

# Helping immigrant and refugee students succeed: It's not just what happens in the classroom



*Eileen Gale Kugler*

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*School-based mental health  
services that partner with  
families open doors to  
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## **Helping immigrant and refugee students succeed: It's not just what happens in the classroom**

*School-based mental health services that partner with families  
open doors to academic achievement*

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### **Design**

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# Helping immigrant and refugee students succeed: It's not just what happens in the classroom

Eight-year old \*Wafa pays little attention in class and she rarely completes her homework. Her teacher keeps trying new strategies to reach her, but ends up feeling frustrated she must devote too much time to this new student who simply shows no interest in learning.

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Juan is an increasing behavior problem in his 7th grade class. Since he arrived from Guatemala last year, he argues with everyone, including his friends; and he can explode violently with almost no provocation. His teacher worries about his lack of social skills.

Student behavior like this is not uncommon in classrooms with immigrants and refugees and it often signals significant issues below the surface. A child who seems disinterested may actually be depressed, living with parents who themselves are disengaged and depressed as they struggle to adjust. A student with violent outbursts, who might just appear undisciplined, can be reliving the emotion of a turbulent event in a war-torn country, experiencing a heightened “fight or flight” response.

These behaviors have a direct impact on student success. Mental health is essential to learning as well as to social and emotional development (NAMI and partners, 2007). In a Durham, NC, program nearly 80% of teachers who referred immigrant and refugee students for mental health services indicated that the students’ behavior issues had a significant impact on academic success, according to Duke University’s Center for Child and Family Health.

The immigrant experience itself brings challenges beyond learning a new language. Children often leave close relatives in their home countries, sometimes those they have lived with for years. The trip to their new home can be a grueling experience, sometimes undertaken suddenly with little preparation or resources. Once in the U.S., the entire family may feel isolated as they navigate life in a new country, often with limited financial resources and institutional supports (Shields and Berhman, 2004). As the children learn English before their parents, many children take on typically adult roles, serving as interpreter and negotiator for family business from finances to health (Chu, 1999).

Students who are refugees often bring deep emotional scars. Escaping countries at war, they may have experienced repeated violence, a factor itself linked to lower academic achievement (Hurt, Malmud, Brodsky, et. al., 2001). Some have lived in refugee camps for years, with unhealthy conditions and little or no opportunity for formal education (Jaycox, Stein, Kataoka, et.al., 2002).



Although they are often severe, the mental health needs of immigrant and refugee students are frequently unidentified. These students usually have limited access to mental health care and face barriers of culture as well as language (Jaycox, Stein, Kataoka, et.al., 2002). Some develop more serious mental health conditions. Many fade into the background, often viewed as disinterested or unwilling to learn, and they fall farther and farther behind academically. At the same time, No Child Left Behind holds schools accountable for the academic achievement of these very students.

## Families are a Critical Component of Student Mental Health

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) recognized the need for mental health care for this critical population and launched a new program in March 2007.

Under the Caring Across Communities (CAC) Initiative, RWJF awarded grants totaling \$4.5 million to 15 projects aimed at reducing emotional and behavioral health problems among students in low-income immigrant and refugee families. The grants support a range of innovative partnerships among schools, mental health service providers, and immigrant or refugee community organizations.

One of the key components of The Caring Across Communities projects is family involvement. The importance of engaging families for student academic achievement is well documented (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Part of the family's role is supporting the student's emotional needs, particularly significant for immigrant and refugee students who often come from close protective families (Shields & Behrman, 2004). Schools can be a vital source of information for families on their student's mental well being (NAMI and partners, 2007).

Parents are the gatekeepers for student's receiving mental health services and family insights are critical, notes Mimi Chapman, director of the CAC project at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "You would not have a child go to a pediatrician alone. It's the same with mental health issues. The parent's perspective has to be incorporated," Chapman says.



Attitudes toward mental health in the cultures of recent immigrants differ significantly from the mainstream U.S. approach. Most recent immigrants attach a stigma to mental health issues, seeing them only as mental illness. In fact, there are no phrases to define "mental health" in most home languages of recent immigrants.

It is important to educate entire immigrant and refugee communities on emotional and behavioral issues. While the American culture values individual privacy rights, many recent immigrants believe in communal responsibility. "Most immigrants are part of strong collective communities in the United States," says Mimi Chapman, and the entire community must understand and support the services the child receives.

