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## Supporting Newcomer Students: A Chicago-Specific Exploration of Social and Emotional Learning Initiatives

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*Preparing people to lead extraordinary lives*

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# Supporting Newcomer Students: A Chicago-Specific Exploration of Social and Emotional Learning Initiatives

Lincoln Hill, MA

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the large number of immigrant children and families within its borders as well as its sanctuary jurisdiction, the city of Chicago serves as an ideal case study towards investigating specialized services for one of its most vulnerable subpopulations of children, primarily the development needs of its immigrant children. The desired outcome for this non-exhaustive research brief is to provide empirical evidence and best practices for Chicago community and school specialists seeking to support the social and emotional needs of their newcomer student population.

**CHICAGO.** With immigrant residents representing approximately 21% of the city's population,<sup>1</sup> Chicago sought to position itself as a "sanctuary" city in 2006 by enacting its Welcoming City Ordinance.<sup>2</sup> The ordinance cites the value in having a diverse community as well as a need to foster trust and cooperation from all its citizens regardless of documentation status. It seeks to clarify Chicago's stance on its relationship with immigrant communities by distinguishing Chicago's legal procedures around immigration from federal immigration laws. The ordinance provides protections to undocumented residents from federal immigration enforcement unless the person in question has been convicted of a serious crime or has a criminal warrant.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this city ordinance, a 2017 Executive Order issued to the Attorney General and the Department of Homeland Security sought to remove protections for undocumented communities by withholding federal grants deemed necessary for law enforcement from

sanctuary jurisdictions.<sup>4</sup> Challenging the Attorney General's power to impose such an order, a Chicago federal appeals court in April of 2018 upheld a nationwide injunction preventing the order's enforcement thus upholding Chicago's status as a sanctuary jurisdiction.<sup>5</sup>

Chicago has incorporated both literal and symbolic measures to adopt legislation and policies to protect the dignities of its newcomer population, including immigrant children and families regardless of legal status. While the U.S. remains the only country to not ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>6</sup> on February 11, 2009, the City of Chicago passed a resolution adopting the treaty, noting that the convention "affirms Chicago's commitment to protect children and promote their rights."<sup>7</sup> Further, in August 2017, Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner signed the Illinois TRUST Act (SB 31) in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood, a community with the largest number of undocumented immigrants (20,000) in the city (Tsao, 2014).<sup>8</sup> The Act limits the scope of state and local law enforcement's role in enforcing federal immigration laws and seeks to build trust between undocumented immigrant communities and local law enforcement officers. The bill currently offers the country's strongest state-level due process protections for undocumented

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immigrants and affirmed Chicago's and Illinois' commitment to serving its undocumented immigrant population.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these local policies and actions that promote a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) leadership frequently responds to the political and cultural anxieties of its stakeholders, particularly those derived from undocumented immigrant families. Following the recent change in federal government administration in 2017, CPS responded to parent concerns about increased immigration enforcement. The district sent a letter and accompanying resources to all CPS families upholding the district's commitment to continue protecting the rights of all its children irrespective of immigration status<sup>10</sup> and reaffirmed the district's commitment as a welcoming district.<sup>11</sup> The district has also provided other responses to changes in federal policy, including a statement following the rescission of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which specifically highlighted resources for undocumented students and their families related to navigating the college application process.<sup>12</sup>

For all the notable policy initiatives Chicago has made for immigrant families and children, little is known about how the city and its schools implement these policies into actions that best support the well-being of its newcomer students. This brief seeks to further investigate the social and emotional learning school policies and services available to newcomer students. This outcome will be achieved by: synthesizing research about this population of students

(including unaccompanied immigrant children, immigrant children regardless of legal status, and refugee students); documenting best practices for social and emotional learning; and illustrating CPS policies that both hinder and promote the specific social and emotional needs of Chicago's newcomers. This brief will also provide examples of schools and school districts catering to the special social and emotional needs of their newcomer students.

## NEWCOMER STUDENTS

The term *newcomer student* broadly refers to any foreign-born student who migrated to the U.S. This umbrella term encapsulates asylees, refugees, and unaccompanied minors amongst many other specific populations of immigrant youth.<sup>13</sup> While all newcomers share foreign-born status, newcomers are not a homogenous group, and many enter U.S. communities with varying levels of English language proficiency, different racial/ethnic backgrounds, and a variety of cultural norms. Consequently, newcomer students tend to have different needs based on these and other characteristics.<sup>14</sup>

Some newcomer students are considered particularly vulnerable compared to others due to their background and experiences before, during, and after migration.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the term unaccompanied immigrant children (UIC) refers to children under 18 years of age who migrated to the U.S. without a primary caregiver and legal status.<sup>61\*</sup> UIC are typically categorized into two groups: those who entered the

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\*Legally, this immigrant population is often referred to as "unaccompanied alien children" or "unaccompanied minors."

