

Making Students and Families Feel Welcome

I know of one teacher who called all families of her students just to say 'I wanted to thank you for entrusting your child to our school. We're happy you're here. I love working with your student.' I heard about the phone call from an older sibling, and it was the first time I'd seen this girl smile in two weeks. Small gestures make a difference.

– Educator response to [Colorín Colorado's survey](#) on support for immigrant families

Key Takeaways

- Schools and early childhood programs can use a variety of strategies to get to know immigrant families and let them know they are welcome in the school community.
- When facing challenging situations, an existing partnership will allow schools to strengthen relationships with families; make communication and problem-solving more effective; and encourage student attendance and participation, as well as family engagement.



See this information online

Making Students and Families Feel Welcome

- View online: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/welcome>
- Download PDF: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/welcome-pdf>

Complete guide: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide>

Excerpted from *How to Support Immigrant Students and Families*.

Let all families know that they are welcome

Why this matters

The best way to let families know that they are welcome is to tell them. This kind of outreach has always been important for ELL and immigrant families; however, it is even more critical for immigrant families who may:

- feel unwelcome in the school, early childhood program, or community
- not know if immigration status impacts the [right to attend school](#) or early childhood program, or even enter the building
- be more likely to keep their children home and avoid educational settings themselves
- keep their children home due to local immigration enforcement activity.

Expressing support signals that you value their place in your community and take those concerns seriously. It is also an important message to [communicate to staff](#) who are serving immigrant students and who may be immigrants themselves or have ties to immigrant relatives/communities.

Tips for getting started

Educators and school/program leaders can communicate this message by:

- regularly expressing that families are welcome
- posting welcome signs and messages of support on doors in multiple languages
- making statements of support available online.

Other kinds of engagement

Schools, districts, and early childhood programs can also share welcoming messages through:

- parent information meetings
- phone calls
- public remarks in the community or local press
- collaboration with community organizations that have a relationship with families (i.e. houses of worship, community centers, and immigrant rights groups)
- Public Service Announcements and interviews with local media outlets in families' native languages, especially for communities with low levels of native language literacy.





Attendance and community engagement

Attendance is an important reason to reach out to immigrant families. Researchers at UCLA [studying the impact of immigration enforcement on schools](#) reported that 68% of school administrators who were surveyed in late 2017 and early 2018 found increased absenteeism among immigrant students to be a problem, with nearly 11% considering it a big problem. Many districts have also seen attendance drop when immigration enforcement activity is reported nearby, as in the case of a [2017 raid in Las Cruces, New Mexico](#), or the [case](#) of a 2018 [workplace raid](#) in Tennessee. Other districts have been concerned about overall [school enrollment](#). These absences not only impact student achievement and teacher planning; they have a financial impact on school districts in states that fund districts based on average daily attendance (Gándara, 2018).

An administrator from New Jersey reports, “The kids are scared and sometimes they hide for days when there are immigration raids in the area. Some of the students have no food or place to live because the parents do not have a job and they go day by day” (Gándara and Ee, 2018a, p. 14).

The same is true in early childhood settings. Researchers from the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) interviewing early childhood educators documented “drops in attendance, fewer applicants, trouble filling available spaces, and decreased parent participation in classrooms and at events” due to concern about immigration enforcement, in addition to fewer trips to community activities at the library, park, or even shopping (Cervantes, Ullrich, & Matthews, 2018, p.3). The CLASP researchers note that young “children are losing out on enriching early childhood experiences that are important to prepare them for success in school and in life.”

Resources

- [Going to school when your family is in hiding from ICE](#) (*The Hechinger Report*)
- [A Stanford University study](#) released in the Fall of 2018 indicates that police cooperation with immigration enforcement officials can impact the enrollment of Latino students in nearby schools. The researchers estimated that such partnerships in 55 jurisdictions nationwide displaced more than 300,000 Latino students between 2000 and 2011.



Create a welcoming environment

Why this matters

The environment of a school or early childhood program has a significant impact on students and families. Here are some ways to make immigrant families feel welcome in your setting.

