

Supporting Afghan Students in Schools & Youth Programs the United States



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Introduction

In the 2021-22 school year and beyond, schools across the United States will enroll significant numbers of children and youth from Afghanistan. These students fled the country after the withdrawal of American military troops and the subsequent fall of the Afghan government on August 15, 2021. While many schools and communities have a long history of welcoming refugee and immigrant students; given the large number of arriving Afghan students and recent traumatic events, educators and school districts may want to do additional preparation.

This toolkit is designed to help educators to:

- Develop a well-rounded understanding of the circumstances of newly arrived Afghan students and their families, including the challenges they may face as they seek to adapt to the American education system;
- Better understand the Afghan educational systems and possible educational experiences of students;
- Name core considerations for working with Afghan students and their families;
- Adopt skills and strategies that may be helpful in working with Afghan students and families; and
- Access information and resources to support their work.

Afghans in the United States

More than four decades of conflict have resulted in over two million Afghans fleeing their country and more than four million displaced within its borders. Between January and mid-September of 2021, more than 665,000 people in Afghanistan were forced to flee their homes.¹

As of 2019, there were approximately 132,000 Afghan immigrants in the United States. More than half of these individuals arrived after 2010, the majority through the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program that resettles Afghans who have served with the U.S. Armed Forces.² In August 2021, after the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover of the country, more than 100,000 Afghans were evacuated from the country; approximately half were under the age of 18.³ Many of those evacuated will become permanent members of U.S. communities.

Afghans evacuated as part of [Operation Allies Welcome \(OAW\)](#) have a number of different legal statuses. While some qualify for SIVs and some are legal permanent residents of the U.S. or other foreign nationals who were visiting Afghanistan at the time of the evacuation, the majority of people evacuated have been granted humanitarian parole. Humanitarian parole allows someone who is otherwise inadmissible into the United States to live in the U.S. for a temporary period of time due to an emergency. Afghans evacuated as part of OAW were granted humanitarian parole for a period of two years and may be referred to as “parolees”. For more information and updates on parole for Afghan nationals, visit the [United States Citizenship and Immigration Services website](#).

¹ *Internal Displacement due to Conflict | Humanitarian Response*. (2021). OCHA. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps>

² The SIV Program was created to protect Afghan allies who have worked for United States-funded programs or who helped U.S. troops. It provides a key pathway for Afghans who have fled their country in search of safety. For more information, see: Batalova, J. B. J. (2021, 9 September). *Afghan Immigrants in the United States*. Migrationpolicy.Org. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghan-immigrants-united-states>

³ International Rescue Committee. (2021, 18 October). *Pathways to Relocate in the United States for Afghan Nationals*. <https://cwsglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Pathways-to-Relocate-to-the-US-for-Afghans-1.pdf>



Photo Credit: A. Oberstadt/IRC. Afghan family living in Richmond, VA, six years after resettling in the U.S., September 2021.

Prior to arrival in the U.S., evacuated Afghans underwent rigorous screening and vetting by the U.S. government in Bahrain, Germany, Kuwait, Italy, Qatar, Spain, or the United Arab Emirates. Screening included a review of fingerprints, photos, and other biometric and biographic data.⁴ After arriving in the U.S., evacuees were transported to military facilities for a full medical screening and a variety of services before moving on to their next destination.⁵ People may have independently left the military facilities or may have been connected to a resettlement agency for some provision of initial resettlement support in their final destination.

Because of the recent and rapid pace of the evacuations, in-depth information is not currently available about the demographics, educational histories, and life experiences of Afghan families who will be joining our communities. Educators and service providers can monitor official sources, such as the Department of Homeland Security [Operation Allies Welcome](#) webpage, for more information and updates.

⁴ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2021, 24 November). *Operation Allies Welcome*. DHS.gov https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/21_1110-opa-dhs-resettlement-of-at-risk-afghans.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

Education in Afghanistan

The Education System

The Afghan national education system includes two three-year cycles of primary education and two three-year cycles of secondary education, as well as optional vocational education. Children and youth may also attend Madrassas (religious schools). While participation in education from grades 1-9 is required by law, access is limited for many students (see below, *Educational Access*).⁶⁷

Lower Primary (Grades 1 through 3): The first cycle of primary education focuses on religious studies, first language (Dari or Pashto), math, art, and physical education.

Higher Primary (Grades 4 through 6): The second cycle of primary education includes the same subjects as lower primary, plus science, history, geography, and second language (Dari or Pashto depending on the region). At the end of grade six, students must pass a national exam to gain admission to lower secondary school.

Lower Secondary (Grades 7 through 9): The first cycle of secondary education includes subjects like religious studies, local language, math, natural sciences, social sciences, foreign language (e.g. English, German, French, or Russian) and physical education. At the end of grade nine, students must pass national exams to gain admission to higher secondary school.

Higher Secondary (Grades 10 through 12): The second cycle of secondary education continues the topics taught in lower secondary. However, students must choose a specialization in the social sciences or natural sciences. At the end of grade twelve, students must pass national exams to receive a national certificate of completion. Another exam, the Konkur Exam or University Entrance Exam, is required for entry into higher education (university).

Secondary Vocational Education: Alternatively, after completing lower secondary, students may opt to pursue technical or secondary vocational education. These programs typically range from two to five years, after which students earn a vocational education certificate.

Though the vast majority of Afghan students who attend school do so in public schools, there is a growing network of private schools operating at the national level, primarily focused on the larger cities or provincial capitals of the country, with the highest concentration found in Kabul. Since 2010, there has also been growth in a new model of Community Based Education (CBE) centers, primarily established by international and national NGOs. These CBE centers are primary and lower secondary education centers established inside or close to communities, in shared spaces, and seek to reduce distance barriers facing many remote and inaccessible communities. CBE centers are linked to the closest formal education school so that children can be transitioned into formal education after they complete lower and higher primary education.

