

NEWCOMER STUDENTS: BRIDGES TO SUCCESS

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As Canada comes to depend more and more on immigrants for economic growth, the quick integration of newcomers becomes an economic, as well as a social, necessity. Almost all urban schools have some newcomers, and even rural schools are receiving a growing number. They come from many countries and experiences, which makes generalizations tricky, but a good way for school staff to understand newcomer experiences, and how newcomers may understand them, is to consider the differences between the school systems in first countries and the Canadian school system.

Most newcomers know how to be successful in the education system in their first country. Since 1999, to qualify as a skilled worker immigrant (about 60 percent of all newcomers), the principal applicant in each family is required to have at least an undergraduate degree, and many have graduate degrees. How can school staff help new families build bridges between their understanding of what it takes to be successful in school in their first country and what it takes to succeed in the Canadian school system?

For the past eight years, over 200 settlement workers from local community agencies have been based in Ontario schools to help newcomers and schools build that bridge. They systematically meet with newly arrived families and youth to provide them with information about the school and the community. They have identified some key ways in which school systems differ and some useful strategies for helping newcomers and schools adapt and understand each other.

PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Parents as partners is not a new idea for most immigrants, but the partnership itself may be very different. In many first countries, parents are expected to feed and dress the child, ensure homework completion and arrange tutoring, if needed. This is usually done with the support of the extended family.

In Canada, the partnership includes all of the above (usually without the extended family), plus debriefing the day, providing stimulating weekend and summer activities, reading with young students, monitoring for Internet abuse and bullying, communication with the teacher(s), choosing courses etc. The list goes on. One parent explained to her settlement worker, "I do my part and the school does their part. Why are they trying to shift their part onto me"?

These changing expectations confront newcomers just as they are establishing their lives in Canada. School is just one of many new systems to learn. At the same time, they are learning the system for finding employment, suitable housing, health care...it's all different. Instead of being able to send their children to school knowing that the school will take care of things, like back home, they find that the school needs their attention at a time when they are most overwhelmed.



EN BREF Le Canada dépendra de plus en plus des immigrants pour assurer sa croissance économique. L'intégration rapide des arrivants devient donc une nécessité économique, ainsi que sociale. Les travailleurs veillant à leur établissement ont dégagé des façons essentielles dont les systèmes scolaires canadiens diffèrent des systèmes scolaires des pays d'origine, et ils ont mis au point des stratégies utiles pour aider les arrivants et les écoles à s'adapter et à se comprendre. Elles mettent l'accent sur le rôle des parents en tant que partenaires dans l'éducation de leurs enfants, sur l'importance des communications avec l'école – en particulier sur les entrevues parent-enseignant, sur les défis particuliers à relever par les arrivants adolescents au Canada, sur la complexité des choix de cours et de la planification future, ainsi que sur l'importance des études en langue seconde.

To help potential immigrants determine if they might qualify to come to Canada as a skilled worker immigrant, Citizenship and Immigration Canada has an on-line test. Would you qualify? Check the test at <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/skilled/assess/index.html>

The following materials have been developed to help schools respond to the needs of newcomer families. All are available from info@cicswis.ca

VIDEO: PARENT-TEACHER INTERVIEW VIDEOS – ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY

These videos follow two families through the parent-teacher interview process, from meeting the teacher to debriefing with their child. They are available in 17 languages, all on one DVD.

VIDEO ABOUT PARENT INVOLVEMENT

For Our Kids is a video featuring nine newcomer parents talking about how they helped their children be successful in school, the challenges they faced and the importance of parent involvement in the Canadian education system. It is available in 17 languages, all on one DVD.

PARENT-TEACHER INTERVIEWS

Hussein and Halima didn't know what to make of it. Asma, their daughter, had just brought home a letter from the school asking them to interview their child's teacher. It was quite specific about the time and date. They had both been to job interviews, and that was difficult enough, but interviewing the teacher!

They figured it out, just as they came to understand many other school routines. The discussion with the teacher went well, and meeting him gave them confidence that their child was safe and getting lots of expert attention. But not all parents do figure it out as quickly. Some don't attend interviews at all, and some attend but are very quiet.

