



SAFER SCHOOLS AND CAMPUSES BEST PRACTICES CLEARINGHOUSE

- Lessons from the Field -

Supporting the Social and Emotional Learning Needs of Afghan and Other Newcomer Students

Wednesday, March 16, 2022 | 3:00 – 4:15 PM ET
Transcript

Tim Duffey:

Good afternoon, and welcome everyone to today's Lessons from the Field Webinar, supporting the social and emotional learning needs of Afghan and other newcomer students. On behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, we're pleased you've joined us today. In fact, some 1000 people have registered for today's webinar. So additional people will certainly be joining us as we kick off here this afternoon. Thanks to all of you who are already online with us.

My name is Tim Duffey, Training Specialist at the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, or as we lovingly refer to it, NCSSE. And I will be facilitating today's webinar. NCSSE is funded by the Office of Safe and Supportive Schools within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. To learn more about NCSSE and to access a range of resources that address school climate and conditions for learning, we encourage you to visit our website. To give you a sense of what the website looks like and what it includes, here we share an image of our homepage on the left, along with some of our most popular products on the right.

Please note that all materials that you'll see today, including the slides, referenced resources, and the archive version of the recording of this event will be made available on the event webpage within this website. In fact, some items, including the slides for today's event and the bios have already been posted at that site. Please note also you can access previous lessons from the field sessions by visiting the webinar series webpage, which is also listed here and which will be posted into the chat.

Before I review our agenda and introduce our first speaker, I want to quickly review information provided by those of you who registered for today's event,

give you all a sense of who's joined us today. The data that you're seeing on screen is from the first thousand or so registrants for today's webinar. And you'll see that the leading response category was other, which is often the case with our events. We do draw a very diverse set of participants. In that category there were a wide variety of individuals who are included. I think folks like federal employees, English language learner teachers, community-based organizations, graduate students, and social services personnel. So that gives you an idea of what fell in that 25%.

The next highest reported role being represented today are student support personnel, such as school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses, followed by state education agency staff, local education agency staff, either district or building perhaps. 11% are school administrator, then followed by advocates. And then we dropped off dramatically to public health personnel and community folks and parents. So that's who's with us today. We're really glad you're here. We know we have a great lineup as reflected in the agenda, which is next.

So, the flow for the event is after we complete this introduction section, we're nearly there, we'll be kicking off the event with brief presentations by Ruth Ryder and Kabrillen Jones of the Department of Education. And that will be followed by Jorge Verlenden from the CDC. We'll then hear from Dr. Shereen Naser from Cleveland State University. And all of those sessions are to set up a panel discussion, which will follow those brief presentations. And that panel is a discussion with practitioners from the field to address strategies that they have used to support the social and emotional needs of newcomer students. So we really look forward to hearing all of that information presented throughout today.

So it's my pleasure now to introduce Dr. Jessica Swan. Jessica is education program specialist in the office of Office of English Language Acquisition at the U.S. Department of Education. Jessica has played a key leadership role in preparing today's webinar and will moderate the event. So Jessica, I turn it over to you.

Jessica Swan:

Thank you, Tim. Good afternoon, everyone. And thank you for joining us to discuss this important topic. It has been a distinct pleasure to work with the speakers we have assembled for today's event as we... this webinar. I know that you will sense the passionate commitment of this unique group of advocates and practitioners throughout their presentations. Let me now introduce to you the speakers we'll be hearing from today. Our first speaker is Ruth Ryder, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education.

She will be followed by a Department of Education speaker, Kabrillen Jones. Kabrillen is the chief of staff in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services at the U.S. Department of Education. Next, we will hear from Jorge Verlenden, Behavioral Scientist with the Division of Adolescent and School

Health in the National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Following Jorge, we will hear from Dr. Shereen Naser from Cleveland State university.

But the bulk of our time today will allow us to hear from a panel of practitioners grounded in notable efforts to support Afghan newcomers. We're so privileged to be joined today by Lysette Lemay, Community Partnerships Coordinator, and Lisa Levasseur, Director for the Department of Family and Community Engagement from Elk Grove Unified School District in Elk Grove, California. We will also hear from Nate Dunstan, Program Manager for Newcomer and Refugee/Asylee Services from Oakland Unified School district in Oakland, California. Molly Hegwood, Executive Director of Metro Nashville Public Schools Office of English Learners. And Alexandra Castillo, English Language Learner from Metro Nashville Public Schools in Nashville, Tennessee will be here with us.

And our final panelist, you don't want to miss this, is Ali Mastan Ali, an Afghan evacuee and graduating senior from Metro Nashville Public Schools. As mentioned on the screen, full bios for today's presenters are available in the event website for the webinar and currently being posted in the chat. So without further delay, I now turn the webinar over to Ruth Ryder.

Ruth Ryder:

Thank you so much, Jessica. And I also want to welcome all of you to today's webinar. And I extend greetings from Secretary Cardona as well. The secretary has provided strong leadership to this webinar series, which was initially established to explore ways to strengthen our support of students as we addressed the COVID-19 pandemic. All of us here at the department are keenly aware of the challenges educators, parents, caretakers, other service providers and students have faced throughout the pandemic.

To showcase effective practices in response to the pandemic, the department established the best practices clearinghouse whose web address will be posted in the chat box now for your access. Through the clearing house, the department continues to provide resources for communities, schools, educators, and families, as we all work together to support the needs of our students, particularly students who are underserved and those who have been most greatly impacted by the pandemic.