Schools in Afghanistan follow two separate academic calendars: one for “warm climate” provinces and another for “cold climate” provinces. This allows for continuity of learning based on seasons and when schools are accessible to children. Cold climate schools—including in Kabul and northern provinces—normally operate from

The Afghan national education system includes two three-year cycles of primary education and two three-year cycles of secondary education.

⁶ World Education Services (WES). (2016, September 6). *Education System in Afghanistan*. <https://wenr.wes.org/2016/09/education-afghanistan>.

⁷ NUFFIC. (2015, January 1). *Education System Afghanistan Described and Compared with the Dutch System*. <https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2020-08/education-system-afghanistan.pdf>.

March to December, with holidays during the coldest months of the year (January and February). Warm climate schools—including in southern provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar—normally run from September to June, with schools closed during the hottest months of the year (late June, July, and August).

The elementary school day in Afghanistan is three hours and 25 minutes long.⁸ The secondary school day is typically four hours long. In some cases, schools have shifts due to overcrowding or to separate girls and boys.



Photo credit: Solmaz Daryani. Afghan girls attend school in Herat, Afghanistan, 2019.

Languages

There are over 30 languages spoken in Afghanistan, but most people speak either Dari (78%) or Pashto (50%).⁹ Some Afghans may speak both languages to a certain extent, but they typically communicate more effectively in one or the other. Approximately 5% of Afghans speak English.¹⁰ Educators and service providers should know that Dari and Pashto are entirely different languages. However, Dari and Iranian Persian are two dialects of the same language, Farsi. When Afghans use the term “Farsi,” they are referring to the dialect spoken in Afghanistan—Dari—and not to the dialect spoken in Iran. These two dialects are mutually intelligible when written, but very different when spoken (and therefore a Farsi/Iranian Persian speaker from Iran is not

⁸ Molina, E., Trako, I., Hosseini Matin, A., Masood, E., and Viollaz, M. (2018, September). *The Learning Crisis in Afghanistan: Results of the Afghanistan SABER Service Delivery Survey, 2017*. World Bank Group, p. 4. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/588881536147087211/AUS0000428-REVISED-SABER-SD-Afghanistan-digital-9-27.pdf>

⁹ Afghanistan - *The World Factbook*. (2021, November 17). Central Intelligence Agency. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/afghanistan/#people-and-society>

¹⁰ Ibid.

an appropriate interpreter for a Farsi/Dari speaker from Afghanistan).¹¹

Dari and Pashto are the official languages of instruction in the Afghan public education system. Which language is used for instruction depends on which is the dominant local language; both are not used at the same time. Students typically begin learning the non-dominant language (Dari or Pashto) starting in grade four. Speakers of minority languages are unlikely to have had specialized support to acquire the language of instruction and integrate into the national education system, and are more likely to drop out of formal education.

Educational Access

Afghan children and youth arriving in the United States will have varying levels of prior access to formal education. Many may arrive with little to no experience, or some experience, while others may have a significant amount of experience. Educators and service providers should be patient with Afghan students and recognize that very few will share identical educational backgrounds prior to arrival in the U.S.

Educational access in Afghanistan improved significantly between 2001 and 2021, yet it remains limited. Security concerns, conflict and displacement, migration and natural disasters, poverty, building and teacher shortages, transportation and distance, and gender norms all present barriers. Before the current crisis, up to half of all children were not enrolled in school, and approximately 60% of these out-of-school students were girls.¹² Further, students with special needs are unlikely to have had access to specialized classes.¹³ Going forward, as the Taliban reforms Afghanistan's education system, these barriers towards access may increase and create new challenges for the country's youth.

Early Childhood Education: Very few Afghan children (~1%) have had access to formal early childhood education programming (such as pre-school, kindergarten, or Head Start)¹⁴. There is no public early childhood education system. Some children from urban areas may have attended private Kindergarten.

Primary School: Children are more likely to have had access to at least some primary education (equivalent to elementary education in the U.S.) than to early childhood education. However, many children may not have completed the level of primary education appropriate for their age. Those least likely to have complete primary education include: girls from rural conservative areas, children from rural and/or insecure areas, children from nomadic or poor families, and children from families where the head of household has no formal education.¹⁵

Secondary School: Youth may or may not have participated in secondary school (equivalent to middle and high school level schooling in the U.S.). Recent statistics suggest that only half of female children and two thirds of male children attend school at the middle school level, and even fewer continue on to high school.¹⁶

Educational Outcomes

¹¹ Translators without Borders, (2017). *Language fact sheet: Farsi & Dari*. <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Farsi-and-Dari-Factsheet-English.pdf>

¹² Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2018, April 25). *Global Initiative on Out of School Children, Afghanistan Country Study*. <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/reports/global-initiative-out-school-children>

¹³ Molina et al., p. 9

¹⁴ Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2018, April 25). *Global Initiative on Out of School Children, Afghanistan Country Study*. <https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/reports/global-initiative-out-school-children>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ UNESCO. (2021). *The right to education: what's at stake in Afghanistan? A 20-year review*. Paris, France. p. 17. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378911>

Along with enrollment in school, learning outcomes have also improved in recent decades. However, they still vary greatly. According to the World Bank, approximately 55% of male and 30% of female Afghans aged 15+ are literate.¹⁷ Educators should understand that many students may come with no formal education or present several years below grade level standards. For example, after four years of primary school, only two-thirds of Afghan students have fully mastered the language curriculum for the first grade, and less than half have mastered the math curriculum for the first grade. Overall, girls have lower rates of literacy and familiarity with educational instruction.¹⁸

Students' Educational Experiences

Type of instruction

Afghan formal classrooms typically focus on whole group instruction. Levels of teacher education and training vary, but it is not uncommon for teachers to have less than a high school education themselves. Therefore, teaching strategies are somewhat limited and lecture-based instruction is the norm. Students are expected to memorize and recall a great deal of information. Students may be used to teachers asking the same question several times to multiple students with the intent that all can be successful in responding to the question. Thus, many students may have strong listening and memorization skills, and may be used to copying notes from the board or lectures with attention to penmanship.