U.S. and were apprehended and processed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and those that entered the U.S. without detection. Data accounting for the number of UIC who arrived in the US and were apprehended by the US Department of Homeland Security indicates that since October 2013, 1,518 UIC were released to sponsors in Illinois (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2018a), 969 of whom were released to sponsors within Cook County, the city of Chicago and surrounding suburbs.<sup>17</sup> Due to the unknown number of UIC who migrate without detection, determining the exact number of UIC residing in the Chicago area – let alone the U.S. – is nearly impossible.

Available research on UIC finds that this subgroup of immigrant children often presents with a unique set of tiered concerns spanning mental health problems including pre-migration and migration trauma,<sup>18</sup> racial and/or ethnic discrimination,<sup>19</sup> limited English language proficiency,<sup>20, 21</sup> familial disruptions,<sup>22</sup> and barriers to educational access.<sup>23</sup> UIC migrate to the U.S. with various degrees of educational competence within a U.S. context. Some UIC received limited, if any, educational services prior to migrating or experienced significant educational disruptions often leaving them significantly academically disadvantaged when compared to U.S. born peers of their same age.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, some UIC enrolling in U.S. school systems require specialized educational resources such as additional tutoring and culturally-sensitive learning approaches.<sup>25</sup> Due to these various psychosocial concerns, UIC tend to require specialized supports once they are released into U.S. communities, particularly once they enter the school system.

While legislation affirms equal protections for children regarding legal status, for some newcomer students, enrolling in schools tends to be unnecessarily difficult. A 2016 Associated Press investigative report found that 35 districts in 14 states (not including Illinois) discouraged unaccompanied minors from enrolling in public schools or pressured UIC to enroll in substandard alternative programs that violate federal guidelines.<sup>26</sup> Though discrimination against UIC in schools has been documented nationally, how, or if, this type of systemic exclusion occurs in Chicago remains unclear. However, both federal and Illinois state legislation offer protections and educational access to UIC and other newcomers. Titles IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 acknowledge that all children, regardless of race, color, sex, religion and nationality, are entitled to free educational services and are protected from discrimination from federal funds and in public schools.<sup>27</sup> And in Illinois, the State Constitution notes that “the State shall provide for an efficient system of high quality public educational institutions and services” for all children between the ages of five and twenty-one who reside within Illinois school districts.<sup>28</sup> This denotation of “all children” includes students regardless of immigrant or documentation status.

Explicitly addressing the educational needs of undocumented immigrant students, in particular, the *Plyler v. Doe* case<sup>29</sup> concluded that students, including those without legal citizenship, are entitled to the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>30</sup> The Court stated that:

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*In sum, education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society. We cannot ignore the significant social costs borne by our Nation when select groups are denied the means to absorb the values and skills upon which our social order rests. In addition to the pivotal role of education in sustaining our political and cultural heritage, denial of education to some isolated group of children poses an affront to one of the goals of the Equal Protection Clause.*

Despite these legal protections and the evidence that school enrollment does not require students or sponsors to provide proof of citizenship, some school districts attempt to deter enrollment for students suspected of being UIC by asking for social security numbers, birth certificates and similar citizenship forms. For sponsors unfamiliar with proper enrollment procedures or students' educational rights, requests for such documents often provides a real barrier to educational access for UIC.<sup>31</sup> For those UIC and other newcomer students who do successfully enroll into schools, school personnel are frequently underprepared and under-resourced when providing appropriate social and emotional support services for these children and their caregivers. While research is beginning to address gaps in access to educational services for vulnerable newcomers, more information is needed on the specific social and emotional needs of this student population once they do access educational environments.

### SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Traditionally, the U.S. educational system has prioritized proficiency in various academic domains while giving limited attention to the social and emotional

skill development of students. Proponents of social and emotional learning or SEL suggest that acquiring core competencies in cognition, affect, and behavior lead to greater interpersonal strengths, prosocial behaviors, cultural sensitivity, school connection, and improved academic outcomes.<sup>32</sup> Recognizing the benefits associated with SEL, the Illinois Children's Mental Health Act of 2003 now requires school districts within Illinois to adopt policies that incorporate social, emotional, and mental health into educational programming, services, and protocols. Consequently, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) district has devoted increased attention and policy changes to develop and prioritize SEL programs for its students.