## Successful Strategies to Engage Families

The Caring Across Communities project directors share information with national program leaders at the Center for Health and Health Care in School at The George Washington University, as well as with each other at collaborative meetings. A number of successful strategies have emerged for engaging immigrant and refugee families in support of their children's mental health.

- **Build relationships with families**  
Immigrant and refugee families arrive with deep respect for the U.S. school system and feel it is not their place to interfere. "They feel they have nothing they can offer schools. We need to bring parents in early on, to change that mindset," says Pia Escudero who directs the CAC project at the Los Angeles United School District (LAUSD).

Kristen Huffman-Gottschling who directs the CAC project at Chicago World Relief, notes that these families are far from disinterested. “These refugee parents resettled here for their children. They are fully invested in their children’s future.”

“The stereotype is that these families are drains on our resources, but they have great strengths and we need to tap into them,” says Grace Valenzuela, director of the CAC project in Portland Public Schools in Maine. “Immigrant and refugee parents have been able to survive extraordinary experiences in bringing their families here,” she states, “yet once they are here, we disempower them” by not helping them understand how the U.S. system works. “We need to give them the power to be in charge.”

The first step in building a relationship with the parents is creating a welcoming school environment. This ranges from a comfortable front office with signs and materials in multiple languages, to personal outreach that respects the culture of the immigrant and refugee families in that community (Sobel and Kugler, 2007)

“If parents don’t feel welcomed by the school administrators and teachers, they will never entrust their children to someone for mental health issues,” says Belinda Rubalcava, director the CAC project at the Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center. She praises the principal at Watsonville High School for helping parents “feel at home,” by welcoming parents at workshops and other meetings. “He loves meeting with the parents,” she says.

Principal Patti Crum of George Watts Elementary School in Durham, North Carolina, believes it is her responsibility to provide a school where families feel safe and supported. “Then the students can learn.” At regular staff meetings, teachers at Watts learn strategies to support students’ emotional needs through training provided by the Duke University CAC project, and they earn continuing education credits. Crum sees this as part of creating an environment that supports academic success at her school where nearly 80% of the population lives below the poverty level and a majority are Latino immigrants. “We made all of our

AYP [Annual Yearly Progress] goals,” she reports proudly.

CAC program partners also travel beyond school walls to develop family relationships. Saida Abdi, a Somali intern in the Boston University’s Master of Social Work program, a partner in the CAC project at Children’s Hospital of Boston, emphasizes the importance of home visits. In addition to providing valuable first-hand insights, “the visits are very much a way to pay respect. The parents are honored we take the time to go to their home.”

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Rapport-building often starts with non-school issues. “We need to first provide the help they need with other issues” such as housing, health, and employment, states Naima Agalab, a parent liaison with the Boston CAC project, directed by Heidi Ellis.

Pia Escudero, who works with immigrants from Mexico, Central America and Korea in the LAUSD project, notes, “This is all about establishing a caring relationship with parents and creating a caring community. Ultimately, if the parents know that we share their life or death concerns, then they will buy into other types of parent involvement the school recommends. They feel that the school is a place they can trust, that steers them in the right direction.”

- **Break down the stigma**

All of the Caring Across Communities projects are school-based which helps reduce the cultural stigma associated with receiving mental health support. Eric Inouye, who directs the Los Angeles Child Guidance Center CAC project, notes that their elementary school mental health clinic is viewed by families as part of the school team supporting students. “The culture of the school is that we will do whatever it takes to help students succeed. If

that includes emotional issues that are holding the student back, then we can provide that help.”

Naima Agalab, a Somali who works with parents from her culture, notes she breaks down stigmas by educating parents without using the words “mental health.” They talk about concerns such as handling anger or recognizing depression using case studies of similar families. “We ease their tension about issues such as medication and therapy.”

Belinda Rubalcava who works with Mexican immigrant families in Santa Cruz says they focus on supporting the child. If there is a concern, “we start with coping strategies, such as suggesting that the parent notice good things a child is doing and not only see problems,” Rubalcava notes. “The parents themselves will start talking about mental health issues, maybe even talking about a family member who had similar issues.”

