



## Serving Refugee Students and Unaccompanied Minors: More Than Just Learning English

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*A nonprofit in San Francisco partners with area high schools to serve immigrant and refugee students, including a growing number of undocumented, unaccompanied minors, who face not only learning English but also trauma and a host of other issues.*

Unrest, crime, and poverty in Central America and other parts of the world have led to periodic migrations of unaccompanied children and young refugees into the United States. These children then enroll in U.S. schools – public education for all children, including undocumented children, is a right guaranteed by the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* decision. Many of these young people have experienced intensive trauma and have legal, socio-economic, and other

needs far beyond learning English, which must be met for them to advance academically.

To help meet those needs, many schools have been reaching out to community partners who specialize in working with this population of unaccompanied minors. *VUE* guest editor Ruth López spoke with Nakachi Clark-Kasimu, former after-school coordinator at the San Francisco-based nonprofit Refugee Transitions, about the lessons and challenges of this work.

*Nakachi Clark-Kasimu is the former after-school coordinator at Refugee Transitions.*

**Q Tell us a little about Refugee Transitions and its work.**

**A** Refugee Transitions is a non-profit organization whose main service population are adults and youths described as “newly arrived” immigrants. This is a general term that incorporates documented and undocumented new Americans, as well as those who may have been in the country for a number of years but still need support to learn English, find jobs, or navigate academic systems – getting through high school and going on to college. Many of the folks we serve are family units.

How we got started, and what is still a big component of what we do, is providing home-based tutoring. We call it “tutoring,” but it’s not just academic – it also incorporates functional and life skills. We also work at schools, providing after-school programming at San Francisco International High School and Oakland International High School, and provide summer camps and work with other enrichment and functional curriculum service providers throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

Our work at schools is funded by grants through the school district. The program I led at San Francisco International came primarily from a grant from ExCEL, one of the after-school providers to the San Francisco Unified School District. We are – for schools, at least – the go-to agency to provide the life skills and non-academic services that students need. But in our school-based after-school programs, the main focus is to first support students academically, with social skills as more of an extension of that.

The home-based and school-based programs are run very differently. Home-based volunteers have more agency and provide support that is client-directed and depends on the client’s needs: for example, for an adult

looking for a job, it might consist of going through job postings, talking about developing job skills, or building vocabulary. Home-based volunteers are asked to stay with their tutee for a minimum of nine months to a year. These are long-term, indefinite relationships that tend to expand to other folks who live with the tutee and who also need support.

For example, often tutors find themselves assigned to one student and end up tutoring a household made up of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, parents, and siblings. Often there are multiple family members and extended family who have been here in the country for a while, and maybe there has been a reunification of family members, or maybe they’re the first ones here and others come into the home later. So these are very dynamic situations, but that sometimes translates into uncertainty and strain.

Tutors can become a crucial support for the whole household. They are, for many families, the sole expert on what it takes to live in the U.S.

There’s a lot of overlap in the populations we serve between Refugee Transitions’ home-based work and the after-school work. We try to expand our wraparound model, where we’re serving the students both in the after-school program and the home-based model. One of my job responsibilities at San Francisco International was to identify students at the schools who could be referred to our home-based program. We encourage after-school tutors to also volunteer as home-based tutors.

In our home-based program we receive referrals from many agencies and individuals – we can get names from anywhere. So we do have students who are at elementary or middle schools or other schools where we don’t have programs, so they’re not getting that ELL support at school. In the schools

where we do have programs, we definitely want to foster that overlap with the home-based program.

**Q What kinds of partnerships are needed to serve the “newly arrived” population?**

**A** Partnerships between schools and communities are vital because the population is so diverse and the work is so dynamic. Every year or two some new dispatch will come from the government letting us know that there is unrest in a particular country, and we’ll begin to see that translate into an influx of people who will need services. As a small organization, we have limited capacity, so we work with other organizations, and each one has its specialties. We work with International Rescue Committee<sup>1</sup> and local community-based organizations such as Instituto Familiar de la Raza,<sup>2</sup> which provides medical and family services. We work with Catholic Charities,<sup>3</sup> which is one of the national organizations that is recognized as a sponsor and can work with the government to relocate folks who have received refugee status.

