

## Students Who Are Displaced Persons, Refugees, or Asylum-Seekers

NASP affirms that schools are essential to the provision of supportive services to children who are displaced persons, refugees, or asylum-seekers. The term *refugee* refers to anyone who has been displaced due to war, natural disaster, or persecution. To be legally considered a refugee in a foreign country, an individual must apply for a special designation as a refugee with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Not all displaced people obtain refugee status; some displaced persons are considered migrants or immigrants (UNHCR, 2017). Further, an asylum-seeker is someone who is awaiting processing of a sanctuary request (UNHCR, 2018). More information regarding definitions and refugee status can be found at: <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>. The most recent data show that the world is experiencing the highest rates of displaced persons ever seen, with an estimated 68.5 million people having left their homes. Of this number, 25.4 million were refugees, half of whom were under the age of 18, and 3.1 million were asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2018).

School psychologists who work with youth who have been displaced may recognize signs of trauma in these newcomer students. *Newcomers* is an umbrella term used to refer to students who were born in another country and have recently arrived in the United States (Rasmussen, Crager, Baser, Chu, & Gany, 2012). Families and youth who have been displaced experience significant life stressors, such as the events leading up to the displacement (e.g., natural disaster, war, or persecution), being cut off from family or friends, the uncertainty of finding a new home, and navigating the unfamiliarity of a new culture (Rasmussen et al., 2012; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). Children who are disconnected from family members are at heightened risk of exploitation, human trafficking, and abuse (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Unfortunately, too many youth who have been displaced may struggle to learn a new language, to adapt to different cultures, and to experience academic success due to significant disruptions to their education (NASP, 2015c). Families may be limited in their ability to support their children because of their own trauma, disconnection from social networks (e.g., relatives and friends), and financial strain, which can limit their time and resources to seek help. Because of past experiences, parents and students may be cautious of authority figures. Furthermore, many are uncertain about their long-term status, and they may hope to return home (Heidi, Miller, Baldwin, & Abdi, 2011). They may experience significant stress related to their own immigration status or that of loved ones. For example, children facing their own deportation or that of a family member are likely to experience physical, behavioral, and emotional symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression, and behavioral changes) related to the loss and ambiguity of their current situation. The severity of these symptoms is often influenced by individuals' and families' social and cultural contexts and the types of support they receive in schools and communities. Although displaced persons may share similar experiences and needs, it is important to avoid making overgeneralizing assumptions. Rather, school psychologists can work with their school teams to focus on strategies that support all students and

provide more targeted support, consultation, and direct intervention to displaced youth and their families as indicated through a tiered model of service delivery.

## **THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS**

NASP affirms that school psychologists are professionals who possess knowledge and skills to provide leadership in meeting the academic, social–emotional, and mental health needs of students who have been displaced. School psychologists work as advocates for all students to help ensure their safety, to ensure access to education, and to provide support for their academic, social–emotional, and mental health needs. Youth who have been displaced and resettled in a new country face potentially traumatic life experiences and uncertainty in navigating their new environments. School psychologists should seek additional training in order to provide equitable and responsive services when working with these culturally and linguistically diverse populations (NASP, 2015a). They can play a vital role in helping these students to leverage their strengths and resiliency to navigate and adjust to their new environments. School psychologists can advocate for schools to create inclusive environments and provide specialized services to help meet the needs of students and their families who have been displaced by doing the following.

### **Facilitating Enrollment**

School enrollment processes are complex and include accessing immunization records, navigating transportation, and verifying past schooling as well as other information gathering. School psychologists can advocate for efficient enrollment processes that allow students rapid access to their education, promote peer engagement, and establish stable and predictable schedules. This can be facilitated by centralizing enrollment processes and providing interpreters and translators to parents if needed (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, n.d.). Although schools may require paperwork for these youth, it is important that parents and guardians understand that students cannot be denied access to a free public education based on their original country of birth or immigration status (Ali, Rose, & Perez, 2011). Further, maintaining confidentiality and securing consent, especially related to discussion of the immigration status of children and families, is essential for legally defensible and ethically sound practice due to the sensitive nature and potential implications of this information.

### **Developing Welcoming and Affirming School Climates**

School psychologists can collaborate with stakeholders to engage in activities that help students and their families feel welcome. For example, schools may display pictures and signage representing various newcomers in their entryways. In addition, schools can provide interpreters and translated documents for students and their parents/guardians, which can help facilitate effective communication between students, their families, and schools (Miller, Thomas, & Fruechtenicht, 2014). Schools should prevent and intervene with bullying related to culture and immigration status. Further, schools should codify written language in their handbooks that specifically prohibits bullying on the basis of immigration status among other identity characteristics (Scherr & Larson, 2010). Lessons about celebrating diversity and multiculturalism could be included in curricula as well (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007).

## **Assisting Students and Families With Navigating the School Environment**

Students who are newcomers to a school can benefit from assigned student mentors. In turn, mentors can benefit from learning about youth from different countries who may have similar interests and experiences to their own. Some schools have formed supportive newcomer group sessions comprised of transfer students and students who are refugees or immigrants. For families, facilitating connections with others who are new to the school as well as those who are already established can be invaluable for helping them adjust to the school and the broader community (Miller et al., 2014). Conflicts between children and parents can arise when they acculturate to the language and customs of the receiving country at different rates (NASP, 2015c). Thus, school staff may benefit from developing partnerships with cultural liaisons who can help support diverse students and families.

