

Building a Newcomer School for Refugees with the Community in Mind

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Abstract

This article describes the concrete ways in which administrators and teachers purposefully designed Place Bridge Academy, a newly-formed school in the Denver Public School System, to best serve its newcomer refugee students and families through a focus on community-building. The article will highlight the unique needs of the children who attend the school, the specialized services Place Bridge Academy has created and located within its school walls to create community, and the types of newcomer classrooms and academic support structures the teachers and administrators have designed with community in mind. By thinking carefully about the needs of its students and families first, the staff at Place Bridge Academy has been able to better cater to and develop its educational and outreach programs to better serve its students and parents and build an intentional community of school stakeholders.

Place Bridge Academy School Mission Statement

*At Place we believe education is important
and that learning can be fun.*

We believe every day is a new beginning.

We believe if you can imagine it, you can achieve it.

*We believe in celebrating diversity and learning
from our differences.*

*We honor and support each other by communicating in a
respectful and kind manner.*

*Our school is a safe and welcoming place to learn
because we take responsibility for our actions*

*and their consequences, and because we value the contributions
of each individual.*

*We believe that the bridges we build at Place
will lead us to growth and excellence in
achievement, scholarship, and character.*

Introduction

As teachers, we often hear that the development of communities is an important part of the work to be accomplished in public school classrooms. We are encouraged to spend time and effort trying to build a sense of community for our students within the walls of our classrooms and also between our own classrooms and the local communities in which our students reside. The popular societal argument is that helping students learn to work collaboratively with one another and in the communities in which they reside will help them as citizens in our society both in the present, but also in the future as they develop into young adults and take on leadership roles in our nation's democracy.

Sometimes, however, I wonder how easy it is to “build community.” Is wishing hard for community to happen enough? Will it happen easily? Aren’t there other societal factors at play that hinder community-building, especially for those students historically disadvantaged and marginalized by society, such as refugee children? My experiences indicate that building communities is a complicated endeavor that needs to be further explored and re-envisioned.

For example, what happens in a classroom when refugee students who have historically been discriminated against by their local communities in their countries of origin are asked to suddenly build community and trust everyone around them? Will these students automatically listen to their teachers’ pleas that emphasize the importance of building community, trust, and collaboration? Or, will they, conditioned by their previous negative experiences in local communities hostile to them, resist the invitation to trust other people whole-heartedly? Sometimes, refugee students and their families, influenced by their past experience in their home countries, feel disconnected to a sense of community within their own ethnic group, in the local communities to which they have been re-settled to in the U.S., and within the local school communities in which they have been enrolled.

To begin to answer some of these questions about how to build community with refugee students, this article describes the concrete ways in which administrators and teachers purposefully designed Place Bridge Academy, a newly-formed school in the Denver Public School System, to best serve its newcomer refugee students and families through a focus on community-building. The article highlights the unique needs of refugee children, the specialized services Place Bridge Academy has created and located within its school walls to create community for these children and their families, and the types of support structures the teachers and administrators have designed with community in mind. By thinking carefully about the needs of its students and families first, the staff at Place Bridge Academy has been able to better cater to and develop its educational and outreach programs to better serve its refugee students and parents and build an intentional community of school stake-holders.

Background on the refugee children and newcomer centers

As waves of children from different refugee groups throughout the world continue to move to the United States, the educational task facing public school teachers in schools in which these children enroll has proven to be a daunting one (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2007). Indeed, upon arrival in the U.S., refugee students have difficulty adjusting to public schools because of various factors including emotional trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (Suarez-Orozco, 2000; Volkan, 1993; Westernmeyer & Wahmanholm, 1996); difficulty with learning the English language (Guererro, 2004; Cummins, 1995; Olsen, 2000; Valdes, 1998); and the ambivalent context of their reception by their local community, school, teaching, staff, and fellow students (Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, and Doumbia, 2003; Lee, 2005, 1996; Lucas, 1996).

