



COVID-19 Guide to Supporting Immigrant and Refugee-Experienced Families

MDE encourages all schools serving immigrant and refugee-experienced students to establish and maintain a culturally aware and responsive COVID-19 virtual support network for those students and their families. Based on communication from Minnesota parents, students, and community members during the COVID-19 pandemic, this document outlines important matters to be considered by schools and districts. They are perspectives on mental health and trauma through a refugee cultural lens, navigating family cultural dynamics to support distance learning, and family/community engagement and language access.

This document provides schools with information, resources, and recommendations to broaden understanding and support for immigrant and refugee-experienced families during the state’s “shelter-in-place” response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not intended to replace consultation with mental health experts, local community-based organizations, and culturally specific direct supportive services providers.

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Perspectives on Mental Health and Trauma through a Refugee Cultural Lens during COVID-19

Question: *What are possible social/emotional challenges facing immigrant and refugee-experienced families?*

Explanation:

Parents and community members are concerned about the impact of “social” or “physical” distancing on refugee-experienced students and families. These concerns are consistent with what mental health experts observe as vicarious or tertiary trauma, whereby the mainstream community’s response to COVID-19 can retrigger wartime and post-war type isolation, anxiety, and fear. Many parents reported experiencing a great deal of distress after watching the news, receiving school closure notices, and seeing their local grocery stores run out of culturally-significant food items such as rice and flour. A Somali-American parent described the feelings and emotions as very similar to his family’s struggles with famine and displacement in the aftermath of the Somali Civil War. This parallel experience has the potential to diminish those parents’ ability to provide a safe and stable home environment for their children. It raises concerns about the impact on children’s emotional health and wellbeing during this time if their parents are unable to cope with their own past and present traumatic experiences.

Due to these reasons, refugee-experienced students are at higher risk of struggling personally and academically throughout this process. Therefore, frequent and informed parent engagement is essential to ensuring that distance learning continues to be a safe and effective experience for them. It is crucial that frontline staff such as teachers, cultural liaisons, interpreters, and family advocates understand the role of parents’ emotional health, the tendency for depression to go undetected in most refugee-experienced communities, and the impact of parents’ diminishing self-efficacy (or perceived lack of skills) if their struggles go unnoticed. Schools must establish a trauma-informed, culturally-sophisticated process to continually assess students’ home environment and family mental health, and be prepared to respond.

RELATED ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

- [USA Today Investigative Article on Heightened Risk of Child Abuse and Neglect amid Pandemic](#)
- [Article on Increase in Child Abuse Cases as result of Pandemic](#)
- [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Tips on Taking Care of your Mental Health during Uncertainty](#)
- [Search Institute blog: Resisting the pandemic of prejudice, reclaiming the power of relationships](#)

Question: *What are possible impacts of physical distancing on immigrant and refugee-experienced families?*

Explanation:

Based on what many parents and community members have said, physical distancing will disrupt the tradition of “communal” support for immigrant and refugee-experienced communities who have historically relied on each

other for survival before and after resettlement in the U.S. This void can cause hopelessness and despair, which could go on to manifest as self-doubt, decline in physical health, substance abuse, and depression. While these issues are not new or unique to refugee-experienced communities, in this new context that is America, the sudden and tragic loss of communal support will exacerbate their existing struggles and significantly weaken their coping mechanisms. We recommend that school support for those families separate time with parents from time spent with the children, and incorporate curriculum that facilitates storytelling and reflection. This is because many parents also felt a deep sense of loss when their children could no longer physically attend school. A Karen parent in Saint Paul, MN stated:

“I am very familiar with fear and sorrow. I was disrespected and hated by my own government back in my homeland. I am not sad or scared because my family could get sick from the virus. This country gave me physical refuge but my children’s schools gave us a spiritual refuge that no government could ever threaten or take away again. When I realized I could no longer walk with my children to their bus stop, or see them run into their bus, or have the peace of mind that they are safe at school with their friends and teachers, I felt fear that I hadn’t experienced since I left Myanmar.”