As an extension of the clearinghouse, this Lessons from the Field Webinar series has been part of our effort to highlight the effective tools, techniques, and strategies employed by everyday practitioners to address the challenges of the pandemic and strengthen the resilience of students in the education system. We have recently expanded the series to address other high priority topics facing America's educators in this challenging time. And today is one of those topics. Today's session is another opportunity for us to continue that journey by exploring strategies for welcoming Afghan students and other newcomer students into our learning communities.

You will be hearing critical information that will help us achieve the goals of the Operation Allies Welcome as schools strive to provide high-quality culturally responsive approaches to support the social and emotional needs of Afghan students as they are coming into their new learning environments. We also understand that the information presented today will support efforts to integrate other newcomer student populations. I want to turn it back to Jessica. And Jessica, I want to thank you for your leadership in this critically important work. Thank you.

Jessica Swan:

Thank you, Ruth for your continued leadership in planning the webinar series and for your comments today. They really help ground us in the commitments of the department to address the needs of newcomer students, a part of Operation Allies Welcome's effort across federal agencies. Let's hear now from Kabrillen Jones, Chief of Staff in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Kabrillen.

Kabrillen Jones:

Thanks so much, Jessica. I'll begin first with a thank you and a reiteration of what Ruth has shared. We are so privy to the unique needs that all of our students have within the COVID-19 pandemic, but especially of our newcomer students who are facing so many transitions. And what is arguably most impacted is mental health and the social emotional needs of those students. So I want to begin with the definition of mental health as defined by the CDC. And mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. And it affects how we think, feel and act, and helps us determine how we would like to handle stress, relate to others and make healthy choices.

And it's important at every stage of life, and especially during these transitions. And so when we think of the students and all that they've been through, we know that it's going to impact them during the school day. And during the school day, it just means that these services are needed more than ever. This may be the only place that some kiddos know to go and get the help that they need. And these schools should be a place of psychological support and a resource. And we also know that students with high levels of psychological distress are less academically successful, have more test anxiety, and less academic self-efficacy.

And if we want to make sure that these newcomers have the best time possible, we want to make sure that they have the support that they need. Next slide, please. And this is a commitment that comes directly from the Department of Education. We have provided over \$122 billion of ARP funding for schools in relief of the COVID-19 pandemic. And we really, really want to make sure that school districts have everything that they need to hire the school psychologists, the counselors, the social workers, the nurses that these students so desperately need, including our Afghan newcomers.

So aside from our monetary measures, just this last fall, we created a resource, and that resource is supporting child and students social, emotional, behavior, and mental health needs. And it outlines seven key challenges, many challenges

that our Afghan newcomers will face themselves. And more importantly, seven corresponding recommendations that K12 schools, higher education settings, communities all can implement to support the unique challenges faced by children and students. And so again, some things that we already know, the rising mental health needs and disparities among children and student groups, this group in particular has unique concerns.

They may be even facing a perceived stigma coming into a new culture and accessing these resources. And then we know that there are existing problems with fragmented delivery systems, and policy, and funding gaps. Which brings us to our recommendation. And these are things that if we can prioritize wellness for each and every child, our newcomers, our kiddos who have been here, our kiddos of different socio and economic and cultural backgrounds, of our educators, of our providers, if we could prioritize wellness holistically, we might be able to really make a change.

In terms of leveraging that policy and that funding that's been provided, yes, those funds were provided for COVID-19, but they can be used in a long lasting way if utilized correctly. And of course, enhancing workforce capacity in terms of hiring the adults in a building that our students so desperately need. And lastly, this provides just some additional guidance. We have some dear educator levels, the clearinghouse that Ruth already alluded to. Of course, our previous handbooks from volume one, two and three, that can really be helpful.

And we know that even though these resources were created for COVID-19, they're applicable for all students at all times. So thank you again so much. That resource can be found online along with the other resources that I mentioned. And again, we just want to make sure that we are holistically supporting our students. And we hope that the recommendations that we provided can help you do that a little better. Thanks so much.

Jessica Swan:

Thank you so much, Kabrillen for reminding us of the importance of mental health support for students, particularly those adjusting to a new life, in new environments. You have provided us with key recommendations and resources to help with these needs. As you can see on the screen, I am so humbled and honored and grateful to introduce to you our next speaker, Jorge Verlenden, Behavioral Scientist with the CDC. So approaches to support newcomer students. Jorge, welcome.

Jorge Verlenden:

Thank you so much for inviting me, Jessica. I am really honored to be here and to have this opportunity to share ways that schools might be able to support their newcomer students from Afghanistan and other countries. We have a long history of welcoming refugee and evacuee families. In the last 50 years, we've resettled more than 3 million refugees from all over the world. And their contributions have historically made our communities more vibrant. However, as you might imagine, even after resettling families who have been displaced may continue to experience hardships.

On the list of this slide, I've noted a few challenge that families might face for lengthy periods, such as housing and food insecurity, as well as underemployment. Depicted, however, in a nested model on the right side of the slide are some of the ways that children's adaptation intersects with the challenges experienced by their family. Some of these particular concepts are more universal in nature, such as striving toward developmental competencies and psychological adjustment.

Some are more unique to children resettling into a new culture, such as the formulation of a home culture and a host culture identity, and then bridging those identities. Additionally, the surrounding context of the neighborhood and the school will indeed play an important role in the child's adaptation. So considering these intersecting factors that are depicted here, how might school find their efforts to foster thriving conditions for their newcomer students?

