

# How can educators support immigrant students?

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

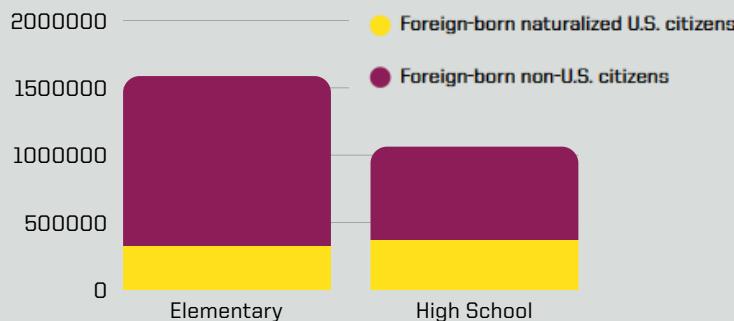
## What challenges do immigrant students face?

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

Challenges in school	Trauma & mental health	Additional difficulties
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adjusting to a new education system, school and new language.</li> <li>Struggling academically; an achievement gap exists between immigrants and native students.<sup>4,5</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiencing trauma before, during, and/or after immigration.<sup>6,7</sup></li> <li>Experiencing increases in anxiety, depression, and somatic disorders.<sup>8</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Navigating medical and mental health services in a new country.</li> <li>Adjusting to new living arrangements</li> <li>Grieving people left behind.<sup>9</sup></li> </ul>

## How many are affected?

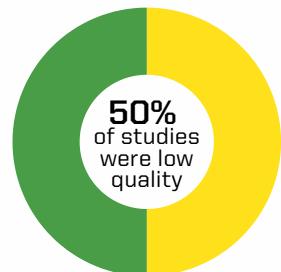
U.S. Census American Community Survey data suggest that there were millions of foreign-born students enrolled in U.S. schools in 2023.<sup>10</sup>



Over 189,000 immigrant students enrolled for Fall 2023 in California.<sup>11</sup>  
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.<sup>9</sup>



# 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.<sup>12,13</sup>
- Students who maintain a connection to their origin culture may have enhanced school belonging.<sup>13</sup>
- Multiculturalism should be supported; a case study suggested positive teacher-student interactions rooted in culturally and linguistically responsive practices can help newcomer learning.<sup>14</sup>

## 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.<sup>15</sup> Being placed in a lower-level course due to language but not achievement levels may be frustrating for immigrants.<sup>12</sup>

1. mCLASS with DIBELS 8<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>6,7</sup>

Rigorous evidence for trauma-informed education interventions is positive but limited.<sup>16,17</sup>

- A 2020 systematic review included just four studies on trauma-informed educational interventions. They all had positive effects but varied in quality.<sup>16</sup>
- 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).<sup>18</sup>
- This review also suggested benefits of community mental health services in schools.<sup>18</sup>

## 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).<sup>19,20,21,22</sup>

## 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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## 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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