Tips for getting started

Make students and families feel welcome by:

Removing barriers to engagement

- ensuring that families are [greeted warmly](#) at the front office in their language
- introducing them to parent liaisons, Family Resource Centers, or other resources
- helping families understand the U.S. school system
- providing transportation, meals, and child care for family events
- identifying specific stressors, such as [stimuli that trigger post-traumatic stress](#)

Communicating in families' languages

- having access to someone who speaks their language
- making information available in their language and format they prefer
- teaching staff how to use a language phone line or other services with an interpreter
- learning how to [pronounce student and family names correctly](#)
- learning a few phrases in families' languages
- welcoming and using students' home languages in the classroom
- connecting students with peers, staff, or volunteers who speak their language

Celebrating students' countries and cultures

- displaying flags, artwork, photos, and mementos from students' home countries
- including culturally responsive books in families' home languages in the library and in classrooms (including books by diverse authors who share students' heritage)
- providing opportunities for students and/or families to share songs and stories from their country or culture if they feel comfortable doing so
- being mindful that some students may not wish to share information about their home country, immigration story, or place of birth and others may not remember or know much about it (see more on [students' silence when talking about immigration](#))



Engaging the school-wide / district-wide community

- encouraging students to brainstorm ideas on how to make peers feel welcome
- encouraging activities that foster students' [empathy](#)
- reminding the community, including all students and adults in the building, of existing policies on bullying, bias, and discrimination
- taking steps to [prevent bullying](#) and addressing bullying incidents when they occur
- sharing these strategies and ideas with colleagues.

In addition, consider adding immigration status as a form of difference that merits equitable treatment in your classroom. Any time you engage in conversations with students about why it is important not to discriminate against others due to their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, or other form of social difference, include immigration status (as is developmentally appropriate). If you have signs in your classroom that name different kinds of bullying or hate speech, include immigration status as well (Gallo, 2018).

Addressing bias

For recommendations on how to discuss and address bias, see the [comprehensive resource list](#) we put together following the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA.

Recommended resources

Resources from Colorín Colorado

- [Engaging ELL Families Guide](#)
- [ELL Family Outreach: Resource Section](#)
- [Creating a Welcoming Classroom: Resource Section](#)

Toolkits

- [Who Are Our Newcomers?](#) (U.S. Department of Education Newcomer Toolkit)
- [Welcoming Newcomers to a Safe and Thriving School Environment](#) (U.S. Department of Education Newcomer Toolkit)
- [Building Welcome Schools: A Guide for K-12 Educators and After-School Providers](#) (Welcoming America)

News headlines

- [Students Help Refugee Families Settle into Life in America](#) (*The Daily Lobo*)
- [High School Club Aims to Make Refugees, Immigrants Welcome](#) (*The Today Show*)



Recommended videos

- [Creating a Welcoming Environment for ELLs and Immigrant Students](#)
- [Why Building Relationships with Immigrant Students Matters](#) (Anne Marie Foerster Luu, ESOL Teacher – Maryland)
- [What Happened When the Students Realized the Yemeni Flag Wasn't on Stage](#) (Diana Alqadhi, English Language Development Specialist – Dearborn, MI)



Making students feel welcome

Teachers use different strategies to make students feel welcome. [Lori Dodson](#), an ESOL teacher in Maryland, shares that her Central American students love seeing books by El Salvadorian author [Jorge Argueta](#), while Michelle Bryant, an ESOL teacher in Virginia, writes,

As the ESOL teacher, I had a local community group that works with immigrants come in several times at staff meetings to inform teachers about cultural awareness and small steps we can take to help newly arrived immigrants feel safe and welcome.

[A teacher](#) who realized the impact her advocacy could have writes this:

A conversation I had with a well-meaning teacher as we made copies one morning turned into a total awakening for her; she said it had never occurred to her that she had students who were struggling with anti-Muslim sentiment or whose families might be undocumented, but once she thought about it, she realized she needed to intentionally put some things up on her classroom walls that affirmed that all were welcome in her room, and to express to them that they could approach her for support.

And Jan Anglade, an ESOL teacher in Georgia, [shared the following exchange](#):

Me: "So you like this school and the teachers?"

Student: "Yes, I like it. You are my favorite teacher."

M: "But I'm NOT your teacher. You have never been in my class."

S: "Yes, but you are nice to us, and smile, and talk to us, and say good morning to us."



Get to know your students and families

Why this matters

One of the most important steps educators can take is to get to know students and families, developing a personal relationship that establishes trust and rapport. It is much easier to address a difficult situation, such as [changes in a student's behavior](#), when you already have a solid relationship.

Tips for getting started

- Learn more about family backgrounds and strengths by talking with families, cultural liaisons, and ELL/bilingual colleagues.
- Invite members of the community or local organizations to share their insights.
- Look for ways to increase the amount of interaction between staff and families.
- Get into families' neighborhoods by planning events in local venues and home visits.
- Give students the chance to tell their stories with tips in [this Colorín Colorado article](#).
- Take a look at the ideas in [Family Engagement is More than Having a Multicultural Potluck](#) from Confianza, posted on Re-imagining Migration.