In the next three slides, I'll share a few approaches that are based on our model of work in DASH. First, the provision of health education that's developmentally appropriate and inclusive can empower your newcomer students to tap into their capacity for healing and contribute to their overall health. However, in providing such curricula, consider that students' education may have been severely disrupted. They may need additional language support and scaffolding.

Students may also need opportunities to have safe conversations with trusted adults. Something like a particularly designed check-in and checkout system for your newcomer students. Identifying translators and cultural brokers in your community can help as you prepare, especially since language and cultural norms may differ. I would like to highlight that small group social emotional learning can assist resettled youth in adjustment by fostering emotional self-awareness and healthy decision making.

Secondly, schools can leverage their existing health service models, tapping health promotion initiatives, intervention programs, and community provider networks that may already be in place. Consider, however, that trauma informed and trauma specific approaches may be needed. There are strategies that exist such as trauma-focused CBT and Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools, otherwise CBITS, that may be a good match and are suitable for refugee populations.

Additionally, some of your newcomer students may have preexisting or chronic health conditions. For all of these reasons, there may be a critical need to help link families to the wider healthcare community for comprehensive support. I want to highlight briefly that some health resources, some which have already been mentioned, specifically for Afghan families are available through various federal partners. Language specific and culturally sensitive health resources, including resources on COVID-19 can help students and families stay healthy.

Finally, as you think about creating a safe and supportive school environment for your Afghan students that emphasizes engagement and connectedness,

consider the additional challenges involved in navigating new peer relationships in a new culture. Consider that displacement may have been traumatic, and that there may be psychosocial and behavioral effects that need additional care. Also, consider that there are many systems of power that children and families will be negotiating as they resettle. Providing support is critical.

But also remember, these students bring international perspectives and a host of strengths that can enlighten your school community. Proactively managing school and classroom social dynamics with these things in mind can help cultivate inclusion and a sense of belonging. Here on this slide, there are links to an array of resources that may be useful to your teams, to families and to students.

Whether you're a practitioner, teacher, researcher, administrator, or student, I am so grateful for your time today, and for all of your work to support your newcomer populations, as well as the rest of your student body. Thank you so much. And I will turn it back over to Jessica now to introduce Dr. Naser.

Jessica Swan:

Thank you so much, Jorge, for that overview of approaches that can be employed to support newcomer students as they transition into our educational system. You have provided a strong foundation for our other speakers. Now, we're going to hear from Dr. Shereen Naser, professor at Cleveland State University. Dr. Naser,

Shereen Naser:

Jessica, thank you so much. I have the honor of being here today with you all and to expand on some of the points that Dr. Verlenden just made. I just want to provide some context for what forced displacement means and its unique implication as we're navigating school-based mental health care. Forced migration is a process that forcibly displaced people go through, and can include refugees, internally displaced people, asylum seekers, immigrants, and others. According to the International Organization for Migration, although the drivers can be diverse, generally forced migration involves compulsion or coercion.

It's also somewhat of a forced dichotomy, because it's not that someone is either forced or not forced to leave, but rather has a spectrum of lack of agency in making that choice. Stages of migration for forcibly displaced families have been put forward in a model in three stages, pre-migration, which includes before they leave their home city or country, the migration period, which can be really long. Some refugee camps, for example, I've worked in where families that had stayed in that refugee camp for eight to 10 years.

Some of the children I've worked with were born in those refugee camps and lived their whole lives in them. And the post-migration stage is where we all come in. The pre-migration stage is usually characterized by limited agency in that choosing to stay or leave and can be things like famine, violence, or oppressive regimes, or natural disasters. The migration stage is usually hard because it has disconnection from family members, tough living conditions. Refugee families I work with for example, might have lived in a tent or in

something that resembled a train car with metal siding that could get as hot as 110 degrees in the summer.

And this stage is characterized by increased vulnerability, including to human trafficking or exploitation. And finally post-migration includes things like economic hardships, language barriers, social isolation, and discrimination. Now, even though I'm saying all this, I'd love to expand on a point that Dr. Verlenden said about strength-based work in schools. When I think about these families that I worked with and work with, they often have to have great resilience and strength to navigate those many environments, to make positive choices for their family, and to keep moving forward.

As a daughter of forcibly displaced people, I can speak to this strength through my own family and through my own perspective. If we want to support forcibly displaced youth and their families, we have to shift our mindset and recognize that forcibly displaced families come to the table with expertise and strength. We have to see these families as partners in helping us navigate systemic barriers that they might face as opposed to simply victims or recipients of care. We can use a strength-based approach, therefore, in schools to help make this shift.

A strength-based approach isn't an attempt to ignore the very real challenges our families face. It's a problem solving technique, or a problem solving mindset that assumes a baseline of protection, dignity, participation, survival, and non-discrimination. A strength-based approach recognizes and uses a child and family's strengths in problem solving. Our first instinct as caretakers in a school setting might be to ask a family, what are you missing? But I would challenge all of us to ask families and flip the script to ask them, what do you have? And use this as the foundation for problem solving, allowing us to pull on family strength and build supports.

If we start from a strength-based perspective, it also allows us to see the system and the context as a barrier. And to really look at that system in context as a place for solutions, not just the family or student as a barrier. For example, if we think about language, it might be our instinct to say, "Oh, the student lacks English knowledge," but what if we started our problem solving approach from a place of, "Oh, they already have another language, and now they're about to have two. That's pretty incredible."

