

# Educating Immigrant Students in Urban Districts

By Shurki Nur and Richard C. Hunter, Ed.D.



Immigrant children constitute the fastest-growing population in the United States, and their presence is rapidly changing the demographics of American public schools—especially in cities where they typically settle with their families.

Because these students' languages, cultures, and values differ from those of educators—and indeed from one another—school districts face challenges and opportunities as they strive to meet every student's diverse needs.

To educate immigrant and refugee students effectively, districts must first meet their psychological and social needs. For example, many immigrant children who attend American schools are from war-torn developing

countries. Many of these children were exposed to the traumas of war, witnessed violence and killings, and lived in refugee camps. As such, they have special issues that must be addressed before they can learn.

Even within the immigrant and refugee student population, there is diversity regarding English-language ability and educational background. Thus, it is vital that school districts create successful learning experiences for these students that recognize their linguistic, psychological, socioeconomic, and cultural needs.

School districts are responsible for distributing resources to schools, but their decisions are restricted by their boards of education. For example, in New York, the federal gov-

ernment provides a minimal amount of funding under the Emergency Immigrant Education legislation. This funding is designed to support schools that are serving recent immigrants; however, no resources are allocated specifically to address the needs of immigrant students.

Furthermore, to fulfill the psychological, social, and education needs of refugee and immigrant students, districts would first require the resources to identify those needs.

Urban school districts are also confronted with the challenge of serving diverse immigrant students who speak a variety of languages. With limited resources, it is not easy to create programs for a variety of language groups if the number of students from any one language group is not adequate to necessitate a separate class, causing school districts to generalize the needs of various groups (Clarkson 2008).

## If immigrant and refugee students are to be educated effectively, school districts must change the way they do business.

Since the No Child Left Behind Act requires school districts to disaggregate data according to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender, districts can report on the achievement of a variety of subgroups. However, disaggregating data into subgroups does not permit educators to examine data based on immigrant and refugee students' status or allow them to report these students in a separate category.

For example, African immigrant students are reported under the subgroup of African American students, which leads to a generalization that prohibits districts from identifying the needs of African refugee and immigrant students (Clarkson 2008). Asian immigrant students, such as Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and others from Southeast Asia, are reported as Asian. That broad category leads to a generalization of immigrant students whose educational experiences and needs are different.

### What Are Urban Districts Doing?

Some school districts respond to the needs of immigrant and refugee students by creating "newcomer" programs. Hertzberg (1998) conducted an ethnographic study of Redwood Elementary School, an elementary school in a wealthy neighborhood that serves fourth- to eighth-grade refugee and immigrant students from low-income immigrant families as part of the district's newcomer program.

Hertzberg learned that the school recognizes the students' backgrounds and cultures by weaving elements of

their cultures into the curriculum and promoting an atmosphere of respect and tolerance.

Hertzberg's findings show that the school's nurturing environment was evident in the way the teachers cared for their students' well-being. For example, when a fourth-grade teacher noticed that one of her students needed dental care, she discussed the matter with the nurse and got him the dental care he needed. When she discovered that another student's glasses were broken, she discussed with his parents the importance of getting him another pair of glasses.

By attending to the general well-being of her students, she created an environment in which they were better prepared to learn. The teachers in the home school that the students attend after completing the newcomer program say that students who come from Redwood arrive well adjusted and motivated to learn.

The success of such programs also depends on how the district implements them. Providing the funding to create positive programs that facilitate and enhance English-language acquisition and that mainstream immigrant children into the regular school is vital. Hertzberg's example also depicts how schools can attend to the diverse educational needs of immigrant students by focusing on their cultural orientation and connecting the home and school.

Houston Independent School District took another course, adopting the First Things First model developed by the Institute of Research and Reform in Education. The model divides large schools into smaller learning environments that support individual students (Hood 2003).

Lee High School is one of the schools that provide immigrant students with a small learning environment, grouping 12–18 students to work with a counselor, teachers, a coach, and an administrator. Grouping immigrant students into a small learning community enables the district to provide individualized programs that focus not only on academics but also on English-language acquisition skills and personal needs.

The model is reported to increase students' academic performance (as evidenced, for example, in increased scores on the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test) and to enhance parental involvement. The Houston Independent School District model illustrates a positive approach to addressing the variety of needs of immigrant students.

Other urban districts use a more holistic approach for attending to the needs of immigrant and refugee students by creating multicultural and bilingual educational programs, emphasizing multicultural education, creating dropout prevention programs geared toward these students, and employing a psychologist to provide support service.

### Recommendations

To educate immigrant and refugee children successfully, districts must hire teachers that are knowledgeable about

the students' diverse cultural backgrounds and can weave their cultures into the curriculum. Delpit (2001) emphasizes the importance of educators' understanding differences in educational attainment, achievement, and school experiences. By understanding these factors, teachers can be aware of limitations, expectations, cultural backgrounds, and educational goals that will affect the outcome of their students.

Also, having a curriculum that reflects and encourages "home language and cultural skills that maintain connections to family and community and at the same time support the development of linguistic and cultural skills that are appropriate to the new society" is important to validating immigrant students' language and culture (Feinberg 2000, p. 224). In other words, educating immigrant students more effectively requires an approach that encompasses valuing diversity and building strong connections between the students' culture and the school culture (Clarkson 2008).

Fullan (1995) raises the notion of moral purpose in which he prescribes that teachers be committed to making a difference in the lives of all students. That calls for a change in the traditional role of teachers to one in which teachers are also counselors and mentors as opposed to just teachers. Fullan's notion of teacher leadership is a vital and brilliant idea because teachers have an effect on learning in the classroom as well as in the community.

Beyond academics, many teachers feel unprepared or unable to adequately meet the psychosocial needs of students (Stewart 2007). School districts should create experts from the ranks of district personnel, such as psychologists, counselors, and others who are familiar with the educational needs of children exposed to wars, and thereby establish effective programs that focus on the psychological, social, and academic needs of the immigrant children (Feinberg 2000).

School leaders must ask whether students of diverse backgrounds are receiving adequate education that is culturally relevant while meeting the educational needs of each child. Shields (2003) suggests that school leaders examine the inequities in schools and address those inequities by creating a democratic school and classrooms. That requires school leaders to be transformative and to create spaces where voices of marginalized groups are heard and where schools value and nurture the diverse cultures of all groups within the school and community.

If immigrant and refugee students are to be educated effectively, school districts must change the way they do business. Indeed, if public schools are to prepare all our young people to participate in and contribute fully in our society, school districts must create policies and procedures that specifically address the educational needs of refugee and immigrant students.



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