

How can educators support immigrant students?

A research overview prepared by Lisa Chinn PhD and Elizabeth Day PhD

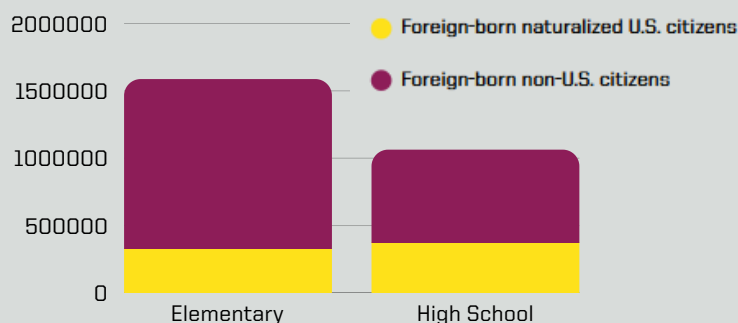
What challenges do immigrant students face?

Moving to a new country is challenging. Immigration policy changes may affect students, and the publicity of such issues may increase stress and fear.¹⁻³

Challenges in school	Trauma & mental health	Additional difficulties
- Adjusting to a new education system, school and new language. - Struggling academically; an achievement gap exists between immigrants and native students.^{4,5}	- Experiencing trauma before, during, and/or after immigration.^{6,7} - Experiencing increases in anxiety, depression, and somatic disorders.⁸	- Navigating medical and mental health services in a new country. - Adjusting to new living arrangements - Grieving people left behind.⁹

How many are affected?

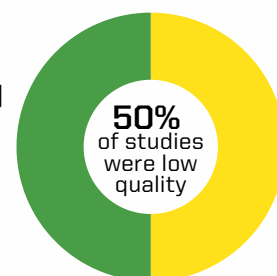
U.S. Census American Community Survey data suggest that there were millions of foreign-born students enrolled in U.S. schools in 2023.¹⁰



Over 189,000 immigrant students enrolled for Fall 2023 in California.¹¹ Most immigrants in California come from Latin America or Asia.

What does the research say?

There is **limited high-quality research** on best practices for supporting immigrant students. One systematic review on interventions for immigrants with behavioral or academic difficulties found 50% of studies to be low-quality.⁹



Insights and Suggestions from Related Research

The information that follows is from either (a) related research that does not directly involve immigrant students or (b) research with low or moderate certainty of evidence of effectiveness.

Acculturation and Cultural Sensitivity

- Mainstream orientation toward a new country (e.g., participating in cultural events) is associated with school success and belonging.^{12, 13}
- Students who maintain a connection to their origin culture may have enhanced school belonging.¹³
- Multiculturalism should be supported; a case study suggested positive teacher-student interactions rooted in culturally and linguistically responsive practices can help newcomer learning.¹⁴

High-Quality Needs Assessments and Screening

Schools should use valid and reliable tests to correctly identify immigrants who are English learners and students with disabilities.¹⁵ Being placed in a lower-level course due to language but not achievement levels may be frustrating for immigrants.¹²

1. mCLASS with DIBELS 8th Edition and Lectura: normed on nationally-representative samples
2. Multitudes: normed with a population representative of California's students

Trauma

Trauma occurs in distinct patterns and is more common among immigrants, especially refugees.^{6,7} Rigorous evidence for trauma-informed education interventions is positive but limited.^{16,17}

- A 2020 systematic review included just four studies on trauma-informed educational interventions. They all had positive effects but varied in quality.¹⁶
- Another systematic review found that cognitive behavioral therapy based approaches tended to work more consistently than other methods (although the review did not follow best practices).¹⁸
- This review also suggested benefits of community mental health services in schools.¹⁸

Interventions

Of programs endorsed in immigration or trauma literature, therapies including Trust-Based Relational Intervention, Child-Parent Relationship Therapy, and Kidnet were the ones marked as promising or better in evidence clearinghouses (although note this was not an exhaustive search).^{19,20,21,22}

Additional Resources

- Welcoming, Registering, and Supporting Newcomer Students: A Toolkit for Educators of Immigrant and Refugee Students in Secondary Schools (2021)
- Serving and Supporting Immigrant Students: Information for Schools (2017)
- Trauma-informed SEL Toolkit (2020)
- Beyond Teaching English: Supporting High School Completion by Immigrant and Refugee Students (2017)
- Massachusetts Dept. of Education Resources for Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Students (2024)

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21. Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse. Child-Parent Relationship Therapy. Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse <https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/769/show> (2023).
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Methods

Findings presented in this brief come from a literature review of academic peer-reviewed studies, as well as evidence clearinghouses, government data and policies. Given the rapid nature of this search, other relevant studies may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal methods for summarizing results, assessing study quality, or exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

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Annotated Bibliography to Accompany the Brief “How can educators support immigrant students?”

