

Great City Schools Step Up to Meet the Needs of Refugee Children

By Michael Casserly



Council of the Great City Schools

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The nation's Great City Schools are not simply meeting their legal obligations to provide educational services to whomever comes through their doors; they are doing everything they can in partnership with others to make sure that newly arriving students are welcomed and prepared to give back to the country that is trying to help them.

None of this is new or unusual for our Great City Schools. Since the earliest days of the 20th century and before, our schools have taken in children and families who eventually served as the backbone of the nation. Even in more recent times, the nation's urban public schools have opened their doors to families from Cuba, Haiti, Guatemala, Vietnam, Sudan, and many other countries as they were seeking refuge, freedom, and a better tomorrow. It is a remarkable and unique contribution to our nation's tapestry, its culture, and strength—all done in the midst of a global pandemic. And it is a contribution that could have only been made by our country's urban public schools.

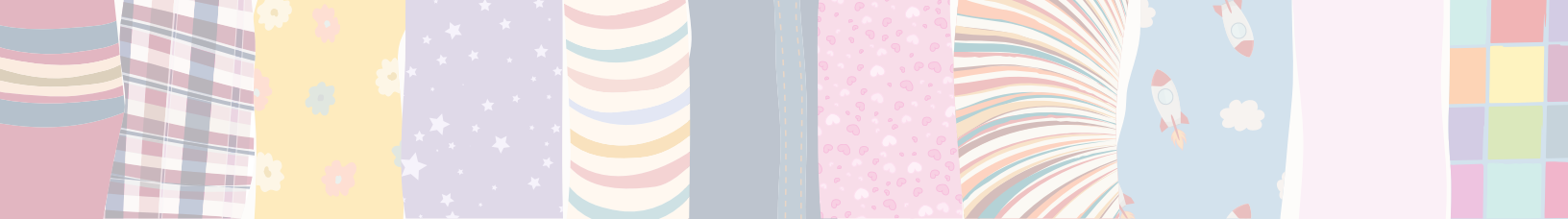
The three years between 2020 and 2023 brought unprecedented challenges to America's system of public education, particularly in the nation's big cities. But amidst a global pandemic, school closures, burgeoning gun violence, a mental health crisis among children and adults, political and social polarization, and rampant staff shortages, urban school systems across the country rose to the occasion and filled gaps in social needs that no other public institution could have done.

They served hundreds of millions of meals to their students, families, and many others, no questions asked. They purchased and distributed millions of technology devices to provide the best instruction they could while the public was quarantined. They created internet access for countless families so students could access their teachers and schoolwork. They devised innovative mental health intervention strategies to address the social wellbeing of millions of struggling children and adolescents. They put masking policies into effect to keep students and adults disease-free. They stepped up to vaccinate not only their own staff but citizens across their regions. And they took in refugee children and families from across the globe who had nowhere else to turn.

Efforts by urban school systems to take in refugee children from Afghanistan and other countries were particularly notable and unique. In May of 2022, the Council of the Great City Schools brought together bilingual directors, educators, and staff from big-city member districts and invited them to share the work they had done and continue to do on behalf of newcomers and refugee students and their families. In addition to providing newcomer aid, instruction, and social services to the new arrivals, attendees reported helping families find housing and coordinating community services. They provided much of the initial social contacts, translations, and food services for refugee families upon their arrival. And they provided cultural orientations, language lessons, and other assistance. Examples across the country underscore the invaluable role that urban public schools played not only during the pandemic but during good times as well.

In **Kansas City, Missouri**, for example, the public school system hosted weekly joint educational orientations with local refugee resettlement agencies for families and children, along with enrolling and screening students.

The **Metro Nashville Public Schools** coordinated with local resettlement agencies to provide orientations, counseling, social work services, and housing to newly-arrived Afghan families.



The **Oakland Unified School District** in California also provided these services along with housing support, immunizations, legal and social-emotional supports, and translation and language instruction services.

A closer look at stories from other big-city school systems across the United States tells a profound story of generosity, expertise, and humanity on a massive scale. These stories not only reveal the efforts and commitment of individual staff, leaders, and school districts during the pandemic and its aftermath—they make a compelling case for the unique reach that public schools have as institutions and the role they continue to play in sustaining the health and wellbeing of our communities and our country.