The relationship we have with these organizations is two-way. They refer clients to us and also help with case management and provide services that we can’t provide, such as psychological services and medical treatment. Our volunteers are not credentialed teachers – if there are academic requirements, we would look to the school district to provide that kind of support.

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1 See <http://www.rescue.org>.

2 See <http://ifrsf.org>.

3 See <http://catholiccharitiesusa.org>.

4 For more about the Internationals Network, see <http://internationalsnps.org> and the article “Newcomer High School Students as an Asset: The Internationals Approach,” by Claire Sylvan in *VUE* no. 37, *English Language Learners: Shifting to an Asset-Based Paradigm*, <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/37/newcomer-high-school>.

Partnering with other organizations and collaboration around funding and service provision is critical to the sustainability of the work. Schools write grants for the after-school programs. Like all nonprofits, we are constantly looking for funders and need that influx of funding, so partnerships become more critical. As funds become more or less available, depending on who’s in the White House and the budgeting choices that trickle down to us, what we are able to provide can be very different. We are housed at San Francisco International High School now, but we had a gap in the past because we didn’t receive a grant.

**Q Tell us more about the partnership between Refugee Transitions and Bay Area schools.**

**A** A few years ago, both Oakland and San Francisco Unified partnered with the Internationals Network, based in New York, which comprises a number of public charter high schools for newly arrived immigrant youth.<sup>4</sup> All students are within three to four years of entry. Our populations were very much aligned. At the negotiation of the Internationals expansion to the Bay Area, Refugee Transitions was at the table to talk about the work that we do. That’s how our relationship began – it started with Oakland International High School, and two years later when San Francisco International High School opened, we were there from day one.

Whether the students eventually transfer to a mainstream school or complete their education at the international school depends on student need. The students aren’t required to stay for a particular time. The main requirement is that the students need to be within the first three years of entry.

**Q** You mentioned that many of the students you serve are unaccompanied minors. What do education stakeholders across the country need to know about this population?

**A** There are some misconceptions about who these young people are. Identified unaccompanied minors have been intercepted at the border, typically coming through Mexico from Central America. These youths are involved immediately in the immigration court process. That looks different from the traditional view of the undocumented person who has been able to remain under the radar and not be identified by a government agency.

Unaccompanied minors are going through a court process to determine if they will be allowed to stay. If they have a sponsor they can stay – if not, they will be deported. It is a messy, crazy process with inconsistent support. Some youths have lawyers, some are defending themselves. We look at it as a “spoke” model, with the student at the center, and then there’s the immigration court, whatever family they may or may not have and be reunified with, the foster care system, the school district – all these different organizations that are very much aware of these students.

The work we are doing at the school sites is happening in tandem with a lot of other organizations that are becoming more aware of these students as their entry has increased. A research team from a local university interviewed all the ninth- and tenth-grade students at one of the high schools and determined who does and does not have legal services, which relatives they’re staying with here, if they’re going through a unification process, how old they are, if there’s interrupted education – that kind of information. Our organization is not equipped to handle the legal part. Where we come in at the school is to provide English language and academic support. Many

of those students are in the ninth and tenth grades – we push into some of those classes and try to link the students with home-based tutors and after-school programming.

**Q** What is unique about these students?

**A** There are certainly socio-emotional needs that drive a lot of the outcomes that we come in to address. Many of the students have had interrupted education, or have insufficient or no education in their countries. Many of them, if they are able, are working, so after-school programming may or may not be accessible. Their living arrangements can be challenging, so home-based tutoring may not be an option. There is a lot of case management and problem solving that I, as the coordinator, participated in – more so than the tutors. I would sit with school administration and teachers and learn what some of the causal factors were for their academic support, and I would then contribute what our organization could provide for those students, like a home-based tutor who could come to the school, or push-in support.

