

Best Practices and Resources for Welcoming Afghan Refugee Students and Their Families

Over the last few months, Virginia has become the home to many Afghan refugee children and their families. As a result, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) recently issued Superintendent's Memo #283-21: [Refugee Student Enrollment](#) to assist schools in navigating barriers to immediate enrollment. The following information and resources are meant to further this assistance as schools support and welcome our newcomers to their communities.

In order to be designated as a refugee, people must have a well-founded fear of persecution in their country of origin because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. We know that these children will be among the most vulnerable students that schools are asked to serve this year. They may have experienced trauma, often severe trauma, after having to abruptly leave their only home and country. Many will have limited English language skills. As a result, support for refugee students must extend beyond the traditional new student orientation. They will need intensive academic support as well as physical health and mental health services.

Access to quality education is the right of every child and schools have an essential role to play in helping to resettle thousands of Afghan refugees and their families into communities. We hope these resources will assist educators in this important work.

This document contains information on the following topics; use the following navigation links to directly access each section:

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Background Knowledge of the Afghanistan Education System

The following information is from the [World Education News and Reviews Education System Profiles](#).

Primary education in Afghanistan runs from grades one to six. Children typically begin school between the ages of six and eight. The primary curriculum is consistent nationwide; however, teachers can tailor it to the local content.

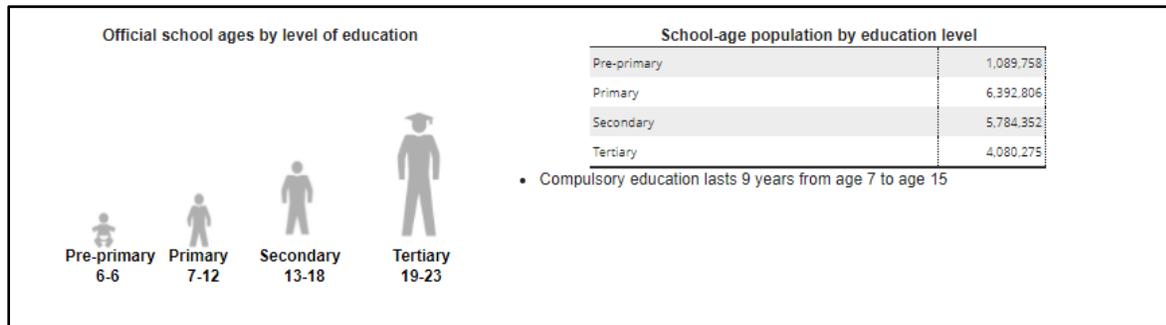
Primary education is divided into two cycles. The first cycle covers grades one to three, and the curriculum includes subjects such as religious studies, first language (Dari or Pashtu, depending on the region), mathematics, arts, and physical education. The second cycle includes grades four to six. The curriculum covers the same subjects as the first cycle, plus additional subjects such as natural sciences, history, geography, and a secondary language (Dari or Pashtu, depending on the region).

Secondary education includes two, three-year cycles. The first cycle, from grades seven to nine, is referred to as lower secondary education, and the second cycle, from grades 10 to 12, is referred to as higher secondary education.

The curriculum of the first cycle includes subjects such as religious studies, local languages, mathematics, natural sciences, social studies, foreign languages (English, German, French, and Russian), and physical education. Students who pass the examination at the end of grade nine can continue to higher secondary education. (Upon completion of grade nine, students may opt to pursue technical and secondary vocational education rather than higher secondary education.) The curriculum of higher secondary education is determined by whether the students choose to focus on a natural sciences stream or a social studies stream, although the subjects taken are largely the same and duplicate most of the subjects taken in lower secondary education. No matter which stream the students take, they need to pass the graduation exam to be awarded the twelfth grade graduation certificate. There may be discrepancies between the current educational attainment for boys and girls.

The following table is from the [United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization](#).

Figure 1



Addressing the Social and Emotional Wellness Needs of Afghan Refugees

The first priority for any school welcoming a new student is to make them feel safe, welcomed, valued, comfortable, and confident in their new school community. Meredith Hedrick, Department Chair of English for Speakers of Other Languages in Annandale, Virginia, explains, "Because if you don't have the social, emotional, you're not going to have the academic and you're not going to have the language" ([Fairfax schools lean on experience to prepare for Afghan refugees, InsideNoVa.com](#)).