To respond to these needs of refugee and other immigrant students, school districts throughout the United States have begun to develop newcomer programs and centers (Boyson & Short, 2003; Constantino & Lavadenz, 1993; Schnur, 1999). These programs are designed to address the needs of students who have newly arrived to

the United States with limited English proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking, gaps in their academic content knowledge, and limited experience with formal schooling. Newcomer programs, such as Place Bridge Academy, are typically structured to provide students with developmentally appropriate English instruction, to provide academic content knowledge these students have often missed in their previous schooling, and to help students transition into life in both public schools into which they have enrolled and to the local communities into which they have re-settled.

As the number of non-English speaking students continues to grow and newcomer programs begin to proliferate throughout the United States, more information is needed about these programs and the teachers who work in them. Although a few studies of the work of teachers in newcomer centers exist (Boysen & Short, 2003; Olsen, 1998), newcomer centers and the ways in which they build community with their students and families are largely understudied.

Initial vision building for a full-service community school

Before Place Bridge Academy opened its doors, Brenda Kazin, founding school principal, teaching staff, refugee parents and their children, and other stakeholders in the school collaboratively developed a school philosophy that envisioned the school as a metaphorical bridge for refugee students and their families to the school itself and the larger Denver community. School leadership believed that refugee students and their families have too often in the past been stranded on “islands” within the community with few connections to the larger communities in which they lived and to social services that could help them in their resettlement to the U.S. and in the local communities in which they live. Ken Hansen, Assistant Principal, shares that the school’s ultimate goal has always been “to bridge language divides, academic divides, and social divides. We need to consciously connect our school, local communities, and refugee families together so we can go on and go forward.”

The vision of the school as a bridge and comprehensive community center was developed based upon extensive focus group interviews with parents, students, teachers, and local community members. The special emphasis on meeting the needs of refugee families at the school initially drove the kinds of services and programs the school wanted to offer and continues to drive current and future planning for the school. Major tenets of the school plan were to include parents, teachers, students, and community members collaboratively and in meaningful ways in the school governance process and to build bridges to families in the school through the creation of a full service community school which helped students and their families get the medical and social support services they needed to become successful in the U.S.

An ongoing focus on building bridges between home and school

Throughout the school's first few years of existence, school administration and staff continually and actively asked parents to get involved, to be active members of the school community, and to provide input to teaching staff and school leadership. An example of this is the active participation of parents in the school leadership council providing input about programs and policies and providing a parent perspective to school administration and teaching staff.

In addition to providing leadership opportunities for parents, the school also has created opportunities for parents and families to gather and support each other through a Parent Welcome Center located near the entrance of the school and staffed by both a Parent Liaison and a Community Resource Liaison. The Parent Liaison builds bridges between the home and school by focusing her work on providing opportunities for parents to volunteer at the school, for parents to learn more about the school and its programs both formally via parent-teacher meetings and informally through parent-teacher coffee hours, and by building community amongst the parents, families, and staff members of the school. The Community Resource Liaison also builds bridges for families by providing parents access to resources they have requested and need such as

organizing a clothing bank at the school, creating a food bank at the school, and coordinating access to local volunteers in the community who can help refugees with learning English, finding housing, and connecting to people in their neighborhoods. Together the two liaisons coordinate many services that provide important assistance to refugee parents and their families.

As part of their work in the Welcome Center, the two liaisons also coordinate and plan English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for parents that are designed to teach parents English, but also are intentionally focused on building school community and parent empowerment. These classes have been designed to not solely focus on having parents learn English, but also to provide opportunities for parents to build a sense of community spirit for families at the school and to help parents build networks of support for each other and the school. Furthermore, teachers of these classes make a conscious effort to explicitly teach parents about how public schools in the U.S. function and how they can connect to local communities in which they live. By providing a class that teaches English, builds community connections, and empowers parents, school leadership hopes to develop a strong foundation at home and at school that students can build upon.

