Public School/Community Collaborations That Foster Immigrant and Refugee Inclusion

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Three weeks after the 2016 Presidential inauguration, a coalition of Philadelphia City Council members, immigrant advocacy groups, the Philadelphia School District, public school teachers, and the faculty and staff union members of the Community College of Philadelphia hosted a town hall to address issues affecting K-12 immigrant students in Philadelphia public schools. A crowd of more than 200 parents, students, educators, and advocates packed into an auditorium at the Community College of Philadelphia to provide testimony regarding their concerns. In the current fear-driven and religiously divisive environment, public schools can play a key role in providing safe spaces for and engaging immigrants. This article describes three types of initiatives to promote inclusiveness in K-12 public schools: (1) working with schools to provide outreach to immigrant students and parents to alleviate fear and promote advocacy; (2) immigration legal clinics and education through school-based sessions; and (3)

collaborations that supplement English Language Learning in out-of-school time settings.

Background

In a landmark 1982 decision, *Plyler v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for school districts to deny children a public education based on their immigration status. In order to comply with this constitutional mandate, school districts do not inquire about a child's immigration status, and therefore obtaining precise data on the number and status of foreign-born students in the Philadelphia system is difficult. However, we do know that more than 10 percent of Philadelphia's 130,000 students are enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs. This is only an indicator; some immigrant children speak English and are not enrolled in ESOL programs and some English Language Learners (ELLs) are Puerto Ricans and U.S. citizens. Most ELL students are concentrated in Northeast Philadelphia, with some in South and West Philadelphia and Kensington. Solis-Cohen, a K-6 elementary school in lower Northeast Philadelphia (zip code 19149) has the largest number of elementary ELL children including Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, and Pashtun/Dari speakers, followed by Southwark (K-8) in South Philadelphia (zip code 19148), with Spanish, Indonesian, Burmese, Karen and Chin, Vietnamese, Khmer, and Nepali speakers. At the high school level, Northeast High, with

more than 600 ELLs, surpasses all other high schools with respect to the number of ELL youth. In addition to offering ESOL classes in select schools, Philadelphia has one comprehensive “sheltered learning” environment at the Franklin Learning Center for high school students newly arrived to the U.S.

Immigrant and refugee children, regardless of status, face common issues in the school system. ELL students struggle with learning English and keeping up in their subjects. In most cases, students study English in a separate class and then return to learn subjects in English during the day. At the town hall meeting and in other discussions, students expressed frustration about not understanding the subjects taught in English. They reported a lack of individual attention in ESOL classes and the rapid “promotion” out of those classes once they achieved a certain level, which in their view was not adequate and did not enable them to keep up in other subjects. Some students wanted to have access to more art, music, and sports (especially soccer), as these are activities where language does not matter.

Refugee and immigrant students and former teachers also pointed to traumatic and sometimes physically violent incidents of bullying both within schools and on the way to and from school. The report of bullying is consistent with national trends. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that following the election, in a survey sent to 10,000 teachers, 2,500 teachers reported increased

incidents of harassment ranging from racist graffiti to assaults, while four in 10 teachers reported derogatory language directed at students of color, Muslims, and immigrants. Undocumented students not only struggle with academics but many also feel hopeless and unable to plan for the future because of their status. Currently, many undocumented students can only attend college by paying the rate foreign students pay -- two or three times as much as residents. They are not eligible for any government grants or loans. Students without status cannot work legally and are pushed into the underground economy. Although, students who arrived in the U.S. before June 15, 2007, and are in or completed a high school program, are eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program created by President Obama in 2012. DACA recipients can achieve a modicum of stability, as they can obtain legal work authorization and be protected from deportation. However, DACA's status under the current administration is not yet resolved, and those enrolled may revert to being undocumented and subject to deportation.

Immigrant parents face barriers to involvement in their children's education, based on difficulties in communicating with teaching staff and fears concerning their immigration status being revealed. The Philadelphia School District employs close to 60 Bilingual Teaching Assistants (BCA) who provide interpretation to parents; these staff function as cultural and linguistic bridges for

parents, but most are assigned to several schools. Several years ago, there were one hundred BCAs.

Against this backdrop, public schools can serve as the vehicle to conduct outreach, provide support, and educational initiatives that create a welcoming environment for students and parents. School-based efforts, such as those described below, will encourage students to stay in school, while offering support to immigrant and refugee families.

Developing Welcoming Schools Policies

Welcoming Schools policies provide students, parents, community members, and schools with tools for affirming a school's dedication to ensuring that all students regardless of immigration status are welcome, safe, and protected in the school environment. The Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition (PICC) and the Temple Sheller Center for Social Justice have successfully created a statewide *"Welcoming Schools Campaign"* including a toolkit for families, educators, and administrators to learn about the rights of immigrants. The Toolkit also contains ways schools, school boards, and school districts can create safety and show support by enacting resolutions and policy changes to help address the fears and needs of the immigrant and refugee community.