Recommended resources from Colorín Colorado

- [A Guide for Engaging ELL Families](#)
- [Getting to Know ELLs and Their Families](#)
- [Children in Mixed-Status Families](#)
- [DACA and Dreamers: What Schools Need to Know](#)
- [Special Populations: Refugees, Unaccompanied Minors, and Newcomer Immigrants](#)
- [The Inner World of the Immigrant Child](#) by Cristina Igoa

Recommended videos

- [Video Playlist: Home Visits with Immigrant Students](#)
- [Video Playlist: Getting to Know Your ELL/Immigrant Students](#)
- [One Principal's Journey to a Refugee Camp](#) (Dr. Cynthia Lundgren, WIDA)

Documentaries

- [The Graduates](#) (PBS)
- [I Learn America](#)



- [When We Stop Counting](#)



When families speak indigenous or low-incidence languages

Families who speak Mixtec

A couple of years ago, staff at Wolfe Street Academy, a [community school in Baltimore, Maryland](#), began to notice an unusually high number of special education referrals among their Spanish speakers. After the special education and ELL team looked at the issue more closely, they realized that a significant number of families that the school thought were dominant Spanish speakers actually spoke Mixtec, an indigenous language from Mexico. The students who had been flagged for special education were in fact trilingual!

Due to the stigma they faced in their home country, the families had not shared this part of their background with the school. The school has since learned a great deal about the language and what influence it might have on language development, and the whole school community has worked to develop pride in the language throughout the school – none of which could have happened without parent input. Learn more about this case study from [an article written for Colorín Colorado](#) by the Wolfe Street staff and related video interviews.

The need for interpreters who speak indigenous languages

Read more about the challenges of managing court proceedings for Latin American immigrants who speak indigenous languages in these news stories:

- [“No One Is Available”: When Immigration Judges Ask for Indigenous Languages Interpreters](#) (Univision)
- [Indigenous Language Interpreters Help Asylum-Seekers at the Border](#) (*Christian Science Monitor*)
- [On Border, Indigenous Interpreters in Demand](#) (*Santa Fe New Mexican*)
- [Language Barriers Pose Challenges for Mayan Migrant Children](#) (NPR)



Learn more about special student populations

Why this matters

It is critical to learn as much as possible about your students' backgrounds and educational experiences, as well as their talents and gifts, as you look for ways to help them succeed. You may also meet students who have unique experiences, strengths, and needs:

- **Refugee students** may have experienced trauma, difficult journeys, and lengthy stays in refugee camps or temporary accommodations with little access to schooling.
- **Students with interrupted education** may have little or no schooling, or a patchwork of experiences.
- **Children of migrant farmworkers** may have moved frequently around the country following different harvest seasons. They may not have school records. They may be living in poverty and particularly vulnerable to events such as natural disasters.
- **Unaccompanied children and youth** may have endured long, traumatic, and violent journeys and may be reuniting with family they have not met or seen for a long time.
- **Students displaced by natural disasters** may have gone through traumatic experiences, upheaval, and long separations from immediate family members.

Learn more in our section on [special populations](#) of immigrant students and ELLs.

Tips for getting started

- Look for clues about your students' experiences without asking direct questions.
- Build relationships with students and families.
- Find out if colleagues such as ESOL teachers, parent liaisons, or community partners have information about students' prior experiences or [background knowledge](#) about students' home countries; invite them to share their insights.
- Learn more about the context for your students' experiences, such as a civil war that caused them to flee or the conditions that migrants face along particular routes.
- Keep in mind that some students may be reluctant to share their experiences. See ideas for supportive ways to engage students that don't put them on the spot in [our related section on immigrants students' silence](#) and our article on student stories.
- Keep in mind that refugees and asylees have different kinds of rights in the U.S.; not everyone that used to live in a refugee camp has resettled through the State Department and has access to the rights and privileges that such a process entails.



