Increasing Success for immigrant and refugee students by supporting family & culture

Partnering with families to support student mental health needs

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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
- 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 & 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 at www.HealthinSchools.org
Additional Resources

- Article in November 2009 Kappan: “Go Beyond the Classroom to help Immigrant and Refugee Students Succeed”

- Issue Brief
  “Partnering with Parents and Families to Support Immigrant and Refugee Children at School”
  Available at www.EmbraceDiverseSchools.com under “Resources”

- Websites:
  Center for Health and Health Care in Schools
  www.healthinschools.org See “Immigrant and Refugee Children” section for Caring Across Communities project

  Embrace Diverse Schools  www.EmbraceDiverseSchools.com