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Meeting the Education Needs of Rising Numbers of Newly Arrived Migrant Students in Europe and the United States

By Julie Sugarman

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With the recent, dramatic increase in the number of young migrants entering Europe, and to a much smaller extent the United States, the demands placed on education systems on both sides of the Atlantic by newcomer students have never been greater. States and localities are struggling to address the diverse linguistic, academic, and socioemotional needs for newly arrived youth who have experienced significant disruption and trauma. Although the flows of Central American unaccompanied children (UACs) into the United States have dropped from their 2014 highs, continued high rates of arrivals of immigrant and refugee students in both the United States and Europe mean that school systems will continue to face urgent challenges in building professional capacity to work with newcomer youth.

A large share of the newcomers who require extensive support from schools and other social systems are refugees and unaccompanied minors who arrive as adolescents, and their numbers are growing in Europe and the United States. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the number of UACs referred to ORR by immigration authorities has risen substantially, from 13,625 in fiscal year (FY) 2012 to 57,496 in FY 2014, with about three-quarters between ages 14 and 18. There has also been an increase in the number of refugee youth between the ages of 10 and 19 who were resettled in the United States, from about 10,500 annually in FY 2011 and FY 2012 to 12,678 in FY 2013. Refugee arrivals are slated to increase further in 2016 and 2017 as the United States responds to the Syrian refugee crisis by increasing its cap on refugee visas from 70,000 in FY 2015 to 85,000 in FY 2016 and 100,000 in FY 2017.

Across the Atlantic, in the first nine months of 2015, the European Union's 28 Member States received 750,210 asylum applications, according to Eurostat, including 138,665 children under age 14 and 61,730 between ages 14 and 17. These nine-month figures are up from 626,960 total asylum seekers in 2014 (including 118,300 children under age 14 and 41,840 between the ages of 14 and 17). Between 2013 and 2014, the number of asylum applicants who were unaccompanied minors doubled from 12,730 to 23,160.

Although the scale of Europe's influx has vastly exceeded the flows experienced by the United States, there are a number of similarities in the needs of immigrant and refugee children and the challenges facing educators and other service providers. In both Europe and the United States, there are communities that have long histories of serving immigrant and language-minority students, but the unexpected timing and size of the immigration flows have emphasized existing weaknesses in systems and capacities. Additionally, new arrivals may be resettling in localities that have not traditionally served newcomers, let alone large numbers of newcomers with extensive educational, health, and socioemotional needs. (In the U.S. context, newcomer youth are settling in diverse urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout the United States. The same is occurring in Europe, at least for the short term as national governments struggle to cope with the huge inflows.) Variation in the attributes of host communities is a critical factor in long-term integration, as how immigrants and refugees fare in the long run may be greatly affected by the diverse approaches, capacities, and cultures of the states and localities in which they settle.

Building teacher capacity is one of the greatest challenges to meeting the needs of newcomer youth. A number of European media sources have reported recently on the shortage of teachers needed to cover the ever-increasing number of students enrolling in European schools, and specifically to instruct students with learning gaps due to interrupted education and who need support to learn the language of instruction. Meanwhile, in spite of the fact that the United States has a long history of requiring English language development services for students identified as needing support, the 2015 Teacher Shortage Area Nationwide Listing indicates that there are teacher shortages in English as a Second Language (ESL)/bilingual education in 32 states plus the District of Columbia. This includes some of the states with the highest shares of English Language Learners (ELLs), including Illinois, New York, and Texas. There has also been concern for a number of years about the dearth of teachers from a migrant background in Europe and the shortage of Latino and African-American teachers compared to the sizes of those populations in U.S. schools.

Serving late-arriving newcomers in secondary schools is particularly challenging, given the increasing academic rigor of secondary curricula and the high stakes associated with completing a high school degree before aging out of the system. Further, in many European countries, the high school to which one is assigned is tracked by academic or vocational level, setting students on a predetermined path with respect to postsecondary opportunities. European and U.S. policymakers have expressed concern about the need to improve graduation rates for all students—and for language learners and migrant-background students in particular. The U.S. Department of Education has published findings for graduation rates in 2012-13, showing that the rate for students designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP) was only 61 percent compared to the nationwide graduation rate of 81 percent. Across Europe, the dropout (“early school leaving”) rate in 2012 was 25 percent for immigrant students and 12 percent for native-born students.

The challenge is not just one of scope. Rather, the increase in students needing support is happening in a context of a shift in educational models. U.S. and European school systems are trying to provide tailored services while avoiding the segregation of linguistically and culturally diverse students into academic silos. Systems are looking at ways to improve instruction not only for specialists but also for mainstream teachers. The profound shifts in approach require school systems to think in new ways about sustained, intensive professional development for all teachers, not just host-country language specialists. Training must go beyond the application of instructional strategies and focus on intercultural communication, language and content integration, and appropriate responses to students who have experienced trauma and the persistent stresses of family reunification, uncertain legal status, and cultural adjustment.

In order to foster dialogue on these critical issues facing U.S. and European policymakers and practitioners, the Migration Policy Institute's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy recently hosted a webinar, *Serving Newcomer Immigrant and Refugee Students in Secondary Schools: Comparing U.S. and European Practices*. During this webinar, I shared some of the innovations in program models and instructional approaches that U.S. schools are using to meet the needs of newcomer students in secondary schools. In that webinar, and in a report I coauthored with Margie McHugh, ***Transatlantic Symposium Report: Improving Instruction for Immigrant and Refugee Students in Secondary Schools***, we share examples of effective European and U.S. approaches which demonstrate the importance of insightful leadership that attends to both system-level and practitioner-level change.

Much more needs to be done to build local capacity in European and U.S. schools to serve secondary newcomers. But more than that, the long-term success of migration policies set at the highest levels of government depends on the ability of state and local systems to support the integration of immigrants and refugees. The challenges outlined here, and the approaches discussed in the webinar and report referenced above, must be made a priority for those who set migration policy, so that they can ensure that states and localities have sufficient resources to meet the needs of the newest members of their communities.

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