

BEYOND TEACHING ENGLISH

Supporting High School Completion by Immigrant and Refugee Students



By Julie Sugarman

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Executive Summary

Although children with an immigrant or refugee background of any age may face hurdles upon enrolling in U.S. schools, these challenges are generally greatest and of most lasting consequence for youth who arrive during their secondary school years. These newcomers face increasingly demanding academic content standards at the same time they are learning a new language and culture. Some may also be dealing with the stressors of family reunification, poverty, and trauma from violence experienced in their country of origin or while in transit.

The stakes are high for these young people and the communities in which they settle: failure to complete a high school degree could mean limited access to higher education and to jobs that provide a family-sustaining wage and benefits. Furthermore, many newcomers are students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), meaning they are significantly behind students of the same age in native-language literacy and math skills and have not developed learning-to-learn skills such as study habits or understanding of the norms of U.S. classrooms. For such students, the pressure to complete a high school diploma before they age out of the system—to go from limited literacy in any language to passing the wide range of high school courses required for graduation—can be overwhelming, particularly when coupled with the pressure to work to earn money for themselves and their families. Under these circumstances, it is easy for students to feel discouraged and drop out of school. Beyond the consequences for these individuals, the loss of their potential wages and talents has long-term implications for their communities and the economy more broadly.

Meeting the educational needs of these students is thus essential to meeting the long-term goals laid out in federal policy.

The stakes are also high for schools. The two most recent national education laws, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and its successor, the *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015*, have required public schools to meet accountability benchmarks on measures such as the number of students passing standardized tests and graduating within four years of enrollment in high school. In some middle and high schools, newcomer students comprise a significant share of the total student population and of the English Learner (EL) subgroup specifically, for whom outcomes are reported separately. Meeting the educational needs of these students is thus essential to meeting the long-term goals laid out in federal policy. As a result, schools are not only concerned with instructional approaches to bring newcomers up to speed in English, they are also actively engaged in creating and systematizing approaches to support newcomer students' academic development and socioemotional needs, the latter being a critical contributing factor to whether students persist in their studies until high school graduation and to the shape of their postsecondary educational and career pathways.

Drawing examples from school districts heavily affected by the arrival of newcomer students, this report explores the key challenges middle and high schools face in seeking to meet both the instructional and noninstructional needs of these youth. Many of the insights discussed were shared by participants in the Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, a project of the National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). By sharing strategies for working with newcomer youth, participants in the network—which included practitioners from the education, physical and mental health, and social service fields—raised important lessons about the challenges and successes of serving this unique population.



A. **Who Are Newcomer Students and What Steps Are Schools Taking to Comprehensively Meet Their Needs?**

Newcomer students in the United States are a diverse population. They include youth both with and without legal authorization to live in the United States. Because Learning Network activities followed the sharp increase in the number of Central American unaccompanied children to arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border and seek asylum in the United States, strategies for serving these youth were of particular relevance to Learning Network discussions. Other than unaccompanied minors—more than 176,000 of whom were released to family or other sponsors already living in the United States from fiscal year (FY) 2014 through FY 2017—it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how many newly arrived immigrants enroll in U.S. secondary schools each year. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey suggest that between 2010 and 2014, an average of 154,100 Limited English Proficient (LEP) youth (ages 12 to 21) immigrated to the United States annually; those who have yet to receive a high school diploma are entitled to access free, public education—in most states, until the age of 20 or 21. Importantly, these students are only a share of all ELs; in 2015, less than half (42 percent) of LEP students enrolled in grades 6 through 12 were foreign born.

The districts studied have invested considerable resources to establish systems to identify and respond to students’ academic and socioemotional needs. For example, school registration is a key opportunity for schools and districts to set newcomer students up for success. During this process, school personnel assess students’ linguistic, academic, and (ideally) socioemotional needs to ensure they are placed in an appropriate instructional setting and connected with additional resources and assistance. After the initial welcome phase, schools continue to provide supports through summer learning, coaching and mentoring, and planning for postsecondary college and career paths. Schools may also provide support to newcomer students’ communities and families through adult education and community outreach and, in doing so, empower them to advocate for and support individual students as well as the needs of the community as a whole.

Districts have been expanding their efforts to connect students to a wide variety of services that address underlying physical and mental health issues, legal concerns, and basic needs.

The implementation of such services is typically guided by district staff who aid school-based administrators in making instructional decisions, coordinating services for specific populations (such as refugees or SIFE), ensuring equitable instruction across schools, facilitating referrals to health clinics, and so on. Some districts also work with community-based organizations (CBOs) to provide these services. These external organizations bring specialized knowledge of the communities they serve and in a variety of sectors such as mental health and housing—expertise that allows them to provide tailored support to individual students and to build the capacity of teachers and administrators. Whether with in-house staff or partner CBOs, districts have been expanding their efforts to connect students to a wide variety of services that address underlying physical and mental health issues, legal concerns, and basic needs.

For unaccompanied and refugee students, many of whom arrived in the United States having experienced violence and poverty in their home countries or during migration, mental health services have been especially in demand in recent years. Many localities report a shortage of free or low-cost services and of providers who speak foreign languages. The complex trauma many of these youth exhibit is not only detrimental to their health and wellbeing, but can be a barrier to academic success as well. In recognition of this need, some systems have developed particularly robust mental health services. In Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, services include training for teachers and other school staff on



working with youth affected by trauma, mental health screening for newcomers, a classroom curriculum to help students develop wellness and resiliency, and connections to more intensive counseling. Another recent innovation is a family reunification curriculum developed by Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia that helps parents and children address the many challenges that families can experience after prolonged separation.

B. Instructional Models and Program Design Tailored to Newcomers

Like student support systems, instructional programs for newcomers take a variety of forms. Most notably, many districts have instituted newcomer programs that centralize instruction and additional services at one or more locations. In some districts, newcomer students (or even more specific groups, such as SIFE or students who arrive at age 16 or older) attend one of these centers for one or more semesters to prepare to transfer to their neighborhood middle or high school and begin a course of study appropriate for their grade level. In other districts, the newcomer program is a strand within a comprehensive high school, into which students are gradually integrated as they develop the linguistic and academic skills to keep up with their grade-level peers. In recent years, some districts have reorganized their newcomer programs as the populations they serve grow and in response to ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of their EL services.

Whether districts serve newcomers at one or multiple locations, they do so by creating an instructional program that takes state policy, student needs, and staff capacity into consideration. The resulting EL student course of study includes English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction as well as supports to help students access academic content such as English language arts, math, science, and social studies. Some states provide districts with very specific guidelines as to how EL instructional programs are to be designed. For example, Arizona created a daily four-hour sheltered English immersion curriculum that focuses on rapid language acquisition before transitioning students into more content-heavy classes. At the other end of the spectrum, New York State requires districts to enroll newcomers right from the beginning in credit-bearing academic courses that provide linguistic support. Schools generally use some combination of ESL classes or small-group instruction, support within general education classes, specially designed (sheltered) content classes for ELs, and content classes cotaught by an ESL teacher and a general education teacher certified in the subject area.

Several districts in this study are taking important steps to increase newcomer student access to credit-bearing general education classes and to create a four-year path to graduation even for those who enter high school with limited literacy and little prior formal education. Such efforts respond to schools' obligation to provide ELs with access to the same curriculum as other students and also to the use of the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate as a federally required accountability measure. Districts have found it particularly challenging to design programs for youth who arrive at age 16 or older without prior high school education. On the one hand, adult education and high school equivalency programs may be well equipped with the resources to teach basic literacy skills, offer classes in the evening so students can work full time, and help youth quickly achieve the English proficiency skills needed in the workplace. However, these programs often do not offer the same breadth of courses as comprehensive high schools or lead to a full high school diploma, and some require a social security number to enroll. Where neither of these routes are deemed an appropriate fit for over-age newcomers, some systems have developed special high school programs that address their unique situation.

C. Lessons Learned

The recent experiences of school districts across the United States point to the urgent need to increase professional capacity to provide both academic and nonacademic services for newcomers. Districts profiled in this study have tapped into local, state, and federal resources to do the critical work of curriculum and program design and staff professional development, as well as to fund additional EL specialist positions to work directly with students. Districts have invested heavily in professional



development for administrators and teachers, both to prepare them to work with new student populations and to ensure content instruction supports language development. Training is also ongoing at the intersection of population and pedagogy, as it is critical to help educators understand the kinds of linguistic and academic supports that EL students with different profiles need (including SIFE, older newcomers, and long-term ELs).

The recent experiences of school districts across the United States point to the urgent need to increase professional capacity to provide both academic and nonacademic services for newcomers.

As student populations change, state and local policies evolve, and academic demands shift in their focus, districts must regularly design new services and evaluate the effectiveness of existing ones. The experiences of districts profiled here suggest opportunities to strengthen the following areas to better support newcomer students:

- evaluating the policies and practices created by teachers and administrators on a provisional basis in response to changing needs and systematizing those that were effective;
- encouraging district and CBO partnerships that include strong coordination among service providers so that students experience coherent and well-targeted interventions;
- ensuring that sufficient funding is available for instructional and socioemotional services and that policymakers understand the rationale behind investing resources in newcomer student supports; and
- tracking the impact of evolving federal, state, and local policies on newcomer student achievement.

School districts, by taking such steps, can help immigrant students meet their educational goals and step into the workforce on firmer footing. In doing so, these efforts also hold the potential to positively impact the school environment and communities more broadly through the realization of individual potential and the social and economic integration of immigrant communities.

I. Introduction

Immigrant and refugee youth who arrive in the United States during their secondary school years¹ face a daunting set of challenges that have the power to shape their future educational and career trajectories. They are expected to learn to speak, read, and write in English at the level appropriate for their grade; quickly close gaps in their subject-matter education; and pass the full range of courses required in their state to earn a high school diploma. All this, while often coping with additional challenges such as adjusting to a new culture and, for some, addressing post-traumatic stress or working to help support themselves or their family.

For several decades, educators have been developing approaches and systems for supporting the linguistic, academic, and socioemotional needs of these newcomer students. However, the unusual increase in the arrival of unaccompanied children in 2014–16, coupled with school accountability data that show persistent achievement gaps between English Learners (ELs) and students fluent in English,

¹ Secondary school in the United States comprises middle school (usually grades 6 to 8) and high school (usually starting with grade 9 and always ending with grade 12).



prompted a rapid evolution and expansion of approaches to supporting the success of these students in recent years. This report tracks these developments, describing the pressures U.S. school districts face and exploring the actions they and their community partners have taken to support newcomer students' academic success and attainment of a high school diploma.

Over the last decade, accountability data have provided a clear indication of the degree to which schools have fallen short of their goals. U.S. schools do not systematically provide data on foreign-born children or children with at least one foreign-born parent.² Instead, to understand the achievement of immigrant and refugee students, researchers and policymakers generally use the EL subgroup as a proxy, even though it includes both recent arrivals and long-term ELs³ (most of the latter being U.S. born). Most states report significant gaps in standardized test score averages between the EL subgroup and all learners in English language arts, math, and science.⁴ Similarly, compared to the average nationwide high school graduation rate of 83 percent in school year (SY) 2014–15, the rate for ELs was 65 percent.⁵ And though these data are not specific to newcomers who arrive during middle or high school, the factors that lead ELs to perform more poorly on these two indicators are often more pronounced among recent arrivals.

Accountability data have provided a clear indication of the degree to which schools have fallen short of their goals.

