districts have stricter policies on school choice, which means URM youth are more likely to attend the school closest to where they live. **These limits to school choice can make it more challenging for URM youth to access schools with the greatest ability to tailor services to their needs.** For example, one URM program discussed tradeoffs faced by URM youth in a group home located in a less racially and linguistically diverse school district. While youth in the group home can attend an alternative high school and postsecondary education programs outside of the area, they must move to a living arrangement in another district if they wish to attend a different traditional public high school. In these cases, URM case managers must work with URM youth to balance their priorities.

These challenges also arise in URM programs that place youth in more rural settings, which inherently have fewer educational options. Youth in the URM program run by Lutheran Family Services of the Rocky Mountains may live with foster families within Denver proper and throughout more rural surrounding counties. URM youth who live in outlying counties are limited to the schools closest to their foster homes, which tend to be smaller and less racially and linguistically diverse compared to those in the Denver school district, which is under a consent decree to improve ELL instruction and support for students.<sup>4</sup> Some students seeking stronger ELL supports opt to travel far distances within the Denver public school district to access specialized programs offered by a subset of public schools.

### *3.D. Grade-level placement*

Most schools use a combination of placement tests and students’ records to determine an appropriate grade-level and ELL-level placement when a URM youth enrolls. Most schools visited by the research team determine ELL placement using the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Screener, a common assessment used in many states.

If URM youth have access to transcripts from their country of origin or refugee camp, schools may translate them and factor prior academic experience into grade-level placements. URM program staff

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<sup>4</sup> In 2012, a U.S. District Court ordered Denver Public Schools to improve services for ELL students through providing a combination of English language development, transitional native language instruction, and supported English content instruction, based on the number of ELL students in each school (Consent Decree, 2012).

said that schools with higher populations of refugee and immigrant students tend to have stronger interpretation services and a higher capacity to incorporate foreign documentation into class placement decisions. However, many URM youth do not have transcripts to document prior education, either because they have not attended formal school in many years or because their transcripts are inaccessible. The few URM youth who have transcripts may receive some school credit or may be placed in higher level math classes, even if their English proficiency is low. URM youth are often exempt from taking foreign language classes.

## 4. Experiences of URM youth in high schools

This section explores URM youth’s academic and social experiences in educational settings. Findings focus heavily on the six URM programs visited by the research team, highlighting insights from focus groups with URM youth and foster parents, as well as interviews with URM program staff and education providers. While academic and social experiences vary substantially for youth within and across URM programs, common challenges and insights emerged that illustrate the unique experiences URM youth have in U.S. schools. These offer lessons and ideas for individuals and programs working with students who have recently immigrated to the United States or who have experienced disruptions in formal education.

### 4.A. Adjusting to school

Given requirements to enroll in and begin school shortly after entering the URM program, youth must quickly learn to navigate their local school setting. URM youth across all sites visited discussed challenges with learning English, understanding school structure and rules, and attending school while still acclimating to life in the United States. Foster parents and URM program staff described similar challenges but also pointed to how quickly and adeptly many URM youth gain their bearings and thrive in school.

#### 4.A.1. English Language Learning

English language acquisition emerged in nearly every interview with staff and URM youth as a key challenge for URM youth, who are often eager to transition into mainstream classes. Learning English has implications for not only how quickly youth graduate and how well they perform in school but also how they make friends, understand rules, and form relationships with teachers.

**Many URM youth said English was the most challenging aspect of school but also the most important.** Even after progressing out of ELL classes, URM youth said they find it difficult when students and teachers speak quickly and use unfamiliar vocabulary. One youth said, “It’s so difficult because of the language... [teachers] make it hard for adults who speak English. For us, who are learning English, it becomes two times harder.” Even URM youth who spoke English in their home countries or learned some English before entering the URM Program usually did not have academic English proficiency, which typically takes many years to develop.

However, a few URM youth pointed to academic areas that were not as inhibited by limited English proficiency. For example, some youth said they enjoyed math because they



“It’s so difficult because of the language... [Teachers] make it hard for adults who speak English. For us, who are learning English, it becomes two times harder.”

– URM youth

could understand the logic of math problems even if they did not have the vocabulary to discuss mathematical concepts in English.

#### 4.A.2. School structure

URM youth also discussed adjusting to the structure, routines, and rules of school. Most said that they felt comfortable after a couple of months, but at first they found it challenging to understand expectations and norms. URM staff and foster parents both attributed some challenges to the fact that some URM youth enter the program after spending many years without structure or guidance. One foster parent said, “A lot have been on their own since they were 10 years old. Then they come



“They never went to school – don't even know how to hold a pen, depending on which culture they come from.... They need a lot of guidance – like the schools to talk to the teachers, and explain.”

– URM foster parent

into a home and have to go to school, with a structured school day, so not all of them like to be in school.”

