



Unaccompanied Children in Schools: What You Need to Know

In recent months, schools throughout the United States have been experiencing a significant shift in their student populations. Although U.S. schools have a long history of educating immigrant students, the arrival of unaccompanied minors from Central America in high numbers presents the unique task of educating students who face a variety of challenges. The following tips offer useful, basic information about this group of students and what schools need to know to best meet their needs.

1. Understand the context of your students' immigration.

- Since 2014, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has detained more than 62,000 unaccompanied children crossing the Mexico-U.S. border; more than 56,828 of them have been reunited with a family member*.
- The vast majority of these minors come from El Salvador, Guatemala or Honduras where poverty, unemployment and violence have risen to alarming levels in recent years.
- While some youths may be coming to the U.S. for economic reasons or to reunite with family members, the sharp increase in drug trafficking and gang violence in Central America has forced young people to leave.
- The U.S. Department of Education has a useful [fact sheet](#) that provides more information about this particular population.

2. Lay the foundation for a strong personal relationship with your immigrant students.

- Learning details about a student's journey is secondary in importance to simple relationship-building. Students may be reluctant or unwilling to tell their stories, but given time, they may begin to open up and share the more sensitive details about their journey with you.
- Given the difficult nature of their journey, when students arrive, it is important to make them feel welcome and try to learn the following information as soon as you can: where they came from (not just country, but town and setting), when they arrived, and with whom they are staying.
- If language is a barrier, include a staff member or trusted adult who can serve as an interpreter. If students are reluctant to offer any information about their situation, consult with a school counselor or social worker for guidance on building a relationship.

* Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

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3. Establish contact with students' family or guardian.

- As with any other student, it is essential to have a positive relationship with those who care for the children at home.
- Unaccompanied minors often live with parents, but they can also be placed with other family members, friends or foster parents.
- It is possible that these children have not seen (or perhaps even met) their parents or relatives in a long time. Students may be struggling with feelings of abandonment if their parents traveled to the U.S. first.
- Remember that despite being with family members, children are still in deportation proceedings so it may be difficult for them to concentrate on their studies. Keep in mind that in addition to attending school, these students also may be caring for younger siblings or working at a job.

4. Help build a strong support network.

- Not only will these students need a tour of the important places at school, they'll also need to be introduced to key staff members so that they are surrounded by a supportive team of adults.
- Be aware that students may not be familiar with a school setting and arrive at school without supplies, warm clothes, etc.
- If you have students who are willing to serve as "buddies," pair them up with your new kids. Students are much more willing to take a chance in a friendly environment. More tips can be found on [Colorín Colorado](#).

5. Reach out to ELL specialists at your school or district.

- The ESL or bilingual education specialists in your school or district will play a crucial role in assessing and identifying students' language needs, especially if students have had their formal schooling interrupted in their home country.

6. Look for ways in which students can share information about their experiences, language and culture in creative and meaningful ways.

- These may include artwork, journal entries and writing assignments (it's OK if they are in the students' first language).

7. Understand your students' challenges and strengths.

- The journey that most of these children have taken most likely has been long, lonely and perilous. Their trips may have lasted weeks or months, and they may have attempted the journey before.
- In transit, children may be exposed to extortion, rape, violence, harsh weather conditions, hunger, dehydration, injury, and other dangers (most children have made the journey atop moving trains).
- The kids who do make it to the U.S. are placed in temporary detention centers, where conditions and not knowing the language can add to their anxiety.
- As a result of these daunting situations, some students may be coping with severe trauma.
- Learn about post-traumatic stress disorder, which can affect any person, regardless of age, who has experienced a significant frightening experience. If





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you notice that any of your students is suffering from any symptoms of PTSD, it is imperative that you seek professional assistance for them. The [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) has helpful resources for children.

- For some students, this dramatic change in lifestyle can be reflected in disruptive classroom behavior.
- At the same time, keep in mind that your students possess resilience and other strengths. Look for ways to show appreciation for those qualities and for opportunities in which the students can demonstrate their strengths in the classroom.

8. Offer your students opportunities to use their first language.

- Not only will using their first language help build confidence, it also will help provide a strong foundation for learning English. Include grade-level reading materials in their native language in your classroom library.
- Be sure to have bilingual dictionaries on hand. Ask your school to help recruit volunteers who can provide more one-on-one assistance. Ask your library to secure books highlighting the students' home country or culture.
- In addition, keep in mind that schools are obligated to meet the educational and language needs of all students and families, including English language learners and immigrants (regardless of immigration status). For more

information on these requirements, see the new [guidelines released by the U.S. Department of Education](#). If you feel that your school is not meeting student needs, ask for guidance from an administrator, ESL director or your state education department.

9. Educate yourself about the experience of unaccompanied minors.

- A number of books and films that offer more information about this student population and their experiences are listed on [Colorín Colorado](#). One of the most compelling and detailed is Enrique's Journey by journalist Sonia Nazario, which follows the trek of one young man north from Honduras and offers an in-depth portrait of what Nazario calls a "modern-day Odyssey."

10. Find out what else is happening in your community.

- If other students are arriving in your school district or community, there may be more resources available. An influx of students may make it necessary for individuals and institutions to come together to determine how best to meet this new population's needs.
- Keep in touch with other schools, houses of worship, legal-aid organizations and immigrant service organizations that may be working with students and their families on ways that you can all provide help to this vulnerable population.





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For additional information, see these resources:

- American Federation of Teachers
go.aft.org/bordercrisis
- BBC country profiles of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras
bit.ly/BBC_LatinAmerica
- Catholic Charities USA
catholiccharitiesusa.org
- Colorín Colorado: Federal Regulations
bit.ly/CC_federal
- Colorín Colorado: How to Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment
bit.ly/CC_welcome
- Colorín Colorado: Unaccompanied Children
bit.ly/CC_unaccompanied
- League of United Latin American Citizens
lulac.org
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network:
Resources for Educators
bit.ly/ed_resources
- National Education Association
bit.ly/HelpingGuide
- National Institute of Mental Health:
What is Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?
bit.ly/about_ptsd
- Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS)
bit.ly/about_ucs
- Refugee Council USA
www.rcusa.org
- U.S. Department of Education:
Educational Services for Immigrant Children and
Those Recently Arrived to the United States
bit.ly/ed_services