Many instructional techniques common in the United States are likely to be totally unfamiliar to newly arrived Afghans. Small group work and center-based instruction are not common. Students may or may not have experience with techniques like inviting students to the blackboard, checking their performance individually, or calling the students by their names.¹⁹ Similarly, activities that require critical thinking, concept application, or student-led learning are likely to be unfamiliar. Students are also unlikely to have had any experience with digital literacy beyond basic web browsing and social media on cell phones. Afghan youth are not expected to have sufficient computer skills for tasks such as accessing online learning applications or platforms (e.g. Google Classroom, Google translate, Class Dojo, Flipgrid, iReady, IXL, Raz-Kids, etc.), completing or submitting homework, creating slide presentations, typing papers, or doing academic research. Digital skills are not typically taught or required until Afghan students enter college.

Classroom resources

Similarly, schools vary in levels of resources available. Schools often lack qualified teachers, access to electricity and water, suitable infrastructure, sufficient budgets, and facilities.²⁰ While nearly all elementary classrooms are equipped with chalkboards and chalk or markers, less than half have desks and chairs. Most students have access to textbooks, but classroom libraries are rare. Only some teachers display educational materials on classroom walls.²¹ Schools in the capital city of Kabul and other provincial capitals are generally much better equipped than those in more rural areas. Students are unlikely to have had access to computers or other digital technology in school.

Interrupted education is common

Even for children and youth who have had access to formal schooling, interruptions to education are common.

¹⁷ The World Bank (2021, September). *Literacy rate, adult male (% of males ages 15 and above) – Afghanistan Data*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.MA.ZS?locations=AF>

¹⁸ Trako, I. T., & Molina, E. M. (2021, March 12). *The learning crisis in Afghanistan*. World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/learning-crisis-afghanistan>

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

²⁰ Alamyar, M. (2018, May 25). "Education in Afghanistan: A Historical Review and Diagnosis." *College and University*, 93(2), 55-60.

²¹ Trako & Molina, p. 8.

Conflict and displacement have been major drivers of interrupted education in Afghanistan for generations. Schools being destroyed, targeted, or taken over by armed groups, the routes reaching them becoming unsafe, conflict in the community, and families needing to move to safer locations are all reasons that teachers and families stop going to school for varying amounts of time. While internal displacement sometimes improves access to education (if students are displaced to safer locations with more accessible schools), internally displaced children are some of the most at risk for being out of school.

In recent decades, Afghans who have sought refuge in neighboring countries, such as Pakistan and Iran, have had varying access to education. In Pakistan, the government and international organizations have provided dedicated schools for Afghan refugees where boys and girls receive some primary and secondary education. In larger cities hosting significant populations of Afghan refugees, experimental and transitional schools provide additional access. These efforts have largely benefited students between the ages of six to 12. UNHCR Pakistan has also provided some Afghan youth with free primary education through schools, satellite classes, and community centers.²² In Iran, Afghan refugee youth have received even fewer opportunities to complete their schooling, often due to complications resulting from their legal status and inability to pay refugee-specific school fees. In recent years, Iran began allowing all Afghan children of school age to attend primary and secondary schools, regardless of their documentation status, and refugee-specific school fees were also removed. Both measures have made education more accessible.²³

Other reasons Afghan children's education can be interrupted include poverty, building and teacher shortages, transportation and distance, and gender-related barriers. Since the Taliban takeover, more families whose children were in school are opting out of sending their children to school, with girls disproportionately impacted, especially those over primary education ages.



Photo credit: A.M. Sayed. Children attend class at an Afghan refugee camp in Lahore, Pakistan, 2013

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 has further interrupted Afghan students' education. During the initial outbreak, all schools in

²² UNHCR Pakistan (n.d.) *Education*. <https://www.unhcr.org/pk/education>.

²³ UNHCR Iran (n.d.) *Education*. <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/education>.

Afghanistan closed for six months. Few students had access to remote learning, especially those in rural areas. Many suffered significant learning loss and many dropped out of school. Although schools in Afghanistan reopened after COVID-19 closures, in the period leading up to the collapse of the Afghan Government, escalating conflict in many provinces resulted in many children continuing to go without schooling.



Photo credit: Yasemin Yurtman Candemir. Afghan family at home in Afghanistan, 2014.

Family and Community Engagement

Common ways that families support their children’s education at home include teaching values, behaviors, and skills to carry over from home to school. These include the need for getting a good education, working hard to obtain this, and respecting the authority of teachers. Families also emphasize the importance of being kind and noble with everyone their children meet.

While expectations for family engagement in Afghanistan are more limited than those in the U.S., Afghans do have a tradition of some community engagement with schooling. Shura is an Arabic word for “consultation,” and the Qur’an encourages Muslims to decide on affairs in consultation with one another. School Management Shuras play a role in the delivery of education in Afghanistan by helping manage and support some formal schools and community-based education centers. School Management Shuras are typically single-sex, especially in rural and conservative areas, but have expanded in recent years to increase female participation and voice.²⁴ Afghan caregivers, especially those with more education, are also likely to encourage their children to take advantage of educational opportunities and be involved in their children’s academic life. In some cases, families may put significant pressure on their children to be academically successful.