These longstanding disparities in student outcomes have prompted researchers and practitioners to re-examine how EL students are served. In particular, Deborah Short and her colleagues⁶ have been instrumental in documenting the various program, curricular, and instructional approaches districts can use to serve adolescent newcomers, and the work of Andrea DeCapua and Helaine Marshall has been fundamental to understanding the needs of students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) who are significantly behind grade level in literacy and math skills.⁷ Along with Laurie Olsen and others who have called attention to the needs of long-term ELs,⁸ these researchers have sharpened the focus on the distinct needs and achievement patterns of subgroups of ELs—such as SIFE, recent immigrants who arrive with skills considered grade-level appropriate in their home countries, and long-term ELs. This research also

2 In their annual Consolidated State Performance Report to the federal government, states indicate the number of foreign-born children (ages 3 to 21) who have attended U.S. schools for no more than three years. However, these data are rarely used in data analysis because these raw numbers are not linked to other important data (e.g., on outcomes).

3 Researchers and policymakers differ in their definition of long-term English Learners (ELs), but they are commonly defined as students who have been identified as EL for six or more years.

4 The percent of ELs and all students scoring at or above proficient on state standardized tests is reported annually in online state report cards; results for the school year (SY) 2014–15 can be viewed at U.S. Department of Education, “SY 2014–2015 Consolidated State Performance Reports Part I,” updated February 2, 2017, www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/sy14-15part1/index.html.

5 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), “Common Core of Data (CCD)—Table 1. Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2014–15,” updated September 15, 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2014-15.asp.

6 Deborah J. Short and Beverly A. Boyson, *Helping Newcomer Students Succeed in Secondary Schools and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2012), www.cal.org/resource-center/publications/helping-newcomer-students; Deborah J. Short and Shannon Fitzsimmons, *Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007), <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/DoubleWork.pdf>.

7 Note that Andrea DeCapua and Helaine Marshall as well as other authors use the acronym SLIFE, which stands for students with limited or interrupted formal education. See Andrea DeCapua and Helaine W. Marshall, “Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in U.S. Classrooms,” *The Urban Review* 42, no. 2 (2010): 159–73; Andrea DeCapua and Helaine W. Marshall, *Breaking New Ground: Teaching Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in U.S. Secondary Schools* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

8 Laurie Olsen, *Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for California’s Long Term English Learners* (Long Beach, CA: Californians Together, 2010), www.californiantogether.org/reparable-harm-fulfilling-the-unkept-promise-of-educational-opportunity-for-californias-long-term-english-learners/.



captured another important trend: over the last two decades, schools have broadened their approach to teaching ELs beyond helping students develop basic, conversational English to ensuring they learn academic English skills across content areas such as language arts, math, science, and social studies. As new research and accountability guidelines brought these goals into focus, educational systems have developed approaches for teaching ELs in a way that allows them to access grade-level content concepts and develop language skills at the same time.

This report illustrates how school districts in a variety of states have responded to recent growth and new diversity in their newcomer student populations, examining the pedagogical shifts required to support student success (see Box 1). Some of the districts that have welcomed newcomers for many years had programs and processes in place to support them, and have more recently taken steps to adjust them in light of new research and needs; others have received relatively few adolescent newcomers in the past and are developing such systems from scratch.

Box 1. The Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success

The district and school practices described in this report are based on insights shared by participants in the Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, a project of the National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). Launched in mid-2016, the Learning Network brought together administrators and practitioners in the education, social services, and physical and mental health fields who are engaged in providing services to newcomers ages 12 to 21. Participants hailed from 36 districts in 13 states, with districts varying in terms of geography, demographics, and size—from very small (four with total student enrollment of less than 10,000) to very large (ten with enrollment exceeding 100,000). The primary goal of the project was to encourage peer sharing and learning among practitioners across sectors. Participants had access to a range of resources and were invited to participate in regularly scheduled webinars and briefing calls.

The experiences, insights, and practices discussed in this report are drawn from two primary sources:

- **Semi-structured interviews.** The author conducted interviews with individual Learning Network participants, including EL directors and other specialists who work with immigrant and refugee students, and senior administrators of community-based organizations (CBOs) that provide services to districts or district-based providers of mental health and student engagement support.
- **Webinars and briefing calls.** The topics of these Learning Network sessions were academic cultural orientation, services for older newcomers, family support, school/community partnerships, and mental health services.

Additional information is also drawn from two related events in which some Learning Network members participated: an MPI-organized session at the December 2016 National Immigrant Integration Conference on district/CBO collaboration in providing services to secondary newcomers, and a private transatlantic symposium MPI held in Brussels in 2015 that brought together leaders in immigrant education from several U.S. states and European countries to discuss common challenges in secondary education.

To ensure the Learning Network was a place where practitioners could feel safe in discussing challenges to and areas of weakness in their programs, the network website and webinars were only available to approved participants, and this report references personal sources and their districts or organization by name only where permission has been granted, while others remain anonymous.



Importantly, the experiences of some districts between roughly 2014 and 2016 demonstrate that even localities with a great deal of experience serving ELs can find it challenging to adapt to unpredictable and dramatic increases in arrivals, heightened linguistic diversity (e.g., Central American youth who speak indigenous languages), and an increase in SIFE and youth who are older than traditional high school age but still have the right to access free, public education.⁹

Even localities with a great deal of experience serving ELs can find it challenging to adapt to unpredictable and dramatic increases in arrivals.

This study provides insight into how districts and their community partners addressed these challenges by: supporting the identification of students' academic and socioemotional needs (on arrival and on an ongoing basis); creating support programs in physical and mental health, mentoring, and family reunification; designing programs and curricular pathways that balance student needs with state policy constraints; and increasing capacity in terms of physical space and staffing levels as well as through professional development. The variation in district policies and practices illustrates that similar needs and tensions may be successfully addressed in a variety of ways.

II. Who Are Newcomer Students?

Newcomer students in the United States are a diverse population. They include immigrants with legal status, such as legal permanent residents and refugees, as well as unauthorized immigrants and unaccompanied children. For the purposes of this report, which focuses on youth enrolled or potentially enrolled in middle and high school, newcomer students are also defined based on the support they need, including English language development, remediation in academic content, and/or cultural orientation.¹⁰

Data on the total number of newcomers served by U.S. schools are difficult to come by, and the size of subpopulations such as unaccompanied minors are even more difficult to ascertain because U.S. schools do not inquire about immigration status at registration.¹¹ As noted earlier, the newcomer population is generally described using data on identified ELs as a proxy even though ELs include both foreign- and U.S.-born children. In SY 2014–15, the federal government reported that 4.8 million ELs were enrolled in public schools, representing 9.8 percent of all students.¹²

9 As of 2015, 24 states plus the District of Columbia required students without a high school degree to attend school until age 18, and in 34 states plus Washington, DC, free education must be offered to youth up to at least age 21. See Stephanie Aragon, "Free and Compulsory School Age Requirements" (fact sheet, Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO, May 2015), www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/18/68/11868.pdf.

10 While they are technically newcomers to the country, English-proficient immigrant youth are not generally considered newcomers by practitioners or in the research literature, where the primary focus is on newly arrived EL students.

11 The U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the 1982 case *Plyler v. Doe* has been interpreted to mean that because students have the right to a free, public education regardless of their immigration status, districts must not ask questions during enrollment that might make unauthorized immigrant parents reluctant to enroll their children in school. Nevertheless, some schools do capture in their data systems whether students belong to specific immigrant groups, such as refugees or unaccompanied child. Federal guidance on enrollment procedures was outlined in 2014 in by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education; see Catherine E. Lhamon, Philip H. Rosenfelt, and Jocelyn Samuels, "Dear Colleague Letter: School Enrollment Procedures" (letter, U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, May 8, 2014), www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201405.pdf.

12 NCES, "Digest of Education Statistics—Table 204.27. English language learner (ELL) Students Enrolled in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Grade, Home Language, and Selected Student Characteristics: Selected Years, 2008–09 through Fall 2014," updated August 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_204.27.asp.



Although data collected by school systems are not reported at the national level in sufficient detail to examine trends in the numbers of adolescent newcomers, U.S. Census Bureau data may be used to make several estimates about this population:¹³

- Between 2010 and 2014, an average of 154,100 Limited English Proficient (LEP)¹⁴ youth (ages 12 to 21) immigrated to the United States annually; of these youth, about 49,800 were within the traditional high school ages of 14 to 17.¹⁵
- In 2015, 42 percent of LEP youth enrolled in grades 6 through 12 were foreign born.¹⁶

These data show LEP newcomer youth—who include unaccompanied child migrants, refugees, and other immigrant groups—to be a relatively small segment of the EL population. The majority are students who were born in the United States and are therefore U.S. citizens.

In some cases, these youth were reunited with their parents after many years and met siblings for the first time—an adjustment that can be difficult for many families.

In light of the dramatic increase in 2014 of Central American children arriving in the United States and, subsequently, entering U.S. schools, meeting the academic and socioemotional needs of these students has become a touchstone of many discussions of newcomer education and a unique challenge for school districts. Many of these youth had little formal education in their country of origin, and the factors that drove many to migrate (e.g., high levels of food insecurity, poverty, and violence, including drug- and gang-related homicides and domestic abuse) as well as dangerous conditions in transit have had lingering effects on their physical and mental health.¹⁷ Although these young people traveled unaccompanied by a parent or guardian to the United States, many reunited with parents or other close family members after they arrived and were taken into the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In some cases, these youth were reunited with their parents after many years and met siblings for the first time—an adjustment that can be difficult for many families. While it remains to be seen whether policies under the Trump administration will decrease the number of new unaccompanied minors settling in U.S. communities, backlogs in immigration legal proceedings mean that those already in the United States may stay for a considerable time, and many may eventually receive permanent legal status.¹⁸

Table 1 shows the number of unaccompanied children who were detained at the U.S./Mexico border from October 2013 through September 2017 and then released to family members or other sponsors in the United States.

13 Note, however, that U.S. Census Bureau data generally undercount LEP students. In contrast to the 4.8 million ELs reported by the U.S. Department of Education in SY 2014–15, the 2015 American Community Survey (ACS) reports only 2.3 million LEP individuals over age 5 enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12.

14 The ACS asks respondents who speak a language other than English at home if they speak English “not at all,” “not well,” “well,” or “very well.” The first three responses are aggregated to create a category of people who are Limited English Proficient (LEP). Because these categories are self-reported, they are based on respondents’ subjective assessments (or, in the case of minors, the responses of parents or guardians on behalf of their children). See Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, “The Limited English Proficient Population in the United States,” *Migration Information Source*, July 8, 2015, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/limited-english-proficient-population-united-states.

15 This calculation counts youth who were between the target ages during the year that they arrived in the United States. Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015 ACS.

16 MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2015 ACS.

17 Marc R. Rosenblum and Isabel Ball, *Trends in Unaccompanied Child and Family Migration from Central America* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/trends-unaccompanied-child-and-family-migration-central-america.

18 Sarah Pierce, *Unaccompanied Child Migrants in U.S. Communities, Immigration Court, and Schools* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/unaccompanied-child-migrants-us-communities-immigration-court-and-schools.

**Table 1. Number of Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors, Fiscal Year (FY) 2014–17**

Fiscal Year	Number of Unaccompanied Children
2014	53,515
2015	27,840
2016	52,147
2017	42,416
Total	175,918

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Unaccompanied Alien Children Released to Sponsors by State,” updated October 26, 2017, www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/ucs/state-by-state-uc-placed-sponsors.