I can think about working with a family myself, and knowing that the family struggled with understanding mental health care and needing mental health care. So we worked with a community organization to bring music therapy to the table, because we knew that the students from this particular community really valued music. And so starting from that strength-based approach allowed us to address their specific needs in that way. And then finally, the language of child rights can allow us to use a strength-based approach. It still allows us to acknowledge the many barriers that forcibly displaced youths in those families face, but changes the perspective from placing the burden of barrier on the

children and family and pushes us to better understand ways their inherent rights might be denied by these external environments.

It also reminds us of our obligation to promote and protect the rights of all children, including children and families who are forcibly displaced. The rich heritage of our students brings to the school building is a strength. And Dr. Verlenden had mentioned that. On this slide, you can see a CASEL standard, which is a standard set forth by the standard for social-emotional learning. For example, social awareness is a type of social-emotional learning that asks us to teach students how to take the perspective of others and to empathize with others. It aligns with the Common Core standard. I only picked fifth grade here because Common Core standards are extensive.

But for English language, for example, we want students to be able to engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, with diverse partners on different topics and texts. When we think about the rich heritage our students bring to the school building, we can see that the SEL standards and the Common Core standards build space for students to connect with one another and sharing their stories is an excellent way for schools to meet these standards. Imagine the powerful discussions student might have with one another if we give them space to talk about forced displacement and their different cultural backgrounds.

We also know that facilitating these discussions so that students get to know each other reduces the risk of bullying and discrimination. Teaching kids how to ask about and talk about their differences while valuing what makes them unique reduces chances for othering. Facilitating students getting to know each other and share their stories doesn't only support the learning environment. It also supports the mental health for forcibly displaced youth and their families. It helps build networks in school for these kids, allows newcomer students to have an increased sense of belonging, not only in schools, but schools often are the first place where students are interacting with a host culture. And it allows them to feel a sense of belonging in their new home broadly.

As educators, our job isn't to tell students who they should be, but rather to open the floor for each of them to tell us who they are and to share that in a positive way with each other. This is one of the many ways we can provide them with the skills they need to excel academically, socially and emotionally. Thank you very much. And I'll pass it back to Jessica.

Jessica Swan:

Thank you so much, Dr. Naser. That's so much powerful the strength... In our work with displaced families can provide significant energy to support them in their course of adjustment to a new environment. You have given us a valuable perspective to ground work as we support newcomers in communities across the country. Now we're going to take it across with a panel discussion. I'm going to start with our first question, and I'm going to ask Lisa Levasseur to come on screen. Hi, Lisa. Lisa, how has your district approached supporting social-emotional learning needs of Afghan and other newcomer students?

Lisa Levasseur:

Hi, Jessica. Thank you so much for having us here today. As Jessica said, I'm the director of Family and Community Engagement at Elk Grove Unified. And I'm honored and privileged today to share about some of the impactful work that our school district is doing to support our newcomer and refugee students and families. But before we do that, I wanted to share a little bit about our districts so you have a better idea of who we are.

We are a massive school district. We are the largest school district ... The fifth largest in California, and the largest in Northern California. We have a little over 63,000 students in our school district. And I like to say that we're beautifully diverse. We are one of the most diverse and least segregated cities in the nation. So we're all living together, which makes a wonderful community here.

We are 320 square miles. So we have 68 schools starting in July, actually, that are in urban and suburban and rural settings. And we incorporate three major cities. So we go into Sacramento, the capital of California. We're in Elk Grove, and then we're in Rancho Cordova. And then we have 129 different languages in our school district. So we are very diverse, but our teacher and staff, our population of our employees is not so diverse. And so we're going to talk a little bit about why that's important and what we did about that a little later.

Then, I just wanted to emphasize that the Sacramento region is number one in California for Afghan population, for newcomer and refugee students and families to arrive here and resettle in this area. So we knew that. About four years ago, we had several schools begin to reach out that this population was growing in their community. At that time, we had about 200 students around ... Four years ago, we had around 200 students in our school district that were from Afghanistan.

And then now, fast forward four years later, and you can see that we have now 1190 students from Afghanistan. They're here at different levels. So we have some that have been here three or four years, and others that are just new to our country, that just came in the past couple of months. We have a newcomer population that's about 1500 students. And as you can see, our Afghan students make up over three fourths of that population.

So we quickly realized we needed to do a couple things to support our students and families. One, we needed to make sure that they had the basic resources so that they could navigate the U.S. school system and adapt to life here in the U.S. and in California in particular. And then we wanted to make sure that our schools and teachers and front office staff and principals were ready to support and partner with these students and families to make sure that they found success here in Elk Grove Unified. So later on, we're going to dive a little deeper into what those supports look like, and how we are helping our students find success. Thanks.

Jessica Swan:

Thank you, Lisa. We're so excited to hear from you and Lysette a little later in the panel. We're going to move out of California now and over to Tennessee

and I welcome to the stage Molly Hegwood. Molly is with Metro Nash and I would love to hear a little bit more Molly about how you're supporting newcomers. Welcome, Molly.

Molly Hegwood:

Thank you so much for inviting Nashville to be a part of this session. Up next, you'll see on the next slide a little bit about Metro Nashville Public Schools. Our office's vision is to ensure that our EL students have their social, emotional, cultural, linguistic, and academic skills necessary to excel in higher education work and life. And so as you hear more about what Nashville's doing for our students, I want you to think about those pillars as we're making those connections for our new students, and also those who have been here longer.

