Helping immigrant and refugee students achieve success:

Partnering with families to support student mental health needs

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Who is in your classroom?

- Imagine 2 students:
  - 8 year-old Wafa who has lived in the U.S. for five years, rarely finishes her work and appears totally disengaged.
  - 12-year old Juan, a recent immigrant from Central America, argues with everyone and explodes violently with little provocation.
Growing number of immigrant and refugee students

- Major immigration over the past 15 – 20 years
  - About one-third from Mexico but increasingly from other countries
  - Diverse in language, culture, economic status, education

- Increased ELL population while overall K-12 population flat

Education Week – Portrait of a Population

www.EdWeek.org
Mental health issues of immigrant and refugee students

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

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

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

- Behavior seen through Americanized lens
- Don’t have access to mental health care
  - May not be culturally responsive care
  - Families may not know how to gain access
- Families overwhelmed themselves
- Stigma of care for mental illness
School Role in Supporting Student Mental Health

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

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

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

- Student achievement is linked to parent involvement
- Parents gatekeepers for mental health services
- Entire family impacted
Strengths of Immigrant and Refugee Families

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

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

Build personal relationships

- Help with issues outside of school
  - Housing
  - Employment
  - Physical health

- Create a relationship of trust
Traditional family involvement

- Geared to parents with “social capital”
  - Knowledge of American system
  - Comfortable being at school
  - Feel they have a right to be heard

- Immigrant and refugee families believe it is not their role
  - Respect school at a distance
  - Often work with children at home
Create Welcoming School

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

- Go beyond stereotypes to learn about culture from:
  - Parents
  - Cultural, religious, community leaders

- Partner with cultural groups in community
  - Cultural brokers
  - Additional resources

- Connect with community service agencies
Tailor Outreach to the Culture

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

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

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

- Break down stigma
  - Focus on continuum of support for the child
  - Work with cultural brokers
- Recognize the trauma and stress on entire family
- Develop collaboration between teachers and mental health professionals
  - Share insights
  - Develop strategies along with families
- Use culturally responsive screening and assessment
  - See Issue Brief on CAC website
I have a concern about a child in my classroom.

If the concern is mild:
- Focus on individualizing proactive strategies & positive reinforcement
- Follow usual class-wide consequences

Am I still concerned?
- If no: Continue using strategies!
- If yes: Consult with GC to see if plan needs to be modified and implemented for another 2 weeks and/or if it is time for a referral to PPT

If the concern is moderate:
- Document concerns (anecdotal) & create a plan that includes: proactive strategies, positive reinforcement, consequences
- Gather information from: Last year’s teacher, SW/GC, School records

Implement & monitor plan (2 wks)
Am I still concerned?
- If no: Continue using strategies!
- If yes: Meeting with teacher & parent to work on behavior plan

If the concern is severe (a danger to self or others):
- Follow school protocol for crisis situation & try:
  - Use script
  - Send follow-up note home

Contact parent for information gathering & collaboration
Talk to and involve families

Developed by Bridges Program, NYU
Additional Resources

- Caring Across Communities (CAC) website
  
  - Information on CAC projects
  - Additional Resources
  - Blog to raise other questions

- New Issue Brief coming!
Caring Across Communities:
Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Children of Immigrants and Refugees

Caring Across Communities

With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 15 sites across the U.S. are developing model mental health programs that engage schools, families, students, mental health agencies and other community organizations to build effective, easily-accessed services for children and youth.

Program Description The Call for Proposals (PDF version, HTML version) describes the key common elements shared by all 15 funded sites. Grant applications are no longer being accepted for this program.

Grantee Descriptions Each of the 15 funded sites describes its objectives, target populations, community partners and services provided.

Asian American Recovery Services
Children's Crisis Treatment Center
Portland Public Schools
Multilingual & Multicultural Center

The Multilingual and Multicultural Center oversees Portland Public Schools’ English Language Acquisition Program for students whose home language is not English. To ensure equal access to educational opportunities for these students, the Center provides support services in the areas of classroom instruction, summer academic programs, staff development, curriculum and materials development, assessment, parent and community outreach, and advocacy.

Over the years, Portland’s Multilingual community has grown exponentially and become increasingly more diverse. Currently, the district has over 1,600 students who come from homes where over 50 different languages are spoken. The students represent about 25% of Portland Public Schools’ total enrollment; some 1,400 of them are identified as English Language Learners (view demographic data).

Come Rock Around-the-World!

Join us for an evening of dancing at a global rock and roll extravaganza. Learn dances from different cultures. Also, enjoy great hors d’oeuvres, a raffle, and a silent auction of multicultural goods and services. The auction will include gift certificates for hair braiding, international restaurants in Portland, and artifacts from around the world. Event details

Friday, March 6, 2009
7:00 to 11:00 p.m.
Italian Heritage Center
Immigrant and Refugee Children

According to the 2000 Census, 1 of every 5 children in the United States is a child of immigrants. Many things about the immigrant experience are stressful for children: They may be separated from family for extended periods of time, some children come from rural or farming communities and are ill-equipped to cope with cities; others come from refugee camps, after witnessing wartime atrocities or personal or family violence. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Caring Across Communities - A new model for serving immigrant and refugee children
In 2006 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation launched an initiative to help meet the mental health needs of immigrant children and youth. Building on strong community-school partnerships, the 15 sites funded through Caring Across Communities: Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Diverse Children and Youth, are helping children and their families make their way in a new country. Individual project descriptions, conference reports, and presentations convey the lessons learned.

Tools and documents to help practitioners, teachers, and others work with
Issue Brief #1  |  May 2008
Center for Health and Health Care in Schools  |  www.healthinschools.org

Screening and Assessing Immigrant and Refugee Youth in School-Based Mental Health Programs

Authors: Dina Birman and Wing Yi Chan

According to the 2000 Census, 1 of every 5 children in the United States is a child of immigrants – either a child who is an immigrant or has at least one immigrant parent. While most children who experience mental health problems have limited access to help, children who have migrated to this country, especially under difficult circumstances, face particular challenges. Providers may be unfamiliar with their culture or the way that their culture understands mental health issues; children and their caregivers may

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