Strategies to consider include:

- Start by showing students and their families how school works, including classroom routines, how to sign in and out of school, how to move around campus, how to get their meals, and how to login on their technological devices. Explain schedules and share possible extracurricular activities in which newcomers could participate.
- Newcomers need modeling, not only for the language but also for the culture. Assign each newcomer with a [trained student mentor](#) to shadow them during the first days of school, introduce them to teachers, answer questions, and help them navigate the school hallways. Families can also be offered a "mentor family" to help them integrate into the school community in a similar fashion.
- Begin forming relationships with your new students by learning about their individual culture, traditions, hobbies, family, and background. Stay respectful of their personal boundaries and understand that they may need time to settle into their new environment before opening up (National Clearing House for English Language Acquisition, n.d.).
- Remember some of the families may not have had access to a formal schooling experience in their country, so taking the time to show them what school is like and how they can get involved are critical first steps to forming a parent partnership (Short & Boyson, 2012).

Due to the extremely stressful circumstances typically associated with their departure from Afghanistan and their journey to the United States, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a real concern when assisting refugees. Signs and symptoms of PTSD, as listed on [KidsHealth](#), include:

- sleeplessness;
- nightmares;
- inability to get along with others, particularly in close relationships;
- paranoia and distrust;
- unwillingness to discuss or revisit in any way the site of the trauma;
- persistent, intense fear and anxiety;
- feeling easily irritated or agitated;
- having difficulty concentrating;
- feeling numb or detached;
- no longer finding pleasure in previously enjoyable activities;
- feeling helpless or “out of control”;
- experiencing intense survivor guilt;
- being preoccupied with the traumatic event;
- physical symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal distress, or dizziness; and/or
- suicidal thoughts, plans, or gestures.

If refugee students or their family members display these symptoms, it is important that the school assist them in getting professional help and treatment. Work with school counselors, school social workers, or school psychologists to help students who are experiencing PTSD in the school setting as well as assisting them in accessing community mental health supports. Schools should operate with a trauma-informed lens when working with Afghan refugees. This includes:

- an emphasis on relationship-building;
- being aware of potential triggers (e.g., fire alarms, physical touch, or strangers); and
- communicating, establishing and implementing predictable classroom routines.

For more information, please review the following resources:

- [Social Emotional Wellness Considerations for English Learners](#): VDOE developed a quick guide with key factors, tips for educators, essential questions, and resources.
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Refugee Trauma](#): This webpage provides information about refugees and refugee trauma, including basic definitions, a description of refugee core stressors, and recommendations related to screening, assessment, and intervention.
- [Supporting Refugee Children & Youth: Tips for Educators](#): Schools across the country are welcoming and serving refugee students from diverse nations. These students bring their unique individual cultures and backgrounds while bearing some of the challenges and stresses of the refugee experience. This article includes tips and related resources that can help educators meet the unique needs of refugee students.
- [Using a Strengths-Based Approach with ELs: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Chronic Stress](#): This article offers some concrete strategies for shifting to a strengths-based approach when working with English learners (ELs) in the classroom as well as numerous student examples.
- [You Are Welcome Here: Supporting the Social and Emotional Health of Newcomer Immigrant Students](#): This 20-minute film from Colorín, Colorado, highlights how the Dearborn, Michigan, public school district is helping its immigrant students succeed. The film features Salina Elementary School and Salina Intermediate School in the South End of Dearborn, Michigan, which serve large populations of families from Yemen.

Grade Placement and Transfer of Credits

Schools should work to enroll refugee students as quickly as possible. Many refugees had to flee their homes and as a result, academic records may have been lost or left behind. In situations where transcripts are missing and communication with the school is not possible, we suggest working with the student and caregivers to re-create students' academic histories. This is accomplished by gathering key information, such as course names, hours of instructional time, length of courses, and grades obtained. Schools may consider gathering information using the methods described as follows:

- Use structured interviews with students and families to gather additional information about academic history and course content.
- Consult with the family to identify postsecondary goals.
- Examine the potential to qualify for English language services.
- Consider brief, local assessments to determine skill level (if the student is unable to read English, these assessments should be translated).
- Examine local policy and guidelines for awarding credit to ensure that all newcomers receive fair and consistent treatment throughout the division.