For many newcomers, parent-teacher interviews are a totally new concept. Only parents from elite private schools in their country of origin would have any experience with interviews or the idea of parent/teacher collaboration. In many countries, meeting the teachers may have been a sign that the child had done something terribly wrong.

Interviews are one of the cornerstones of the Canadian system, but if parents aren't familiar with them and don't understand that teachers expect them to come, then it isn't surprising that they don't attend. Even when they do come, participating in an interview can be challenging. It isn't just a matter of language. A parent may have the vocabulary but no experience talking in a conversational style with someone as 'highly esteemed' as a teacher. Having an interpreter present can help bridge the language gap, but some parents may wonder what they would say to the teacher. *Isn't the teacher the expert on school matters?*

The timing of interviews may be an obstacle. The kinds of jobs that many newcomers are obliged to take may not allow them to take time off. Meeting parents during the day or on alternate evenings may make meeting easier.

Interview veterans know that teachers are very professional, but first-time parents of a struggling student might worry that the teacher will criticize or judge them. Anyone who has visited another country knows how hard it is to communicate with a limited vocabulary in a second or third language. Doing it in front of your child's teacher is even harder. *What will the teacher think of me? Will I reflect on his or her attitude to my child?*

Settlement workers find that there are three steps to involving newcomer parents in parent-teacher interviews:

- First, have a welcome event at the school so that the teacher or principal can introduce the idea that all parents visit the school several times a year.
- Second, in the weeks before interviews, encourage the same parents to attend a workshop about parent-teacher interviews. Settlement workers have developed free multilingual videos to show parents what happens in a typical inter-



view, that the teacher is friendly, and how the interview leads to a positive discussion with their child afterwards (see www.settlement.org/eguide).

- Third, speak to each family a few days before to encourage them. Some schools are able to provide interpreters.

TEEN NEWCOMER

It was a mixed feeling. I was excited, happy, scared ...

Oh, man, I just wanted to leave my country so bad. Most, I wanted to come here because of the snow.

I was excited when I was going to Canada, but when I arrived I actually wanted to go back to my country, because seeing the look on my parents' faces – they were so scared and confused ... and you look outside of your window and it's all different, and so foreign.

I felt good because I was coming to America. When I got here, you know, none of the things that I heard back home ... was the same.

How can schools help students make the transition from friends, extended family and their lives in their first countries to school in Canada?

These comments by newcomer teens about their first weeks and months in Canada are from the video called *New Moves*. It features 14 students talking about their adjustment to school in Canada, their successes and challenges (see www.settlement.org/newmoves).

The comments highlight some difficult problems. How can schools help students make the transition from friends, extended family and their lives in their first countries to school in Canada? Most students come to school without knowing any other students. They may not speak any English, and they may have been obliged to come to Canada. To be successful, students have to quickly work through those challenges. It requires considerable resilience, and the first months in the new school are very important.

In August 2007, settlement workers and their school partners piloted a new program called Newcomer Orientation Week (NOW). For three and a half days, in the week before school starts, newly arrived students participate in a series of activities that orient them to their new school and allow them to make some friends. The activities are led by peer leaders – students who were themselves newcomers in previous years. The peer leaders are trained during the previous week.

An independent evaluation described the pilots as "highly successful", and in August 2008, NOW expanded to forty schools from Windsor to Ottawa. A senior elementary version, called Welcome and Information for Newcomers (WIN), was piloted and may expand in 2009. (For more information about NOW, see www.settlement.org/NOW.)

POST-SECONDARY OPTIONS

Guidance counsellor Bev Norton knew it wasn't going to be easy. Vlad, a Grade 11 student, told her that his parents insisted that he not change courses and that he must stay on track to go to university. She had run into this before. It seemed like the parents couldn't see what was best for their child. Why were they so stuck on university?

Bev's dilemma is too common. How do guidance counsellors and teachers help parents understand that university isn't for everyone. How can they help them see that some children will be happiest and most successful on another track?

All parents want their children to go to university and become lawyers and doctors, and a high percentage of children of university graduates do follow their parent(s) to university. The same is true for newcomer families. Most newcomers are selected to come to Canada because of their higher education. And, like their 'Canadian' counterparts, they want their children to go to university too.