We have 17,500 active English learners in our district. Our district total size is around 82, 83,000 students. Our active EL students and transitional students account for 26% of Metro Nashville Public Schools. We have 127 languages spoken here in Nashville. Our top languages are Spanish, Arabic, Kurdish, Somali, Swahili, and Burmese. Something that's very interesting about Tennessee is that we have a Tennessee state rule that says that every English learner has an individual learning plan developed by their EL teacher and other teachers that they work with.

That includes language goals and pieces from the WIDA framework. So we'll dive into the next slide and look at our recently arrived English learners. So of our 17,000 plus students, we have 2185 students that have recently arrived and have been in Metro Nashville Public Schools less than one year. We have a SAIF program that is specifically tailored to students that have interruptions in education. And we also have a program at every single school site to support English learners.

For our new students coming from Afghanistan, we have enrolled 124 new students from Afghanistan in the last five months. So we have 200 students total from Afghanistan in our district, and 124 of them have recently arrived. It's about half and half on language. So 106 of the students speak Dari, and 94 of the students speak Pashto. So an interesting piece about our district is our district is 550 square miles. So here's a map of our county. And the darker purple areas are where majority of our EL students live.

So as you can see, the majority of our students live in Southeast Davidson County. So as our new Afghan families, we knew they were coming, we met with the refugee resettlement agencies, and we talked about ideally, where could we have these families housed, where we will have them enough school staff, where we will have those resources available for them in the community and the school. And then once the families arrived, we found out that those families would be living in Northeast, Northwest Davidson County.

So that's where we don't have as many EL students living. Our staff looks very different and the resources available for those students in their language also were not as readily available. So that has presented quite a challenge for us.

And so in a little bit, I'll talk a little bit more about how we handled that and how we have continued to support those students in Nashville, wherever they have landed.

Jessica Swan: Thank you, Molly. We are definitely excited to hear more from you and Alex and Ali. Hang up folks. We're headed back to California, and I am pleased to introduce to you now, Nate. Dunstan Nate is with Oakland Unified School District. Nate, can you provide us a little bit of context for your work in Oakland?

Nate Dunstan: Sure thing. So our district is a little bit smaller than the previous two that presented. We have only about 34,000 students in OUSD and 3000 are newcomers. So it's a high percent of our district that are newcomers, almost 9%. As you can see on the slide, most of our newcomers are from Central America, Spanish speaking and some mom and another indigenous language speakers. Small number from Yemen, and then about 115 from Afghanistan who have arrived over the past eight, nine years.

Of those Afghan students, only 56 are newcomers, meaning that students that have been here for three years or less. And we only have 20 who have arrived since the evacuation started in last summer. So relatively small numbers. We have a practice to place our students in ninth grade, regardless of their age. If they're high school age, 14 to 18, we'll put them in ninth grade, unless they're coming to us with transcripts from high school in Afghanistan. If they're over 18 and they have transcripts, we'll place them.

We also have a continuation school for older students that need to graduate more quickly, but we haven't enrolled Afghan students there really. We work closely with the resettlement agencies to coordinate everything from the time of arrival, including immunizations and then the non-academic support. So helping the families apply for low income housing access, public benefits, connect with after school programs, summer programs and other supports for students.

There's a couple of local CBOs, mostly Refugee & Immigrant Transitions, and Soccer Without Borders. Those are our two main partners when it comes to Afghan students at this moment. And then because up until recently most of the Afghans that were coming through the SIV program were typically ... The household included a English speaking, computer savvy dad, that had an email account. So we have an email list that's useful for connecting with Afghan families.

Jessica Swan: Terrific, Nate. I'm grateful for your presence here today. I thank you for providing that overview for Oakland. I'm going to open it up to a panel discussion, and I'm going to invite all of the panelists to turn on their videos for this next portion of our webinar. You each have provided robust description of the possibilities that lie in front of us for supporting newcomers. I recognize that each of your districts is as diverse as the students that comprise that district. But you are doing such phenomenal work in this field. I'm going to start out with

you, Molly, if you don't mind. Molly, could you talk to us a little bit about the big challenges that you face in this work and the lessons learned from this work?

Molly Hegwood:

Absolutely. I mentioned a few of the challenges when we started. So overall, our biggest challenges were the timing, the placement of where the families were living in the community, staffing of schools, and some of the high school pieces that Nate also mentioned. So timing, when we initially found out we had students coming our way, we got together with our refugee resettlement partners and we made a plan. And we waited and we waited and we were like, "Where are the families?" And then all of a sudden we had the 100 students enroll all at one time.

So this created a strain on our registration systems, our busing and things like that, just to make sure we could get everybody in as quickly as possible. We also wanted to make sure they got the language screener, and then everybody had what they needed, support wise at the school. As I talked about earlier, the location was challenging. So we quickly had to create teams in Northern Davidson County to help with the families. They're living in a apartment complexes together, which was great, so we could centralize some of these services and get community partners to wrap around them.

But the majority of services available to our immigrant community are in Southern Davidson County. So we had to make sure those resources were available and readily available for families to access once they were living in that area. Also, looking at the teaching staff, ensuring that we've given them the training that they needed in those schools to support the students and understanding the cultural differences and strategies for working with students that have newly arrived.

The schools where the students lived, they were all going to the same schools. So we had to quickly increase some of the staffing at those schools. When you get 25 to 35 students at one time, it threw off our ratios a little bit. So we had to add staff members and we had to make sure that we had those pieces accessible. We also had to hire translation staff. We already had a Dari interpreter on staff, but we added a work-based learning intern, who's on the call with us, Ali, and he'll talk a little bit later. And we also have just hired a Pashto interpreter, that actually is a newly arriving member who is a part of the community, who is going to be working with us.