Once enrolled, school staff should frequently check in with students and their teachers to ensure proper placement and identify any needed support.

For more information, please consider the following resources:

- [Guide to Obtaining, Interpreting, and Evaluating International Transcripts](#)
- [Working with Refugee Students in Secondary Schools](#) from the Minnesota Department of Education offers guidance including step-by-step procedures on interviewing, researching, evaluating, and interpreting transcripts.
- [Metropolitan Area Foreign Student Advisors](#) (MAFSA) contains documents and presentations that have been useful when enrolling students from other countries.

U.S. Department of Justice Fact Sheets:

- [Confronting Discrimination Based on National Origin and Immigration Status: A Resource for Families and Educators](#)
- [Fact Sheet: Information on the Rights of All Children to Enroll in School](#)
- [Ensuring English Learner Students Can Participate Meaningfully and Equally in Educational Programs](#)

Cultural Considerations

Afghan refugees are facing a new culture, and may feel overwhelmed by the changes. By taking intentional steps to understand and value their culture, we can help them to feel valued and seen. Thus, it is important to generate activities that allow students to share their culture as they learn about the cultures in their school community. Allowing and encouraging students to bring their cultural perspective into the classroom enhances the learning experience for all students. Being aware of Afghan customs, social norms, and traditions can help educators' bridge gaps and effectively communicate. Here are a few cultural considerations to keep in mind:

- If the opportunity arises, offer sympathy regarding the current situation in their home country. Afghans are likely to deeply appreciate the gesture and respond with warmth. However, be sensitive not to push for details of their personal experiences in Afghanistan.
- Recognize that experiences of persecution differ between ethnicities and be aware that members of minority ethnicities may prefer to identify by their ethnic affiliation overseas (e.g., Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek). Pashtuns are much more likely to identify solely as "Afghan," as it is historically synonymous with "Pashtun."
- A common verbal greeting is "Salam" or "Salam Alaikum," meaning "Peace be upon you." People usually place their right hand over their heart when they speak to show respect and sincerity in the greeting.
- People generally do not touch those of the opposite gender during greetings unless they are a close family member. Therefore, men should wait until a woman extends her hand first before extending his own hand for a handshake.
- Be sure to extend an offer multiple times. If you only offer something once, an Afghan person may respond, "No, it's okay," out of modesty and politeness even though they may intend to accept the second or third offer.
- Afghans lower their gaze and avoid sustained eye contact with members of the opposite gender. Younger people may also lower their gaze from elders. This is considered respectful and observant of differences in status. However, when talking to people of the same age, gender, or status, direct eye contact is expected.
- Consider that nodding may not necessarily indicate that an individual understands or agrees with what you are saying. An Afghan may nod out of politeness. Follow up crucial information with questions so they can show they know and understand what you said.
- Invite a refugee to share information about their family but do not push them to share. Some people have been separated from relatives or had family members killed. Others may be hesitant to talk about their family out of fear that it could endanger them.

The above cultural considerations are not a comprehensive list. They were selected from a larger list available on the [Cultural Atlas website](#).

Additional Resources for Educators

Educators play an important role in ensuring the social, emotional, and academic success of newcomer students. The more effort teachers put into getting to know their students, teaching them self-advocacy skills, and building on their funds of knowledge, the greater chance their students will have of reaching their highest potential and succeeding personally and professionally.

- [Meeting the needs of refugee students](#) (video)
This video includes excerpts that highlight the many ways educators can support refugees and newcomers in the English Language Learners (ELL) classroom.
- [Afghan Voices: Books for Children and Young Adults](#)
The following books bring a wide range of Afghan stories and voices to life. While they present a variety of themes and settings, they capture the resilience, spirit, and warmth of the Afghan people. These books can be used to support school and community discussions of current events as they develop in Afghanistan.
- [How are school districts easing transitions for Afghan students?](#)
This article highlights preparations for incoming refugees, including expediting enrollment and offering mental health, healthcare, and other wraparound services.
- [Free English lessons for Pashto speakers](#)
- [English for Persians \(YouTube Channel\)](#)
- [Eight Great Tips for Reading with Families](#)
- [Pashto cards](#) or [Pashto full list](#) and [English cards](#) or [English full list](#)
- [English Lessons in Farsi](#)
- [Thirteen Instructional Strategies for Supporting ELL Newcomers](#)