Tulsa

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, some 9,348 of the school district's 33,000 students are multilingual learners from all over the globe. Some 1,392 of these were immigrant students and 326 were refugee children from Afghanistan. Laura Bristow, a Tulsa school district staff member, described her school system's efforts to support these students and their families, including partnering with Catholic Charities, B'nai Emunah Synagogue, the YWCA, St. Francis Hospital, the local food bank, the Tulsa Police Department, the Tulsa Transit Authority, the local housing authority, and others to simplify enrollment, orient parents, distribute technology devices, process immigration papers, translate materials into Dari or Pashto, develop teacher resources, conduct home visits, and provide initial language instruction to Afghan arrivals.

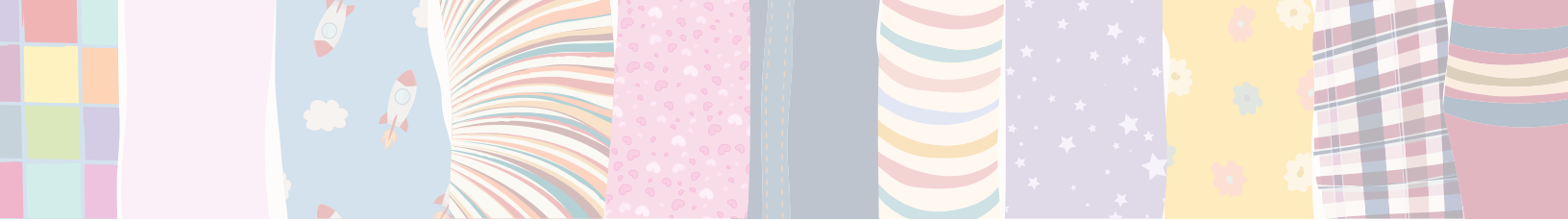
As they worked to absorb their new families, Tulsa relied on the experiences of their sister Great City School systems in **Austin**, **Denver**, and **Sacramento** for models and lessons. The district started with language and cultural instruction for families as they were being placed in hotels by refugee agencies. They followed those sessions with home visits after families were placed in the community and orientation sessions at neighborhood schools. The school district helped arrange transportation for families as they were getting settled, held welcome meetings, connected families with community resources, conducted school tours, and arranged local school resource teams.

At the schools where refugee children from Afghanistan were being placed, the district developed and provided teachers with Afghan cultural training, information on likely traumas that families might have experienced, and culturally responsive materials. The district also arranged to have school materials and forms translated into Dari and Pashto and provided personal translators and the option of using translators over the phone. Families with elementary-school-aged children were given pencils, paper, crayons, markers, scissors, glue, notebooks, picture dictionaries, and other supplies; while families with older children were provided with word dictionaries, Chromebooks, backpacks, and other resources.

At the district level, the school system under the leadership of Deborah Gist and the board of education set up a task force to coordinate enrollment, information technology (IT) services, mental health and wellness supports, homeless education expertise, child nutrition, transportation, and language and cultural services that met weekly and that coordinated with other groups across the city.

Nashville

Molly Hegwood told her Great City School colleagues about the efforts of the Nashville-Davidson public schools to help the many immigrant and refugee children who had come to the "Athens of the South." Nashville is a school district with about 83,000 students, 163 schools, and students who speak some 127 languages. As it was, the enrollment of the district was about 26 percent English learners (ELs), but since August 2021, during the height of the pandemic, the school system received another 386 arrivals, 250 of which were from Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Honduras, Iraq, and the Congo. Some 3,913 Nashville students have been in the United States less than a year.



Like Tulsa, the Nashville public schools, under the leadership of superintendent Adrienne Battle, set up a task force of school counselors, homeless specialists, school enrollment teams, teachers, and mental health providers to help welcome the new arrivals. The task force worked with Catholic Charities and the Nashville International Center for Empowerment to plan for the new families and coordinate services. The school district worked with its community partners to provide training to staff before the new residents arrived and coordinate with each other to ensure that services did not overlap or create gaps.

Most of the new arrivals were placed in transitional housing by city agencies in apartment buildings on the north side of Davidson County. The county health agency conducted vaccinations and other medical supports. And the school district, for its part, added EL staff to the nearby schools, along with EL coaches, translation staff, wrap-around services, and other coordination.