### CPS POLICY ON STUDENT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH.

The CPS policy on student social and emotional health explicitly aims to:

*enhance student school readiness, academic success and use of good citizenship skills; Foster a safe, supportive learning environment where students feel respected and valued; Teach social and emotional skills to all students; and Promote student social and emotional well-being by partnering with families and communities.<sup>33</sup>*

The policy seeks to achieve these goals through programming incorporating the whole school system including administrators and staff, parents and families, as well as community partners. The policy addresses its commitment to early identification and clinical assessment of social, emotional, and mental health concerns by school personnel and referrals to

community providers.<sup>34</sup>

While the CPS policy on student social and emotional health should offer a framework relevant to the mental health vulnerabilities of all newcomer students and in accordance with research findings, the policy's delivery leaves much to be desired. The CPS employee position roster notes that, in March of 2018, the district employed just 319 school social workers for the 371,382 students enrolled in the district or approximately one school social worker for every 1,200 students.<sup>35</sup> School social workers are masters-level clinicians who have specialized training to meet the mental health, academic, and social and emotional needs of students. They typically prioritize providing supports and services to vulnerable populations of students including, but not limited to, immigrant children. School social workers work within school systems to rectify systemic barriers to the mental health needs of students while implementing multi-tiered systems of supports that impact the whole school community through collaboration.<sup>36</sup> Considering the crucial role of social workers in school systems, the ratio of school social workers to students in CPS is particularly concerning when considering the social and emotional development of newcomer student

Still, school social workers are not the only mental health supports accessible through CPS. School counselors, school psychologists, supervised graduate level trainees in mental health fields, and social and emotional learning specialists also deliver mental health services to students in the district. Such services include individual and group counseling, substance abuse counseling, consultation, trainings,

and psychological assessments among others.<sup>37</sup>

As of March 2018, there were 729 full-time school counselors and six part-time school counselors within the district or roughly one counselor for every 505 students.<sup>38</sup> While the district's school counselor to student ratio is lower than the Illinois state ratio of one counselor for every 678 students,<sup>39</sup> the American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of one counselor for every 250 students.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the National Association for School Psychologists recommends that districts employ one school psychologist for every 500 to 700 students,<sup>41</sup> though CPS employs 232 school psychologists or one for every 1,600 students.<sup>42</sup> The dearth of mental health professionals employed within CPS highlights a critical and urgent need for greater systems of support for all students, but particularly those susceptible to mental health challenges such as vulnerable newcomer students

In addition to scarcity of mental health professionals, a 2017 report conducted by the Educators for Excellence, an organization promoting "student-centered, teacher-driven ideas to improve outcomes" of Chicago students, notes that only 25 schools of more than 650 schools in CPS received specialized training in better screening and identifying students with symptoms affiliated with trauma.<sup>43</sup> In general, students living in low-income and inner-city communities report high exposure rates to violence and traumatic events,<sup>44</sup> and approximately one in six children in Chicago live in high crime areas.<sup>45</sup> Forty percent of CPS students reported feeling "not safe" or "somewhat safe" around their school according to a University of Chicago Consortium on School Research report.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, newcomer students already

exposed to trauma before coming to the U.S. may be at risk of continued and exacerbated trauma exposure once they enter certain Chicago communities. UIC, in particular, often experience significant trauma prior to migration, during migration, and post-migration which may potentially lead to posttraumatic stress, depressive and anxious symptoms, and a myriad of other mental health concerns if left untreated.<sup>47</sup>

Eighty-one percent of CPS teachers surveyed in the Educators for Excellence report expressed a desire for more SEL training as well as trauma-informed care and restorative practices to address culture and climate concerns.<sup>48</sup> Researchers and practitioners alike acknowledge the value in trauma-responsive practices that are “educative and therapeutic” and stress the need for greater education across school communities related to the impact of chronic trauma on their students.<sup>49</sup> Experts also cite the value in restorative practices, a type of paradigm approach to discipline and community healing that seeks to prevent harm, acknowledge harm, and repair harm through the values of social responsibility and respect. One of the desired outcomes of this approach is to reduce school suspensions and expulsions while offering less punitive and more restorative consequences.<sup>50</sup>

Currently, CPS partners with several local SEL community providers such as the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL),<sup>51</sup> Umoja Student Development Corporation,<sup>52</sup> and Alternatives, Inc.<sup>53</sup> to consult with and train school personnel and specialists on restorative practices. In a press release from 2016, CPS shared that these partnerships led to restorative practitioners reaching 74 different schools with notable reductions in suspensions, expulsions,

and law enforcement intervention in CPS schools.<sup>54</sup> And as of June 2018, the district employs 23 social and emotional learning specialists,<sup>55</sup> providers with master’s degrees in psychology, counseling, and other related fields who collaborate with approximately 5-10 schools throughout the academic year around SEL service delivery.