Another challenging piece that we did not anticipate were vaccinations. So the students were vaccinated at the military base, but they were missing one vaccination that was required by Tennessee state law. What we wanted to do was get them in school as quickly as possible. So we worked with our health department to get the records transferred for the refugee resettlement agencies and those families, and also did mass vaccination events in the housing area so that the families didn't have to get to the various places to get vaccinated.

The last piece I would talk about with challenges is high school students and enrollment. Very similar to what Oakland talked about in the sense of transcripts, we want to make sure that students are placed in courses based on what they've completed. And normally we only can do that based on transcripts. Since the student didn't have at the transcripts, we are going to be doing some competency testing, where we'll be testing whether they ... If they say they've completed biology, they will take that test and see if they have mastery of that content so they can get that credit versus having to sit back through that course again. So those are some of the challenges and solutions that we've worked out just with this recent arrival of new students.

Jessica Swan: Thank you, Molly. It really sounds like you've had to be very nimble and very creative in response, to assisting evacuees. Nate, what you add to that list of challenges?

Nate Dunstan: I think that for us it remains to be seen the newer arrivals from Afghanistan, what challenges we'll see. I want to say that I've been working with Afghan families in Oakland for almost nine years, and the Afghan population has been very successful compared to other groups of refugees coming through the resettlement agencies especially compared to other newcomers. We found that Afghan families, really there's a strong emphasis on education, expectation of success for their kids.

And up until now, I mentioned that most of the Afghan households had at least one English speaking parent, usually dad. But of course, the challenges here in the Bay Area are often related to housing and affordable living. It was really hard for Afghan families to settle here with just one breadwinner. Often there would be multiple kids. Mom would be taking care of the kids and dad would be out working two or three jobs.

We've relied heavily on our community partners to provide services. And I've worked very closely with community partners to help strengthen the safety network for refugees in general, but especially for Afghans beyond the initial refugee resettlement, three, six, maybe nine months, or a year of placement assistance. So that's been useful. So we rely on those community partners a lot, and they can come into the schools and help with interpretation or translation of documents.

The other thing I would add is that on the vaccines, the resettlement agencies often schedule families for a vaccination clinic and when you have lots of people arriving at once, that can push back school enrollment. So I love what Molly said about the setting up clinics. We've addressed that case-by-case by just helping families connect to a community-based clinic to get those missing vaccines and get the kid in the school ASAP.

Jessica Swan: Those are some important points. And I appreciate your mention of community partnerships. I'm wondering, Lysette, if you could speak a broad one about building and maintaining partnerships to support Afghan newcomers in your

community. What does the referral process look like, and how perhaps have these partnerships changed over time? Lysette.

Lysette Lemay:

Sure, thank you, Jessica. So as Lisa said, thank you for inviting Elk Grove to be a part of this important discussion. So some ways that our district has built and maintained partnerships and support of our Afghan newcomers, a couple of things that we've done. First of all, we have participated in the Refugee School Impact and CalNEW grants. By securing those funds, we were able to immediately hire staff who are multilingual, specifically that speak Dari, and Farsi, and Pashto. Both of our staff have also lived the resettlement experience, so they're able to connect with our newcomer families in a real and meaningful way.

They're here to assist with interpretation, translation, helping with the enrollment process, and any questions that arise. They are helping with vaccination and immunization questions and challenges. We also partner with several of our local resettlement agencies, as well as some of our local nonprofit organizations that provide basic need support to our newly arrived families, whether that's food, clothing, furniture. Some of them provide some basic academic supports like tutoring, and they also provide some community and connection building activities like soccer, just so our kiddos can start to not only acclimate, but build those relationships and feel connected in the community.

In terms of the referral process, first and foremost, we've communicated out to all of the sites across our massive district as Lisa mentioned, who the staff are, how they can be contacted, and what services and supports they are able to provide to families. So school site staff can directly reach out to our liaisons and then our liaisons connect with those families, whether that's setting up interpreting to set up appointments, sitting in on meetings to make sure families understand the process of whatever is happening within those meetings.

Likewise, we use a system called Calendly so that staff can also reach out directly to our liaisons and set up those appointments and be very clear about what the support is that they're going to need. And then finally, we advertise it on our family and community engagement website, so that folks know who exactly to reach out to. Additionally, our liaisons are doing warm handoffs and connecting our families to those local organizations to receive the supports and services that they need. So those are just a couple of ways that our district are working to support our newcomer families.

Jessica Swan:

Excellent. Thank you so much, Lysette. It really takes an entire community. And one population that's very special in that community are teachers and school staff. I'm hopeful to ask, perhaps for Nashville, could you speak to how you are equipping teachers and school staff to serve your newcomer students? Are you providing specific professional development around social-emotional learning and, or trauma informed learning? Alex.

Alex Castillo:

Sure. And thank you so much for having us here today. I'm speaking for Metro Nashville Public Schools. To equip our staff and school staff and our teachers with newcomers, as Molly mentioned, we have our elementary, middle and high schools in the area of the Northeast, Northwest. And within those schools, we dropped about 15 to 25 newcomers into the schools at about two weeks at a time. One of the schools had only one EL teacher and that strained the support that could be provided, and we had to add an EL teacher to the site quickly and supported the grade level classroom teachers with more supports.

And with that, the teachers also had so many questions about translation services, the curriculum support, the language, and a lot of cultural differences that they were seeing within the classroom. And luckily, MNPS is fortunate to have instructional coaches dedicated to supporting teachers of English learners. And the teachers are all required to take an annual training on EL strategies and WIDA standards. So we all have that background knowledge. And also, MNPS has created a professional development PD pathway specific to the staff's role.