These students have been through some deeply challenging experiences. They all have been through detention centers – essentially incarcerated for crossing the border, for wanting to pursue a better life, for wanting to flee threats in their home country. Many have been to multiple centers. They may have been to a center in Texas and then been transferred to one in Virginia – each with their own bureaucratic pieces that the students have to navigate while being farther and farther away from any support network, and not being able to access services for a long time because they get moved to a new place. Then when they do land in a new school, there’s all of that time to make up, and also all that trauma to work through.

There's a lot we don't know about their experiences. We know they're here, we know they're undocumented, but what's less known is how long these children have been on their own or living with an extended family member or friend of the family, before they even begin the journey to the U.S. I knew of one student whose mother had to raise him over the telephone for about three years because she had come to the U.S. and he was still in El Salvador. She would call him every night and make sure he had done his homework and eaten. Eventually she was able to send him the money to get from El Salvador to California. He had to do that by himself – he walked through Mexico barefoot, since he lost his shoes on the way. These stories are difficult to tease out: there's the fear that once the students get here and want to be reunified with their families, child welfare authorities might label the parents as unfit.

**Q Why do schools need to pay attention to this issue and recruit community partners like Refugee Transitions?**

**A** Whether schools know it or not, our traditional model of how we expect kids and families to access schooling – coming in on the first day or before school starts, registering their students, filling out paperwork, reading the manual, knowing how school works – is very rarely the case for these students. They need creative and individualized support. They can come to the school at any time, any day of the school year. Depending on how districts place their students, they may or may not be achieving at grade level – usually not. The language barrier adds another layer, and these students have considerable socio-emotional needs that make their performance in the classroom look very different from other students. The students will also still possibly have special needs and academic learning issues that are much

more difficult to access when there is not a common language, when there's a fear of deportation, and when there's a court system to navigate, say, at fifteen years old, possibly by themselves without parental support. So there are a lot of layers and a lot of issues that schools simply can't provide – no single organization can – so a network of collaboration is key.

**Q What advice do you have for readers in other communities who are interested in doing this work?**

**A** Teacher training and curriculum development throughout the grade levels based on the idea of differentiated learning is key. Individualized instruction, assessment, and curriculum should be guided not by the curriculum or the objectives, but by student needs. That is *good* practice for all students, and it is *essential, critical* practice for ELLs – but it is *non-negotiable* practice for unaccompanied and refugee youth. Individualizing these supports creates more work and more layers of difficulty, so collaboration is key. It's important for supports to address students' specific needs as we learn more and more about what these needs are.

The needs also change as youth are in the country longer, experiencing this court system, which can go on ad nauseam, and as they age and become acclimated to U.S. systems. We want them to be infused with self-determination. We don't want them to remain dependent forever, but we do want them to be supported continually, many would say “from cradle to career” – I say “from cradle to self-sufficiency,” to being able to support themselves and others.

Funding is key, and I believe that it is only sustainable when it has been in partnership, when organizations that have specialties that can support these communities are not competing for these funds, but can be more specific

about their work and connect with other organizations that can do specific aspects of the work well.

It's important for us to choose and foster from *within the community* the people who will lead and advocate for the community. What I hope to see is organizations taking a two-way approach where they give support, but also train clients to take over the support work and become partners. Parents and family members are often silent, both because they feel like they have nothing to contribute and because they are ignored by institutions with the bias that we who are here in the U.S. and who are in these organizations know best how to serve the clients. But actually, the clients and the folks in the communities can do it better. We at the nonprofits and schools can read the data sheets, view the statistics, and use data-based practices to address student needs, but we can never know as well as the people who have lived these experiences – these youth and their families – what it is truly like, and what is most effective.

*For more information on Refugee Transitions, see <http://www.reftrans.org>.*