On average, 81 percent of unaccompanied minors who arrived in the United States in 2014 through 2016 were between the ages of 13 and 17.¹⁹ Additionally, these youth were not evenly distributed throughout the country. Rather, as Table 2 shows, one-third of these children released in 2016 went to just ten counties.

Table 2. Top Ten Counties Receiving Unaccompanied Children, FY 2016

State	County	Total Number of Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors in FY 2016
California	Los Angeles County	3,517
Texas	Harris County	3,470
New York	Suffolk County	1,472
Maryland	Prince George’s County	1,420
Florida	Miami-Dade County	1,325
Virginia	Fairfax County	1,321
Florida	Palm Beach County	1,260
New York	Nassau County	1,219
Texas	Dallas County	1,103
Maryland	Montgomery County	1,079

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by County, FY16,” updated January 26, 2017, www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/unaccompanied-children-released-to-sponsors-by-county-fy16.

Both large and small school districts have been affected by the arrival of unaccompanied minors over the last four years. Among the top ten counties listed in Table 2 are counties in which there is only one school district (such as Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties in Maryland), counties that are dominated by a large city school district (such as Los Angeles Unified School District in Los Angeles County, California and Houston Independent School District in Harris County, Texas), and counties that are made up of dozens of relatively small districts (such as Nassau and Suffolk Counties in New York).

Many of these same districts also welcome significant numbers of refugee students each year, as do many suburban and small-town school districts throughout the country. These areas are attractive for refugee resettlement; local officials often invite the resettlement of newcomers to boost the local population, and these areas boast a lower cost of living than large cities.²⁰ In FY 2015, 14,262 refugees between ages 10

19 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Facts and Data—Age,” updated June 30, 2017, www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/about/ucs/facts-and-data.

20 See, for example, Tim Henderson, “Shrinking Small Towns See Hope in Refugees,” Stateline, August 5, 2016, www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2016/08/05/shrinking-small-towns-see-hope-in-refugees.



and 19 were resettled throughout the United States.²¹ Among all refugees admitted that year, Burma (also known as Myanmar), Iraq, and Somalia were the top countries of origin, and Syria had risen into the top ten where it has stayed in the two years since.²² Many refugee students from these and other countries enter U.S. schools having experienced interruptions in their formal education and trauma due to war, violence, or dangerous conditions while fleeing their country of origin to seek safety elsewhere.

Although the arrival of new refugee and unaccompanied child populations affected some communities more than others, their arrival has spurred helpful discussions relevant to the broader secondary-school-age newcomer population. And while the Trump administration has taken steps to cut refugee admissions²³ and may enact changes to how unaccompanied minors are processed and to other legal immigration channels,²⁴ the children and youth who have already arrived will continue to be a significant presence in communities and schools around the country. As such, they are likely to remain an important population for educators and policymakers in the years to come.

III. Identifying and Meeting Students' Comprehensive Needs

From the time newcomers enter a school in the United States, their districts are engaged in learning about their educational and linguistic background, what they experienced in their home countries and en route to the United States, and their hopes and plans for the future. Districts have invested considerable energy in creating systems to gather information about students in order to place them in the right educational program and provide the right academic and nonacademic supports. Many districts have benefited from community partnerships that bring in additional expertise and cultural knowledge to shape effective interventions that help students overcome barriers to school success.

While many districts make considerable efforts to ensure the school registration process is responsive to the needs of students and their families, these systems take many different forms.

A. Intake and Registration

For many immigrant families, their first contact with any U.S. institution occurs when they enroll their children in a school. While many districts make considerable efforts to ensure the school registration process is responsive to the needs of students and their families, these systems take many different forms. School districts around the country differ in whether incoming secondary-school students are directed to go to their assigned neighborhood school or to a central intake or welcome center. In some cases, all new students register at a central office regardless of their background. In others, the central intake location is only for linguistically and culturally diverse families; parents may hear about this option

21 U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), "2015 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics—Table 15. Refugee Arrivals by Relationship to Principal Applicant and Sex, Age, and Marital Status: Fiscal Year 2015," updated December 15, 2016, www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015/table15.

22 Jie Zong and Jeanna Batalova, "Refugees and Asylees in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, June 7, 2017, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states.

23 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2018* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2017), www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/274613.htm.

24 Sela Cowger, Jessica Bolter, and Sarah Pierce, *The First 100 Days: Summary of Major Immigration Actions Taken by the Trump Administration* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/first-100-days-summary-major-immigration-actions-taken-trump-administration.



through word of mouth or from CBOs that work with refugees and immigrants, or they may be directed there by information on the district website or by staff at their local school.

There are advantages and disadvantages to having a centralized intake location. A central office may be far from students' homes or in an area difficult to reach by public transportation, but it does make it possible for the district to ensure that students are given a consistent and linguistically appropriate welcome and an appropriate educational placement based on the services that each school provides. Having an intake or welcome center specifically for newcomer families allows the district to provide specialized services in an environment that feels welcoming to parents who do not speak English.

Some districts have a combination approach whereby some intake services are offered at the central office and others at the designated school. In others, school-based administrators responsible for student registration can consult with district officials as needed. For example, in Atlanta Public Schools, high schools may call the district newcomer specialist to a school to help develop a class schedule and support plan for a newly enrolled student.²⁵ Some districts ask that students register at their assigned home school but administrators are empowered to refer students to other schools that may have better services for them, such as a newcomer program. However, not all systems are set up for such cooperation. One very large district represented in the Learning Network does have a school-choice system allowing parents to enroll their children in a school outside their neighborhood, but schools do not have systems in place to facilitate referrals to other schools. Therefore, parents can only take advantage of the choice system if they have the know-how to access and complete the application and can provide their own transportation.²⁶

During the registration process, federal regulations require districts to ask all families about their home language use in order to determine whether students are potentially ELs.²⁷ The home language questionnaire generally asks what language(s) is/are spoken in the home by the student and household members, as well as which language(s) the student learned to speak first. If the answers to these questions indicate that the student may be an EL, he or she must be given an English language proficiency assessment. Parents must be informed of the result of that assessment and have the right to refuse EL services (but not to refuse the identification of a student as an EL).²⁸ Because the language screening can be scored immediately, administrators can explain to parents the instructional services the district offers and help them consider which best suit the needs of their child before completing the registration process.

Intake services for secondary-school students also include a review of the student's educational history in order to inform grade-level and course placement. This may include the evaluation of student transcripts, if they are available, but may also be based on an interview with the student and/or parent. Many districts place SIFE in ninth grade even if they are older than age 14 so that they may have access to the full high school course of study. Some districts also offer services such as a health screening or discussion with parents about resources available in the community at registration. For instance, in the Los Angeles Unified School District, which has integrated physical and mental health services, a psychiatric social worker is available to immediately meet with the student and family to conduct a brief assessment of their needs, including those involving mental health. The district also provides referrals to community resources, including legal services, and follows up with families after six weeks to ensure they have contacted their referrals.²⁹ Similarly, Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia has a centralized welcome center that helps students who may have experienced trauma connect with counselors or social workers at their new schools.³⁰

25 Author interview with Katherine Stocking, Teacher on Special Assignment, and Margaret McKenzie, Coordinator, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and World Languages, Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta, GA, August 26, 2015.

26 Author interview with Refugee School Impact Grant administrator, September 10, 2015.

27 This is asked of all families to avoid profiling based on physical characteristics, last name, or other factors.

28 U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, *Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, 2015), www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-el-201501.pdf.

29 Author interview with Nicole Mitchell, Coordinator, Los Angeles Unified School Enrollment, Placement, and Assessment (SEPA) Center, Los Angeles, CA, August 20, 2015.

30 Jen Ferrara, Robin Hamby, and Karen Kleiber, "Support for Newcomer and Reunifying Families in Fairfax, Virginia" (presentation as part of the webinar Support for Newcomer and Reunifying Families, MPI, Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, April 19, 2017).



In contrast to these efforts to welcome newcomer students in a way that will set them up for academic success, some districts and schools have in recent years been publicly called out by advocates and the news media for failing to register students—typically children of unauthorized immigrants and older teenagers—or for inappropriately pushing them to alternative programs and adult education to avoid having to serve them in comprehensive high schools.³¹ In response to such reports, New York State issued guidance around enrollment policies with the intention of ensuring schools follow through on their obligation to serve all students and to inform staff responsible for enrollment of alternative types of documentation they should accept as proof of a family’s residence within the school or district boundaries.³²

B. Ongoing Academic Support and Cultural Orientation

After registration, newcomers typically receive some type of orientation, ranging from informal conversations with peers or administrators to formal presentations. Such orientations cover topics that would be discussed with anyone new to the district (such as daily schedules and extracurricular activities) as well as issues of particular relevance to students who may be unfamiliar with U.S. schooling. This can include how to respectfully interact with teachers, the importance of asking questions, disciplinary expectations, and why it is important to graduate from high school. Orientation to school life is particularly critical for SIFE who may have limited experience with cultural and behavioral expectations in a formal school environment and who may not have developed skills such as taking notes and studying at home. As schools organize orientation sessions, they may choose to survey teachers and administrators to identify important challenges that can be addressed proactively or former newcomers who can share what they wish they had known when they started school in the United States.

Orientation to school life is particularly critical for SIFE ... who may not have developed learning-to-learn skills such as taking notes and studying at home.

Helping newcomer students understand school culture is a process that continues well beyond the first week of school. In addition to relatively surface-level differences between home-country and U.S. school cultures, such as rules about speaking in class, behavior in the hallways, or purchasing lunch in the cafeteria, students must also be oriented to culturally specific ways of thinking that are normative in U.S. classrooms. This can include viewing learning as a foundation for future learning (rather than solely as a tool for practical use) and understanding the emphasis placed on individual achievement.³³ Students who have attended school in other countries might also be used to a far less participatory learning environment based on teacher lecture and choral response rather than group work or expressing opinions in response to reading or other prompts.³⁴

Some districts have created systems to ensure that newcomers are supported academically and socially in a way that is both intentional and consistent. In Portland Public Schools (Maine), cultural orientation is integrated into newcomer classes and focuses on U.S. schooling and high school culture. Several additional supports are also offered to ELs, including summer learning, academic coaching, and

31 Garance Burke and Adrian Sainz, “AP Exclusive: Migrant Children Kept from Enrolling in School,” Associated Press, May 2, 2016, <https://apnews.com/b7f933ef6e054c2ca8e32bd9b477e9ab/ap-exclusive-migrant-children-kept-enrolling-school>.

32 Cosimo Tangorra, Jr. and Angelica Infante Green, “Enrolling and Serving Recently Arrived Unaccompanied Children” (slides, New York State Education Department, Engage NY, Albany, NY, September 10, 2014), www.p12.nysed.gov/ssss/pps/residency/nysed-unaccompanied-children-presentation.pdf.