So we have a EL teacher track, content teacher tracks, and counselor and administrator track, which is really great. And the pathways, of course, is on instructional strategies, trauma informed practices, SEL and meeting the needs of the whole learner through SEL. And as each new student from Afghanistan arrived, the school teams were notified along with the school counselor, the trauma informed coach, and as well as their social worker. And the team was able to rally around the families and be able to get the resources and supports that they needed in place right away.

And we also, as Molly mentioned, have our SAIF program, which is for student from interrupted formal education housed within seven of our MNPS schools. And all the students that qualify are eligible and bust to those locations, taking that transportation, liftoff families. And students that qualify for this program have limited literacy in their first language, have interruptions in education and are at the entry level of their English language proficiency.

Jessica Swan:

Terrific, Alex. It sounds like you really have a multi-tiered system for your teachers. So we've talked about the community supporting our newcomers. We've talked about the teachers and the staff supporting our newcomers. So I would like to switch our attention to our families. How are you, Lisa in Elk Grove best serving your newcomer students by reaching out to their families?

Lisa Levasseur:

Thank you, Jessica for that question. So we know all of our students that enroll in our schools go home to families. And we know that every home culture is different. So our lens with reaching out to families was really through the idea of what Dr. Naser actually said earlier around seeing our families as assets, and that they all have some funds of knowledge that we want to tap into to make sure that we are partnering with them and making sure that they feel supported and success here.

So I'm going to talk about just a couple of ways we did that. So pre COVID, we hosted a couple of Afghan Ts, where we had families come, we had our multilingual staff there and families came and we just wanted to learn from them and build community. Many of these families we know were new in the past six months and so we wanted to make sure they knew others that they could reach out to and build a sense of community at their new school.

We also wanted to make sure we were meeting the needs of our families. So we met with any new family that enrolled through our immunization clinics and surveyed in their home language. We had surveys to find out exactly how we could support them in the right way. And so we took that information and started to create some resources and supports, and then the pandemic hit. And so during that time, we offered virtual office hours where we had our multilingual staff available in the afternoon and evening for families to log on and ask questions about Google Classroom and helping their students to enrollment, to attendance, to just community resources in general.

We wanted to make sure that we were available for them. We also created educational videos in languages like Dari, Farsi, Pashto around enrollment, attendance, parent view. The parent information system that we have. We wanted to make sure that families knew what that was and how to utilize it. And then this past summer, I'm really proud of the outreach. We did over 5,000 positive relationship building, welcome to your new school home visits.

They were all virtual at the time, but this really helped us understand who our families were, what they needed and how we could better support them. So we opened this up to any family, but we particularly targeted our newcomer and refugee families to make sure that they have that bridge and that person that they could reach out to when needed. And then finally, now that we're starting to open up again, we are opening four newcomer welcome centers.

I mentioned earlier that our district is 320 square miles, and we know transportation is an issue. So we strategically placed these newcomer welcome centers around our district, in the areas where we had higher populations of students from Afghanistan and other newcomer students. And those newcomer centers will provide wraparound supports for all of our students and families that are new to our district.

Jessica Swan: Did you say 5,000? Did I understand that correctly?

Lisa Levasseur: Yes. Yes. It was 5,135, I believe. Yes. It was really exciting.

Jessica Swan: Wow. It's really exciting, Lisa. There's so much hope for the work that you and your colleagues across the nation are doing each and every day to serve our students. These last years have been undeniably difficult. And I would imagine a little bit more difficult for those working in and with schools. Further difficult for those who have been forcibly displaced. But we welcome into our country, and

you are doing that work each and every day. So our message of hope. Molly, are you going to explain to me, where do you find hope in this work?

Molly Hegwood: Absolutely. I have the honor of working with Ali Mastan Ali, and he arrived here in 2016 as an Afghan refugee, and is now interning as a high school senior at the Office of English learners and is helping to onboard all of our new families. So he's with us today and we're going to have him tell a little bit about his story and what brings him hope and his next steps. So Ali, welcome. I'm so happy you're here. Tell us about when you first arrived here in the United States.

Ali Mastan Ali: I was born in Afghanistan, and I was living in a village. It's called Maidan Wardak. And I did not go to school there. I was with my family, my dad, my mom, with my two sister. And we were trying to move into Kabul City, because when we were living in Maidan Wardak, the city was far away. So we planned to move to Afghanistan with my dad, my mom, with my two sister. But on the way, when we were trying to move to Kabul City, the group of Taliban stopped us with guns and they had masks, and they took all the men out ... And we were in a taxi. So they took all the men out and we had to walk to Kabul City. It was about 16 to 17 hour walk.

So they took all the men out, but they let us go. So I told my mom, "Let's go," And the rest of the family. They were stranger, but we were in the taxi so we were walking about 16, 17 hour to Kabul City. Once we made it in Kabul City, we lived there for a few years. I went there for two years school, first and second grade. And then my mom said, "Let's go to Pakistan." Then started a case in Islamabad. We were in Pakistan. I lived there for year and a half, and we started a case. I went to school in Pakistan. I learned Urdu, and I had some English classes, but I didn't learn English because the way that they were teaching, I couldn't understand. So I only learned Urdu.

Molly Hegwood: Great. And now you're working at the EL office as a translator. So that's amazing. So you told us a little bit about your journey in Afghanistan and coming here. Tell us what it was like as a newcomer in our schools when you first came from Afghanistan.