Research indicates that promoting SEL competencies creates an optimal strategy for both preventing and treating various mental health issues. Because immigrant students are new to the U.S. educational system, SEL school-based programs ideally provide opportunities for these students to form relationships to peers and other school personnel.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the Report of the Surgeon General’s Conference on Children’s Mental Health specifically acknowledges that mental health is a critical component of a child’s general health and affirms that social and emotional health is an aspect of “healthy child development.” As another avenue to potentially assist newcomers with their transition into schools, CPS may benefit from reaffirming its commitment to its SEL policy and prioritizing the social and emotional wellbeing of its children by increasing its number of school social workers and other mental health professionals while also providing more schools with trauma-informed training.



### **CPS POLICY ON BILINGUAL EDUCATION SERVICES.**

In addition to susceptibility for mental health concerns and trauma, many newcomers face hardships in school environments due to their limited English language proficiency.<sup>57,58</sup> The majority of newcomer students share many characteristics with other minority student populations such as English learners (ELs), indicating that language education programs are a critical component to their success as students and their social and emotional development.<sup>59</sup> Requirements for bilingual education services within CPS denote eligibility according to the following two questions: 1) Is a language other than English spoken in the child's home? and 2) Does the student speak a language other than English?<sup>60</sup> Utilizing these criteria, currently 18% of all CPS students are bilingual, and, in 125 schools in the district, 35% or more of the student body identifies as bilingual.<sup>61,62</sup>

The CPS policy on bilingual education notes that all students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade whose home language is not English should have equitable access to educational and language acquisition opportunities afforded to native English language speakers. The policy adds that Dual Language Education, a language services model that seeks to foster cross-cultural exchange and promotes bilingual proficiency for all students including both native English speakers and English learners, is an effective and desirable option for providing bilingual education services that go above and beyond Illinois standards for bilingual education.<sup>63</sup> Research supports this position stating that dual immersion programs (frequently referred to as two-way immersion

programs) do not prioritize English compared to other languages and allow for all students to participate – not just nonnative English speakers. Rather than relying on cultural separation and acculturation, these programs promote cultural awareness, enculturation, and academic achievement.<sup>64,65</sup> Consequently, dual immersion programs may potentially be more likely to achieve an atmosphere where more students are included and can learn from one another in an ideally affirmative educational space – factors associated with fostering social and emotional learning.<sup>66</sup>

While CPS acknowledges the benefits of dual immersion, the district has been slow to adopt this paradigm. Currently, only 20 schools of more than 650 in CPS practice this language services delivery model.<sup>67</sup> Instead, CPS schools typically provide another common language services program, English as a Second Language (ESL).<sup>68</sup> ESL classes are typically comprised of non-native English-speaking students who are learning English to eventually join English-only classes. Research findings investigating bilingual education services and SEL posit that ESL graduates retrospectively reported feeling isolated and removed from mainstream students. Additionally, they expressed experiences of multicultural insensitivity, bullying, and social exclusion.<sup>69</sup> Negative incidents associated with ESL programs may also lead to decreased affiliation with students' own ethnic background.<sup>70</sup> For newcomers who already feel isolated from other students due to language and cultural differences, ESL programs may have the potential to exacerbate these feelings.