Multiple foster parents said the initial adjustment to school is most challenging for youth with no formal education experience and that school staff play a crucial role in introducing students to the daily routines and practices of being at school. Describing these youth, one foster parent said: “They never went to school—don’t even know how to hold a pen, depending on which culture they come from... They

need a lot of guidance—like the schools to talk to the teachers and explain.”

URM youth also discussed early challenges in understanding expectations and routines. For example, one URM youth described not knowing what to do when a teacher handed her a piece of paper for homework—she took it home, and brought it back the next day, still blank.

#### 4.A.3. Life skills

Beyond academic skills, education partners discussed goals to holistically provide youth with skills that will serve them after they leave school. These include managing one’s emotional reactions (i.e., emotional regulation), goal setting, and building relationships with mentors and peers to support one’s emotional well-being.

One focus group of URM foster parents defined success for URM youth as going beyond simply completing high school or postsecondary education. Rather, youth should also develop sufficient social networks, feel supported by a community, and hone the skills needed to live on their own. While URM programs provide youth with support in these areas, foster parents said that school should represent yet another source of preparation for life after the URM program. For example, youth should learn how to seek help when struggling in school and how to work with peers.



“A lot have been on their own since they were 10 years old. Then they come into a home and have to go to school, with a structured school day, so not all of them like to be in school.”

– URM foster parent

## 4.B. Integrating into school communities

In interviews, URM program staff, foster parents, and youth generally described school communities as welcoming and open to URM youth, and to refugee populations more broadly. While the characteristics of students vary drastically between schools in different communities throughout the country, **URM youth across all six programs visited had positive perceptions of school staff and peers and did not report bullying or discrimination as pressing issues.** URM programs and education partners generally described URM youth as active and engaged in school communities.

URM youth said that even though school may be challenging academically, they enjoy making friends and participating in school activities. In Fullerton, California, an administrator from an



“Learn English. Learn about pop culture. Make American friends—white, black, American-Asian, whatever. That’s how you blend in; I feel like it’s easier that way, at least it was for me.”

– URM youth,  
on advice to offer future URM youth

alternative high school serving a handful of URM youth described URM youth as motivated, hard-working, and often quick to bond with other students, many of whom have also faced trauma and other challenges, including disruptions in formal education.

When asked what advice he would offer to youth who are new to the URM program, one URM youth said it is most important to: “Learn English. Learn about pop culture. Make American friends—white, black, American-Asian, whatever. That’s how you blend in; I feel like it’s easier that way, at least it was for me.”

In multiple schools, staff described ways in which URM youth have taken advantage of opportunities to take on leadership roles. For example, Wyoming High School, a school attended by youth in the Bethany Christian Services URM program, has a program that honors students for having strong character, based on factors like being kind, compassionate, and gracious. Multiple URM youth have won the award over the past few years. In addition, staff from multiple schools said URM youth often step up to mentor newcomers and support other students in the school community. Education partners and URM program staff both said URM youth often show newer URM youth “the ropes” of school and develop social groups.

### 4.B.1. Social experiences

URM program staff and education partners pointed out that some challenges to integrating URM youth into mainstream classes are related to social factors. **Age and maturity differences were most often cited as a source of discomfort and challenge for URM youth.** Although most URM youth first enroll in school at age 16 or 17, many are placed in classes with 14- and 15-year-olds. Combined with URM youth’s lived experiences and often high levels of maturity, finding social connections can be challenging. Further, the definition of “child” differs among countries, cultures, and socioeconomic status for incoming URM youth (Rogoff, 2003). Unlike their classmates, URM youth may not consider themselves “youth” at all.

**Some URM youth also described initial discomfort related to the lack of racial and cultural diversity of their schools.** In multiple focus groups, URM youth discussed feeling uncomfortable as the only black students in primarily white or Latino schools. One foster parent from a suburban area expressed concerns about her foster daughter, who is the only student who wears a hijab at her predominantly Christian school. URM program staff said that these experiences influence their efforts to enroll URM youth in more diverse schools when possible. For example, one URM case

## Call for research: Relationships & Networks



Stakeholders expressed interest in how URM youth's relationships with foster families, peers in group homes, and biological families impact their academic success. These relationships contribute to development, experiences in school, and social capital that could impact longer term outcomes and well-being.

manager said attending diverse schools can reduce feelings of standing out among the student body, but in general integration in schools just takes time.

For URM youth who do attend schools with large populations of students from their same culture or country, there may be opportunities to connect with youth who share similar experiences and traditions. One youth from Eritrea said that his social circle at school was comprised primarily of other Eritrean and East African students. He was grateful that his

foster parents spoke only English, because he was able to speak Amharic with his friends at school and practice English at home. In another example, Crittenton Family Services in Fullerton, a program comprised primarily of former UACs from Central America, often refers youth to a local alternative high school attended by many immigrants from Central America. Staff said that youth often enjoy becoming friends with classmates who speak Spanish, share cultural and religious values, and may share similar immigration experiences.

