



## Implementing Best Practices for Welcoming Newcomers

Schools with successful newcomer programs have in place a variety of practices that are effective in welcoming newcomers. According to Breiseth, Robertson, & Lafond (2011) and Castellón et al. (2015), schools with successful newcomer programs have created systems of supports in six key areas to ensure that newcomers can thrive in the school community:

### 1. Knowledge about students, including their prior schooling and life experiences

To integrate newcomer students into U.S. schools, and to ensure they are receiving the appropriate academic program and supports, it is necessary to assess students' educational needs, including the need for appropriate language assistance services and whether the student requires an evaluation to determine if he or she has a disability and as a result requires special education and/or related aids and services under the *Individuals With Disabilities in Education Act* (IDEA) or *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973* (Section 504). Beyond that, teachers and school staff should find ways to build their knowledge of the general country and cultural origins of their newcomer students, and also strive to get to know the individual students—their personalities, hobbies, cultural backgrounds, and family circumstances, as well as the stories of their journeys to their new lives. Inviting the sharing of this information, while respecting boundaries of privacy, may help increase the student's confidence, build trust, and enable the school to develop strategies to capitalize on the students' strengths. (NCELA, n.d.a).

### 2. Program structures to support students' learning

In order to meet the needs of newcomer students, especially those in middle and high school who need to learn enough English to earn academic credits and graduate in a short period of time, some schools offer alternatives to the mainstream school schedules and academic programs. Some examples are block scheduling, extended school days or years, and smaller class sizes. Since newcomers may be accustomed to different types of scheduling or teacher assignments in schools in their home countries, or may be adjusting to middle school or high school upon entry into U.S. schools, structures that provide consistency for students across multiple school years may be helpful. An innovative practice that can contribute to the success of high school newcomers is called "looping," a strategy that provides students with consistency across their school years by having the same teacher two or more years in a row. In all circumstances, schools should carry out their chosen programs in the least segregative manner consistent with achieving the program's stated educational goals (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, & U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2015, January).

### 3. **Communication with students and their families**

In some newcomer programs, the schools use practices that promote hallway and classroom communication among students who share the same home language. This may occur in bilingual, two-way bilingual, or Dual Language programs. In some cases, parents may request that their child attend a program that focuses on attainment of English language proficiency without attending a bilingual program; these schools or programs can still integrate use of a student's home language in instruction, as this provides a strong base for newcomers to learn both academic content and English and also helps those who are ELs make the transition to learning in English. It is also important to communicate with parents in their home language(s), and to recognize that even as students gain proficiency in English, their parents may still rely on their home language for school communications.

### 4. **Parent and family engagement in the school community**

As detailed in Chapter 5 of this tool kit, parent and family engagement is critical to ensure newcomer students' success in school. It is important for schools to reach out to parents in multiple ways and offer multiple means of participation.

### 5. **Cultural and language integration**

Newcomer students have diverse backgrounds and needs, depending on previous school experiences, their level of literacy in English and in their home language (or language of wider communication), their immigration status, and home living status. To ensure students feel welcomed into the school community, schools should address each student's individual situation, seek understanding of their home country and culture, and provide support when and where students need it.

### 6. **Community integration**

Creating partnerships with community organizations is helpful for providing a welcoming school and community. Schools may partner with a range of community organizations, and the focus may include refugee resettlement, social services and health, the arts, religion and ethnicity, and postsecondary education, to name a few (Short & Boyson, 2012, pp. 55-58).

## MULTIMEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM

### **Building Bridges Project: Student Video Diaries**

Newcomers High School in Long Island City specializes in teaching recent immigrants. In a project that reflects many of the best practices outlined here (as well as instruction in English language arts), the high school collaborated with St. Luke's, a private middle school in Manhattan, to establish a conversation about diversity and combatting bias. ELs at the high school exchange letters with their St. Luke's "buddies," and meet with them several times a year. The St. Luke's buddies help the students edit their personal immigration stories, and then, in turn, develop research papers on immigration based on interviews with their Newcomers HS buddies. Several Newcomers HS students also created video diaries so that they could share their personal stories with more people. More information about the Building Bridges project can be found at <https://www.niot.org/nios/newcomers>.