33 DeCapua and Marshall, “Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in U.S. Classrooms.”

34 Sarah Dryden-Peterson, *The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/educational-experiences-refugee-children-countries-first-asylum.



partnerships with youth-serving community agencies.³⁵ Similarly, Houston Independent School District integrates cultural orientation into coursework, using the curriculum *Inside the USA* from *National Geographic* during the first six weeks of class to prompt discussion of topics such as the characteristics of U.S. schools and students' migration experiences.³⁶

For some localities, district staff share with school-based staff the responsibility for working directly with students. In Aurora Public Schools (Colorado), for example, most newcomer students attend the high school across the street from the district welcome center, so the center offers a support program for SIFE from that high school twice a week. In that program, students work on English language development and literacy, while also building crosscultural relationships with peers and teachers that aid social adjustment. The program also connects students with extracurricular programs based on their interests, with the aim of increasing school engagement. Staff keep track of student attendance at school and advocate for students when necessary.³⁷

Still other districts position newcomer orientation within a broader spectrum of outreach and services to immigrant and refugee families. Copiague School District, a small district on Long Island, New York, hosts an extensive Saturday program that provides classes for K-12 students, adult education and citizenship courses, health fairs, and community outreach for parents (such as breast cancer awareness and information on how to get a bank account or library card). The district also has a home visit team in every school to provide support to families that are experiencing challenges; the program aims to overcome the intimidation some families feel about going to the school by meeting them at home and providing contact information for bilingual staff at the school with whom families can feel comfortable talking. Additionally, the district has a transition coordinator and works with community partners to help EL students think about their options for postsecondary study and the college application process.³⁸

Districts apply a variety of strategies for creating support systems to manage students' and families' diverse needs. In Fairfax County, the office that oversees English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is available to consult with school staff to support their decision-making when it comes to ELs who are experiencing ongoing challenges. These teams can also assist schools in proactively creating supports for SIFE rather than waiting to see if students struggle academically.³⁹ In response to the recent influx of unaccompanied children, several districts involved in the Learning Network used federal Title III funds—a portion of which are intended to support schools that experience an increase in their recent immigrant population—to fund additional staff at the district or school level to coordinate services (within the district and via referrals to outside services), mentor and advocate for students, encourage school attendance, work with parents, and address the needs of specific subpopulations.

C. Community Partnerships

CBOs play an important role in supporting newcomer students, especially in districts with rapidly changing demographics where the community knowledge they bring can bridge gaps in the cultural competency of school staff working with newcomers. These organizations often play a number of roles and offer a variety of services in the community, making them a natural partner for districts with limited capacity to offer or refer students to physical and mental health, legal, and housing services. They may also be able to implement interventions that have proven successful elsewhere, enabling school districts to benefit from the experiences of other localities.

Districts and CBOs seeking to work together productively can take a number of steps to smooth collaboration. These include formalizing partnerships so that expectations are jointly agreed and set in

35 Grace Valenzuela, "Preparing Newcomers to Schooling in the U.S." (presentation as part of the webinar Academic Cultural Orientation for Secondary Newcomers, MPI, Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, October 27, 2016).

36 Virginia Elizondo, "Academic Cultural Orientation for Secondary Newcomers" (presentation as part of the webinar Academic Cultural Orientation for Secondary Newcomers, MPI, Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, October 27, 2016).

37 Author interview with Jean Burke, Director, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education, and Silvia Tamminen, Welcome Center Coordinator, Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, CO, June 15, 2016.

38 Author interview with Michelle Budion, Director of English as a New Language and World Languages, Copiague School District, Copiague, NY, September 14, 2016.

39 Ferrara, Hamby, and Kleiber, "Support for Newcomer and Reunifying Families."



writing from the beginning, setting up regular meetings between school and CBO staff, establishing a data sharing agreement that lays out what student data can be released while respecting privacy rights, and facilitating communication between practitioners at different sites who work with the same students.

One example of a well-established partnership can be seen in Washington, DC, where the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) works with area school districts on a number of initiatives. These include a Promotor Pathway that targets those students who are most at-risk of dropping out of school. The organization places *Promotores* in local schools to act as case managers and mentors for students over a period of four to six years. The goal of this work is to improve students' academic engagement and to help them achieve their educational and career goals and engage in healthy behaviors.⁴⁰ A key characteristic of the work LAYC does is consistency. The center aims to create a pipeline of services across feeder schools so the same LAYC staff serve a cohort of students over an extended period of time. To the same end, LAYC also implements training that allows school-based and LAYC staff to develop common skills and approaches, use common concepts (such as positive youth development), and share data across LAYC services.⁴¹

*Legal and mental health services are in particularly high demand,
but accessibility remains highly uneven.*

Another partnership that shared its approach with the Learning Network exemplifies how community groups can quickly fill important gaps in service provision for schools with changing populations. Communities in Schools (CIS) is the nation's largest dropout prevention program, operating in 25 states and the District of Columbia. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, an increase in the number of unaccompanied minors (about half of whom attended just four schools—one elementary, one middle, and two high schools) prompted a partnership with the local CIS affiliate. Together, CIS and the district created a specialist staff position to coordinate services for these child migrants and brought in additional case managers and other staff to address the students' socioemotional needs. CIS provided support across the board in attendance, behavior, coursework, and parent engagement, while also working one-on-one with students and offering know-your-rights workshops for students, teachers, and administrators.⁴²

In other communities, CBOs have partnered with districts to implement a parent-to-parent network to engage newcomer families and provide services such as afterschool tutoring, youth leadership development, assistance with college applications, and afterschool meals. CBOs often provide mental health services as well, as will be discussed in Section III.D. Legal and mental health services are in particularly high demand, but accessibility remains highly uneven. Many localities lack translators or providers who speak students' home languages (especially languages other than Spanish) and who can offer free or low-cost services. Some states also have rules limiting access to Medicaid for unaccompanied minors, which is the primary way for low-income individuals to access physical and mental health services, including those offered by school-based clinics. Accessing services in suburban or rural areas can be even more of a challenge, particularly where public transportation is lacking and fewer providers have the specialized knowledge and skills needed.

40 For additional details on the impact of the program, see Brett Theodos et al., *Solutions for Youth: An Evaluation of the Latin American Youth Center's Promotor Pathway Program* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2016), www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/2000742-Solutions-for-Youth-An-Evaluation-of-the-Latin-American-Youth-Center's-Promotor-Pathway-Program.pdf.

41 Luis A. Quiñones, "Latin American Youth Center" (presentation as part of the webinar School/Community Partnerships to Provide Holistic Support to Newcomer Students, MPI, Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, January 30, 2017).

42 Federico Rios, "Communities in Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg: Immigrant Services" (presentation as part of the webinar School/Community Partnerships to Provide Holistic Support to Newcomer Students, MPI, Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, January 30, 2017).



In comparison to districts in which CBOs fill discrete gaps in services or provide some, but not all, the services students need, Oakland Unified School District has made an intensive investment—along with city and county government—in wrap-around services.⁴³ The district is working toward making all campuses full-service community schools, meaning that schools serve as hubs for a variety of services, whether provided by the school, other public agencies, or CBOs. While some campuses are still building their program, all 16 schools in the district that host newcomer centers are already community schools and all but one have an onsite health and mental health clinic supported by the county. Other services supported by CBOs (and supervised by a school-based coordinator) include restorative justice,⁴⁴ college counseling, student engagement, community navigators, and trauma response. Of note in recent years, the city and county have supported nonprofit legal services for unaccompanied children, efforts that connected at least 350 students to representation as of December 2016. Another notable partner, Soccer Without Borders, runs teams at middle and high schools that staff have found to be very impactful in terms of student engagement.⁴⁵ It is only through the wide range of partner organizations that the district is able to offer the breadth of services that it does.

D. Mental Health Services

One specific area where wrap-around services have been in high demand is in providing mental health supports. Many communities have reported a shortage of affordable options, and services are often offered in a limited number of languages other than English, if at all. Although it is too early for robust research to be available on the most recently arrived cohorts of students, practitioners working with newcomer youth have reported a high incidence of trauma among some groups—especially child migrants who fled Central America and some refugee groups including Syrians.

Many communities have reported a shortage of affordable options, and services are often offered in a limited number of languages other than English.

For all practitioners who work with newcomers, it is critical to understand how the students' life and schooling before arriving in the United States can shape how they find their place in U.S. schools. For example, many unaccompanied minors who arrived in the United States in the last few years came not just for economic opportunity but also in some cases to escape gang violence and sometimes neglect by caretakers with whom they were left when their parents immigrated to the United States, sometimes many years earlier. In their home countries and en route to the United States, some will have been exposed to violence, sexual assault, and trafficking. Their post-traumatic stress symptoms are the result of complex trauma, which can look different from trauma caused by a single event, and may manifest as externalizing behaviors (e.g., acting out) and/or internalizing behaviors (e.g., self-isolation).⁴⁶ Family reunification can also be stressful and confusing for both youth and their parents or other relatives. And, for unaccompanied children as well as many other newcomers, the process of finding one's footing in a new culture and learning a new language is often fraught with challenges and stress.

43 Wrap-around services generally refer to nonacademic services offered on school campuses that might otherwise be offered in community-based clinics, such as physical and mental health, legal, and social work services.

44 Restorative justice is a model of preventing and addressing interpersonal conflicts through nonpunitive actions that repair relationships and support meaningful accountability. See Oakland Unified School District, "Restorative Justice," updated March 16, 2017, www.ousd.org/domain/134.

45 Tom Hughes, "Community Schools for Newcomers: Oakland's Partnerships in Service of Recent Immigrant Students" (presentation at the annual National Immigrant Integration Conference, Nashville, TN, December 13, 2016).

46 Cristina Muñiz de la Peña, "Unaccompanied Immigrant Children: Providing Care and Supporting Resiliency" (presentation as part of the webinar Recognizing and Addressing Trauma in Adolescent Newcomers, MPI, Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, March 3, 2017).



The subsections that follow profile three systems that support students' mental health and emotional needs. They demonstrate how well-resourced organizations (whether a district or a CBO) can provide critical services to address acute issues and ongoing cultural adjustment. Their approaches include working with groups of students, families, and/or educators in order to harness all-important peer support and build capacity to provide trauma-informed services across the system.

I. Los Angeles Unified School District

School Mental Health, a department within the Los Angeles Unified School District, provides school-based psychiatric social workers, individual and family therapy through a clinic and wellness center, intensive education-related counseling through students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and crisis counseling. The clinic and wellness center provide mental health services through a tiered support system that focus on developing resiliency, a sense of safety, the ability to be calm, self- and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope. Through universal supports offered to all students, the department aims to build familiarity and trust with the clinic prior to referring individual students to targeted supports; this comfort with mental health services increases the likelihood that students themselves will seek help and accept the supports provided.

This training seeks to change the paradigm from a focus on behavior to a focus on understanding the roots of the behavior and providing support.

The wellness clinic also provides trauma-informed professional development to district and school staff. This training seeks to change the paradigm from a focus on behavior to a focus on understanding the roots of the behavior and providing support—changing the question from “what’s wrong with you?” to “what happened to you?” The training encourages staff to provide students with clear limits on behavior, develop logical rather than punitive consequences, give students choices, and help students feel understood and supported. The team also provides training on “psychological first aid,” a concept that stresses how adults can help students feel heard and protected, even when they are not able to provide the full extent of the support needed. It stresses the importance of listening when students communicate something related to trauma in their lives, being mindful not to cut the student off or respond in a way that makes them feel like what they have shared is somehow harmful, dangerous, or provoking bad feelings in the adult.⁴⁷

For students who require targeted supports, the clinic offers the Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS) Resiliency Classroom Curriculum. This program, which generally entails between eight and ten sessions, is offered to selected classes (such as ninth grade health classes or newcomer English classes). Based on a program developed by the Nathanson Family Resilience Center and adapted for classroom use, the curriculum helps students and teachers cultivate a common set of skills that can be used to deal with the effects of chronic stress. It teaches a number of wellness skills such as problem solving, emotional regulation, and relaxation. Clinic staff have found that the program reduces the stigma associated with mental health issues and lowers the prevalence of trauma-related symptoms. Students typically find the group sessions to be a safe environment and are supportive of each other, with many working through similar circumstances. The FOCUS curriculum also serves as a way to screen for more intensive mental health needs.⁴⁸ As the second largest school district in the country, the ability of Los Angeles to meet all of these needs using district-based staff may be unique to its size and not fully replicable in other locations.