While lack of racial and linguistic diversity was primarily described as a concern or challenge, some URM youth pointed to benefits of these types of settings. For example, youth may be quicker to learn English and become familiar with U.S. culture due to increased exposure.

## 5. Education services for URM youth

This section describes the most common types of schools that URM youth in the study enroll in, as well as how URM programs work with those schools and other education partners to help youth meet their educational goals. **As most youth arrive in the URM program at age 16 or 17, the majority initially attend high school.** Starting school this late puts many URM youth at risk of aging out of eligibility for traditional public schools and/or the URM program before completing high school graduation requirements. Understanding how URM programs and partners respond to this risk may be relevant to others serving youth with disrupted educational experiences and English learning needs.

Across site visits and in the survey, URM program staff described educational attainment as a top priority for youth. To help youth work toward these goals, URM case managers aim to support youth in graduating high school while they can still access supports through the URM program. Students who do not obtain a high school diploma by the time they reach their state's maximum age of eligibility must pursue education services outside of high school, such as a GED or high school equivalency programs offered online, at community colleges, or at other community agencies.

### 5.A. How URM programs communicate and collaborate with schools

Many URM program staff said they aim to work with schools directly to check students' grades and attendance records to monitor their educational progress. In a few cases, URM program staff mentioned challenges to communicating with schools, setting up supports and accommodations to meet URM youth's needs, and accessing education information for students. URM case managers and foster parents use direct outreach to schools to navigate these challenges and support youth.

**URM program staff described strong school partners as those with staff who proactively reach out to the URM program and take initiative to learn about the specific needs of URM youth.** URM program staff said that it is also easier to work with schools whose staff are familiar with processes for placing students arriving from other countries (translating transcripts, placement tests, etc.) and provide tailored supports such as connecting URM youth with aides in mainstream classes and accommodations for religious practices. However, not all schools are able to provide this level of support or understanding, especially those who do not distinguish between URM youth and other populations of ELLs. While their needs may overlap, URM youth have needs that may be different from other ELL students, such as disruptions in formal education, frequent appointments with service providers and legal partners, and accommodations for religious practices.

Some URM youth need additional or specialized academic support, and URM programs often work with school staff to help youth on a case by case basis. In Phoenix, one URM program staff member discussed leveraging resources for students with special needs, such as 504 plans, which are part of a federal mandate for public schools to provide accommodations for students with disabilities. For cases that qualify, the URM case manager uses 504 plans to request specific accommodations and supports for URM youth (e.g., physical classroom modifications, access to course materials in different formats or settings).

### *Practice Highlight: Cultural Liaisons*

Lighthouse Academy in Grand Rapids, MI is a school that employs Cultural Liaisons to support their students. Cultural Liaisons are part-time staff who speak the same language and have similar experiences as their students. Lighthouse Academy's first Liaison, who was hired in 2019, is from Uganda and speaks Swahili and another regional language. School staff described the Liaison as a "great bridge," able to connect with students in a way that the other school staff had been unable to. Staff said that once the students get comfortable with the staff, they call the Liaison with questions about things ranging from cultural norms to car insurance. Lighthouse hoped to add more staff who speak Spanish, Rohingya, and Tigrinya in 2020.

In addition to case managers, foster parents play a critical role in building relationships with schools and supporting youth's academic progress. URM foster parents said support from URM case managers is key because it can be difficult to know how to navigate educational services and supports for URM youth alone. In a focus group, one foster parent said that to ensure schools serve each URM youth to the highest degree possible, "You have to advocate, advocate, advocate."

In interviews, very few URM programs discussed providing training to local education partners about the URM population. More often, URM programs described schools providing training and professional development that is relevant

but not specific to URM youth, such as service strategies for ELLs and students who have experienced trauma. For example, one school serving youth in the Bethany Christian Services URM program trains all staff in in trauma-informed practices and offers optional trainings specific to refugee youth.

Teachers may also receive a variety of trainings from their districts, which can impact their attitudes and approaches to instruction for students with needs akin to those of URM youth (e.g., language needs, histories of trauma). While previous research points to the importance of teacher attitudes and beliefs on student's educational outcomes (Weinstein, 2002), there are gaps in research on how these factors impact URM youth specifically. Throughout the study, stakeholders pointed to teacher training and preparation as a research priority.

## 5.B. Traditional public high schools

In the six sites the research team visited, URM youth most often attended traditional public schools. Characteristics vary among schools attended by URM youth, often reflecting the demographics of the communities in which youth live. This section provides examples of the schools URM youth attend and the services available.

### 5.B.1. Programs for English Language Learners (ELLs)

Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, all public schools are required to provide accommodations for students who are not proficient in English. That said, **the quality and size of ELL programs vary substantially throughout metropolitan areas and school districts**, based largely on the number of students in need of these services and the resources available to provide such services. Communities with higher populations of ELLs tend to have more robust programs.