Considerations for Working with Afghan Students and

²⁴ Hall, S. 2014, December 31). *School Management Shuras: A Bridge between Girls’ Education and the Communities? Case Study on Community Mobilization for the promotion of girls’ education - Afghanistan*. GIZ-BEPA. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/school-management-shuras-bridge-between-girls-education-and-communities-case>

Families

Each individual and family is unique

Afghanistan's peoples and cultures are diverse, with different ethnicities, languages, and distinctive experiences.²⁵ Each family has its own distinctive make-up, family beliefs, and goals, and each person in the family is likely to have their own individual beliefs, goals, and temperaments. Families and individuals also change over time, evolving as they adapt to their communities, grow older, learn new information, and have new experiences. While having a general understanding of culture and context is important, it is no substitute for getting to know an individual and family. Educators should strive to be curious, while also respecting that individuals are the most reliable reporters of their history and reality, and each person is best placed to determine which programs and resources meet their own needs.

Every individual and family has important strengths

All people have inherent strengths including lived experience, talents, knowledge, and resiliency. Because of language and cultural differences, and in some cases limited educational experience, many new students from Afghanistan may understandably feel insecure about their educational preparedness or intelligence. Their first experience with the U.S. educational system may either reinforce this belief or do the opposite: increase a sense of confidence and competence. It is critical that educators understand the important role they play, and whenever possible, seek to recognize and promote strengths as opposed to deficits. Take extra time to support students' comprehensive understanding of the educational system and help them leverage the knowledge and skill sets they have developed. This will go a long way to supporting their development of new knowledge and skills and increasing their motivation to advance educationally.

Children, youth, and families may have had significant traumatic experiences

Afghanistan endured many decades of conflict leading to the events of summer 2021 and evacuees' harrowing journeys to the United States. During the evacuation, most families first made their way to the chaotic Kabul airport, then to a U.S. Military base overseas (locations included Germany, Italy, Spain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain). After processing, families flew to a Safe Haven military base in the U.S. (locations included Wisconsin, Texas, New Jersey, Virginia, New Mexico, and Indiana) where most remained for a period of months. Finally, they traveled to the communities where they will reside, where many were placed in temporary housing while waiting for long-term housing to become available.

Each step of the journey to a U.S. classroom or youth program has been challenging, and students and families may still be processing these experiences. In addition, many left loved ones behind in Afghanistan and remain deeply concerned about their continued safety.

For information on age-specific effects of trauma, visit the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network website](#) and see [Helping Youth after Community Trauma: Tips for Educators.](#)

²⁵ Culture can be defined in many different ways. For this toolkit, culture is defined as the knowledge, attitudes, artifacts, beliefs, roles, languages, customs, world views, and historical contexts that are shared by a group of people. People can be part of multiple cultures at one time. For example, someone could be part of their ethnic culture while also being part of a religious culture that might differ from others who share that ethnicity.



Photo credit: U.S. Air Force/Tech. Sgt. Matthew B. Fredericks. Afghan children evacuated to the United States watch Sesame Street at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, December 2021.

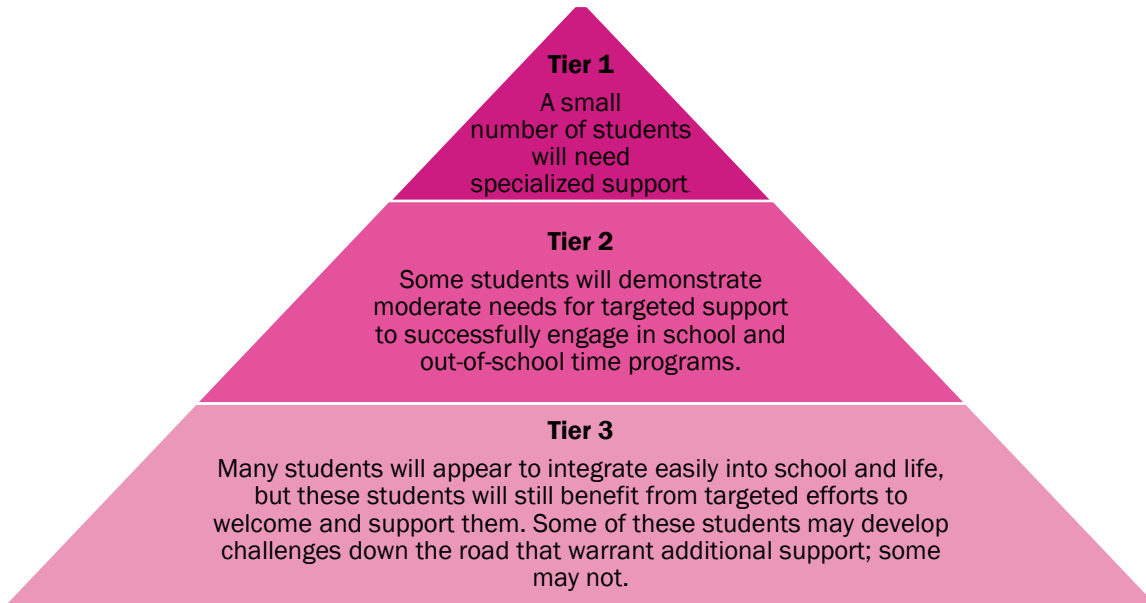
Educators should remember that all people have the capacity for resilience and recovery, while also recognizing that exposure to trauma and toxic stress can have short- and long-term detrimental impacts on people’s health, development and well-being. They may notice some students displaying symptoms that are associated with trauma. This table reviews general symptoms that can occur in children of all ages:

Cognitive Symptoms	Physiological Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Behavioral Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Trouble concentrating and filtering distractions ■ Persistent thoughts about traumatic events ■ Memory impairment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sleeping problems ■ Stomach or headaches ■ Pains that don't seem to have physical cause 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fear or anxiety ■ Agitation or irritability ■ Hopelessness ■ Apathy ■ Trouble managing emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Trouble managing behavior ■ Avoidance of social contact ■ Engagement in risky behavior

Educators should prioritize the restoration of physical, psychological and emotional safety, as well as a sense of self-efficacy and control. This includes providing safe and healing classrooms (see *Approaches to Welcome and Support Afghan Students*, below), while also being prepared to make appropriate referrals to professionals with specialized expertise. Schools and programs utilizing multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to support students’ academic and behavioral success may anticipate more students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports (see diagram on next page).²⁶

²⁶ *Essential Components of MTSS*. (2020). Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. <https://mtss4success.org/essential-components>. Many US states have their own MTSS frameworks. MTSS frameworks typically integrate [Response to Intervention](#) approaches and [Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports](#) (PBIS).

