

# How schools and other public services in the US can promote refugee integration

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**Services and policies need to be more thoughtfully designed to enable young refugees' social and economic integration. This requires a better understanding of what constitutes sustainable integration and what factors promote it.**

For adolescent refugees who have been resettled, the education system can be a fundamental part of adjusting to a new society.<sup>1</sup> Beyond simply facilitating academic advancement, school systems – when equipped with the right resources – can nurture the types of relationships with peers, teachers and other trusted adults that bring about sustainable socio-economic integration.

Since 2017, the authors have been undertaking a multi-sited, mixed-methods study: the Study of Adolescent Lives after Migration to America (SALaMA). This study has engendered reflections on what constitutes sustainable integration and what factors promote it.<sup>2</sup> The study's objectives include assessing the mental health and psychosocial well-being of high school students who have been – or whose parents have been – resettled to the US from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The study also aims to identify these students' daily stressors and the support mechanisms available to them.

The study data reflect the lived realities of refugee families from the MENA region across vastly different settings; from the relatively small city of Harrisonburg, Virginia, to the richly populated cities of Chicago, Illinois, Austin, Texas, and the Detroit metropolitan area in Michigan, a historically common site of resettlement for Arab refugees and other immigrants. SALaMA has not only produced novel learnings about the needs of this growing sub-population and the school systems that welcome them but has also generated invaluable insights into the ways refugee students and those who care for them can be supported in a manner that promotes enduring inclusion and well-being.

In this article the authors offer four overarching reflections that they hope may guide

practice and inform policy debates on refugee integration.

## 1. The hazards of measuring deep processes with shallow indicators

Too often, researchers and practitioners evaluate integration using readily measurable indicators, such as majority-language acquisition, school enrolment and employment rates, or the openness of integration policies. While these are necessary data for tracing the trajectory of resettled refugees and other displaced people, and for making comparisons across contexts, they are insufficient for understanding the meanings, mechanisms, challenges and lived experiences of integration. Even when the main objective is to assess degrees of integration at the population level, such measures are insensitive to some of the most important dimensions of adjustment to a new society, such as a sense of safety and belonging, access to and use of trustworthy and responsive social services, or degree of psychosocial well-being.

SALaMA has uncovered wide variation in outcomes on each of these dimensions, highlighting the severe limitations of a variable such as school enrolment as a catch-all indicator of educational integration. Many participants identified school support measures that promoted their academic success and sense of inclusion. Others reported experiences of discrimination and racism, feelings of exclusion or marginalisation, and a lack of support for their academic advancement. Some struggled while others thrived, and most experienced multilayered combinations of both – gradients of integration that are entirely lost in many conventional measures. While there are impressive efforts being made to enhance the multidimensional



Arabic language students engage with their teacher at the London Academy of Excellence Tottenham (LAET) (Credit: Rob Anderman and QFI)

measurement of population-level integration,<sup>3</sup> those responsible for serving resettled refugees would benefit from more granular, detailed data on the quality, depth and challenges of refugees' adjustment processes.

These details matter. In an analysis of two school districts, for example, the authors found that foreign-born students, and especially those from the MENA region, had significantly higher levels of suicidal ideation, and that a sense of school belonging protected students against this risk.<sup>4</sup> Such findings are alarming. If sustainable socio-economic integration is about providing opportunities to achieve equitable life chances or capabilities, then we need to know more, at the very least, about what it is that makes some refugees question their will to live.

Beyond simply drawing greater attention to the importance of mental health, this research indicates a need for a more holistic view of integration; one that takes more seriously the meaning that refugees make of their resettlement experiences and aspirations and one that does not assume that superficial public service and labour market participation inherently equate to sustainable integration.

## 2. Public service participation does not inherently enable integration

Even when public service systems are relatively well-resourced and employ policies that support equity and inclusion, they may inadvertently produce harmful stressors that undermine refugee well-being and sense of belonging. In contexts where, for example, educators punished students for using Arabic in class, this not only created stress for the students but ignored evidence that dual-language education is beneficial to newcomer learning.<sup>5</sup> Official school district statements of inclusion also rung hollow when US-born students called their Muslim peers 'terrorists' with impunity, or when educators and classmates singled girls out for their decision to wear or not wear a hijab.<sup>6</sup>

These findings underscore the vital importance of true cultural responsiveness in public service provision, where providers should learn from students and adapt to their needs and preferences as equal community members.<sup>7</sup> The cultural responsiveness of public services, such as schools and health centres, should be a core indicator of integration among host communities.

### 3. The misunderstood power of enclaves

One implication arising from the authors' research in the Michigan city of Dearborn, which has a large and multigenerational concentration of Arab-Americans, is that refugees may benefit from resettling in areas with large concentrations of people with a shared ethnicity.<sup>8</sup> Rather than delaying integration (as some studies suggest and as many integration policies take for granted), living in Dearborn empowered refugee students to learn English while receiving comforting support from fellow Arabic-speaking peers and educators. Studying alongside other newcomers as well as second- and third-generation Arab-Americans enabled newcomers to adapt to the norms and procedures of Michigan's education system while still recognising meaningful aspects of their religious and ethnic identities in the school climate.

In this context, refugee students tended to fare just as well academically and psychosocially as their US-born peers. Without exaggerating the protective and promotive effects of ethnic enclaves as such, these findings can be taken as further evidence that the quality of public services – and especially their ability to promote a sense of recognition, inclusion and belonging – are at least as important for sustainable integration as the overall availability of public services.

### 4. The impact of the pandemic

No recent event has highlighted the need for high-quality, inclusive and responsive services for integration as profoundly as the COVID-19 pandemic. Students described losing access to valued school resources during and after the pandemic, from arts classes to in-person therapy. Students with previously minimal exposure to information technology (IT), or who had only recently arrived in the US, struggled to engage in virtual learning altogether. Nearly every student from the MENA region interviewed by the authors lamented the social isolation they endured during remote learning.<sup>9</sup>

One student said, "I can't communicate with my friends because of COVID"; as a result, he relied on online video games for social interaction. For students already affected by conflict,

displacement, family separation and the challenges of resettlement, such drastic interruptions of their new routines and support systems could have especially harmful mental health effects. A female student said that the mental health of many of her classmates "started going down because they haven't been outside; they haven't been doing stuff that they like to do".

For many students, the initial isolation transformed into full-fledged withdrawal later in the pandemic, with some unable to get out of bed, leave their room or eat. Shifting classes to online modalities ensured educational continuity but resulted in fewer available therapeutic resources to support MENA students' psychosocial well-being. As schools and other services continue to readjust to in-person engagement, carefully designed interventions will be needed to reignite the feelings of belonging that may have dimmed in the absence of quality, in-person services.

SALaMA data collected during the pandemic underscored the positive role schools can also play in supporting adjustment and belonging among students' families. School providers in Chicago, for example, reported that students whose parents or other caregivers lost their jobs sought out trusted adults at school to help fill out unemployment applications. Such anecdotes demonstrate that when students remained continuously engaged with supportive schools during the pandemic, they were able to leverage these relationships to access safety nets for their families.

### A two-way process in practice

As much as the academic literature has recognised that integration is a two-way process in theory, many policies and programmes still operate as though refugees are the only ones who do, or do not, integrate. Public service systems, and the receiving community more broadly, not only promote integration but are an essential part of it. Truly responsive schools and other public services learn from refugees and grow with them. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed alarming tears in our fabric of care; it should also remind us that what makes integration sustainable is the strength of the seam that binds us all together.

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