ELL programs are typically structured into tiers or levels based on students' initial level of English proficiency. URM program staff said that students with little to no English comprehension may spend as much as half of their school day in ELL classes, with the remainder of their schedule comprised of electives such as gym and art. However, schools vary in the number of mainstream classes that youth with lower English comprehension start in. Students at higher ELL levels generally enroll in more mainstream (non-ELL) academic classes, plus one or two ELL classes to continue to develop language skills. School staff work with students to create language plans that track progress through ELL levels. In some schools, ELL classes do not count toward the minimum number of credits students must accrue in order to graduate; they may count as partial credit, toward a single domain of credit (e.g., English class requirements), or not at all.

URM program staff and education partners noted that **even schools with large ELL programs may not fully meet the needs of URM youth**. Staff said many schools adopt a “one size fits all” approach to serving ELL students and, due to limited resources or other constraints, have high student-to-teacher ratios. Some URM staff also expressed concerns that students' language plans, which are intended to support transitions into mainstream classes, may effectively exclude youth from certain projects or classroom activities.

However, most school administrators interviewed described working to move ELL students into mainstream classes as quickly as possible, with the goals of increasing students' content knowledge, allowing students to earn credits toward graduation, and connecting students to more native English speakers. All URM programs visited cited this as a challenge, because it increases the time required for URM youth to progress through high school. This can result in older youth aging out of high school eligibility before graduating. In these cases, students must pursue a high school diploma equivalency or GED education at community colleges or other organizations.

#### Practice Spotlight: ELL tracks for academic content at Wyoming High School (Wyoming City, MI)

About 20 percent of Wyoming High School's student body are ELLs, a subset of whom are refugees and URM youth. In addition to traditional introductory English classes for ELL students, Wyoming High School provides specialized history, economics, and government classes for ELLs, taught by a bilingual social studies teacher. Some of these classes are for ELLs only, while others include English-speaking students. In an interview, staff said that teachers draw from the cultural diversity of countries that students are from through practices such as basing reading selections on student interests and experiences.

### Practice Spotlight: Comprehensive Staffing at Franklin High School (Seattle, WA)

Franklin High School has a robust ELL program to serve a large ELL population, including a handful of URM youth. Staff estimated that approximately 70 percent of the student body passes through the ELL program at some point during their time at school. Common native languages include Somali, Tigrinya, Vietnamese, Mandarin, and Spanish.

The school employs five dedicated ELL teachers, seven ELL interpretive aides (representing the 12 most common languages spoken by Franklin students), ELL counselors, and an ELL supervisor. Many of Franklin’s social studies, math, and science teachers have ELL endorsements and training, representing a community that is broadly prepared to engage ELL students in every classroom. Beyond academic offerings, Franklin bolsters its ELL program through engaging with parents and guardians in annual “curriculum nights,” where interpretive aides and other ELL staff present on the cultures of students in the school.

### Staff training and preparation

ELL training for teachers varied within and across the six sites visited. Some schools provide ELL training only to staff who teach ELL classes, while other schools train all administrators, teachers, and counselors in best practices for supporting ELL students. These trainings range from short modules on practices such as using visuals and adjusting sentence construction to long-term credentialed training programs. For example, in one Richmond area district, the ELL program provides a web-based handbook for all district staff that provides guidance by grade and content area and awards a micro-credential to teachers who learn and practice the guidance on working with ELL students.

Some schools also make a point to hire teachers and paraprofessionals from diverse racial, ethnic, and immigration backgrounds, particularly those with fluency in languages other than English and who incorporate these diverse backgrounds and experiences in their teaching. Multilingual teachers and students may be recruited to guide ELL students around school in their native language and orient them to the building. (For an example, see the Practice Highlight Textbox on Page 17.)

### 5.B.2. Newcomer Programs

Beyond ELL services, some public schools operate programs for recent immigrants and refugees, often known as newcomer programs, as a predecessor to transitioning into ELL classes or general classes. These programs provide additional support, beyond English instruction, to students who may have experienced disruptions in their education, have little formal education, and have limited or no literacy. Not all schools throughout the United States have large newcomer populations and the resources required to create and operate these programs. Among the sites visited, schools in Denver, CO and Grand Rapids, MI operated newcomer programs.

Newcomer Programs not only support English language development, but also introduce students

#### Call for research: Newcomer Programs



Researchers and practitioners alike have expressed interest in comparing service models for serving ELLs and refugees. In particular, researchers have called for evaluations of newcomer programs to understand long-term outcomes for students (Mcneely et al., 2017).

to the structure of formal education and equip them with core academic skills, such as how to study and take notes in class. In interviews, school staff said that newcomers typically transition into classes with other ELL students and the general school population within one or two years. In Grand Rapids, where Wyoming High School operates a newcomer program, the academic content varies year by year, depending on students' academic levels, and teachers use online modules that allow students to progress at their own pace.