Ali Mastan Ali: When I first arrived here it was totally different and it was hard for me. Everything was hard and I did not speak any English. The first day of school, at night, my mom had to make some lunch for me, because the school food wasn't halal, and we couldn't eat the food, but we were new still. So I had some hard time with eating food at school. And the school stuff were different than my country. In my country, the teacher, if you didn't get the answer, they would hit you with a stick and the teacher would put pencil or pen between your finger and squeeze them as hard they could. And here it is different.

The teacher were nice. They helped me a lot. Even in middle school, high school. They help me a lot. Always they help me. Even now at my school, they help me. And I am happy for this job because I get to help my mom, my two sister. And

I'm happy to help new Afghan get to go to college. My teacher helped me apply for college. Tennessee Promise financial aid, stuff like that.

Molly Hegwood: We are so happy for you, Ali, and to be able to be a small part of your journey. What do you think made the most difference when you first came here? What made the success for you in this country?

Ali Mastan Ali: My teacher helped me a lot because I did not speak any English. They were helping me in so many ways. They were like, "It's okay if you don't get it this way, we'll teach you in a different way." They were giving me different books, easy books to read, write. They were teaching me how to speak. And even now, they help me. And in this office, when I'm working, I'm happy. Molly help me. Megan, Margaret help me. Everyone helping me.

Molly Hegwood: We're here to help you. That's our job, and we're glad that you feel supported. Last piece. We have a lot of schools and communities here on this call. What do you want them to know as they welcome others from Afghanistan?

Ali Mastan Ali: I want them to know, since there are new Afghans, and I want them to help them a lot. And most of them probably doesn't even speak English. I want the teachers to help them and understand their situation, because some of them are afraid because of what's happening in Afghanistan. They might be afraid, and I want the teachers to know the food differences. Because the child that are going to school soon, they don't speak English. I want the teachers to make sure they're eating halal food. Even if they don't know about halal food, they can search it up, look it up and help them.

And I want the teachers give them a space to pray. Muslims pray five times a day. So I want them to give them a clean space to pray. And the girls and boys cannot sit together because the girls have hijabs on, and in my country, they were separated. Boys cannot sit with girls, but girls can sit with girls. Guys can sit with guys, but they cannot sit together in one desk.

Molly Hegwood: Well, thank you. Thank you, Ali for sharing your story. Thank you for helping us and letting us learn from you. So we just appreciate you so much. And like I said, Ali is what gives me hope.

Ali Mastan Ali: Thank you, and-

Jessica Swan: Terrific.

Ali Mastan Ali: ... I still need help every day. Molly helps me. The schools help me. Everything I need, I ask Molly, Megan, Margaret. Everyone in the EL office at school, they help whatever I need. And I want to thank Molly and everyone else in the EL office for helping me. And thanks for your time for listening to my story.

Jessica Swan:

Thank you so much, Ali and Molly. You all give me hope, but most of all, you Ali. You're a reminder of why we do what we do as educators, as school staff, as administrators, as leaders who care about our students across the nation. From the U.S. Department of Education, we send our appreciation and gratitude to you, Ali, and know that we're proud of you. We are nearing the end of our time together. So let me take a few moments to thank our presenters today. Ruth, Kabrillen, Jorge, Shereen, Lysette, Lisa, Molly, Alexandra, Nate, and Ali.

You have provided us so much important information and inspiration today. The work you do to effectively support newcomers as they enter our learning environments is a critical task facing many in our education communities today. And the information that you shared goes a long way towards these efforts. On behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, I thank you. Continue the good work. Know that you have our gratitude and our support. We will move now to wrapping up today's events, and I'll turn the events back to Tim Duffey to conclude the webinar. Tim.

Tim Duffey:

Thank you, Jessica. And thanks to all of you who were presenters today. Really deeply appreciate your wisdom that you shared with us. It was an honor to be a part of today's event. As we close, we're posting the link for the feedback form on screen now, and it's also been posted in the chat and will be posted there again. I encourage everyone who attended today to take just a few minutes and provide us with feedback on today's session, and to share what topics and format you might prefer for remaining issues in this Lessons from the Field series.

In addition, please visit our website where today's presentation will be posted, and you can listen to the archived version if there's some items you might want to go back to remind yourself of the content. Also, please feel free to share that link with colleagues who may have an interest in the topic we discussed today. You can also see all of the slides the speakers have shared, along with links to resources referenced during the session at that site.

As a reminder, we will be capturing all questions that were posted in the Q&A box. And I realized we did not have an opportunity to get to them all, but they're all, every one of them very important to us. And we will share that information with staff at the Department of Education to inform upcoming events in this series. So with that, I want to thank each of our presenters again, for the excellent information and the passion that you shared with us today. We also want to thank each of you, almost over 600 people, actually, who participated in today's event for your active engagement and for being here.

We are going to leave the Zoom room open for an additional five minutes following the session so that you can click on the feedback link and go to the survey, or provide any additional questions you might want in the Q&A pod. Our next Lessons from the Field Webinar will be conducted later this month on March 30th. And in that event, we will address the critical role school-based health centers play in supporting the wellbeing of all students. Watch for that

announcement coming out soon, and we hope you'll join us for that event as well.

Again, I greatly appreciate your time today, and thank each and every one of you for all you do to provide students with safe and supportive learning environments. I hope we'll see you on a future Lessons from the Field Webinar. Have a great rest of your afternoon.