RELATED ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

- [Pioneer Press article on Minnesota Government Leaders calling for the postponement of Hmong funerals](#)

Question: What is an example of how the pandemic has re-traumatized local immigrant or refugee-experienced communities?

Explanation:

Rice has long been a staple of the Asian-American diaspora communities’ cultural diet. Saint Paul, Minneapolis, Brooklyn Park, and Brooklyn Center, are home to the state’s largest Asian immigrant and refugee-experienced communities, where a widespread panic to stockpile on rice in early February led to a momentary shortage of the item. Local Asian-owned grocery stores, Cub Foods, and wholesale warehouses such as Costco and Sam’s Club could not stock their shelves fast enough to meet the demands of the community, ultimately reviving memories of the Secret War in Laos when whole families nearly died of starvation from the lack of rice. Author and activist, Kao Kalia Yang, wrote in a recently published online article:

“My father and mother were of the generation that grew up looking toward the sky for rice.”

(Yang, Kao Kalia. “Hmong Elders Are Stockpiling on Rice Because They Know What Hunger Feels Like.” Medium, March 24, 2020, (<https://gen.medium.com/hmong-elders-are-stockpiling-rice-because-they-know-what-hunger-feels-like-6d357eb83f58>). Accessed March 27, 2020.

Agreeing with the article, another member of the Hmong community recalled her mother’s story of being so desperate for rice during the war that they often trekked into mine-littered fields to scrape rice from the dirt that remained after bags of rice were dropped from American helicopters.

RELATED ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

- [Medium Op-Ed: Hmong elders stockpiling rice because they now what hunger feels like](#)
- [Pioneer Press article on Minnesota Government Leaders calling for the postponement of Hmong funerals](#)
- [Star Tribune Article: Minnesota seeks to help immigrant residents cope](#)

Navigating Family Cultural Dynamics to Support Distance Learning during COVID-19

Question: How can teachers facilitate and encourage shared learning and meaningful interactions between parents and children?

Explanation:

Teachers should not assume that parents know how to use a computer or iPad, are proficient in English or their home language, or even feel comfortable speaking with their children about school work. Teachers should not assume that all students have adequate space, designated quiet time, schedules, or parental guidance and support at home. These are assumptions that, as a society, we impose on others based on our own socioeconomic status and resources, culture, and lived experiences. On the contrary, teachers should expect that time management, navigating personal/familial/school expectations, proper nutrition and sleep will be difficult to achieve for many of those students. The reality for many students from low-income immigrant and refugee communities has always been that home and school life traditionally do not align well. In other words, there is very little time, resources, and space at home for those students to continue their studies beyond the school day. Their priority once they get home from school is to be with siblings, sons, and daughters to their families first.

Learning must continue to be a healing, nourishing, and relevant experience, even if it may lose priority in the context of COVID-19. Teachers must understand and navigate these dynamics thoughtfully in order to keep student engaged and focused. Teachers should be observant, attentive, and flexible with the curriculum enough to modify class requirements based on students' home-life circumstances. Consider facilitating activities or discussions that invite parents and children to engage, assigning homework to parents and children that incorporate collaboration and individual work, and being intentional about providing leadership opportunities for parents and children to influence their virtual learning experience.

RELATED ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

- [PBS article on Routines to support child development](#)
- [National Center for Education Evaluation at IES FAQ on Meeting Needs of English Learners in Online Environment](#)
- [National Center for Education Evaluation at IES FAQ on State and District Response to Pandemic: Students with Disabilities](#)
- [Minnesota Youth Council COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [Keep Connected Free Family Dinner Toolkit](#)

Question: How can socioeconomic factors affect distance learning for students from low-income households?