### **Practice Spotlight: Newcomer programs in Denver Public Schools (Denver, CO)**

One Denver public school operates a notable newcomer program, which multiple URM youth attend. The students at the school speak a wide variety of languages, including Spanish, Arabic, Farsi, Swahili, French, Tigrinya, Amharic, and Karen. To facilitate the newcomer program, the school has 10 paraprofessionals on staff, all of whom are refugees and immigrants themselves, who assist teachers and students by providing translation services, in-classroom support, and counselling.

In 2020, the school was also actively participating in pilot programs to improve instruction for newcomer and ELL students. In one pilot, mixed classes of ELL and English-speaking students were co-taught by ELL and non-ELL teachers. These mixed classes allowed ELL students to access more advanced content and earn credit toward graduation requirements. In another pilot, intermediate and advanced ELL students in the 11th and 12th grades enrolled in higher level classes (e.g., Advanced Placement classes), while receiving extra support from paraprofessional staff. Both pilot projects aimed to improve efforts to provide newcomer and ELL students with content knowledge and language acquisition at the same time.

Some school staff noted that students sometimes struggle with the transition from newcomer programs into mainstream classes. For example, some students face challenges moving away from a setting in which other students are “like” them (e.g., ELLs, people of color, from another country), and into a population of students who may share fewer experiences or academic challenges. However, schools also described efforts to ease these transitions through mixing ELLs and English-proficient students in classes and providing support services for ELLs in mainstream classes (See Denver Public Schools Box below).

### **5.C. Alternative public high schools**

Some URM youth attend alternative schools, which operate under the umbrella of public school or charter districts to serve students who need specialized support beyond the capacity of traditional public schools. Some alternative schools are designed for specific populations, or more broadly for students who are not on track to graduate high school in four years. While these programs take many forms throughout different states, they often use accelerated curricula, flexible or extended school days, and smaller class sizes to help students obtain high school diplomas before reaching the maximum age allowed by the state. In an interview, one alternative school administrator described the school's curriculum as going “broad” rather than “deep,” with a goal of providing students with essential information while also getting them through classes at a faster pace.

URM youth often fall within the target population of these schools, as they tend to start high school late and face delays in accumulating credits toward graduation. In some cases, URM youth begin at traditional public schools and then transfer to alternative high schools that operate within in their local public school district. In one case, the Bethany Christian Services URM program in Grand

Rapids worked directly with a local charter school district to start an alternative school for refugee and UAC youth, Lighthouse Academy (see box below). However, the Grand Rapids URM program is unique in its large size and the presence of a large local population of refugee students. URM youth in other sites may have access to alternative high school programs that are designed for other specific populations, such as ELL students. In Seattle, for example, URM youth take advantage of Bellevue College's Career Education Options Language Integration Program, which serves ELL students who are at risk of aging out of high school at age 21. The program provides students with additional time and support to work toward their high school diploma and either an Associate's degree or professional/technical certification.

### **Practice Spotlight: Charter school for refugees and UACs (Grand Rapids, MI)**

Lighthouse Academy is a charter high school district with nine programs on six campuses. The North Anchor Program is designed for refugee students and was created in 2014 in partnership with the local URM program. Of the school's 70 students in 2020, around half were URM youth, while the rest were UAC youth or refugee youth resettled with families. While grade level is based on credits, class placement is based on each students' needs, so classes often have students from several grades. In addition to core subjects and language development, the school focuses on providing behavioral and emotional support, with a philosophy that students who do not feel safe or who are dealing with significant issues in their lives will have trouble learning.

The North Anchor Program has five teachers, one student advocate who focuses on student credits and transitions after high school, and one responsible thinking advisor who helps students with decision making and behavior management. All staff are trained in trauma-informed practices to prepare them to work specifically with refugee students, many of whom have faced trauma prior to and/or after arriving in the United States. Interviewees said that helping youth who are separated from their families starts with staff awareness about the refugee experience.

## **5.D. Postsecondary education**

According to URM program staff, foster parents, and URM youth themselves, many URM youth aspire toward postsecondary education. However, others are more motivated to pursue employment that does not require postsecondary education. Due to the URM program's age cap of 21, many youth exit the URM program before completing postsecondary education. As a result, site visits and ORR program data provide limited information on postsecondary education attainment and experiences compared to other types of education. However, in interviews URM program staff described a variety of resources available to URM youth who choose to pursue postsecondary education. URM youth and foster parents also offered insight into some of the most common challenges faced by youth in postsecondary education, which are similar those faced by other ELL youth and first-generation college students.

### **5.D.1. Services for youth pursuing postsecondary education**

URM programs connect youth with financial supports to help them attend postsecondary education, both while they are in the URM program and after they emancipate. After turning 18, URM youth have the option to move into independent living arrangements and receive living stipends from the URM program. Some URM programs offer a flat stipend amount to all youth, while others base stipend amounts on the number of hours that youth attend school and/or work each month. In these arrangements, URM youth who enroll in postsecondary education programs tend to rely on a

combination of their earned income and financial support from the URM program to afford postsecondary programs and living expenses while in school.

