



Schools Prepare for Young Refugees

60,000 new English learners require right resources

The influx of unaccompanied and undocumented Central American children entering the U.S. has been receiving unprecedented media attention this summer, even though the phenomenon of children crossing the border without their caregivers is nothing new. The number of unaccompanied children detained at the border has been steadily increasing since 2000, but the public debate has never been more passionate than it is now. Federal law prohibits immigration authorities from turning away children from noncontiguous countries, which is why these Central American arrivals are taken in while Mexican-born children are turned back. Politics aside, the estimated 60,000 children arriving at the border this year have the right to be educated while they are in the U.S., and nearly all of them will need English language learner (ELL) instruction.

Many school districts are still grappling with how to accommodate these extra students. Some fear that allocating resources to newcomers will take away from low-income students who attend precariously funded schools. The National Center for Public Policy Research released a statement predicting that the impact of absorbing newcomer immigrants into public schools “will disproportionately fall on black and lower-income students, as they are disproportionately likely to attend public schools.”

Other districts are stepping up and welcoming these new students, most of whom were “unaccompanied” on their journeys to the U.S. but now reside with family or other caregivers as they await immigration hearings. States are eligible for Title III funds to help school districts that have experienced significant increases in foreign-born students to improve instruction, provide tutoring, and launch community-participation programs.

In Miami, superintendent Alberto Carvalho requested additional federal funding in June to support the needs of foreign-born students, including English language instruction and psychological services.

“We are in the business of teaching children regardless of where they are born, what language they speak, or their socioeconomic status,” said Carvalho. “There is a significant shortcoming in addressing this issue, so we are seeking federal help to increase the tools and resources to carry out our mission.”

California state schools chief Tom Torlakson has announced \$3.5 million in assistance for districts that experience a growth of at least 3% in the immigrant student population.

“We don’t make immigration policy in our classrooms; we help every child who comes through our doors,” Torlakson said. “With our help and support, I am confident that California’s schools will be able

to provide a safe haven for children waiting for authorities to reunite them with their families.”

In addition to funding schools with newcomers, some districts are creating special programs exclusively for these young migrants. San Francisco International High School has a student population made up entirely of recently arrived immigrants and connects students with the special resources they need, such as counseling and legal representation. In Georgia, Dalton Public Schools is offering English language and basic technological instruction through its Newcomer Academy, while neighboring Whitfield County Schools has implemented a similar program for new students from Guatemala and El Salvador.

Maureen Costello, Teaching Tolerance director at the Southern Poverty Law Center, explained that ELL educators play a key role in schools with newcomer students because they are uniquely well equipped to meet the needs of these students and can advocate for them, but they will also be pivotal in helping to prepare other faculty and staff to serve these especially vulnerable children.

“It’s really important to serve students first, to keep politics outside the school house door, and make the atmosphere hospitable,” she said.

Costello stressed the importance of engaging caregivers as well, by providing translations of information and announcements and using telephone interpretation services. Teachers and staff should be reminded of what information they are legally permitted to request and what they aren’t, such as social security numbers. Newcomer children and their caregivers should be seen as part of the school community.

While it’s difficult to imagine impacting the situations in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador from which these children are fleeing, many commentators have remarked that the best way to alleviate the humanitarian crisis of children seeking refuge at the border is to invest in the security and prosperity of their countries and communities of origin. When asked what educators in the U.S. can do, Costello answered, “The best thing that educators can do is to educate about the conditions that these children are escaping.” Part of this is empowering students to consider their experiences as a sources of knowledge and committing to “listening and letting the children tell their stories” and fostering cross-cultural understanding by seeking commonalities.

“Everybody’s family in some way has had a struggle,” Costello said. “If not in this generation, in a previous generation there was a struggle.”

Copyright of Language Magazine is the property of Language Magazine and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.