47 For more information, see the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, “Psychological First Aid for Schools (PFA-S),” accessed October 20, 2017, www.nctsn.org/content/psychological-first-aid-schoolspfa.

48 Kim Griffin-Esperon, “Promoting Resiliency for Newcomer Students” (presentation as part of the webinar Recognizing and Addressing Trauma in Adolescent Newcomers, MPI, Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, March 3, 2017).



However, the use of tiered supports—from universal to more targeted interventions based on student need—is a model that may work in other locations that can integrate some screening and intervention activities into class time and provide services in partnership with mental health CBOs.

2. Terra Firma in New York City

Located in New York City’s South Bronx, the program Terra Firma aims to meet the complex medical, mental health, and legal needs of unaccompanied minors and families. This co-located, integrated medical-legal partnership is embedded in a community health center affiliated with the Montefiore Health System and operates as a collaboration between Montefiore, Children’s Health Fund, and Catholic Charities. The key goals of the program are to promote health and wellbeing by providing a medical home through which to connect to services and by working collaboratively to improve the chances these child migrants have of gaining legal relief. The partnership also helps families through the reunification process and serves as an advocate, educating other practitioners about the needs of unaccompanied children and the interventions that can help them.

A core activity facilitated by Terra Firma is an afterschool immigrant youth clinic. Participants have an opportunity to meet individually with medical and mental health professionals as well as pro bono immigration attorneys. They also have the chance to participate in enrichment activities, such as tutoring, a communal dinner, and group therapy. For sponsors of unaccompanied minors (e.g., their family or caretakers), the program offers a monthly support group to offer assistance during the reunification process and to help sponsors learn about resources in the community and understand legal issues.

One of the noteworthy aspects of the program is the colocation of health and legal services. Having multidisciplinary professionals work alongside each other makes them more accessible to families and allows professionals from different disciplines to help each other understand client needs and contexts. Further, medical and mental health testimony can be critical to an immigrant youth’s attempts to gain legal relief; health professionals may be more aware of past trauma than a newcomer’s attorney and be in a position to testify in court.⁴⁹ These two services will continue to be a critical need as immigration courts work through the extensive backlog of unaccompanied child asylum claims.

3. Fairfax County Public Schools

As one of the top counties to receive unaccompanied children in recent years, Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia has developed an extensive Immigrant Family Reunification Program (IFRP). This program aims to help its students and their families work through the challenges that reunifying after prolonged separation can bring. The IFRP also offers professional development and resources for schools, though parent classes and support groups remain its core components.

As one example, the Families Reunite class runs in three 3-hour sessions, with the third session including both children and their parents. Classes are taught by district staff as well as community and faith-based leaders and are highly interactive. In the first session, parents discuss their lives in the United States, family communication, and parent engagement in education. The second focuses on helping parents understand the perspective of children and youth in the reunification process. And in the last session, parents and children work together on building connections, communication, self-awareness, and problem solving. For parents who need more support, there is also a parenting class and the opportunity for parent-led support groups.⁵⁰ Having started out as a home-grown solution to a pressing local problem, the Families Reunite curriculum serves as an example of an innovation that has been expanded and systematized to the point that it represents an approach that can be shared with other districts seeking to replicate its success. As more districts and communities develop approaches similar to those discussed in this section, there will be more opportunities to crosspollinate—whether through informal conversations among practitioners or through formal programs offered by CBOs and tailored to local contexts.

49 Muñiz de la Peña, “Unaccompanied Immigrant Children.”

50 Ferrara, Hamby, and Kleiber, “Support for Newcomer and Reunifying Families.”



IV. Design and Implementation of Instructional Programs

Building on strong EL instruction and newcomer program models that have evolved over decades, districts have created programmatic and curricular approaches to meet the needs of new student populations and to respond to changes in educational policies and research on effective practices. These approaches are developed within the policy and demographic context of each state and district and reflect administrator priorities and resource constraints. As a result, the examples in this section illustrate the complexity of pedagogical decision-making when it comes to designing program models and instructional courses.

A. Program Models

Districts approach the design of program models for secondary-school newcomer students in a variety of ways, and these may change based on the introduction of new state educational policies, shifts in the number of newcomers to arrive each year, and the diversity of their educational needs. Areas of divergence worth noting include whether:

- the district serves newcomers only at one or more designated sites versus at every neighborhood school;
- designated newcomer sites are standalone schools versus a strand within a comprehensive school⁵¹ (and, if the latter, the degree to which newcomers are integrated into general education classes);
- SIFE newcomers are taught alongside newcomers who have a higher level of native language literacy or only with other SIFE;
- students transition to a different program once they reach a certain level of English proficiency or stay in the school through graduation; and
- instruction is only in English, mostly in English, or is a transitional bilingual program that primarily uses the native language in the first year of instruction before increasing the amount of English used over the next two to three years.⁵²

One increasingly popular approach that was pioneered by the Internationals Network for Public Schools has resulted in notably higher graduation rates for participants compared to their peers in other programs.⁵³ Founded in New York City in 1985, by SY 2016–17 the organization had come to support 27 schools in five states plus the District of Columbia.⁵⁴ Students all enroll as newcomers (defined as having been enrolled in U.S. schools for four years or fewer), but remain at the school even after exiting from EL status. Students in Internationals classrooms are generally mixed by age, grade level (in grades 9 and 10), native language, academic background, and English proficiency level. In most Internationals schools, English is the primary language of instruction, but students' native languages are valued as

51 A standalone site is a school with its own administration that provides specialized services. In contrast, a comprehensive high school (usually synonymous with the term neighborhood high school) provides a full spectrum of educational programs. In some cases, a standalone site can be physically co-located in a building with other standalone or comprehensive schools; the important distinction is that in most cases students in standalone programs do not intermix for academics or school-sponsored extracurriculars with students from other co-located schools. In contrast, a strand within a school maintains some separate elements, such as its own course list and professional development, but the strand and the rest of the school run under one administration and students can intermix for whatever purposes the school chooses.

52 For more information on how these variations look in practice, see Short and Boyson, *Helping Newcomer Students Succeed*.

53 David L. Kirp, "How a School Network Helps Immigrant Kids Learn," *New York Times*, May 30, 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/05/31/opinion/sunday/how-a-school-network-helps-immigrant-kids-learn.html.

54 Those states are California, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, and New York. See Internationals Network for Public Schools, "International Schools," accessed September 11, 2017, <http://internationalsnps.org/international-high-schools/school-map/>.



resources. Central to the success of the model are a variety of practices that support the integration of language learning and academic content. These include experiential and cooperative learning, as well as collaborative teaching that pairs an interdisciplinary team of teachers with a cohort of students in order to facilitate planning across academic subjects and help teachers develop a well-rounded sense of student strengths.⁵⁵

In some districts, having one centralized newcomer center (or even several regional centers) is not logistically feasible. For example, in Atlanta Public Schools, an urban district with a relatively small number of newcomers, serving these youth at centralized locations was ruled out because of the excessive time it would take students to commute through heavy traffic and the fact that newcomers are relatively spread out across the district. Some Atlanta schools have a sufficiently large EL population to have one or more full time English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, while many other schools are served by itinerant teachers whose time is split among several sites. ESL teachers are generally allocated based on the number of ELs in the building, but the district has the flexibility to allocate more support to some locations, especially if they have a significant number of SIFE. Because the schools in which students are served have varying capacity levels, the type of services each student receives is tailored to the context; administrators have advanced creative solutions to serving students in schools that lack specialized staff, such as extending seat time by supplementing face-to-face instruction with educational technology.⁵⁶

Because the schools in which students are served have varying capacity levels, the type of services each student receives is tailored to the context.

Three school districts involved in the Learning Network illustrate the decision-making process associated with a district shifting its approach to newcomer education; two districts transitioned from centralized newcomer services provided in one building (from which students later transfer to their neighborhood high school) to services offered at multiple sites, while the third shifted in the opposite direction. For many years, the roughly 500 newcomer students entering San Francisco Unified School District high schools annually had been placed in a standalone newcomer school for one to two years before they transitioned to a comprehensive high school. In the late 2000s, district officials became concerned that students were not making adequate progress in acquisition of English and, after moving to their comprehensive high school, oftentimes needed to repeat courses to meet graduation requirements. The officials were also concerned that many students had to travel a significant distance to reach the newcomer high school, had few opportunities to interact with more fluent speakers of English, and had limited access to a full range of credit-bearing courses⁵⁷ and electives.

As a result, in 2010, the district decided to create six pathways sites—five as a strand within a comprehensive high school and one small, standalone high school affiliated with the Internationals Network for Public Schools. At each of these sites, students can access the newcomer services they need within the newcomer pathway and then gradually move into general education classes, thus remaining enrolled in the same school through graduation. Critical to the success of this change was the

55 Margie McHugh and Julie Sugarman, *Transatlantic Symposium Report: Improving Instruction for Immigrant and Refugee Students in Secondary Schools* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/transatlantic-symposium-report-improving-instruction-immigrant-and-refugee-students.

56 Author interview with Stocking and McKenzie.

57 In general, credit-bearing courses are aligned with state standards for a grade level and content area. For a comprehensive example of credit-bearing and non-credit-bearing courses, see New York City Department of Education, Office of Academic Policy and Systems, *High School Academic Policy Guide* (New York: New York City Department of Education, 2016), 28-31, <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/27BF8558-B895-407A-8F3F-78B1B69F030A/0/AcpolicyHighSchoolAcademicPolicyReferenceGuide.pdf>.



district's investment in intensive professional development for teachers, administrators, and counselors on the characteristics and needs of newcomers with varying educational and linguistic backgrounds. This training also helped ensure that all educators are familiar with the variety of English language development courses and supports available as well as what is appropriate for students with different needs, such as those with advanced levels of literacy in their native language and SIFE.⁵⁸

The second district involved in the Learning Network that changed its approach was motivated by some of the same concerns. In addition, its move away from a standalone site was also precipitated by the increase in the number of child migrants to enter district schools starting in 2013 and the EL director's belief that students should be served in their neighborhood communities. Because the original centralized program served a maximum of 18 students at a time, it had limited capacity to offer sheltered⁵⁹ content (math, science, social studies) and credit-bearing classes. And while newcomers could theoretically take content classes at a co-located alternative high school (to which transportation was already provided from all secondary schools, making it a logistically sensible choice), the nature of the curriculum at that school—which included considerable independent coursework—was ill-suited to the needs of EL students. As more unaccompanied minors began to arrive in the district, the largest high school that already had full time ESL staff was asked to keep their newcomers while other high schools were to continue sending students to the newcomer center. At the same time, the district began to offer extensive professional development for current staff and to hire additional ESL teachers to begin the shift toward serving more students at their home schools. By SY 2015–16, the newcomer program had been closed and students were largely served through cotaught sheltered classes.⁶⁰

Finally, the third district to make a change did so by consolidating services to make them more effective and accessible. Administrators in this district were concerned that comprehensive high schools were not adequately meeting the needs of the rapidly growing population of SIFE, and thus began to plan to open a specialized program for newcomers with very low levels of English proficiency. The district also wanted to bring such students together at a site that had wrap-around services tailored to their needs. In response to community feedback, the district adjusted its plan and created two sites that are open to ELs of all proficiency levels and in which students can stay enrolled through graduation. Both sites are co-located with other high schools but have their own administration. In addition to these two schools, about half of the other high schools in the district also serve ELs, offering a variety of ESL and sheltered content courses; for ELs who do not live within the boundaries of these schools, transportation is provided to the next closest school. District administrators decided on this as the preferable model because they felt there needed to be a minimum number of ELs in a school to offer the appropriate classes.⁶¹

Especially when faced with policy or demographic changes that require a quick response, many districts look to research and to peers for examples of program models that work. As the examples in this section show, there is no one solution that works in all contexts; rather, even seemingly opposite approaches (as with districts that centralize newcomer services and those that offer them at all neighborhood schools) can be different means to the same end goal of providing effective instruction to newcomers.