In addition to URM program services, URM youth are eligible to receive support for postsecondary education that is equivalent to what is offered to youth in domestic care, including services through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (“Chafee program”), such as Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs). Through ETVs, URM youth may receive funding to cover up to \$5,000 per year of postsecondary education tuition, housing, transportation, books, and materials for up to five years.

### Call for research: long-term educational outcomes for URM youth



A few studies have examined post-exit outcomes for the URM population in the United States, but these studies are small in scale and not representative of all URM youth. One study surveyed URM youth who emancipated from a subset of URM programs in 2015 to investigate factors associated with educational attainment. The study found that youth who spent more time in the URM program were more likely to complete high school and enroll in college; having permanent legal status was also associated with a higher likelihood of completing high school (Crea et al., 2017). Another pilot study that interviewed a non-representative sample of 30 URM youth after they exited the URM Program found that most had finished high school and half were enrolled in college (Evans et al. 2018). Both studies identified a need for longer term follow-up with URM youth to gain a deeper understanding of educational outcomes, and how education impacts employment, well-being, and other factors.

In states with public custody arrangements<sup>5</sup>, URM youth may receive services directly from their local Chafee program. For example, in the Lutheran Family Services of the Rocky Mountains URM program, all URM youth are assigned to a Chafee worker in their county of residence, who serves as a case manager and teaches independent living skills, helps youth apply for college, and helps youth secure grants to support them through postsecondary education. For URM youth who live in states with private custody arrangements, the URM programs provide the same services directly, rather than referring youth to Chafee-funded services. In these private custody states, ORR provides funding to cover services that are typically paid for by state and county child welfare agencies in public custody states.

URM programs can also help connect URM youth with community-based programs and nonprofits that serve youth in domestic foster care, to provide additional education-related support. For example, URM youth in Washington State have access to the Passport to College program, which provides financial aid, counseling, and priority consideration for work-study programs. Similarly, URM youth in Richmond can participate in Great Expectations, a program operated through local community colleges that provides students who have been in foster care with academic coaching, financial support, and career planning services.

## 5.D.2. Youth experiences pursuing postsecondary education

In multiple sites, URM program staff said it can be challenging for URM youth to transition to postsecondary education settings that lack the same level of support they receive in high school

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<sup>5</sup> URM programs are located in states with public or private custody arrangements. Under a public custody arrangement, URM youth are in the legal custody of the state or county child welfare agency and receive some services directly from those agencies. Under a private custody arrangement, URM youth are in the custody of the URM provider agency.

settings. Though URM youth may not all be first generation college students, many face similar challenges to first generation college students in the United States, such as needing to turn to resources beyond one's family or immediate social network for advice, financial support, and assistance navigating postsecondary education settings. Although URM youth can continue to access tutoring and other academic support in college and vocational programs, youth must learn how to seek out help when it may not be offered or readily available. However, to put the issue in context, our survey of URM programs found that URM program directors considered the initial adjustment to school as a more pressing challenge than URM youth's access to postsecondary and vocational school or general academic success.

While not all youth wish to pursue postsecondary education, URM programs encourage youth to do so and try to provide financial and academic services to support their attendance. In focus groups, URM youth discussed a variety of career goals (see box at right), many of which require postsecondary education. For example, one youth described wanting to finish college and be a writer to share stories about his experiences as a refugee. Another youth shared hopes to get a degree in computer science and work with refugee camps like the one he lived in before arriving in the U.S.

While most focus groups with URM youth and foster parents suggested that URM youth are largely supported in pursuing whatever education goals make sense for them, there are occasional disagreements. In some instances, foster parents and URM youth may have different ideas about what that education will be or look like. For example, one URM staff described a situation where a youth's foster parents set high expectations for the youth to apply to an elite four-year university, while the youth wanted to attend a local two-year vocational program. In these cases, **URM program staff described trying to prioritize the URM youth's goals above all else.**



URM youth reported wanting to become nurses and doctors, chefs, professional soccer players, lawyers, public speakers, published authors, tech developers, flight attendants, and more.

### *5.E. Additional support to help URM youth succeed in school*

Beyond enrolling URM youth in school, many URM program staff provide educational support directly as part of case management. In addition to referring URM youth to in-house services provided directly by the URM programs, over half of URM program directors surveyed reported relying on external organizations to provide tutoring, college preparation, and other education supports. **Many URM youth highlighted these additional supports and activities as their favorite parts of being at school and helpful as they worked toward their goals.** Understanding how these activities contribute to URM youth's academic success and social experiences in school may be helpful for programs and advocates working with refugees and recent immigrant youth.