Recommended resources from Colorín Colorado

- [Getting to Know Your ELLs: Six Strategies for Success](#)
- [Special Populations: ELL and Immigrant Students](#)
- [Refugees and Displaced Students: The Story Behind the Story](#)
- [Building Bridges Through Storytelling: What Are Your Students' Stories?](#)

Recommended video

- [Mister Rogers on Welcoming Children of Migrant Workers in the Classroom](#) (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1985)

Films about refugees

Re-imagining Migration shares the following films about refugees on its website:

- [Fatima's Drawings](#): This film follows a nine-year-old refugee's journey from home in war-torn Syria to Sweden.
- [4.1 Miles](#): A captain in the Greek coast guard works to save migrants, fleeing from their homes, from drowning at sea. (Nominated for the 2017 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject)
- [Sea Prayer](#): This illustrated film depicts a Syrian father's reflections as his son sleeps on the dangerous sea journey awaiting them.
- [Desperate Journeys with Khaled Hosseini](#): Hosseini, a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, speaks with refugees and their families to explore the question, "Why do refugees leave their homes?"
- [Step into a Refugee Camp](#): In the fall of 2016, *The New York Times* broadcast live from the Zaatari Refugee Camp. At the time, the number of displaced people in the world was larger than at any time since the end of World War II. The short video that the times produced from the broadcast introduced ordinary people, around the world, to Syrian refugees and life in the refugee camps.



Identify student and family strengths

Why this matters

All students and families have strengths and assets. Recognizing those strengths can create a foundation on which to build an effective partnership. It is an important shift from a “deficit” approach, in which families and students are defined by their needs and challenges.

Tips for getting started

- Highlight student and family strengths and celebrate them publicly and regularly within the entire school/program community. Look for families’ strengths and successes in overcoming and managing their challenges and caring for their children.
- Ask students and families to describe their skills, interests, and talents, and ask for additional input from colleagues and community partners.
- Look for ways to do this in the classroom. Encourage teachers to look for students’ strengths (using this chart of [asset-based language](#) as a starting point), as well as local or national contributions from members of the students’ communities.

Recommended resources

- [Using a Strengths-Based Approach with ELs: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Chronic Stress](#) (Colorín Colorado article by Debbie Zacarian, Lourdes Álvarez-Ortiz and Judie Haynes)
- [Teaching to Strengths: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Chronic Stress](#) (Book by Debbie Zacarian, Lourdes Álvarez-Ortiz, and Judie Haynes)
- [Strengths-Based Instruction for ELLs](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [A Strengths-Based Approach to Teaching English Learners](#) (Cult of Pedagogy)
- [Finding Students’ Hidden Strengths and Passions](#) (Edutopia)
- [The Strengths of Immigrant Students](#) (Harvard Graduate School of Education, via Re-imagining Migration)
- [Engaging English Learners: Interview with Confianza founder Sarah Ottow](#) (Re-imagining Migration)



Recommended videos

- [Getting to Know Students Through Parent Letters](#) (Clara Gonzales-Espinoza, 4th-Grade Teacher – Albuquerque, NM)
- [Our Parents Value Education and Their Children’s Teachers](#) (Diana Alqadhi, English Language Development Specialist – Dearborn, MI)
- [Building Upon Student Strengths](#) (Dr. Lynn Shafer-Willner, WIDA)





Building upon student and family strengths

“Roots and wings”

Dr. Sandra Duval, an instructional specialist who immigrated to New York City from Haiti as a child, recommends bringing children’s lives, experiences, and cultures into the classroom – as was done for her when she was a child in school. She was particularly impacted by lessons in which she learned about important historical contributions of Haitians to the Americas (Duval, 2018). Learn more from her chapter in [Teachers as Allies](#) (Teachers College Press, 2017) and from these [video clips](#) from her colleagues, Anne Marie Foerster Luu and Lori Dodson:

- [Dr. Sandra Duval’s work on “roots and wings”](#)
- [Dr. Sandra Duval and the power of seeing yourself in the curriculum](#)

“We do gardens”

In California, a group of teachers organized a meeting for the school’s Hmong and Cambodian parents (whose people had been farmers for many generations) to discuss the creation of a new school garden. The teachers were disappointed when just a few parents attended the meeting and assumed there was little interest in the garden. On garden day, however, eighty family members arrived with hoes and dug up the garden in a single day. When asked why the families hadn’t attended the meeting, a parent said, “We don’t do meetings. We do gardens” (Ferlazzo and Hammond, 2009, p. 45).

What does a strengths-based approach look like?

In their introduction to the Bank Street College of Education [series on supporting young children of immigrants](#), Dr. Fabienne Doucet and Dr. Jennifer Keys Adair write:

Work that engages children and families in strength-based, asset-oriented ways should:

1. *Recognize strengths and capabilities of children, families, and communities*
2. *Avoid programs, policies, discourses and practices that begin with deficit views of immigrant families and communities*
3. *See the children of immigrants as intersectional and complex*
4. *Create programs that begin from the expertise and experience of immigrant families. (p. 5)*