All families with these expectations find it difficult to consider other options. For newcomer families, there may be an additional factor: the sacrifice the family made to come to Canada. All big decisions – like emigrating to a new country – are justified by hopes for success and a better life. For newcomers, the sacrifice starts with leaving family and friends behind, it continues with the almost universal drop in economic status when they arrive, and for many it includes underemployment, especially among foreign-trained professionals. If the parents feel disappointed in their success in Canada, and if the child is not doing as well as expected in school, they may well ask themselves "Why did we come to Canada?"

Unfortunately, for guidance counsellors like Bev, an unwelcome message about the best options for the child might be hitting some very tender issues.

The complexity of the course selection system is another contributing factor. In most first countries, the streaming of students happens in different ways and usually at a later age than in Canada. In Ontario, it starts in Grade 8 for Grade 9. Although there are variations on this in other provinces, the number of choices and pathways is much more complicated than in most newcomers' first countries. One parent, who learned the system after helping his older child through it, explained that university course selection in his first country is simpler than the secondary school course selection system here.

Settlement workers have developed some key messages about choosing courses and success in secondary school.

- Each year, you are expected to help your son or daughter choose courses.
- This is not easy because there are many different types of courses. The choices can greatly affect his or her opportunities after graduation.
- The guidance counsellor can help you.

Ongoing communication between parents, guidance counsellors and teachers helps the parents understand how their child is doing and the implications for his or her choices after graduation. And, hopefully, they also help to avoid difficult situations in the guidance office.



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“ ”

I think all of us

as volunteers came in acknowledging that, yes, we may have skills, but we're also going to learn a lot.

— Michele Hillier, Sri Lanka



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THE ESL DILEMMA

Dante's parents were frustrated. Next term they want Dante to move out of ESL and take an extra science or math course. But his ESL teacher, who was so helpful in Dante's first year, recommended that he continue in ESL. They were confused; his English seems strong, he speaks to his friends in English, and he certainly speaks English better than his first language.

It is ironic that the very program that can accelerate their learning(ESL) is misunderstood as holding students back.

Dante's parents are not alone. Studies in Toronto and British Columbia suggest that many newcomer parents are reluctant to enrol their children in ESL because it would limit the time available to study the core-curriculum courses. Yet, teachers know that students need the ESL support to be successful.

Many parents are concerned by the idea of segregated classes. *If my child isn't with the other students, he or she won't have the same opportunities.* ESL also suffers from misunderstandings about special education, which, like ESL, is a segregated program. For many years, some refugee communities were over-represented in special education, which became a catch-all for students who missed years of

school due to war and displacement.

Communicating the value of ESL, especially the courses teaching more sophisticated skills, is a challenge. The link between good writing and reading skills and success in higher education isn't clear to many newcomer parents or to many school staff. (Adult educators have repackaged adult ESL language programs so that the higher level programs have a different name.) It is ironic that the very program that can accelerate their learning is misunderstood as holding students back.

School culture is a factor too. ESL students are often at the low end of the student hierarchy. Getting out of ESL can help a student move up the social ladder.

In the larger scheme of things, ESL programs for newcomers have been at the low end of school system priorities. The diversion of ESL funding to other budget lines has limited both the kinds of program options that are available to students and the ability of teachers to innovate to respond to the challenge. Advocacy by settlement agencies, teachers and newcomer support groups has led to less diversion and some new funding and policies, but much more needs to be done.

According to a 2007 paper issued by the Canadian School Boards Association on the needs of second language learners, all jurisdictions are dealing with the same issues. The CSBA called for "Federal-provincial-community partnerships to provide the range of essential supports that fall outside the traditional picture of classroom instruction but are acutely needed by immigrant children in school." In other words, newcomer integration is not just a school responsibility.

The development of federally-funded school-based settlement programs in B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, P.E.I., Nova Scotia and Newfoundland is a great beginning. They have brought new perspectives, programs and support to schools. Many tools have been developed to help parents and school staff understand the differences in school systems, adjust programs and help students be successful, and in their professional development activities, many schools are adapting their policies and building skills to respond to their diverse community.

The timing couldn't be better. Responsive schools and settlement programs are helping accelerate the settlement of newcomer students and their families just as their success is becoming an even more crucial part of the future well-being of all Canadians. |

PETER DORFMAN is the Provincial Coordinator of Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS), a partnership in eight Ontario communities of settlement agencies, schools boards and Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

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