PICC understands that it is important for the immigrant

community to lead the way and express their needs before attempting to advocate on their behalf. Therefore, PICC spent months before and after the election having one-on-one and group discussions with students, as well as parents, advocacy leaders, teachers, and school officials. All expressed concerns related to the new administration and increased Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) presence in their communities, high levels of bullying, and the lack of clarity about what schools will do to support families impacted by immigration raids.

As PICC began doing school presentations in classrooms across Philadelphia and other parts of the state, we heard children as young as third graders ask questions such as *"Will my parents get deported?"* and *"What is going to happen to my siblings and me if my parents are sent back to their country?"* PICC staff also heard parents and teachers asking if sending their kids to school (especially undocumented children) was safe. To address such concerns, PICC provided Know Your Rights sessions, gave out Know Your Rights cards for children to carry, and give to parents, and conducted role plays on how to deal with ICE during classroom visits, school, and community events. PICC has worked with the *Caucus for Working Educators (WE)*, a group of educators and staff in the Philadelphia school system, to provide training to, and actively engage school staff in educational workshops and advocacy. Many educators have brought speakers to their

classrooms, created lesson plans to learn about the immigration system, and worked with immigrant rights groups to make classrooms more welcoming. Others have prepared students, parents, and colleagues to testify about their needs in front of the School Reform Commission, the local governmental body that oversees public and charter schools.

PICC, together with union and community allies, seeks to have the School Reform Commission pass a "Welcoming Schools Resolution" that clarifies Philadelphia School District policies on protecting students from ICE enforcement activities. It is important that students, parents, and school personnel are aware of ICE's current policy (called "Sensitive Locations Memo") which states that ICE will generally not conduct enforcement activities in schools, at educational activities, or at school bus stops. Policies such as this and model resolutions are contained in the Toolkit. A campaign that involves students, parents, educators, and advocates to achieve a school district-wide resolution empowers participants and promotes leadership. PICC seeks to put an end to the policing of students of color, to stop the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline, and to ensure our schools provide language access and culturally trained staff for students and families.

Access to Immigration Legal Service Providers

The government's recent crackdown has left many immigrants desperate for quality legal advice. Public schools, as a trusted place in the community, are well positioned to help meet this need by connecting students and parents with trusted legal service providers.

Offering legal education to undocumented students, in particular, makes sense: certain immigration protections, such as DACA and Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), are available to young people, and the latter requires that an attorney has identified the child's eligibility and taken certain steps before the child turns 18 years old. Gaining lawful status for a child who is eligible also takes time -- often years. Identifying and assisting an eligible child early on can therefore be key to ensuring her access to higher education and employment as she approaches adulthood.

With this in mind, HIAS Pennsylvania, through a $20,000 pass-through grant from the School District and in partnership with La Puerta Abierta, created an initiative to support outreach and education around immigration issues for students and school district personnel. HIAS Pennsylvania's part of the project involved two components: professional development (PD) for teachers and staff, and direct outreach and education to students. The project centered around three schools with high numbers of immigrant students: Franklin Learning Center, Furness High School, and Northeast High School. HIAS Pennsylvania attorneys first conducted a PD session for

teachers at each school during the spring of 2017. The session provided an "Immigration 101" with particular focus on the current immigration enforcement landscape and the forms of legal relief most often pursued by undocumented children. The sessions also addressed how immigration status impacts access to higher education and highlighted resources students and staff can turn to for support.

Following each session, HIAS Pennsylvania attorney staff conducted in-school “Know Your Rights” workshops for students. Teachers, administrators, and bilingual case aides publicized these workshops, and each workshop drew a diverse crowd of between 20 to 60 students. Students learned about their rights under the law and how certain undocumented immigrants might seek legal status. Afterwards, students were offered free consultations with an immigration attorney. Several undocumented students learned, for the first time, that they might have a pathway toward legalization.

The reception and reaction to these events were overwhelmingly positive. While limited in its scope, this small project showed what a sustainable, long-term partnership between schools and immigration legal service providers might look like and might achieve. Such a project could provide ongoing education and support to immigrant students and families, connecting many with needed resources that they would not otherwise find. Integrating this approach into Philadelphia’s Community

Schools initiative which is poised to deliver a panoply of human and health services through targeted public schools would expand the program. A fully-funded project would include funding to cover free immigration legal representation for certain students or family members (similar to ActionNYC's program). Such an investment would go a long way toward giving some of our city's most vulnerable youth a chance to reach their full potential.

