

# **Increasing Success for immigrant and refugee students by supporting family & culture**

***Partnering with families  
to support student mental health needs***



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# Growing number of immigrant and refugee students

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- Major immigration over the past 15 – 20 years
  - About one-third from Mexico but increasingly from other countries
  - Diverse in language, culture, economic status, education
  
- Increased ELL population while overall K-12 population flat

Education Week – Portrait of a Population

[www.EdWeek.org](http://www.EdWeek.org)



# Mental health issues of immigrant and refugee students

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- Leave “home” and relatives
- Communication challenges
- Economic concerns
- New way of life
  - often rural to urban or vice versa
  - Climate change



# Immigrant and Refugee Experiences

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- Share some common experiences
- Refugee experience
  - War and violence
  - Refugee camps
  - May be uprooted quickly
  - Legal supports once in U.S.
- Immigrant experience
  - Split families
  - Documentation issues



# Trauma often part of life

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- Difficult journey
- Separation and grief –
  - Reuniting families that might never have been a family
  - Settlement in different parts of U
- Violence
- Current stress as well as PTSD
- Often affects entire family



# Student Mental Health Issues Often Unidentified

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- Behavior seen through Americanized lens
- Don't have access to mental health care
  - May not be culturally responsive care
  - Families may not know how to gain access
- Families overwhelmed themselves
- **Stigma** of care for mental illness



# School Role in Supporting Student Mental Health

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- Identify problems before they become serious
- Source of information about child to parents
- Trusted resource for family
- Provide parents strategies to support child
- Help connect families to services
- Mental health providers can interact with teachers who see child daily



# Impact on Student Success

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- Traditional strategies not resulting in achievement for some immigrant students
- Untreated behavior can impact entire class
- Committed to development of “whole child”





# Caring Across Communities

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- 15 projects serving diverse populations
- \$4.5 million in grants from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Aimed at low-income immigrant and refugee students
- School-connected mental health services
- Innovative community partnerships



# Family involvement essential

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- Student achievement is linked to parent involvement
- Parents gatekeepers for mental health services
- Entire family impacted



# Strengths of Immigrant and Refugee Families

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- Often protective and close-knit
- “It takes a village” – entire community takes ownership
- They respect the school
- Many were well-educated in their own country
- Resilient: Overcome great obstacles to get to the U.S.



# Challenges of Working with Immigrant and Refugee Families

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- Stigma against mental illness
  - Different view of “mental health” than our culture – more integrated, holistic
- Respect school by keeping their distance
- Cultural, language barriers
- Family is adjusting to new environment



## Strategies to Connect with Immigrant and Refugee Parents

# Build personal relationships

- Help with issues outside of school
  - Housing
  - Employment
  - Physical health
  
- Create a relationship of trust



# Traditional family involvement

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- Geared to parents with “social capital”
  - Knowledge of American system
  - Comfortable being at school
  - Feel they have a right to be heard
  
- Immigrant and refugee families believe it is not their role
  - Respect school at a distance
  - Often work with children at home



# Create Welcoming School

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- Signs in multiple languages
- Front office staff who are welcoming & supportive
- Administrators who personally reach out
- Teachers who make personal contact
  - With each family
  - Positive messages as well as concerns
  - Materials in home languages
- Home visits
  - Sign of respect
  - Gain insights into family, culture



# Collaborate with Community

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- Go beyond stereotypes to learn about culture from:
  - Parents
  - Cultural, religious, community leaders
- Partner with cultural groups in community
  - Cultural brokers
  - Additional resources
- Connect with community service agencies





# Tailor Outreach to the Culture

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- Find out issues in that community
- Be sensitive to cultural nuances
  - Time
  - Extended family
  - Communication styles
- Involve parents from that culture in planning and implementing outreach



# Create targeted programming

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- Small group events
- Multiple, personal invitations:
  - Notes home
  - Phone calls
  - Notices in cultural newspapers
- Encourage “snowballing”
- **Hold programs in the community**



# Partner with Families

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- Respect their insights, experiences
- Ask them to share their expertise
- Help them navigate the system:
  - how school operates
  - how to access services at school
  - how to access community services
- Discuss strategies together to care for students and themselves
- **Two-way dialogue**
  - **listen and learn**



# Support mental health

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- Break down stigma
  - Focus on continuum of support for the child
  - Work with cultural brokers
- Recognize the trauma and stress on entire family
- Develop collaboration between teachers and mental health professionals
  - Share insights
  - Develop strategies along with families
- Use culturally responsive screening and assessment
  - See Issue Brief at [www.HealthinSchools.org](http://www.HealthinSchools.org)



# Additional Resources

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- Article in November 2009 Kappan:  
"Go Beyond the Classroom to help Immigrant and Refugee Students Succeed"
  
- Issue Brief  
"Partnering with Parents and Families to Support Immigrant and Refugee Children at School"  
Available at [www.EmbraceDiverseSchools.com](http://www.EmbraceDiverseSchools.com) under "Resources")
  
- Websites:  
**Center for Health and Health Care in Schools**  
[www.healthinschools.org](http://www.healthinschools.org) See "Immigrant and Refugee Children"  
section for Caring Across Communities project  
**Embrace Diverse Schools** [www.EmbraceDiverseSchools.com](http://www.EmbraceDiverseSchools.com)