B. Class Placement and Course of Study

Whether a district has a designated newcomer site or serves students at their home schools, a number of factors go into administrator decisions about the design of their course of study. These include state policies, historical analysis of student needs, and the challenges and opportunities posed by staff capacity. As the scope of EL education has broadened to include both English acquisition and grade-level content, instructional planning for ELs has come to include their entire courseload—from ESL and sheltered content courses offered by EL teachers to support provided in the core content areas of English language arts, math, science, social studies and in art and elective classes. The course of study a particular student should follow is determined by his or her English language proficiency level and, often, by his or her level

58 McHugh and Sugarman, *Transatlantic Symposium Report*.

59 In sheltered content classes, teachers use a variety of strategies to help ELs understand the meaning of content concepts and to develop their language skills at the same time. Sheltered classes may enroll only ELs or a mix of ELs and non-ELs.

60 Author interview with teacher on special assignment/manager of district EL services, March 17, 2017.

61 Author interview with ESOL Instructional Supervisor, March 27, 2017.



of native language literacy and prior academic record. In recent years, many districts have also revised their EL course of study to reflect new accountability requirements (such as the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, as will be discussed later in this section) and research showing that ELs have been disproportionately denied access to advanced, college-preparatory coursework.⁶²

I. Diverse Approaches to Instructional Programs

In terms of state policy, Arizona and New York State offer a good demonstration of how divergent theories of language acquisition drive vastly different approaches to EL instruction. In Arizona, ELs are placed into a four-hour sheltered English immersion (SEI) block that focuses on discrete English language skills (which carries one core credit and three elective credits); they may also take up to two credit-bearing classes in core content areas. In designing this program, state policymakers assumed that the accelerated direct instruction in English grammar and vocabulary an SEI program offers would allow students to exit from EL status after one year and quickly enter general education courses at their grade level. However, a study conducted in SY 2009–10 found that few students were able to exit EL status within one year, as planned, and that those who could not increasingly fell behind in their core academic content.⁶³ Numerous policy and educational analyses have demonstrated that the design of SEI was based on ideology rather than research on effective instructional practices and—as the approach continues to be practiced in Arizona—has led to the exacerbation of educational equity for ELs.⁶⁴

In terms of state policy, Arizona and New York State offer a good demonstration of how divergent theories of language acquisition drive vastly different approaches to EL instruction.

In contrast, in 2014, New York State revised its regulations to increase EL access to grade-level, credit-bearing courses even in their first year in a U.S. school. Depending on their level of English language proficiency, ELs in New York must take between one-half and two units of standalone English as a new language (ENL, equivalent to ESL in other states), and between one and two units of integrated ENL. Integrated ENL classes count toward credit in core content areas and are taught either by a dually certified teacher or cotaught by an EL specialist and a teacher certified in the content area.⁶⁵ In this system, students are able to take as many credit-bearing courses as their non-EL peers and are supported in at least one of those courses with integrated EL instruction.

The majority of states do not prescribe a course of study for ELs in quite the level of detail that Arizona and New York State do. As a result, many districts have been acting on their own to address evolving student needs. In terms of the type of courses offered to newcomers and the sequence that students typically follow, some districts have a consistent program for newcomers from school to school; others allow each school to essentially create their own model using a combination of traditional ESL classes

62 Rebecca M. Callahan, “Tracking and High School English Learners: Limiting Opportunity to Learn,” *American Educational Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2005): 305–28.

63 Karen E. Lillie et al., *Policy in Practice: The Implementation of Structured English Immersion in Arizona* (Los Angeles: The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles, 2010), www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/language-minority-students/policy-in-practice-the-implementation-of-structured-english-immersion-in-arizona.

64 See, for example, Sarah Catherine K. Moore, ed., *Language Policy Processes and Consequences: Arizona Case Studies* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2014).

65 For the New York State Commissioner’s Regulations for units of study for English as a new language and transitional bilingual education programs, see New York State Education Department, “Units of Study Tables for English as a New Language (ENL) and Bilingual Education Programs,” accessed August 21, 2017, www.nysed.gov/bilingual-ed/schools/units-study-tables-english-new-language-enl-and-bilingual-education-programs.



(focused on language and literacy development), push-in support during content instruction, sheltered content classes, coteaching, and general education classes (conducted by teachers who may or may not have training in teaching ELs, and who may or may not have opportunities to consult with ESL teachers).

An ongoing source of concern for many EL administrators is how to serve newcomers in schools with a small number of ELs. When only a handful of ELs are present in a school and all are served by an itinerant ESL teacher, it can be challenging to ensure that all students, including newcomers, are receiving the district- or state-required minimum level of service based on their English proficiency level. For such schools, it is difficult to implement some of the aforementioned types of support—push-in, sheltered content, and coteaching—with limited time available for teacher/student contact. In these schools, students are likely to spend most of their day in general education classes. While not specialized, these classes can nonetheless provide effective instruction to newcomers as long as teachers are well trained in working with ELs and are supported by school and district administrators and have the resources they need.

An ongoing source of concern for many EL administrators is how to serve newcomers in schools with a small number of ELs.

Many districts have taken steps over the last few years to prepare more general education teachers to provide sheltered content for ELs (see Section IV.D.). In doing so, several have found it preferable to group first-year newcomers together for general education classes, rather than to spread them out across all sections equally. In Houston, for example, grouping newcomer students together as a cohort that attend all content area classes together allows specialists to work with specific teachers to help them learn strategies for effectively teaching ELs, while also allowing the school to ensure that newcomers are placed with the teachers who will be the most supportive.⁶⁶ Atlanta Public Schools has followed a similar strategy of placing newcomer students with teachers who are experienced in working with ELs and who are open to building their professional capacity to serve those students.⁶⁷ Other districts go further, requiring educators who teach ELs (or specifically newcomers) to have an endorsement to their teaching certification signifying their additional training in EL instructional methods.

Even when schools provide the best instruction possible given their capacity, this variation in approach can produce mixed results. One way schools have sought to increase consistency and alignment with a proven approach is by adopting the model created by the Internationals Network for Public Schools. As noted earlier, these schools tend to use a great deal of project-based learning in mixed-level classes, in which all students are ELs or former ELs and where all teachers have training and credentials on EL learning. Although schools and districts can adequately serve students by combining various instructional models based on the resources they have available, having the structure that the Internationals Network model provides allows schools to create a cohesive program based on research-based principles of instruction.

2. The Push for a Four-Year Path to Graduation

Among the school districts interviewed for this project, several indicated a focus on increasing newcomer students' access to credit-bearing content courses in order to accelerate their path toward high school graduation. Previously, those school districts had routinely placed new arrivals—especially SIFE—in

⁶⁶ Elizondo, "Academic Cultural Orientation."

⁶⁷ Katherine Stocking, "Atlanta Public Schools" (presentation as part of the briefing call Program Models for Newcomers Over Age 16, MPI, Learning Network for Newcomer Youth Success, September 15, 2016).



non-credit-bearing ESL classes and remedial content classes to allow them one or more semesters to catch up on language and content concepts before enrolling in high school general education courses. This automatically placed these students on a five-year path to graduation, as they were not earning high school credits at the same pace as their non-EL peers. Increasingly, however, districts are developing creative ways to ensure that students get credit for their early coursework so they have a pathway to graduating from high school in four years.

Creating a four-year graduation path for newcomers responds to a number of concerns. First, under the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, schools are required to report their four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate—the rate at which students entering ninth grade graduate within four years. As a result, schools and districts are under pressure to ensure that they hit the state-determined goal for the share of students to graduate in four years (and the formula all states are required to use allows no exceptions for ELs). An instructional design that automatically puts newcomers on a five-year path to graduation can raise concerns among administrators that their school would be disadvantaged in terms of accountability metrics compared to schools without a newcomer program. Creating a four-year path can help administrators feel comfortable with the idea of serving newcomers, while also attending to the metrics by which they will be judged. Offering newcomer ESL and sheltered content classes for credit can also help districts meet their obligations under federal civil rights statutes to provide all students—including ELs—access to the same rigorous, grade-level academic content.⁶⁸ Finally, for students who enter high school at an age older than that of a typical incoming freshmen, a four-year path to graduation increases their chances of graduating before aging out of the system (at age 20 or 21 in most states).

Schools and districts are under pressure to ensure that they hit the state-determined goal for the share of students to graduate in four years.

However, it is important to note that research has not yet shown that a four-year pathway to graduation is beneficial to students' long-term academic goals or results in accelerated progress in English language proficiency. The four-year pathway does not make assessments any easier or give newcomers any more time to acquire the language, but it does respond to the concerns of school administrators that schools serving high numbers of ELs are penalized when it comes to accountability for graduation rates. As this strategy of combining all remedial work and the ninth-grade curriculum into one year is implemented more widely, researchers and practitioners may find it to be infeasible. They may also find that the accelerated four-year approach allows students to successfully accumulate graduation credits but is generally not able to provide the kind of academic preparation needed in postsecondary work—a criticism that has been made of high school credit-recovery programs.⁶⁹

Depending on state and district credit requirements, students may not have to take credit-bearing classes in all content areas every year. In cases where students are only required to take three or fewer years of a subject, schools may offer newcomers a year of elective classes that focuses on the language required to succeed in the content areas, followed the next year by the first course in the high school content sequence. In one Learning Network district, students had been taking a class focused on the language of math in their first year followed by a three-year credit-bearing sequence of math courses—a line-up that met the graduation requirement that students take three years of math. When the state increased the graduation requirement to four years of math, the district developed a new credit-bearing course that introduces students to all of the mathematical concepts introduced from elementary school through algebra. This course is frequently cotaught by one teacher certified in math and one certified in ESL, but

68 U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, *Dear Colleague Letter: English Learner Students*.

69 Julie McCabe and Rebecca St. Andrie, "Credit Recovery Programs: Full Report," Center for Public Education, January 26, 2012, www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Staffingstudents/Credit-recovery-programs/Credit-recovery-programs-full-report.html.



can also be taught by a dually certified teacher. The district has similarly revised its newcomer ESL class to align with grade-level English language arts standards so that it counts toward the four years of English required for graduation. As students only need three years of social studies, ELs can take class supporting social studies language skills as an elective in their first year in order to prepare for the credit-bearing American history class the following year.⁷⁰

Once enrolled, some programs struggle to serve newcomers who do not complete the requirements to graduate within the given time limit. To graduate from high school in another Learning Network district, for example, students must pass the prerequisite courses to enter the four-year university system, which is a higher standard than state requirements. In this district, SIFE—even those who enter U.S. schools by age 13 or 14—may not be able to meet this higher bar within four years. While school principals have the option of allowing a student to stay for a fifth year, students tend not to stay if they are not close to completing their coursework. Children who are homeless or in foster care, as well as students in alternative education programs, also have the option of completing high school by meeting only the state requirements, but SIFE students only have that option if they fall into one of those categories. Pursuing a high school diploma or equivalency program through an adult education program is another option, but one that is often similarly inaccessible to SIFE if they do not meet the prerequisite reading level in English.⁷¹ The complexity of this issue is even greater for older students, as will be discussed in the next section.