### 5.E.1. Extracurricular activities

URM youth, foster parents, and program staff across all sites said that many URM youth find valuable social connections through playing sports, joining music groups, and other school clubs. In one focus group, foster parents said that youth make friends easily, particularly through ELL classes and sports teams, and with other youth from their culture. Staff from schools and URM programs also pointed to the importance of extracurricular and social engagement. One school administrator went so far as to say that newcomer students who find social connections, which often come

**Soccer**, in particular, was described as a favorite activity among youth across all sites. This is in line with research that suggests soccer's common vocabulary makes it particularly popular among recent immigrants who are still learning English (Spaaij, 2015; Cushman, 2014).



through sports, clubs, and other peer groups, are more likely to stay in school and not drop out.

However, some URM staff noted that URM youth who work or who must spend extra

time studying to keep up with coursework may not have the capacity to participate in enrichment activities. In addition, the availability of community-based extracurricular and afterschool activities varies from community to community. In one focus group, foster parents who lived in outlying suburbs of a metro area said they chose afterschool programs and counseling services based on which programs were located closest to school or their home.

**Access to culturally specific activities also varies significantly across communities and schools, depending on the composition of the student body and surrounding area.** More racially diverse schools, such as those in the Grand Rapids area, are typically most likely to facilitate groups for specific populations. For example, Lighthouse Academy in Grand Rapids has a girls' group in which female refugee and immigrant students talk about societal norms in America, the importance of voicing their opinion, hygiene, and norms in dressing. Wyoming High School offers opportunities for Latinx students to attend cultural conferences, hosts a Chinese New Year celebration, and has what the school described as an African girls' group. However, staff at these schools said that the groups tend to be small and are not always sought out by URM students. For the most part, URM staff pointed to examples outside of school as ways for youth to maintain connections to their culture and religion.

### 5.E.2. Tutoring

Across all URM programs visited, case managers said they make referrals to tutoring services when URM youth demonstrate needs beyond what teachers can support in class. Many students find tutoring directly through their schools, which may provide professional or peer-based tutoring. URM case managers also find in-house tutors or tutors at local partner organizations for students as needed. Topics of tutoring typically include English, academic material, and general study practices.

**URM foster parents and case managers said that URM youth often need support that goes beyond academic content knowledge.** For example, one URM foster parent said that her foster daughter had a hard time with planning and time management. In this case, the URM youth's caseworker hired a tutor to help the youth develop those skills. URM staff said that although youth arrive with many strengths and abilities, many need to further develop planning and time management skills in ways that are different from what they needed in their earlier circumstances to be successful in education and employment in the United States.

Multiple URM programs pointed to a shortage of tutors who speak languages other than English and who can understand the specific needs of URM youth. To address this gap, some URM

programs develop their own tutoring programs. As the largest URM program, Bethany Christian Services in Grand Rapids created a tutoring program that employs about 15 tutors each academic semester, funded by the state of Michigan. To enroll youth in the program, foster parents or caseworkers submit referrals on behalf of the URM youth that include a recent academic transcript, letter of need from a teacher, and an evaluation of the youth's English language skills.

In Denver, some URM youth utilize an afterschool program designed for refugee youth in the community. The East Colfax Youth Center, a non-profit organization, provides tutoring, college preparation assistance, and summer enrichment opportunities for refugee youth in the area. The Center is in a local community center for refugees and staffed almost entirely by volunteers. The local URM program refers some youth to this program for support, knowing the organization is familiar with the strengths and needs of refugee students.

### 5.E.3. Educational support while transitioning to independent living

Many URM youth continue to pursue education as they transition to living on their own, which can happen when youth enter an independent living arrangement while in the URM program and/or after they exit the URM program. URM program staff said that this transition can be rocky, especially as youth learn to balance school, work, and other responsibilities. Both URM youth and foster parents discussed potential benefits to extending or expanding URM program services so that youth could access higher levels of support and continue to receive that support for longer time periods.

Foster parents in multiple sites said that encouraging youth to stay in foster homes longer, rather than moving to independent living arrangements as soon as they turn 18, would help URM youth be more successful in working toward educational goals. **Foster parents in URM programs that changed policies to allow longer term foster care (past age 18) said the shift made a big difference for youth, especially those still in high school and working to graduate on a tight timeline.** Although foster parents from multiple sites acknowledged that URM youth are often eager to live on their own as soon as they can, they said they believed that continuing to live in foster homes could enable them to focus more on education than employment.

URM youth also discussed ideas for changes to levels of financial support for youth who do choose to move into independent living arrangements, rather than stay in foster care. As discussed earlier, URM youth who are living independently receive stipends based on the estimated cost of living and local URM program policies. Those who are in school may be required to both work and attend

#### Practice Spotlight: Advocacy and support for students in foster care (Seattle, WA)

Treehouse is a large education advocacy organization for youth in foster care, with a small team of staff who specialize in serving URM youth. Treehouse uses an evidence-based model called "Check and Connect" that includes regular check-ins between an education specialist and the youth, teachers, and other adults (such as caregivers or counselors) to make sure they are all supporting the youth's success in school. Treehouse can also connect youth with cash incentives and resources to fund extracurricular activities, driver's education, uniforms, and other expenses. At the youth's request, education specialists can provide career education and referrals to counseling or housing support services.