Welcoming Students Affected by Forced Migration: A Tiered Understanding



Children, youth, and families are likely to be experiencing significant environmental stressors

While families are likely to highly value school and education, they may find it difficult to engage with school and youth program personnel, particularly within the first year of arrival in the U.S. In addition to traumatic experiences associated with conflict and persecution, displacement from their homes and leaving loved ones behind, Afghan children, youth, and families are likely to be facing many stressors as they seek to adapt and rebuild their lives in the U.S. The table on the next page reviews some examples:^{27 28}

Resettlement Stress	Acculturation Stress	Isolation Stress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Financial stressors ■ Housing inadequacy/instability ■ Difficulties finding employment ■ Loss of community support ■ Lack of access to resources ■ Transportation difficulties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Intrafamily conflicts over new and old cultural views ■ Peer conflicts related to cultural misunderstandings ■ Being asked to translate for family members ■ Problems fitting in at school ■ Struggles forming an integrated identity including elements of their new culture and their culture of origin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Feelings of loneliness and loss of social support ■ Experiences of discrimination or harassment ■ Experiences with others who do not trust the refugee child and family ■ Feelings of not fitting in ■ Loss of social status

²⁷ *About Refugees*. (2018, September 5). The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/refugee-trauma/about-refugees>

²⁸ *Refugee and Immigrant Core Stressors Toolkit* (2019, November). Boston Children’s Hospital Trauma and Community Resilience Center. https://redcap.tch.harvard.edu/redcap_edc/surveys/?s=HRPDCPPA3H

Targeted efforts may be required to support communication and engagement, and educators should be patient and persistent in these efforts. Due to cultural preferences, male members of the family may be more likely to be the ones who engage with school personnel, particularly if those personnel are also male. Female family members may be more comfortable becoming more involved when school personnel are female.

Family and community responsibilities, and gender norms, may impact student engagement with schools and youth programs

Afghan cultural norms place a high priority on family and community responsibilities, including for youth. These responsibilities typically fall along gendered lines: female family members typically have more responsibilities inside the home, and male family members have more responsibilities outside the home. These may conflict with expectations of schools and programs. For example, many girls will continue traditions of completing chores and housework before and after school. This may make homework difficult. Boys, however, may be responsible for helping elderly family or community members, such as by accompanying them to appointments, which may also reduce studying time.

Without specific accommodation for families' priorities and concerns, Afghan girls may have more difficulty accessing school and out-of-school programming. Families may not be comfortable with women and girls traveling alone and may prefer that men and boys who speak more English interpret for them. Because it is very uncommon for Afghan girls to leave home overnight, overnight trips will likely be met with great hesitation. Talking with and reassuring families will increase the chances of students being allowed to participate.

Sample Scripts: Engaging with Family Members

- Thank you for everything you have done to support [student name] as they transition to a new school. Is there anything I can do to help right now?
- I recognize how much new information you're hearing. It can be overwhelming learning so much information so quickly.
- When it comes to [student name]'s education, what is the most important thing to you right now?
- I understand you have concerns about [topic]. Can you tell me more about what you think?
- It sounds like you are thinking that [summarize viewpoint]. Did I get that right? Did I get anything wrong?
- Thank you for sharing your perspective with me. Would it be useful for me to explain [topic] further, to help you make a decision?
- I respect your decision. I'm always happy to talk to you about this again. If you have further questions or thoughts on [topic], please contact me at [contact information].

Approaches to Welcome and Support Afghan Students

In this section, you will find actionable guidance on creating a welcoming, inclusive, culturally and linguistically responsive, and healing environment for Afghan and other students who have experienced forced migration. It is impossible to detail an exact approach to educational programming that would honor newcomers' diverse identities. However, there are some guiding principles that can be helpful, including:

- Engage and approach students and families with cultural humility and responsiveness
- Ensure appropriate supports related to linguistic and religious needs
- Respect cultural differences while refraining from making assumptions

Create an intentional plan for how you will support newcomer families

As early in your planning as possible, identify possible partners in your community with whom you should coordinate. Meet with your local community organizations, resettlement agencies, and other immigrant-serving organizations to learn about supports available to new families and how you might partner. A useful first step is speaking with local resettlement agencies or your State Refugee Coordinator's office about the number of Afghan and other newcomer families that your district can expect to welcome. This information will help you decide how to accommodate increased demand on student and family support services, such as:

- Dari and Pashto interpretation and translation, in line with schools' legal obligation to communicate information to limited English proficient parents in a language they can understand"²⁹ For more, see: [Information for Limited English Proficient \(LEP\) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them](#).
- School enrollment, including procedures for supporting families who arrived without school records
- Literacy, numeracy and language proficiency screening
- Services for English language learners
- Digital inclusion supports
- Afterschool and supplemental academic supports
- Transportation

Case Study: Austin Independent School District

The Austin, TX Independent School District (Austin ISD) serves about 700 refugee students who collectively speak 116 languages. To prepare for an increase in enrollment of Afghan students, the Multilingual Education Department has taken the following steps: implemented a requirement that all elementary school teachers and secondary school English teachers be ESL certified; created a dedicated Refugee Family Support Office; provided staff training on Afghan history and cultural considerations; and a made series of recommendations to build relationships and partner with families who may need additional support. For more information, see Colorín Colorado: [Welcoming Afghan Families: Lessons Learned from Austin ISD](#).