C. Options for Older Newcomers

Although many school districts have committed significant time and resources to ensure that EL students have equitable access to a course of study that leads to a high school diploma, focusing solely on the traditional four-year high school pathway may fail to meet the needs of over-age and undercredited students. There are a number of reasons why youth in this age range (roughly ages 17 to 21) can be more challenging to serve than students even two or three years younger. In most states, systems are only obligated to provide a free, public education to students until a certain age (most commonly age 20 or 21), so administrators may be reluctant to enroll older newcomers who are unlikely to accumulate enough credits in time to graduate. Although adult education services may be available to serve these students, many do not offer a high school diploma (many lead to an equivalent, such as the General Education Diploma, GED) and few include the kinds of elective courses and extracurriculars that a comprehensive high school can offer. In some jurisdictions, potential students must have a social security number to attend adult education, meaning unauthorized immigrants would be unable to enroll. And while many older newcomers who hold jobs to help support their families may find it easier to attend a program that is scheduled around the needs of working adults, few such programs are prepared to serve students with their unique educational needs.

The K-12 system can be a challenging place for older SIFE in particular. It can be difficult to find secondary-school teachers with the appropriate qualifications to teach basic literacy skills to older adolescents—though that is often a strength of local adult basic education and adult ESL centers. Some students may also feel embarrassed about taking classes with much younger peers, and some may not find the traditional high school curriculum relevant to their situation. Overwhelmed and discouraged by the steep demands of becoming literate in English, addressing gaps in their education, and completing the full courseload required to graduate high school, these youth may make decide that their time and energy will be better spent by entering the workforce.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, staff who serve these students may be caught between trying to help students fulfill their personal goals and trying to uphold the mission of the school district. One district-level administrator to participate in the Learning Network recalled being rebuked for asking if the K-12 system could offer a way for students to earn GEDs because the district sees itself as being “in the business of [supporting students in] earning a high school diploma.” Although she said she believed strongly in having

⁷⁰ Author interview with ESOL Instructional Supervisor, March 27, 2017.

⁷¹ Author interview with Refugee School Impact Grant administrator, September 10, 2015.



high expectations for all students, she noted that a high school equivalent degree could be the best route for older students who frequently tell her they are only interested in learning English. Because some of these students do not have the necessary proof of legal status to enroll in the adult education program where GEDs are offered, and the K-12 system has no GED option, the students must choose either to pursue a full high school degree path or not to enroll in school at all.⁷²

A number of other Learning Network interviewees also reported struggling with how to advise older students, particularly those who come to register for school but do not have sufficient (or any) transferable high school credits and would not be able to earn enough credits before they age out of the K-12 system. While some students in that situation may enroll anyway because they are interested in having the experience of learning in a U.S. high school, others might make a different choice, such as deciding to learn ESL in a non-degree-granting community program.

Though far from universal, some school districts do offer options for older students. One newcomer high school described by a Learning Network participant has year-round and flexible scheduling, including evening classes that run until 10pm to accommodate students who work or have other family responsibilities. Students who enter this school before age 22 can also continue taking classes there until age 26. Nevertheless, one administrator in this district noted that attending school this way can take a long time, during which other life events may get in the way of graduation. The district also offers students the option of pursuing an English-language GED at a local community college, but because the programs only start every three months, some students may decide not to enroll at all while waiting for the next program to begin.⁷³

A number of other Learning Network interviewees also reported struggling with how to advise older students.

Minneapolis Public Schools offers another example of a specialized program for older students. The district recently converted its newcomer high school—once available to all ELs over age 14—into a high school for older newcomers (ages 17 to 21) in association with the Internationals Network for Public Schools. The school partners with the local community college to offer accelerated coursework and internships to prepare students for graduation and life after it. Younger high school students in the district attend their neighborhood high school, all of which offer EL services and specialized newcomer supports.⁷⁴

One of the largest alternative programs serving late-arriving newcomers in the country is Pathways to Graduation (P2G), a free, high school equivalency program in District 79 of New York City. Each year, District 79 provides six specialized educational programs for approximately 13,500 youth under age 21, more than half of whom enroll in P2G. Because 34 percent of P2G students are ELs, services to support them form a core part of the program. Enrollment may take place anytime during the school year, and a Referral Center counselor will meet prospective students and families in any borough to discuss program options. The majority of newcomers are placed in borough “hub” sites, which have a larger number of teachers, support staff, and services, such as college and career counseling, immigration assistance, and paid internship opportunities. Newcomers may opt for high school equivalency instruction in English or Spanish and also enroll in ENL classes. As students make academic gains, they may transfer to one of 91 satellite sites, each of which provides unique programming. In SY 2017–18, P2G is working to expand its college preparation services and career and technical education options for Spanish speakers. And for students who age out at 21, P2G works with CBOs and the New York City Office of Adult and Continuing Education to find an appropriate continuation program.⁷⁵

72 Author interview with teacher on special assignment/manager of district EL services, March 17, 2017.

73 Author interview with former manager of EL department (now retired), September 24, 2015.

74 Author interview with Eve Woogen, School Success Program Assistant, Multilingual Department, Minneapolis Public Schools, Minneapolis, MN, August 10, 2016.

75 Author interview with Sarah Cacicio, Advocacy Manager for English Language Learners, District 79, New York City Department of Education, New York, NY, September 14, 2017.



Smaller districts might not have the staff resources or the potential student population to replicate the robust services offered by New York City or the other districts profiled in this section. It is nonetheless critical for all districts to consider what they can do to meet the needs of over-age newcomers in the light of their right to equal access to free, public education. Whether within the existing K-12 system or in conjunction with adult education, older newcomers can benefit from a program designed with both flexibility and rigorous academic expectations.

D. Staff and System Capacity

In districts where the newcomer student population is now larger, more diverse, or exhibiting more complex needs than earlier arrivals, Learning Network participants emphasized that two key strategies: adding nonteaching staff at the district or school level and expanding staff capacity through professional development. Many districts reported needing more staff support to coordinate services (both within the district and with CBO partners), to build teacher and administrator capacity at school sites, to oversee the development of new systems and specialized services, and to work with individual students and families.

I. Reorganizing and Scaling up Personnel

Many districts rely on federal Title III grant money to expand newcomer services and district coordination. States disseminate this annual federal grant primarily based on the number of ELs in each district, while also setting aside up to 15 percent of their Title III budget for districts that have seen an increase in recently arrived immigrants (measured as the number of students who have been enrolled in any U.S. school for three years or fewer). One Learning Network participant reported that her large city district—which had historically had large numbers of ELs, but not newcomers—received Title III immigrant funds for the first time in many years due to the number of unaccompanied children who enrolled there in 2014.⁷⁶ Likewise, another district reported that in SY 2015–16, they qualified for their first Refugee School Impact Grant—a program administered by states with funds from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement.⁷⁷ Although districts such as these have served large numbers of ELs for decades, they may still need special support to build new programs or scale up existing ones when faced with changes in the size or make-up of the EL population.

As an example of the kind of scale-up districts have undertaken in the last few years, Houston Independent School District created a newcomer division within their Multilingual Programs Department. The district also reorganized their offerings for newcomers in secondary schools, designating some high schools as hub sites that will accept newcomer students from outside their neighborhood catchment areas. Other campuses with fewer than ten newcomers were designated as transfer campuses. Aware of the fact that it can be difficult to convince principals to take on large numbers of additional students who are unlikely to pass standardized tests that count toward school accountability, the district was careful in its selection of hub schools. It decided to choose those sites that already served large numbers of newcomers, partnering specific transfer campuses to each hub and making the transfer last for one year only (being the first year of enrollment in any U.S. school, this also corresponded to the period when their standardized English language arts test scores would not count toward school accountability calculations). The district also supported hub-school teachers and administrators in the form of coaching from district specialists and additional materials and resources. Creating the hub campuses allowed the district to limit the number of sites where support for newcomer students was necessary, making their work to increase administrator and teacher capacity much more efficient.⁷⁸

A California district faced a similar capacity challenge as more unaccompanied children from Central America were released to sponsors in their community. This district used an increase in funding from

⁷⁶ Author interview with former manager of EL department (now retired), September 24, 2015.

⁷⁷ Author interview with Refugee School Impact Grant administrator, September 10, 2015.

⁷⁸ Elizondo, “Academic Cultural Orientation.”



the state through its new Local Control Funding Formula to increase its newcomer supports. One of the district's primary strategies was to fund sufficient EL specialist positions, starting at the beginning of the school year, to account for the students likely to arrive during the year. Even with this forward planning, however, teachers sometimes had to be hired mid-year, as happened in SY 2015–16 when the district reached its capacity to serve high school newcomers in the second week of school. The district continues to refine its projections, aiming to strike the balance between preparing to receive mid-year arrivals while being fiscally conservative enough that there will not be empty seats at the end of the year. The district also created several new district-level positions to support unaccompanied minor and refugee students and the educators who work with them. These district-level staff provide support by ensuring that students are connected to legal and social services and by working with school administrators to design and appropriately staff their instructional services. The district EL director stated that although district staff were generally seen as being the locus of support for newcomer students, she hoped eventually to have a centrally trained EL specialist or coordinator at every school to bring more parity to the services offered to newcomers.⁷⁹

One of the resource-related strategies that a number of districts represented in the Learning Network wanted to invest in was increasing the number of bilingual guidance counselors and social workers at every school site that serves newcomers. These staff would have the training and skills to ensure all students are receiving appropriate services—as well as knowledge of the local school context that district EL staff doing those tasks might not have—and could proactively check in with students rather than waiting until a problem arises and needs to be resolved. Another often-overlooked resource that is critical to tracking student needs is the district data system. Several interviewees reported that their district had created or that they would like their district to create a category in the data system to flag subpopulations such as unaccompanied minors, refugees, or SIFE to make it easier to track the progress of these students. To the extent that districts are restricted from inquiring about immigration status on enrollment paperwork, they may need to implement alternative data collection methods if they are to track these indicators that are critical to ensuring that ELs receive effective services and supports.

Another often-overlooked resource that is critical to tracking student needs is the district data system.