## **Partner with families, don't just inform them**

Traditional family involvement strategies often amount to little more than an information stream coming from the school to the parents. Yet families can make a difference in their child's success when they are actively engaged as partners. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The challenge for immigrant and refugee families is knowing how to navigate the American system. (Sobel and Kugler, 2007)

Many of the CAC projects provide training for teachers and administrators on empowering families. In several New York City elementary schools with high Afro-Caribbean populations, the CAC project based at New York University (NYU) helped organize pre-K through 1st grade parent-teacher conferences early in the school year before any academic issues arise. Under the program called “Parents as Partners,” the CAC project gave teachers an interview guide designed to spark honest dialogue on what's going on in the life of the student and family.

The NYU project also works directly with immigrant and refugee parents. Building on research that shows that students who maintain their home culture are more successful at school, the CAC project created Ethnic

Socialization Workshops where parents learn strategies to teach their children about their own culture. “The parents love these workshops because their own culture is valued,” says project director Esther Calzada. “And the same parents who come to the Workshops become more involved in the schools, including coming to PTA meetings.”

Calzada sees the impact of “snowballing” among parents in their programs. “We ask each parent to bring one friend. New parents feel a comfort in knowing there will be someone else ‘like me’ there – it won't matter if I speak with an accent.”

Parents themselves become leaders in building support networks in their communities. Through Duke University's CAC project, a Latina mother who came to parenting charlas -- informal workshops in Spanish -- now serves as a mentor for other Latina mothers.

In Fargo, N.D., the Village Family Service Center's CAC project works with refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Bosnia, and Liberia. Parents from these communities created a MultiCultural PTA (MPTA), led by a Sudanese father with support from CAC partners, according to Sandi Zeleski, the CAC project director. The MPTA provides a voice for disenfranchised parents and gives them a vehicle into the school, says Vonnie Sanders who directs the Fargo Schools English language learner program, adding. “The MPTA Board members are such incredible leaders.”

- **Work with Community, Cultural and Religious Leaders**

There are clear similarities among immigrants and refugees; however, there are also many differences in ethnic groups based on their experiences and cultural norms. Cultural nuances impact everything from the way questions are answered to when families might arrive for a scheduled program.

The Caring Across Communities projects work with leaders from the communities themselves to serve as cultural brokers. The Family Service Association of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, is working with a respected Liberian pastor in a church serving that community in their CAC project. Reverend Toby's leadership has been instrumental in gaining the trust

of Liberian refugee families, according to CAC project director Audrey Tucker.

In Portland, Maine, the CAC project works with indigenous healers from the ethnic communities to learn more about how that culture views healing both physically and mentally. The healers, most of whom are professionals in the community, are used as interpreters and case managers. "They are efficient and effective cultural brokers," says program director Grace Valenzuela.

- **Recognize the trauma and stress of the entire family**

Many families come to the United States to escape traumatic lives, yet they carry the trauma with them. At the same time, they are coping with life in a new country, with a new language and different cultural expectations.

Immigrant parents "always feel like they are trying to catch up," according to Valenzuela. Often knowing less English than their children, the parents face a "power shift" that places them in a dependent position. "We need to give them the right language and the right information to be ahead of the game," Valenzuela states. In their focus groups, the Portland CAC program gave parents the opportunity to talk about the issues they face personally, how they heal, who they turn to for help. "We were planning an hour and a half for that discussion, but it went on for three hours," Valenzuela says. "This was the first time anyone asked them these questions. It was so powerful for them to share their stories. These are incredible people."

By working with the parents, the programs are improving the mental health of the whole family. Juana, the Latina mother who mentors other mothers, praised the parent training provided under the Duke CAC project directed by Michelle Lyn. "The program helped us a lot, not just with our kids but with ourselves. You learn how to think about things before you do them. You learn what to do before things become serious," she says.

Strengthening the entire family is a fundamental goal of RWJF's Caring Across Communities initiative. Many immigrant and refugee students have lived through traumatic situations, but they benefit from being part of close-knit families and caring communities. Building a trusting relationship with parents and extended families, helping them adjust to their new life, is a critical key to improving the mental health and the academic success of these students. As Grace Valenzuela notes, "Successful families have successful children."

\*Student names are pseudonyms.

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