



Policy Brief

School Supports for Newcomer Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Drawing on evidence from the Study of
Adolescent Lives after Migration to America
(SALaMA) to inform best practices.

 Washington University in St. Louis

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Recommendations for Schools

- Implement initiatives to support educators in culturally responsive social and emotional learning (SEL), encouraging educators to reflect on small ways they can support newcomer students in the classroom and frame students as equal community members with valuable resources and skills to contribute.
- Prioritize programs that foster a sense of recognition, inclusion, and belonging among newcomer students to promote these students' mental health and wellbeing.
- Approach newcomer student supports holistically, considering household and community impacts on students' mental health and wellbeing. For example, make efforts to meaningfully engage parents and utilize school supports outside of the classroom

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical phase of human development, during which physical, neural, and psychological growth are readily influenced by external factors. Experiences during adolescence can have a profound effect on health and wellbeing that last through adulthood. While this developmental period can be challenging for any individual, adolescent refugees and asylum-seekers face a number of unique challenges that increase their risk of adverse mental and psychosocial health outcomes.

After enduring a multitude of hardships fleeing their home country, these young people must also adapt to a new language and culture, process their loss of home and experiences of migration, and learn to navigate complicated legal and public service systems. In addition, newcomer students in the school system find themselves trying to catch up to their peers while being subjected to discrimination, micro-aggressions, and bullying in their new community. It is no surprise that adolescent refugees are at elevated risk of poor psychological outcomes, such as mood and anxiety disorders.

Schools play a central protective role for young refugees and asylum-seekers. For example, studies in the U.S. have found that refugees and asylum-seekers reporting a strong sense of belonging in their schools tended to have lower levels of psychosocial distress. Evidence also suggests that in addition to supporting student integration, schools can facilitate the integration of parents as well, with parents becoming markedly more involved in their children's schools over time.

What is SALaMA?

The following recommendations on the ways schools can support newcomer student wellbeing come from the Study of Adolescent Lives after Migration to America (SALaMA), conducted by Washington University in St. Louis and Qatar Foundation International (QFI). Since 2017, SALaMA has undertaken a multi-sited, mixed-methods study in partnership with a number of school districts and local refugee resettlement agencies around the country. SALaMA studies have been conducted with schools in: Austin, Texas; Harrisonburg, Virginia; Chicago, Illinois; and the Detroit Metropolitan Area, Michigan.

The study's objectives include assessing the mental health and psychosocial well-being of high school students who have been – or whose parents have been – resettled to the US from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The study also aims to identify these students' daily stressors and the support mechanisms available to them. The study has not only generated important learning about the needs of this growing sub-population, but has produced insights into means of resilience and best practices taken by schools, communities, and families to support students as they adjust to life in the US.

To learn more about SALaMA, including findings, methodologies, publications, and resources, please visit our website: <https://sites.wustl.edu/salama/>





School-Based Strategies to Support Newcomer Student Mental Health and Wellbeing

Strategy 1

Invest in Culturally Responsive Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Investing in culturally responsive social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives for educators presents invaluable opportunities for promoting student and school adjustment by cultivating social- and self-awareness and healthy relationships.

- SEL, and complementary approaches such as restorative practices and trauma-informed care, are especially promising when they center equity and meaningfully address power differentials and the intersecting influences of race, ethnicity, gender, class and religion, among other social identities.

Some teachers participants in SALaMA actively reflected on what they took for granted as white, U.S.-born educators and attempted to expand their educational toolkits.

Through self-reflection, some teachers tried to learn more about their students, whether by reading about Iraqi history beyond the Gulf Wars, learning Arabic vocabulary or practicing to pronounce their students' names properly. Teachers sometimes also granted accommodations, such as homework extensions during Ramadan, but were careful not to make students feel singled out or belittled.

A 15-year-old sophomore in Austin shared that his teacher's efforts to learn about Iraq—his home country—communicated that “they acknowledge me,” which made him “feel kinda special.”

This balance between adjustment and equal treatment stood out against other instances of teachers exhorting their students to “Speak English!” or using students as teaching examples.

- SEL can encourage teachers to learn from their students, see them as equal community members, and adapt to their needs and preferences.
- SEL can also help educators and school administrators avoid stereotyping newcomer students and making assumptions based on students' perceived identities.

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Maybe I'm not really teaching as well as I thought I was,” one teacher in Michigan remembered thinking, adding, “Because sometimes I'll give [my students] a reference, and I'll check myself, because as it's coming out of my mouth, I'm like, ‘No. They have no frame of reference [for this].’”

Strategy 2

Promote a Sense of Recognition, Inclusion, and Belonging

Schools can help improve the resilience, mental health, and wellbeing of newcomer students by promoting programs that help students feel included while also recognizing the meaningful cultural identities of these students.

One strategy is to build programs that foster peer-based mentorships and friendships between US- and foreign-born students with similar cultural backgrounds.