Explanation:

Many students from low-income communities have responsibilities at home that their teachers and schools are usually not aware of. Older children from low-income households typically work afterschool in the food service,

manufacturing, and assembly industries to supplement their parents' income. These jobs are typically labor intensive, require overtime work on the weekends, have schedules that frequently change, and most remain open and operating as usual. A Liberian-American high school student enthusiastically stated that he requested more work hours after his father was laid off and his mother might lose her job eventually. He felt very fortunate to still have an income, especially now that his family needs money to buy food, supplies, and medicine more than ever. He explained that once both of his parents are jobless, he and his siblings will be without health insurance until their MNSure application gets approved. He vowed he would not allow his family to be cash poor and uninsured at this time; and now that he is not required to physically be in school, his priority is to support his family.

From conversations with other parents and community-members who identified as low-income, it was clear that they also expected their older children to find afterschool employment once the governor's "shelter-in-place" order is lifted and schooling can still be done virtually. A couple parents also reported that they were sheltering in place with relatives, grandchildren, and grandparents rendering their need for resources more urgent than anything else. Their children's ability to earn income at this moment is added assurance that their family is able to make it through. To navigate this dynamic judiciously, teachers must refrain from criticism or judgement, and instead strive to be a persistent source of comfort and reinforcement for students. Consider scheduling more frequent one-on-one meetings and establishing a personalized timeline for assignment due dates with those students. Get to know their parents and provide the necessary resources or referrals to government and non-profit COVID-19 subsidy programs to offset families' financial needs. This would also be an appropriate situation to frequently assess those students for symptoms of burnout and distress.

RELATED ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

- [VOX article: Immigrants afraid to seek health care amid pandemic](#)
 - [The World News: Replicated Vox article on immigrants' fear to seek health care amid pandemic](#)
- [National Center for Education Evaluation at IES FAQ on State and District Response to Pandemic: Free and Reduced Lunch](#)
- [National Center for Education Evaluation at IES FAW on State and District Response to Pandemic: Technology Access](#)
- [Hunger Solutions Map of Free Meals in Minnesota](#)
- [Virtual Learning on Discovery Education](#)
- [Minnesota Afterschool Advance: Purchase new chrome books for families](#)
- [City of Saint Paul: Bridge Fund for families and Small Businesses](#)
- [EdAllies Article: Why distance learning can't always come first](#)

Question: How can responsibility to family and gender roles and expectations affect distance learning for students from cultural communities?

Explanation:

The intersectionality of culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender will indefinitely impact student capacity to stay engaged in distance learning. A Hmong-American student explained that going from school to home and back felt a lot like teleporting from one universe to another. Home and school life were very distinct

experiences – a divergence that she had become quite comfortable navigating until now. Suddenly, she was unsure of herself in this new reality as she described distance learning as a “bad dream” where she must juggle school work with her role and responsibilities as a daughter. In the Hmong community, these gender-specific expectations are more frequently relegated to the daughters and women in the home. Older children are expected to babysit, cook, clean, and provide homework support to younger siblings while their parents are still required to work. A Somali-American student also said that she was now a babysitter first and a student second. In normal times, an aunt who lived in the same apartment complex would stop by to babysit her two younger brothers until 5 pm when her mother gets home from work. Now it was her responsibility to babysit her brothers.

It is important to note that both students did not report feeling pressured by their parents to do anything, but rather by the unprecedented circumstances brought on by COVID-19. They understood it was necessary and embraced their new reality. Teachers should respect why space at home may be limited, home maybe noisy, and students may have to multitask during meetings. Consider facilitating activities or assignments that students can complete with their younger siblings, friends, and other adults in the home to encourage bonding and communication. Indications of decline in student performance and engagement should be addressed appropriately in a timely manner as they may be signs of burnout or other forms of distress.