Hegwood indicated that they crafted their program of supports by looking at the efforts of the **Oakland Unified School District** in California.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg

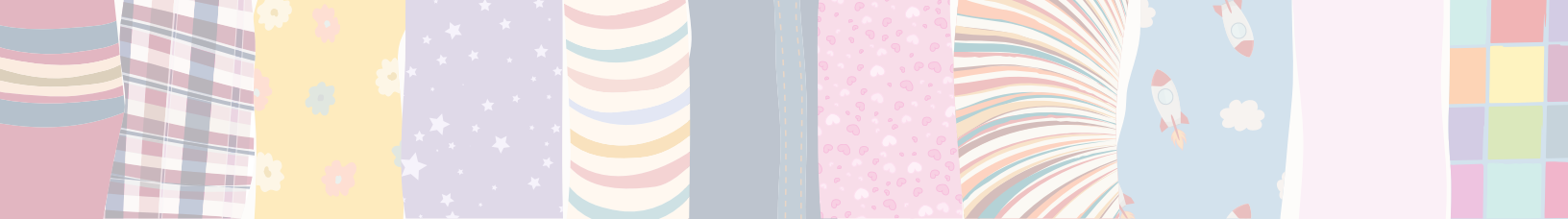
According to Charlotte-Mecklenburg school staff, the state of North Carolina expected about 1,200 refugees in 2021. Approximately, 300 of these individuals ended up in Charlotte, North Carolina, and about 72 of them enrolled as students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools. The school system already has students from 175 countries across the globe.

In Charlotte, the community had a large task force to coordinate services for the many new arrivals it hosts. Included are the school system, the Cardina Refugee Resettlement Agency, the Learning and Language Acquisition Team, Catholic Charities, Veterans Bridge Home, Samaritan's Purse, The Independence Fund, the International House of Metrolina, Myers Park Presbyterian Church, the City of Charlotte, the Universal Institute for Successful Aging of the Carolinas, Welcome Home CLT, Myers Park United Methodist Church, the UNC-Charlotte College of Education, Better Real Estate, Loaves and Fishes, and many other groups. These organizations worked together to welcome new arrivals, align and coordinate services, and create a seamless transition into the public schools and the community.

The task force held regular meetings to coordinate government support and then coordinate work from the various volunteer agencies. They created a comprehensive online resource hub for Afghans, modeled on the Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration framework. As soon as local resettlement groups knew that the community would receive new arrivals, they contacted the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district and its international center. The center can enroll new arrivals either virtually or in person. It also reviews transcripts or records and interviews arrivals to determine appropriate grade-level placement. Students were placed in the school nearest their residential placement and assigned case managers and resource teachers to monitor progress, handle cases, and ensure students had the resources they need. They also work with families to provide seamless services and address concerns.

The school system also provided mentors for the students, tutoring, and support in identifying needed community services—along with social and emotional support. The school system's international center also provided iPads to students and families in their native languages with resources donated from Bank of America, which is located in Charlotte, the city "that's got a lot." The school system supplemented this aid with English language lessons for parents, welcome meetings, weekly sessions, food assistance, and afterschool care.

School system staff indicated that its work was modeled after similar work in **Tulsa** and that the **Charlotte** community was extraordinarily generous with donations and assistance.



Other Great City Schools

These cities were not the only ones reaching out to new arrivals at the heart of the pandemic. **Anchorage School District** provided its schools with cultural and language information on their new students, the traumas they might have experienced, and connections with Afghan parents who were already residing in the community.

St. Louis worked with refugee Afghan families as they were placed in hotels across the city, providing translation services, community connections, and services required under McKinney-Vento.

In **Indianapolis**, school district personnel interview every newly arriving student in their native language to build an initial oral transcript and to gauge needs. The school system also administers subject-matter assessments to give course credits in areas passed.

These efforts by the Great City Schools to welcome and serve new refugee and immigrant students are being put to the test again in SY 2022-23 by the rising number of new arrivals from all parts of the world coupled with ongoing staffing shortages in schools. Innovative and coordinated efforts such as those described here will again be required to provide wrap-around services and responsive instruction.

About the Council

The Council of the Great City Schools is the only national organization exclusively representing the needs of America’s urban public-school districts. Composed of 78 large city school districts, the organization’s mission is to promote the cause of urban schools and to advocate for inner-city students through legislation, research, instructional support, leadership, management, technical assistance, and media relations. The organization also provides a network for school districts sharing common problems to exchange information and to collectively address new challenges as they emerge to deliver the best education for urban youth.

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