²⁹ *Information for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them* (n.d.) U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-lep-parents-201501.pdf>

Also consider how you will support the staff who will engage the most with Afghan students and families, including educators, school counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and parent and community coordinators. Provide staff time and resources to access relevant trainings and learning materials. Relevant topics might include:

- Teaching and supporting students affected by forced migration, trauma, and with limited or interrupted education
- Psychological First Aid (PFA)
- Integrating literacy and language support into general education classrooms
- Self-care and what to do if they experience vicarious trauma

Procure and create necessary curricular resources, such as:

- Dari-English & Pashto-English bilingual books
- Dari-English & Pashto-English bilingual dictionaries, flashcards, labels
- English picture dictionaries
- Curricular resources for students to learn about their new Afghan classmates, while taking care to minimize content that may be triggering (See below, *Create healing classrooms and learning spaces*).

See *Resources for Educators & Service Providers*, below, for specific resource recommendations.

Build rapport and trusting relationships with students and families

Supporting Afghan and other newcomer students begins with forging relationships with families and children based on trust and mutual respect. One key way to welcome students and families is by offering orientations in home languages about school in the U.S. Many relevant orientation materials already exist: see Immigrant Connections, [Resources to Orient Afghans to K-12 Education in the U.S.](#) For tips on creating your own orientation materials, see English Learner Portal's [Checklist to orienting immigrant & English learner families](#).

Questions Afghan Families May Have About School

- How does the school schedule work? How many teachers will students have? Will students stay in the same classroom all day or go to different classes?
- How do students get to school and home each day? What do students do if they miss the bus? Can students leave school without permission?
- How do school meals and bathroom breaks work? What is the availability of halal food (food permissible to Muslims)?
- Is there space and time for religious students to pray?
- What technology is used in classes and how does one use/access it? (e.g., email, school portals, apps, etc.)
- What type of participation is expected in different classes (academics, physical education, music, etc.)?
- What should students do if they face bullying or feel unsafe?
- What should students do if they need help with schoolwork?
- When and why should students meet with school counselors or other academic advisors?
- What is required to move on to the next grade? To graduate? What are the educational and vocational/experiential steps needed to reach various career goals?

When getting to know newly arrived Afghan families, introduce yourself and your role in the school or program community. Emphasize your desire to help every student succeed. As you begin to build a relationship, show that you are curious about your students and their families, their goals, and the things they care about. Take steps each day to communicate that you see and value them. Prepare to respectfully engage with students and their families around concerns such as a girls' participation in afterschool programming, while also respecting family decisions.

Checklist: Culturally Responsive Strategies to Build Trust and Rapport with Afghan Students and Families

This box suggests various strategies which may be adapted for your school or program context. Not all strategies may be possible given resource and capacity limitations, but incorporating as many as is feasible may help Afghan students and families succeed.

- Make interpretation readily available, as required by federal law. Go beyond translation apps to offer high-quality in-person, video, or phone interpretation.
- Try to ensure outreach to female family members is done by female staff (especially early on).
- Assign each student one teacher, advisor, or peer mentor that they can go with questions, concerns, or just to talk. These trusted contacts can give students space to discuss expectations, upcoming assignments, etc. and reflect on experiences at school so far.
- Share information about existing opportunities and accommodations for students to adhere to cultural and religious traditions. Explore whether additional accommodations are needed, such as appropriate spaces and time for Muslim students to pray; availability of halal food; or accommodations to uniform or dress codes so that students may wear culturally preferred attire.
- Clearly explain any situations where students will be asked to stay at school longer than usual, to mitigate any confusion or fear among families when students do not arrive home at the normal time. Plan extra time to talk about extracurricular activities, address concerns, and provide reassurance to increase the likelihood of students, especially girls, being allowed to participate.
- Partner with Afghan community organizations or volunteers to help educate students about U.S. social norms. Give students concrete examples of acceptable and unacceptable behavior (for instance, explain that labeling others, name-calling, being disrespectful of different faiths or ethnicities, etc., are not acceptable and that students may get in trouble for these behaviors).
- Provide home visits rather than asking families to come into the office (e.g., for sensitive conversations or to share information about school town halls, parent-teacher conferences, parent-teacher associations, etc.). If families are connected with resettlement agencies, consider involving their caseworkers or other relevant service providers.
- Facilitate activities for the entire family to promote engagement and relationship building between families and school staff. For instance, create an affinity group for Afghan students and families where learning and resource sharing among families could be facilitated.
- If you have a number of Afghan families coming to your school or school district, explore whether families would like to participate in gender-specific meetings or focus groups to share information about how to best engage with them and support students. Ask families if they would like to co-facilitate such meetings with school personnel. Ensure Dari and/or Pashto interpretation will be provided as needed.

Focus on strengths; be creative and open to student learning styles

Educators should find opportunities for students to display existing competencies. Allowing students who are not literate in English or their home language to display their skills in other ways can be extremely valuable. Allowing them to draw, sing, write or record poetry in their language, or teach others about their culture or something they are good at can all be valuable ways to promote self-esteem and belonging. Being in charge of important tasks like leading the line, collecting homework, etc. can also display your sense of confidence in a child. It is also important to notice and point out to student's strengths, skills, and effort. When you point these out to students, be sure to make them specific so students feel your praise is authentic. For example, instead of saying, "great job," say "I like the way you stuck with that math problem until you came to a solution."