- Results from SALaMA in Dearborn, MI, which has a large concentration of Arab-Americans, suggest that attending school with a large number of Arab-Americans helped newcomer students feel empowered to learn English while receiving support from fellow Arabic-speaking peers and educators.
- These peer relationships also enabled newcomers to adapt to the norms and procedures of Michigan's education system while still feeling connected to their ethnic and religious identities.

For schools that do not have a large concentration of Arab-American students, it is important to foster peer friendships between native students and newcomer students so that newcomer students feel supported and included.

In SALaMA, newcomer students who did not have the support of other Arabic-speaking students tended to have more initial difficulty adjusting. As these students' English improved and they took more classes with the general student population, they started to develop more peer relationships.

Many newcomer students in SALaMA felt supported when their friends were genuinely interested in learning about them and their background; withheld judgment and laughter when they struggled in class; and stood up for them when other peers bullied them.

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Being in a class with people from the Middle East/North Africa made me feel like I belonged because it made it easier to make our culture part of our identity. It also made it easier to practice our religion without any judgment making me feel like I belong.”

Language learning programs can also serve as a facilitator or barrier to the inclusion of newcomer students. Results from SALaMA showed that, while learning English is an important component in helping students acclimate to their new community, prioritizing English language at the expense of newcomer students' heritage languages can exacerbate academic inequities for adolescent students from the MENA region and can influence their acculturation and wellbeing.

- These results highlight the benefits of approaching language as a resource, rather than a barrier, for students resettled from conflict-affected countries in the MENA region.
- They also amplify the need for education systems to value and support newcomer students' unique identities and abilities as tools that help them to thrive.

Finally, extracurricular activities can be leveraged to both build peer relationships and facilitate language learning.

- One SALaMA analysis revealed how providers recognized newcomer students' participation in group and extracurricular activities as a protective factor that increased their self-esteem, built community, and facilitated a sense of belonging.

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We... have conversations explaining to parents that it is okay for their daughters to try out for a sport and that we would honor things like hijabs and stuff like that in track, in basketball, in whatever.”

In some cases, providers from SALaMA also noted some gender differences in extracurricular participation, noting that caregivers' sometimes limited girls' participation in extracurricular activities.

When encouraging newcomer students' participation in extracurricular activities, schools may need to help facilitate conversations between students and parents about extracurricular activities.

Strategy 3

View Newcomer Student Support Holistically

Schools should approach newcomer student wellbeing holistically and view students' support as extending beyond the classroom or individual educators. By utilizing school- and community-based resources, as well as the assets of newcomer students and their families, schools can better ensure that they are considering the ways that household and community environments impact students' mental health.

- Findings from SALaMA suggest that, despite challenges associated with families' newcomer status, parents of newcomer students remained engaged with schools and with their children's learning at home.
- Schools can harness parents' educational involvement by viewing parents as partners in supporting newcomer students.

For example, SALaMA found that initiatives like language support services, cultural liaisons to encourage parent-school communication, and tutoring programs all helped parents meaningfully engage with their children's schools.

In some schools, liaisons and other school staff have not only enabled participation in school and community activities, but also visited parents at home and at work, and even led sessions to support caregiver SEL and mental health.

In addition to recognizing the role of parents in supporting students, it's important that schools acknowledge that individual educators cannot possibly provide all of the necessary support to newcomer students. School systems should incorporate additional tools at their disposal to support newcomers and the educators serving them.

- Austin, for example, has built a mental health system within its public schools, which provides preventive and specialized support.
- Schools like Harrisonburg Public High School in Virginia, meanwhile, offer newcomer programs that not only include English as a second language (ESL) classes, but also an extended cross-cultural orientation and skills training.

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We are refugees, we have more challenges against us because our kids are learning in a second language. It's not learning like in their mother tongue. So, if you take all of these considerations into your mind, then, for sure, he will not be able to make it. So, that's why I made the decision to bring him to [this] school. Because I want to offer him the most suitable education environment here in [this] high school.”

- For schools who may not already have these kinds of holistic support services or do not know how to build these kinds of supports, fostering strengthened partnerships with community-based organizations could provide a pathway for schools to refer students and families to culturally appropriate support services as needed.

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...When we have such a diverse community—over 70 languages—cultural background and understanding of the responsibilities and roles of a parent or a family within a child's education is very different. So, we really try to find a way to make it easy to navigate, easy to understand for families, simple ways to get involved, and really becoming very intentional in looking at... some of the barriers that typically have prevented families from coming into our schools, and how to remove those and create a more accessible means of interacting with us...”

The Importance of Supporting Newcomer Student Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Newcomer students who have reported having ever witnessed someone else being physically hurt in real life are 5.5 times more likely to face a disciplinary event at school.¹
- Newcomer students who have reported facing a drastic change in their family in the last year have significantly lower levels of resilience and perceived school belonging.¹
- Students who have reported ever experiencing a life-threatening emergency exhibit greater depressive and anxiety symptoms.¹
- Newcomer students who have reported higher levels of school belonging are more resilient, while lower levels of reported school belonging are associated with higher levels of suicide ideation.²

¹10.1007/s40609-020-00179-z

²<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.07.012>