RELATED ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

- [Migration Information Source Article: Family obligation among children in immigrant families](#)
- [NPR story on when older siblings step into parents' shoes](#)
- [My Immigration Story](#)
- [Healthy Grandfamilies: Resource for grandparents raising grandchildren](#)
- [Search Institute Checklist on Building developmental relationships during pandemic](#)

Parent/Community Engagement and Language Access during COVID-19

Question: *Why is family and community engagement important in the context of distance learning?*

Explanation:

The impact of COVID-19 on immigrant and refugee-experienced communities, and the degree to which their children will have success with distance learning, will be largely determined by how well educators and school leaders understand their lived reality. Those communities are exceptionally vulnerable for all of the reasons discussed in this document, and yet it is merely a fragment of their struggles as new Americans who must learn to navigate complex systems for survival. It is important for schools to recognize what parents bring to their children's education, particularly in times of fear and uncertainty, when a positive and resilient home environment is key to ensuring children's emotional health. Even when parents struggle with language access or fear of being perceived as challenging teachers' authority if they asked too many questions, we know that a parent who routinely talks to their children about school can make a big difference in their children's educational experience. With that said, we also recognize that schools are unable to be and do everything that is needed, which is why we encourage schools to build strategic relationships with community-based organizations. Community engagement is typically underrepresented in districts' family engagement plans, underlining an absence of resource focused on building meaningful partnerships with local community-based organizations, non-profits, and advocacy groups. These establishments hold indispensable information and resources about the communities they exist to serve and can be a force for progress and meaningful change for historically underserved and invisible student groups.

RELATED ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

- [Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans COVID-19 Webpage](#)
- [Minnesota Council on Latino Affairs COVID-19 Resource Webpage](#)
- [Keep Connected: Parent Engagement Workshop Curriculum](#)
- [Keep Connected: Family Conversation Starters](#)
- [Search Institute Blog on working from home during the pandemic](#)
- [Star Tribune Article: Minnesota's African immigrants and refugees rally to overcome quarantine hardships](#)
- [City of Saint Paul COVID-19 Emergency Management Webpage](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Human Services Adult mental health crisis response phone numbers](#)
- [PACER Resource Page for Organizations that can provide assistance](#)
- [PACER webpage on support for children and families](#)
- [YMCA blog on Mindfulness tips and techniques](#)

Question: *What is language access?*

Explanation:

In accordance with Title IV of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and Executive Order 13166, as a recipient and conductor of federal funds, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and all public school districts must ensure that everyone has consistent and effective access to programs, services, and information. In this case,

COVID-19 information, resources, and community-based supportive services. If language assistance services are not readily available, individuals who communicate in languages other than English may not be able to access critical information related to what schools, government, and communities are doing in response to COVID-19. Language barriers may also prevent bilingual parents from adequately engaging in distance learning with their children and teachers. As a result, certain individuals' or communities' concerns and needs will go unnoticed and support will be limited or completely absent. MDE recommends that all public school districts work toward eliminating language proficiency as an impediment to accessing any information related to COVID-19 and distance learning for their students and families, to the fullest extent required by law. Most language access plans typically encompass effective guidelines, procedures, and a timeline to frequently training staff on policy best practices and implementation.

RELATED ARTICLES AND RESOURCES:

- For specific questions about Community Engagement and Language Access, please contact: MDE.el@state.mn.us
- [Center for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) Factsheets on COVID-19](#)
- [United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division Compliance](#)
- [Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services Online Training for Refugee and Immigrant Family and community engagement in the schools](#)
- [Race Forward Racial equity impact assessment toolkit](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Health Materials and Resources for COVID-19 response](#)
- [Isuroon COVID-19 Information and Resource webpage](#)
- [TransACT](#)
- [Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans COVID-19 Webpage](#)
- [Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage COVID-19 Webpage](#)
- [Minnesota Council on Latino Affairs COVID-19 Resource Webpage](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Education's COVID-19 Response, Updates, and Resources](#)
- Links to other State Education Agency's COVID-19 Response, Updates, and Resources:
 - [State of Kansas](#)
 - [State of California](#)
 - [State of California Distance Learning](#)
 - State of Georgia: [Parent Mentor Partnership](#) and [Georgia Home Classroom](#)
 - [State of South Dakota Title III Migrant Program](#)
 - [State of South Carolina](#)
 - [Nebraska Department of Education Guide on scheduling in the home environment](#) and [Nebraska Department of Education Coronavirus Resources](#)
 - [State of Washington](#)