Create healing classrooms and learning spaces

When supportive relationships are coupled with safe and supportive learning environments, educators create the maximum opportunity for students—especially those recovering from traumatic events—to learn, grow, and thrive. Healing classrooms and learning spaces help students achieve:

- **Sense of control:** Feeling safe and secure, and that your day is predictable (you know what to expect and what is expected from you). Feeling you can influence what happens to you.
- **Sense of self-worth:** Feeling capable, confident, and hopeful about having and being able to contribute to a positive future. Liking yourself, and having good self-esteem. Feeling able to achieve what you set out to do.
- **Sense of belonging:** Feeling included, cared for, and accepted. Feeling part of a group and valued by the community. School clubs and sports can enhance this sense of belonging.
- **Positive relationships:** Having safe, stable connections with educators, staff, and other students, characterized by mutual respect, trust, transparency, and collaboration. Feeling seen, heard, understood, and valued.
- **Intellectual stimulation:** Understanding and seeing the value in learning goals, feeling like you have agency in how to achieve them, feeling appropriately challenged, and feeling that you are making progress. Able to connect new material to your existing knowledge and experience, see the relevance of the learning to your life, and have opportunities to learn in a variety of ways.

For more on healing classrooms, see IRC's self-paced e-learning course: [Toxic Stress & Student Well-Being among Students Affected by Forced Migration](#).

Four Strategies to Help Create Healing Classrooms and Learning Spaces

1. **Increase predictability and consistency:** Students who have experienced severe adversity need a predictable environment in order to regain a sense of stability and control in their lives.
 - Orient students thoroughly to routines, expectations, terms, and ways of doing things in your school, classroom, or youth program—even those you might consider to be obvious.
 - Implement routines consistently; let students know when something out of the ordinary is going to happen and explain those events (e.g., bells, drills, special gatherings, outsider visits, etc.).
 - Plan and manage transitions so that they are orderly; communicate precisely what students should do and how.

2. **Meet students' emotional needs:** Students first and foremost need to feel safe, supported, and valued in their learning environment so their brains can relax, take in and synthesize new information, and take risks in order to develop new skills.
 - Think through lessons and activities to anticipate potential triggers of intense emotions; modify plans to remove triggers or to prepare and support students during the activity (e.g., an assignment asking students to write about their family could trigger grief for separated families).
 - Let students know that it's okay to have trouble concentrating, feel overwhelmed or sad, etc.
 - Normalize errors and mistakes as part of the learning process; demonstrate that students should not hesitate to participate due to fear of being wrong or feel ashamed if they do make mistakes.
 - Integrate daily self-affirmations or self-compassion mindfulness exercises into your daily routines.
3. **Use positive, empowering group management:** Setting clear expectations and calmly applying positive classroom management strategies helps students know how to be successful.
 - Let students know their options for when they need to step away and reset. Ask what strategies have worked for them and try to support those strategies.
 - Implement classroom management strategies consistently, equitably, calmly, and without embarrassing or criticizing students.
 - Use restorative practices to manage conflict and give students agency to repair relationships when harm is done.
4. **Use spatial design to foster trauma-informed care principles:** Proactively designing learning spaces to promote safety, transparency, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and mutuality, and empowerment helps students feel safe, valued, and in control. Refine your learning space design to ensure it feels calm and fosters visibility, mobility, and personal space.
 - Post visual reminders of expectations and schedules to help students know what to expect throughout the day.
 - Ask students where and with whom they feel most comfortable sitting.
 - Have students help design installations of their work, items from home, or photos.

Refugee School Impact (RSI)

The [Refugee School Impact](#) program, funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), promotes the academic performance and successful integration of ORR- eligible children and youth by:

- **Providing specialized services and support for eligible children and youth**, such as English as a Second Language classes, tutoring, newcomer or transitional programs, after school and summer programs, mentoring, and behavioral health supports.
- **Supporting families learning to navigate the U.S. education system**, such as school-specific orientation for both families and students, navigators or cultural brokers, and language access.
- **Developing capacity for school staff and systems**, through activities such as specialized trainings for school staff, translation and interpretation, and hiring of specialized staff dedicated to working with ORR-eligible children, youth, and families.

RSI funds reach the local level in a variety of ways. In some communities, the funding and programming centers on refugee resettlement agencies, whereas in other communities the funding and programming centers on school districts. To learn how RSI works in your state or community, contact your [State Refugee Coordinator](#) or check the website of your state office for refugees.

Case Study: Wais and his Teacher

Wais fled Afghanistan to escape the Taliban in 2002 after the 9/11 attacks. After a long and extremely difficult journey, he arrived in the U.S. at ten years old and was enrolled into fifth grade at a local elementary school.

Wais had never had the opportunity to go to school and spoke no English. He felt many emotions about going to school for the first time: hesitant, anxious, and excited. The excitement, however, wore off quickly. Wais struggled to understand the content his teachers were delivering. He didn't understand what was expected of him in times like recess, assemblies, advisory hours, and tutoring time. Unexpected changes like substitute teachers were also sources of confusion and stress. Paying attention and retaining information was made even harder by sleepless nights resulting from panic attacks caused by flashbacks, and from separation anxiety associated with forced separation from his mother in Afghanistan by the Taliban. He also didn't know how to overcome the language barrier to make friends or communicate his needs to his teachers.

At times Wais withdrew, and at other times he lashed out. He avoided his teacher's questions and playing with other students, fearful of criticism. After a classmate called him a terrorist, he started to skip school. Confrontations with classmates led to suspensions.

Wais' fifth grade teacher recognized that Wais had significant emotional, social, and academic needs and decided to develop and implement a plan to help him succeed. She started by encouraging Wais to get involved with afterschool activities and become physically active, both for the opportunity for structured social activities and the mental and physical benefits of exercise. She advocated for Wais to receive additional English and academic tutoring, and she helped him to learn ways to express his frustration without resorting to aggression. She communicated an open-door policy whenever he needed to talk. He also began speaking with the school counselor, and the school found alternative ways to hold Wais accountable for inappropriate behavior without resorting to suspensions.