Another important component of the school's vision is a planned, intentional focus on the provision of social services to families via the Parent Center and other outreach services (such as a mobile health RV, a dental clinic, and counseling services) located right on campus. Part of the intentional plan of the school is to address the needs for health-related services for refugee students and their respective families. This includes working with Rocky Mountain Health, a regional health services provider, to bring a medical services RV that is customized to provide both medical and dental services for its clients.

Students and families who wouldn't otherwise receive medical care or know where to get it are helped by the existence of this service provider which both provides primary care, but also provides families with referrals to local heath care providers in their com-

munities. Realizing that refugee students and their families often face a set of psycho-social adjustment issues that may be different from native-born students, school leadership has also strategically partnered with local non-profit organizations to provide specialized counseling for refugee students who are facing problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder and coping with loneliness and alienation in their resettlement to the U.S.

Finally, school leadership has been particularly attuned to the need for teachers and school administration to have cultural and language guides located within the school walls. Although teachers themselves make concerted efforts to reach out to families at home and invite them into the classroom, parents who have children from the school and who come from the cultures represented at the school are a very important resource for teachers in terms of translation, bridging cultural differences, and providing one-to-one attention in the classroom. Hence, the school administration has actively recruited parents to complete their own education at local community colleges and to apply for paraprofessional positions at the school. The presence of paraprofessionals who are familiar with the history, cultural practices, and family lives of the ethnic groups within the school has been an invaluable resource for teachers, school support staff, and administrators at the schools.

Re-thinking what works in community schools

School administrators, teachers, parents, and other school stakeholders continually reference the idea that the school has intentionally focused on the development of the whole child and attention to their needs rather than solely focusing on academics. School leadership has built all programs based upon the premise that children cannot learn or pay attention if they have a toothache, haven't eaten during the course of the day, and have psychosocial needs that have not been addressed. Moving beyond a focus on test results and standardized achievement scores only, the school has consciously chosen to focus its efforts on the whole child which includes a child's academic progress, but also includes the child's psychosocial devel-

opment and growth as a whole person. Kazin, the school's principal, underscores the importance of this notion of school as community center when she states, "We need to think of the school as the center for everything; the center for health, the center for education, and it has to be almost a community center for refugee families and their children to meet their basic needs, to share their culture and their lives, and to feel comfortable enough with us to feel safe and in a position to learn."

Place Bridge Academy is novel in its full-service community school approach for refugee students and its willingness to work hand-in-hand with non-profit service providers. The school has also shown a strong commitment to lead in organizing these services and coordinating these services through program coordinators at its school site, a complicated feat due to the numerous social service agencies it is currently working with. This approach is often hard to coordinate because of the tremendous time it takes to work on these components of the school aside from the normal organizational and academic requirements of schools. However, these efforts have resulted in benefits (including increased rates of parental involvement, community engagement, and student attendance) that far outweigh the costs for refugee students in the school, but just as important, for their families.

Thinking about the future: How to build on what already works

As Place Bridge continues to grow in terms of student enrollment and plans for the future, the school administration and staff face several challenges. One challenge that they face is how to continue to provide new programs and services that students and their families request such as crisis counseling services and job coaching services for parents while managing the many programs already in place. Because of the many external agencies already providing services, the school is trying to coordinate the addition of new programs while also attending to the important academic and curricular developments already in process. Another challenge is how to maintain existing specialized programs that focus on community

development and the development of the whole child in an era of increasing standardization and heightened focus on test scores.

Finally, the school faces the welcome challenge of rapidly increasing student enrollment such that it is on pace to quickly outgrow the current building they are in because of tremendous interest from refugee families and other families within the school district that are very interested in the school's focus on community development. As the school continues to grow, school leadership is dedicated to hiring administrators, teachers, and other school staff committed to consciously creating a school environment in which students and families feel like an important part of an intentional community, and to serving as a model for other schools striving to best meet the specialized needs of their refugee students and their families.

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