Community Collaborations to Promote English Language and Academic Support

The need for supplemental ESOL programs and assistance has been an ongoing issue in public schools. K-12 refugee students may face special barriers, including suffering from trauma if they witnessed violence and/or the death of a loved one. Often isolated in camps, some refugees speak tribal languages that may not be widely spoken in the U.S. or even among their own national group. Thus, English becomes the only language refugees can use to communicate with others, even those sharing the same nationality. In recognition of the special situation of refugees, the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement/Administration for Children and Families provides Refugee School Impact Grants to aid in providing targeted assistance to K-12 refugee youth. Funding is provided on a per capita basis related to the number of refugees arriving in a region, and in Pennsylvania, it is provided to the Pennsylvania Refugee Resettlement

Program. Through an RFP process, HIAS Pennsylvania received a grant to provide out-of-school academic and English language support in Philadelphia.

During the 2016-17 academic year, 50 refugee students were enrolled in after-school programming for grades K-12 at Gilbert Spruance School and Northeast High School. These schools in Northeast Philadelphia serve large populations of non-native English speakers composed of both immigrants and refugees. The two after-school programs provide homework help, English language support through interactive activities, and an opportunity for socialization with peers and adults. Additionally, both programs encourage creative expression through workshops by visiting teaching artists and personal narrative writing through the Writers Matter curriculum.

The refugee after-school program, held from three in the afternoon to five in the evening three days a week expanded to a full day in the summer. The summer classes help to close the academic grade level gap between refugee youth and their native English-speaking peers by reinforcing language concepts learned in school, while also providing a safe and friendly social space. The summer program is not limited to Spruance and Northeast High School students but open to all refugee students who attend schools in Northeast Philadelphia. The 2017 summer program will reach 50 to 60 refugee students through programs for students in grades K-4 and 8-12.

The role of HIAS Pennsylvania's Refugee Education Coordinator has been crucial in establishing a rapport with school district administrators in departments such as the Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programming and the Office of Family and Community Engagement. HIAS Pennsylvania and other refugee-serving agencies maintain these relationships through the Philadelphia Refugee Education Collaborative, a coalition that meets quarterly to share concerns about refugee students and to problem-solve. Issues such as enrollment procedure, high school selection, and testing are addressed. The wider Refugee Education Collaborative has resulted in increased communication between refugee-serving organizations and the School District.

The success of HIAS Pennsylvania's refugee youth programming depends largely on trained volunteer participation. With the assistance of volunteers, refugee students can receive individualized homework help and language instruction. An intentional and invaluable byproduct of these volunteer-student interactions is the learning about different faith and racial backgrounds that takes place. Most volunteers identify as Jewish or Christian, and for the students, who are primarily Muslim, this presents an opportunity to build bridges across religious divides.

The growth of these student-volunteer relationships is among several informal measures of program success. More formal measures include reports on students'

progress from their ESOL and subject area teachers, scores on the tiered ACCESS assessment for ELLs, and student surveys. Additionally, HIAS Pennsylvania program staff communicates regularly about observed growth in students' language use and confidence and increased socialization with peers in both their first languages and in English.

In an effort to expand programming for all ELL students regardless of status, HIAS Pennsylvania will partner with the Philadelphia School District to bring summer arts enrichment programming to 120 middle school-age immigrant and refugee beginner language learners in Northeast Philadelphia, grades five to eight, not served by the current refugee program. Through five art-based learning tracks that include creative writing and visual art, students will grow as English language users and community members who are valued for their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In a tearful farewell after the close of the 2016 summer program which enrolled ninety students, students and bi-lingual community volunteers described how the programs made them feel accepted and valued, and motivated them to learn and serve. The need to expand the program to enroll one hundred and twenty youth is a strong indicator of its popularity with immigrant families and recognition of its importance by the School District.

Once after-school ESOL programs are integrated into the school, they form a basis for additional parent and

community engagement. For example, both the elementary and high school Northeast programs included parent workshops that dealt with school selection processes, a crime prevention discussion with a police guest speaker, presentations by successful immigrant graduate students, discussions on conflict resolution, and the introduction of cultural opportunities to the students such as an Arabic drumming group from Al Bustan.

Looking to the future, coordinating the after-school efforts targeting refugee and ESOL students with other after-school/out of school time programs (OSP) would be an important way to share best practices and to increase involvement of ESOL/immigrant students in OSPs across Philadelphia.

Conclusion

Public schools are critical to promoting inclusion of immigrant and refugee children and their families. Local school districts can respond to the current harsh environment that stigmatizes immigrants and refugees by developing district-wide policies that protect children from entanglement in the immigration system and that deal with bullying based on ethnicity or religion. Schools are also key sites where access to critical immigration legal services and education can be delivered. Finally, providing quality supplemental ESOL programing by partnering with immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations not only helps immigrant and refugee

students advance academically, but also engages the larger community in building relationships with diverse populations.

Works Cited

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