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Andon, A., Thompson, C. G. & Becker, B. J. A Quantitative Synthesis of the Immigrant Achievement Gap Across OECD Countries. *Large-Scale Assessments in Education* 2, 7 (2014).

This article analyzed whether there is an achievement gap between immigrant and native students. They used standardized testing data (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS) from Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including the U.S., from 2000-2009. In over 80% of their tests, effect sizes indicated that native test takers outperformed immigrants, with some exceptions in certain content areas like math. Over 75% of the effect sizes were statistically significant.

Avery, J. C. et al. Systematic Review of School-Wide Trauma-Informed Approaches. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma* 14, 381–397 (2021).

A systematic review identified just four papers that incorporated school-wide trauma informed approaches and met their inclusion criteria, and the papers were of varying quality. Some took place in specialized schools such as residential schools, so it is unclear if the interventions will also work in standard public schools. Of the methods that were beneficial in these papers, Trust-Based Relational Intervention was the one that we could find versions of in an evidence clearinghouse, where it was evaluated carefully and rated as promising.

(<https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/896/show>;
<https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/912/show>).

Bal, A. & Perzigian, A. B. T. Evidence-based Interventions for Immigrant Students Experiencing Behavioral and Academic Problems: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Education and Treatment of Children* 36, 5–28 (2013).

After a literature search, six studies were identified on interventions for immigrant students with disabilities, behavioral, or academic problems. Only half were found to be of acceptable quality. This review did assess study rigor but did not assess risk of bias, so its findings should be interpreted with caution. The introduction of this article provides good background on why such interventions might be necessary, highlighting difficulties that immigrant students might face, such as higher rates of dropout, risk for disability, and risk for PTSD. Results suggest that additional research is needed on interventions for immigrant students who are struggling.

Bas-Sarmiento, P., Saucedo-Moreno, M. J., Fernández-Gutiérrez, M. & Poza-Méndez, M. Mental Health in Immigrants Versus Native Population: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 31, 111–121 (2017).

This systematic review did not find that immigration was associated with all types of mental health challenges, but they did find links with depression, anxiety, and somatic disorders. They note that these mental health issues are often linked to stress, and the experience of migration can be stressful. The authors state that migration on its own may not cause mental health issues but factors such as conditions in the host country and trauma experienced during a migration journey can contribute to issues.

Betancourt, T. S. et al. Comparing Trauma Exposure, Mental Health Needs, and Service Utilization Across Clinical Samples of Refugee, Immigrant, and U.S.-Origin Children. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 30, 209–218 (2017).

This analysis compared trauma exposure, psychological distress, and mental health service utilization among refugees, immigrants, and U.S. origin people referred for assessment and treatment. Refugee youth tended to have more types of trauma exposure than native U.S. or immigrant youth, including higher community violence exposure, dissociative symptoms, somatization, traumatic grief, and phobic disorder.

Hersi, A. A. & and Watkinson, J. S. Supporting Immigrant Students in a Newcomer High School: A Case Study. *Bilingual Research Journal* 35, 98–111 (2012).

The experiences of six immigrant students and three teachers in a newcomer high school for immigrants in the U.S. were qualitatively investigated. Findings showed that learning was linked to positive teacher-student interactions, which were bolstered by culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. Additional research with a larger sample is needed to draw firmer conclusions about how teachers can support immigrants.

Sullivan, A. L. & Simonson, G. R. A Systematic Review of School-Based Social-Emotional Interventions for Refugee and War-Traumatized Youth. *Review of Educational Research* 86, 503–530 (2015).

This systematic review searched for studies on school-based interventions for immigrants who were refugees and/or war-traumatized. This review did not apply best practices for systematic reviews; they did not formally assess study quality and bias or state that they double-screened references, although they did narratively critique each intervention's quality. Therefore, we cannot make firm recommendations based on this review. They found that all identified CBT-based programs were beneficial. Studies on creative expression therapy, such as drama, were inconsistent, with one even reporting adverse effects. Effects from multimodal interventions were mixed.

Schachner, M. K., He, J., Heizmann, B. & Van de Vijver, F. J. R. Acculturation and School Adjustment of Immigrant Youth in Six European Countries: Findings from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). *Frontiers Psychology* 8, (2017).

This study used large 2012 PISA data from six European countries with different levels of supportiveness (multicultural policies) for immigrants. Its results are correlational, not causal. They found that in countries with all types of multicultural policies (unsupportive, moderate, supportive), mainstream orientation (e.g., participating in mainstream cultural events in the new country) was associated with school belonging; school belonging was in turn associated with higher math achievement, a more positive attitude toward school, and less truancy. At the same time, maintaining an ethnic orientation toward a student's country of origin was also associated with school belonging in countries with supportive or unsupportive (but not moderate) multicultural policies. The results suggest that multiculturalism, with room for enjoyment of both the new country's culture and the student's ethnic orientation, may be beneficial for immigrants.