## **Developing Cultural Responsiveness and Empathy of School Staff and Students**

School staff are better prepared to meet students' needs and develop supportive relationships with families when they are familiar with students' cultures of origin. In addition to partnering with community-based cultural liaisons, school psychologists who are sensitive and well versed in students' cultures can work with families as cultural brokers to educate school staff about culturally responsive practices, especially as related to dietary restrictions, religion, customs, and more. By learning about the cultural backgrounds of different students, educators and classmates may recognize that these individuals and their families bring many assets rather than liabilities (Miller et al., 2014). In addition, school psychologists who understand how the intersection of students' various identities (e.g., immigration status, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation), coupled with possible conflicts within these identities, affect their experiences and their corresponding risk and resilience will be better equipped to meet students' needs (Proctor, Williams, Scherr, & Li, 2017). School psychologists who reflect on their practices critically, and who link interventions with cultural knowledge, create the potential for more genuine engagement with students and families. This, in turn, contributes to opportunities to help build students' and families' resilience and empowerment through culture, as well as additional aspects of identity.

## **Providing Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Academic Supports, Mental Health Supports, and Trauma-Informed Care**

Given the variable, and often disrupted, educational experiences of children who have been displaced, they may have gaps in their academic skills. Although the majority of these youth will adapt well to school, school psychologists remain aware of the significant environmental stressors faced by recent immigrants and youth who have been displaced. School psychologists who are part of a school's intervention team can be aware of any early signs of struggle among displaced youth and provide appropriate educational supports to match their needs. Some displaced youth may face challenges with acquiring the dominant language of their host country and may initially receive support in classrooms with teachers who specialize in supporting English language learners (Weinstein & Trickett, 2016). Generally, those youth who have participated in formal education prior to displacement will find it less difficult to adapt to their new learning environments compared to those who have had limited access to educational experiences. Thus, instructional levels should be assessed and academic interventions

provided as needed at appropriate levels within multitiered systems of supports (MTSS). School psychologists should work with children at every tier to ensure appropriately designed educational programming that removes barriers to learning, giving students equal opportunities to succeed. Prematurely referring students who were displaced for special education evaluation without consideration of individual and family circumstances may result in inappropriate disability identifications.

Due to the increased likelihood of having experienced trauma, students' mental health needs should be prioritized as well. Among the limited numbers of students who receive mental health treatment when it is needed, the vast majority receive these services at school (i.e., 70–80%; NASP, 2015b). Hence, students who have been displaced should be monitored for mental health challenges as part of Tier 1 prevention efforts. School psychologists can be leaders in helping organize and drive culturally responsive universal (Tier 1) approaches that include positive behavior intervention supports and trauma-informed school practices.

Within a trauma-sensitive approach, school psychologists can encourage empathy and understanding among school staff regarding potential trauma and provide teachers with strategies for helping students access supports within MTSS. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), in particular, has resulted in positive outcomes for students who are refugees who have experienced trauma (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Although some students may benefit from trauma-focused CBT, this approach requires specialized training, and the type and intensity of the trauma experienced may dictate that it is better suited for primary treatment outside the school setting. In addition, students may not have the English proficiency to benefit from services from practitioners who are not multilingual. CBT should be implemented in a culturally responsive way in order to be most effective (Hinton, Rivera, Hofmann, Barlow, & Otto, 2012). It is also important to consider that students and their families may hold a variety of values and beliefs about mental health and related treatments (NASP, 2015b). Therefore, school psychologists should be prepared to work with families and community liaisons to find the most culturally appropriate resources that will address youth and family needs. These alternative approaches to service delivery may require school psychologists to reflect upon the influence of their own beliefs and possible biases in serving displaced persons. School psychologists should also seek ongoing supervision from those who have more experience with these populations, either locally or nationally. When practitioners do not have the advanced competency to address a serious concern, they can refer children and families to appropriate community resources. Whether through direct therapy, consultation, referral to community providers, or other service delivery, school psychologists can help ensure that the supports provided are culturally responsive, delivered on an ongoing basis, monitored for effectiveness, and adjusted accordingly.

### **Collaborating Within Districts and Across Community Service Providers to Meet Needs and Build Resiliency**

School psychologists can lead efforts to coordinate services within districts by working with ELL teachers, school social workers and counselors, outreach liaisons, administrators, and community agency representatives who also work with displaced persons. When additional supports are needed, school psychologists should identify and collaborate with community service providers and act as cultural liaisons to create a bridge from the school to community. Cultural liaisons may also include clan

or group elders, religious leaders, or other community leaders. Additionally, resettlement agencies and refugee, immigration, or global resource centers often provide a wide range of services including interpretation and translation services, English and citizenship classes, education and training programs, employment and career services, after-school programs for children, and general support to newcomer families as they learn to navigate their communities and rebuild their social networks. Even when trauma-informed services are already established in schools, it may be necessary to coordinate additional care with community service providers due to the intense level and multiple types of needs of some students and families. For example, families may be facing the effects of intergenerational trauma following decades of persecution (Sullivan & Simonson, 2016). Schools can also be vigilant in identifying indicators of human trafficking and collaborating with community agencies to prevent and intervene accordingly. By discussing these challenges with families and knowing available resources, school psychologists can more readily connect children and families with needed services.

## SUMMARY

School psychologists possess the knowledge and skills to advocate for culturally relevant practices to meet the academic, social–emotional, and mental health needs of students who are considered to be displaced persons, refugees, or asylum-seekers. School psychologists must advocate for these students to help ensure safety, access to education, and mental health support. Children who have been displaced may face unique mental health challenges, in many cases resulting from traumatic experiences related to displacement. School psychologists can ease the transition for newcomer students and their families by facilitating efficient enrollment processes, developing welcoming and affirming school climates, assisting students and families with navigating the school environment, developing cultural responsiveness and empathy among school staff and students, providing academic and mental health supports (including trauma-sensitive care), and collaborating with community service providers to meet needs and maximize resiliency.

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