Another ongoing challenge in some districts—made more acute where the number of newcomers has increased recently—has been to convince district school boards and other senior leadership of the need for the specialized services and investment in resources that EL staff request. One EL director involved in the Learning Network said that because the leadership in her district does not understand the newcomer population well, the district lacks consistent policies and procedures that could help both newcomers and the staff that serve them. For example, she said it would be easier to keep principals from inappropriately referring older students to adult education if the rules around enrollment were made clear and if these expectations were enforced by administrators at the highest levels (especially by principals' supervisors, as EL directors do not generally have any administrative power over principals). She also stated that, in spite of the rapidly growing EL population in the district, the number of staff in the district EL office was decreasing. This central office had one staff member per roughly 820 ELs; by comparison, the special education office had one staff member per roughly 160 students.⁸⁰ This same concern was echoed by another district leader who noted that although her district had roughly the same number of EL and special education students, she was the only district-wide EL administrator (but was not a supervisor at the executive level), while special education had an executive director, three supervisors, and many staff.⁸¹

79 Author interview with district EL director, California, September 15, 2015.

80 Author interview with ESOL Instructional Supervisor, March 27, 2017.

81 Author interview with teacher on special assignment/manager of district EL services, March 17, 2017.



Just as EL professionals—including both teachers and administrators—must sometimes advocate on behalf of individual students to ensure they can access the services to which they are entitled, so must they advocate on behalf of the structures within the district that are necessary to serve them. Senior leadership may need a better understanding of the needs of ELs, especially the importance of supporting them beyond the acquisition of basic English if they are to reach rigorous academic goals.

2. Professional Development

In addition to expanding administrative and support staff, most districts across the country have also made critical investments over the last few years in professional development for teachers and administrators. Even where newcomer populations have not grown or changed significantly, districts have been responding to changing expectations for EL instruction, namely by helping general education teachers understand how to support ELs within regular content classes. Such support takes many forms, including workshops using nationally recognized instructional approaches, courses offered for graduate credit, or job-embedded coaching.

Even where newcomer populations have not grown or changed significantly, districts have been responding to changing expectations for EL instruction.

For example, one district involved in the Learning Network has been working with faculty at a local college to develop and pilot components of a newcomer certificate program for practitioners. This project includes online, facilitated modules and an inquiry-based learning structure in which a cohort of teachers comes together from across the district to engage in learning based on their classroom experiences. This program will eventually create a year-long course that will culminate in a professional certificate.⁸² Similarly, another district runs an administrators' academy in which school leaders take courses tailored to their role that count toward a state bilingual endorsement. One of the goals of the academy is to help principals use knowledge about second language acquisition to make better day-to-day decisions; this could include deciding not to pull ELs out of general education classes when they struggle, but to instead add supports so that they can succeed in a more challenging environment.⁸³

While professional development often takes the form of workshops or formal classes (whether online or face-to-face), the changing role of the ESL teacher also provides an opportunity for more job-embedded training. Although it can be a relatively expensive model, coteaching has become increasingly popular. In addition to ensuring that ELs benefit from the expertise of both subject-matter and language-acquisition specialists, having an ESL teacher work alongside a general education teacher can also result in the general education teacher picking up techniques and ideas that can be applied to other classes. ESL teachers can also provide insight about both schoolwide practices and those within specific classrooms to boost awareness among general education teachers about what they can do better to make their instruction more effective for ELs.

One of the most critical areas for professional development has been helping staff understand the difference between the needs of various EL populations. For example, high school teachers often find it particularly challenging to know how to work with SIFE who have very limited literacy skills in any language. Teachers in a number of districts have also been requesting more information on the backgrounds of their students, including their home culture, differences in communication styles, and conditions students may have experienced in their home country and during migration.

⁸² Author interview with district EL director, California, September 15, 2015.

⁸³ Author interview with district EL director, Washington State, July 26, 2016.



V. Conclusions and Implications

It is generally understood in the United States that high school completion represents an important personal milestone leading to gainful employment and perhaps higher education. It is also a measurement of a school district's overall success and a means for community advancement. While many school districts are currently engaged in innovating in pursuit of their mission to care for and educate all students, they also face real penalties for failing to meet four-year graduation rate targets, among other accountability goals. Because high school newcomer programs typically adopt a non-credit-bearing course format for students with interrupted formal education in their first year to allow them to catch up on basic skills, this particular accountability measure is arguably unfair to schools serving large numbers of newcomers who then require five or more years to graduate. On the other hand, there is an argument to be made for ensuring that students—especially those who are older when they start high school—move expeditiously through the system so they have a chance to achieve a high school degree and move on to the next phase of their lives. Earlier enrollment in grade-level, credit-bearing content courses might also provide a more certain path to college-preparatory classes. The question then becomes pinpointing how much tension is productive between holding students and schools to the rigorous standard of a college-preparatory high school degree in four years versus causing students to drop out because the courses offered are not relevant to their aspirations or the standards they are asked to meet are impossible. There is, in short, a risk that schools providing excellent instruction and support may be labeled failures despite their merits.

Tailoring of services to changing contexts (whether driven by population shifts, new pedagogical demands, or both) requires building capacity.

Amid this tension, schools and districts employ a variety of strategies to support secondary-school newcomers in achieving rigorous linguistic and academic outcomes. Support for newcomer students begins when they first encounter the school district at the time of registration—a first meeting can either set students on a path to accessing appropriate instructional and nonacademic services or discourage them from participating in school at all. Districts that prioritize newcomer education ensure that registration staff are prepared to welcome every student in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner and to collect critical information on students' backgrounds. From there, schools can work with students and their families to ensure newcomers are placed in the appropriate English as a Second Language and academic content courses and that they have opportunities to address the socioemotional issues that might otherwise lead them to drop out of school.

A common theme that emerged from the interviews with administrators and practitioners conducted for this study was the importance of the cycle of innovation and evaluation that drives programs to better serve students. In some cases, this involved creating new programs to address mental health or family reunification needs or finding ways for newcomer English Learners to access content-bearing high school courses beginning in their first year. And all of this to changing contexts (whether driven by population shifts, new pedagogical demands, or both) requires building capacity. This includes both the tangibles, such as classroom seats and instructional staff, as well as the abstract, such as building knowledge capacity in administrators and teachers to understand what works, for whom, and in what context.

Although national immigration policy is in considerable flux as the Trump administration lowers the refugee admissions ceiling and advances proposals to limit legal immigration and streamline the removal of those in the United States without legal status, the lessons schools and districts have learned over the last several years will remain important as districts strive to meet the needs of students already



in the system as well as for designing ways to better serve newcomers who arrive in the future. Those implications include the following:

- **Systematizing newcomer services.** As districts experienced growth and/or diversification in their newcomer populations, many created ad hoc responses to address immediate needs. Yet as those approaches evolve, decisionmakers will need to evaluate whether they are effective and to ensure resources and practice guidelines are in place to sustain those that are. Amid uncertainty over possible changes to immigration policies that could shape the number and characteristics of future newcomers, ensuring that policies and practices are well documented will help maintain institutional knowledge about what worked for the benefit of future cohorts of students.

An example of where this has already happened can be seen in the provision by some school districts of guidance to registrars about enrolling unauthorized immigrant children, at times as a direct response to public criticism. However, the creation and dissemination of information regarding students' right to enroll—as well as detailed information about all district programmatic options and nonacademic services—needs to be an ongoing conversation between district or school administrators and those front-line staff who welcome and register students. Administrators must also ensure adherence to such policies, whether there are many or few newcomers to enroll.

Systems should also be put into place to help students and parents understand their educational options. To make truly informed choices, parents may require knowledge of school systems that many families of newcomers do not have. Regular know-your-rights or cultural orientation seminars are one way for schools or CBOs to provide this information to community members.

- **Research and evaluation.** With new state accountability systems due to be implemented over the next few years, stakeholders should soon have access to increased information to help them understand the academic outcomes of ELs as a group, as well as for newcomers specifically. Whether state accountability systems require such granular reporting or not, middle and high schools should break out their data to examine trends among subgroups such as SIFE and long-term ELs. Doing so would allow them to better target improvement efforts based on the diverse needs within EL populations. Such analysis could also make it easier to understand whether low standardized test scores in a particular school or district reflect system inadequacies affecting ELs even after decade or more of enrollment or instead the presence of students in their first or second year of formal secondary education who are progressing at a reasonable pace.

At a broader level, research on the characteristics of effective programs and services may also shed light on how new approaches to academic and nonacademic supports play out in terms of helping young people succeed in school, and, ultimately, integrate into U.S. society.

- **Community partnerships.** Many districts have partnered with community-based organizations to provide critical services in physical and mental health, legal services, and other areas. Offering these services within school walls or having school-based staff coordinate them with external providers has the clear advantage of bringing services directly to newcomer students rather than expecting them to find their way to resources. Systems can facilitate such partnerships by, for example, ensuring that schools and CBOs share data, where possible, or by hiring a dedicated liaison to work with partners.

Some communities have also found it beneficial to create cross-institution working groups to allow education practitioners and representatives of government agencies, CBOs, and other stakeholders to meet regularly to discuss ongoing needs and to share resources. Other districts have found success in bringing school- and non-school practitioners together for joint professional development and in ensuring that practitioners who serve the same students can communicate (e.g., by providing teacher contact information to a tutor in a CBO-run afterschool program).



- **Funding and resource needs.** Federal funding, available through Title III of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* and the Refugee School Impact Grant administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is critical to supporting services for newcomer students. These funds were established to help districts provide the kind of support that gives newcomer students access to the same educational opportunities as other students, as guaranteed in federal civil rights laws. This funding is particularly critical when state and local funds, which make up the bulk of education resources, are both inequitable and insufficient, as is the case in many states where funding for schools was lower in SY 2016–17 than prior to the recession in 2008.⁸⁴

States and districts will need to make sure that funds remain available to both support existing programs and expand services that have proven successful. These include the coteaching model; supports in cultural orientation, mental health, and academic mentoring; and capacity-building resources such as specialists to assist with programmatic decision-making and instructional coaches to assist with job-embedded professional development. Such investments can accelerate the rate at which newcomers accumulate credits and stay on track toward graduation.

For communities operating in a political environment that is hostile to immigrants, it may be particularly challenging to openly discuss resource needs. Educators will need to make the case to policymakers, first, that noninstructional supports are essential to student well-being and to meeting state accountability goals, and second, that administrative coordination is essential to designing and implementing programs in alignment with best practices to ensure maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

- **Policy impacts.** Policies that are seemingly unrelated to EL education can have ripple effects on services for newcomers. For example, the use of the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate as an accountability measure has led to changes in newcomer program design, with some programs eliminating non-credit-bearing classes that focus on basic literacy and math skills. Similarly, limitations placed on a community's adult education services—including restricting access to individuals with social security numbers—combined with a K-12 system that prioritizes the completion of a college-preparatory high school degree can leave some students without options that align with their needs and circumstances. More research and local program evaluation will be necessary to establish whether district innovations are contributing to positive outcomes or are merely complying with policy priorities without long-term benefits or, possibly, with unintended consequences.

The experiences shared within the Learning Network and discussed in this report demonstrate the remarkable amount of energy and innovation in the field of newcomer education—not just in the traditional gateway cities of Houston, New York City, and San Francisco, but also in newer destinations such as Charlotte, North Carolina and Portland, Maine. Creating effective services means creating programs that can withstand and adapt to ever-changing demographic, political, and education policy contexts as well as resource constraints and opportunities. As data systems and educational research advance understanding of which practices are truly effective with specific types of students and in particular contexts, districts and their community partners should be recognized for their ongoing efforts to innovate. Their experiences offer valuable lessons not just for other newcomer programs but for mainstream education as well.

84 Michael Leachman, Kathleen Masterson, and Marlana Wallace, *After Nearly a Decade, School Investments Still Way Down in Some States* (Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016), www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/10-20-16sfp.pdf.



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