Unable to get Wais' mother to attend school events for parents, his teacher would also make home visits. When possible, she brought a Dari interpreter. Other times she got creative, such as bringing questions and information typed in Dari. Not all conversations were successful, but her efforts built rapport and a relationship. During these visits, she learned that Wais' fondest memories from Afghanistan were of flying kites. She used this insight to help Wais remember the good things from his life in Afghanistan, and to relate to his peers in a new way: bringing kites to school and having Wais teach his classmates how to fly them.

The results weren't immediate, but over the next few months, Wais began to acclimate. The tutoring helped him feel more confident communicating in English. He began to play with a few teammates from the running team during recess, and he improved his ability to manage his emotions. By the time Wais began middle school, he felt more confident with English, had made friends, and was enjoying athletics. He was on a path to success. Wais' teacher continued to be a valued mentor throughout his schooling and they are still in touch today.

Reflection Questions

- What are some signs that Wais needed additional support from his teachers and school?
- Which healing learning space strategies did Wais' teacher use? What did Wais achieve as a result?
- Is there anything you would have done differently if you were Wais' teacher?

Resources for Educators & Service Providers

Background Resources:

- [Afghan Backgrounder](#), **Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange (CORE)**: This document contains historical, political, and cultural information intended to cultivate a general understanding of Afghans who are arriving to the U.S.
- [The Taliban in Afghanistan](#), **Council on Foreign Relations**: This backgrounder promotes understanding of the Taliban and its current and historical role in Afghanistan.

Resources for Educator Trainings & Professional Development:

- [Toxic Stress & Student Well-Being among Students Affected by Forced Migration](#), **IRC**: This self-paced e-learning course explains common experiences associated with forced migration, how toxic stress affects children and youth, and key ways that effects of toxic stress can be mitigated within Healing Learning Spaces.
- [Psychological First Aid \(PFA\) for Children](#), **Save the Children**: This course introduces the concepts and steps involved in providing support to children following a distressing event. It includes activities that focus on the core elements of PFA and how to apply them.
- [Educational Experiences of Afghans: Learning from Afghan Refugee Students & Families](#), **Immigrant Connections**: This webinar recording from November 2021 featured Afghan students and parents.
- [Understanding the Backgrounds of Refugee Students and Families](#), **English Learner Portal**: - This five-hour course discusses the U.S. Refugee Program as well as the Refugee School Impact Program; strategies for refugee family and community engagement, addressing social-emotional concerns, and supporting refugee students in school; and sociocultural and educational characteristics of the primary refugee populations arriving to the U.S.
- [Refugee Educator Academy](#), **Carey Institute for Global Good Center for Learning and Practice**: This website offers courses, communities of practice, and other learning opportunities.

Pedagogical Resources for Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students:

- [Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm \(MALP\)](#): The MALP is a culturally responsive instructional approach that supports educators of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) and other culturally and linguistically diverse learners. It assists with the transition from preferred and customary ways of learning to Western-style formal education by integrating key elements of formal education while balancing and acknowledging their needs and preferences.
- [WIDA](#): WIDA offers a trusted, comprehensive approach to supporting, teaching and assessing multilingual learners.
- [Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model, 5th Ed.](#) The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model is an instructional model for delivering grade-level content standards to English learners, developing their English skills, and getting them college and career ready. The linked book and other resources further address the SIOP model and other sheltered English instruction techniques.
- [Colorín Colorado](#): This resource-packed website for teachers of English Language Learners includes videos, articles, and resource lists.

Multilingual Curricular Resources

- [Resource Pack, Education Above All](#): This facilitated activity pack includes bilingual Dari/English and Pashto/English materials for children and youth in transition.
- [Hoopoe Books](#): This website includes free downloadable reading resources available in English/Dari and English/Pashto.
- [Safe Healing and Learning Spaces \(SHLS\) Toolkit, IRC](#): This toolkit provides child protection and education practitioners with all of the content needed to initiate an SHLS program; it is appropriate for ages 6-11. The SHLS Parenting Curriculum is also available in [Dari](#) and [Pashto](#).

Curricular Materials for Teaching about Forced Migration and Afghanistan

- [Teaching about Refugees, UNHCR](#): These teaching materials are designed for four age groups (spanning ages 6-18).
- [Modern Afghanistan: Making Meaning in the Aftermath of Conflict, Primary Source](#): These teacher-created, classroom-ready activities are aligned to Common Core standards and designed around key primary sources for grades 8-12.
- [Homeland Afghanistan, The Asia Society](#): This series contains 75 video episodes on the geopolitical and cultural heritage of the region, featuring leading experts as well as hundreds of archaeological finds, paintings, literary works, music, photographs, and documentary films.
- [Welcoming Newcomers & Resettling Afghan Refugees, The Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility](#): This page includes learning activities for multiple age groups to capitalize on teachable moments.
- [Afghan Voices: Books for Children and Young Adults, Colorín Colorado](#): This list includes books that can be used to support school and community discussions of current events in Afghanistan.

Trauma-Informed Care & Education Resources:

The below resources, all from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, focus on the intersection of trauma-informed care and education.

- [Refugee Trauma Resources](#)
- [Resources in Response to the Recent Terrorist Attack and Afghanistan Transition](#)
- [Trauma Facts for Educators](#)
- [Children of War: A Video for Educators](#)
- [Assisting Parents/Caregivers in Coping with Collective Traumas](#)

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About Switchboard

Switchboard is a one-stop resource hub for refugee service providers in the United States. With the support of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), we offer tools and materials, learning opportunities, research, and technical assistance on resettlement-related topics. From employment, education, and health, to monitoring and evaluation, Switchboard's focus areas reflect real-world needs.

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