Treehouse staff expressed that the organization has made conscious attempts to increase their cultural competency to better serve URM youth and other ELL students. The roughly 10 education specialists that regularly serve URM youth have taken initiative to participate in trainings about different immigration statuses, trauma, and language skills.

school for a certain number of hours per month. In focus groups, URM youth said they wished independent living stipends were always large enough to support attending school full-time, so they could devote more of their energy to making academic progress. Foster parents also said that it could be beneficial to extend the maximum age for URM program services beyond age 21, so that youth could continue to access case management and other program benefits as they pursue higher levels of education.

#### 5.E.4. Other support services

URM programs also access education support services offered to the general public, then tailor services to URM youth when possible. For example, staff from multiple schools mentioned student mentoring programs that pair current high school students with incoming students to help them adjust to new settings. When possible, schools may try to pair incoming newcomer and ELL students with other students who have had similar experiences. Educators said URM students often participate in these programs when they first arrive, and after they become more settled, they step into the mentoring roles to support new students.

Some education partners, including schools and tutoring organizations, pointed to gaps in other services that present additional barriers to URM youth achieving long-term educational goals, such as mental health supports, affordable housing, and transportation. In one URM program, staff discussed a few cases of youth dropping out of college due to the high cost of rent and potential housing instability once they aged out of foster care.

## 6. Highlights, challenges, and insights for the field

Site visits, surveys, and data analysis illustrate the variation of educational services provided by URM programs. This section highlights cross-cutting themes that are notable for programs serving URM youth, as well as populations with similar needs, including ELLs, recent immigrants, and youth who have experience in foster care.

### Education services are not always tailored to meet URM youth's specific needs.



All URM youth have access to ELL services in their local public schools, but schools vary greatly in their ability to infuse services with cultural competency, accommodate consequences of past disruptions in formal education, and support youth with histories of trauma. When tailored local resources are not available, URM program staff and URM foster parents may step in and provide support directly or reach out to one another to brainstorm ideas to meet youth's needs. However, this type of creative and tailored advocacy may be difficult for foster parents and case managers to sustain over time or replicate for all URM youth.

### Success in education should be flexibly defined.



URM youth have a wide range of educational backgrounds and future goals, some of which include postsecondary education. Many education partners described URM youth as particularly dedicated and resilient when it came to devoting time and effort to their education. Many foster parents and URM program staff said they support URM youth in determining the level and type of education that makes sense for them. However, URM youth said that sometimes their goals for themselves do not align with expectations of their foster parents and URM case managers.

Many URM youth want to begin fulltime employment as soon as possible, even if it is at the expense of their education. Many URM youth, particularly former UACs, come to the United States with the goal of earning money to support their families and may prioritize employment over pursuing education. Some URM program staff and foster parents said that it can be difficult to support these goals when they believe pursuing education is in a youth's best interest. These situations cause tension and, in some cases, URM youth may exit the URM program early to pursue work or other opportunities.

### **Social networks and community connections are important for long-term stability.**



Multiple URM programs described the importance of URM youth creating social networks and relationships to support their transition into self-sufficiency. Schools provide both formal and informal opportunities for youth to join and form peer groups. While language barriers can affect the speed at which URM youth build friendships and relationships, URM staff said that youth are good at forming social networks within and beyond refugee communities.

URM youth may be placed in less diverse communities that can limit their exposure to students who share their experiences, cultural traditions, and languages. URM foster parents who live in these types of communities discussed feeling somewhat helpless as they looked for ways to help youth find friends, cultural networks, and extracurricular activities if their schools were not able to provide them. At the same time, youth and foster parents also described schools as providing opportunities for URM youth to make friends with students from the United States and learn about U.S. culture.

### **URM youth need support in their transition to higher education and independence.**



Multiple URM program staff and many URM youth discussed the challenges of balancing education, work, and the responsibilities of living independently. These challenges are particularly pressing for older youth who will soon age out of the URM program, much like the challenges faced by youth in the domestic system as they age out of foster care. In order to pursue long-term education goals, including postsecondary education, URM youth rely on financial and emotional support both within and beyond the URM program.

### **Programs and stakeholders call for more research into education services for URM youth.**



Throughout the study, URM programs, researchers, and education partners all identified gaps in current research into educational outcomes and service options for URM youth. Academic success for URM youth results from an interplay among the academic, social, and emotional experiences in and out of school, as well as collaboration between URM programs, community-based organizations, and foster families. To understand URM youth's academic experiences and outcomes more holistically, stakeholders need research into all components affecting URM youth's pursuit of education.

URM programs and partners across sites also identified a strong interest in learning about long-term outcomes for URM youth, including educational attainment and employment. Ideally, long-term educational outcomes could be linked with youth's incoming characteristics, educational backgrounds, histories of trauma, health, and the characteristics of services and schools URM youth access while in the program.

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