In addition to ESL and Dual Education language service delivery models, a number of schools in

the U.S. have adopted another program that often precedes typical bilingual services referred to as newcomer programs.<sup>71</sup> Newcomer programs offer “specialized academic environments that serve newly arrived, immigrant English language learners for a limited period of a time.”<sup>72</sup> These programs typically last for one to two years before the newcomer students transition into their school’s typical language support program. A 2012 report on 63 newcomer middle and high school programs note that there are a wide range of newcomer ELs with various characteristics that can broadly be classified into four categories of learners: 1) literate, on-level newcomers, 2) literate, partially schooled newcomers, 3) newcomer students with interrupted education, and 4) late-entrant immigrant newcomers. The researchers note that the variety of newcomer characteristics influences best practices towards meeting the specific needs of the students.<sup>73</sup>

Best practices for bilingual education services indicate a need for affirmative and inclusive spaces that are culturally responsive and engage the whole community.<sup>74,75</sup> Within CPS, this is perhaps demonstrated by one Chicago high school located in Rogers Park, a neighborhood known nationally for its robust immigrant and refugee community. Roger C. Sullivan High School has been immensely successful in implementing an English language learner (ELL) program for its immigrant and refugee students that is culturally congruent, systemic, and trauma-informed. Currently, 45 % of the school’s student population is foreign born with students originating from 38 different countries. 40% of Sullivan’s students are enrolled in the ELL program where more than 35 languages

including Swahili, Arabic, French, Spanish, and Rohingya are spoken.<sup>76</sup>

Sullivan’s ELs attend classes in a cohort model allowing students to travel to different classes together while receiving language support throughout the school day. The school’s leadership invested its additional funds into its ELL program and sponsored trauma-informed trainings for its ELL instructors. Additionally, the school maintains connections with local refugee resettlement agencies and has received 89 refugee students within the past academic year. Due to its impressive program offerings for refugee and immigrant youth, Sullivan is the first newcomer program within CPS and is estimated to receive an additional \$300,000 to further strengthen its ELL program.<sup>77</sup>

While Sullivan does not offer a dual language education program, their ELL language service delivery model promotes enculturation, considers context, and is systematically imposed – all components helpful for promoting SEL and welcoming school environments.<sup>78,79</sup> For other schools, shifting to Dual Language Education could promote greater social and emotional development for newcomers who may already feel inclined to hide their documentation status and distance themselves from their peers. By adopting dual immersion, however, newcomers may begin to collaborate with their peers, form stronger relationships with school personnel, and increase their sense of school belonging.

## **CPS MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND DIVERSITY.**

When considering the integration of newcomer

students into U.S. school systems, it is critical to acknowledge the influence of systemic oppression in the distribution of services and subsequent socioemotional outcomes. School systems in the U.S. remain microcosms of societal ills that often promote oppression, racism, xenophobia, and Western cultural ideals that value independence and assimilation over collectivism and enculturation.<sup>80,81</sup> Although public schools are becoming increasingly more diverse and multicultural education more prominent, immigrant students and their families/sponsors still experience disproportionate incidents of discrimination and bullying when compared to their U.S. born counterparts.<sup>82, 83</sup> Before even enrolling in schools, some immigrant students already present with a host of hardships and difficulty adjusting to not only a new school environment, but an entirely new culture and country.<sup>84,85</sup> For these reasons, school personnel must be proactive in their pursuits of equity and inclusion while remaining attentive to how their school environment is both promoting and hindering multicultural inclusion for newcomers.

The CPS policy on multicultural education and diversity expresses the district's commitment towards providing equitable education for students regardless of cultural identities and ability status, including but not limited to students of different national origins, a direct application to UIC. The policy highlights that the entire school environment must incorporate a multicultural focus to achieve equitable outcomes for all its students.<sup>86</sup> This aspect of the policy speaks generally to climate and culture concerns within CPS and the quest to create inclusive and affirmative spaces rather than spaces that encourage only

students with non-dominant identities to assimilate into the mainstream culture.

Districts that have been successful in this regard, such as the Minneapolis Public School district, have created systemic changes to welcome immigrant children including staff cultural sensitivity trainings, the hiring of bilingual staff, parental and caregiver involvement opportunities, cultural enrichment programs, as well as valuing traditions and customs associated with their children's country-of-origin.<sup>87</sup> Adopting a similar framework within CPS might ensure that newcomers are properly integrated into their school environments in the most culturally responsive and inclusive manner possible which would further bolster their social and emotional health.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With increased public attention to current government policies and changes impacting immigrant children and families, school districts and personnel may benefit from additional guidance and support on how to better address the developmental needs of their newcomer student population. This research brief, though non-exhaustive, seeks to assist in this domain by employing Chicago Public Schools as a case study for the implementation of social and emotional learning initiatives for newcomer students. The author proposes the following recommendations to CPS and other districts:

- Acknowledge that newcomer students are not a homogenous group and have different cultural, individual, and migration experiences that will

likely impact their academic and social and emotional needs.

- Social and emotional learning initiatives should involve systemic preparation that include the entire school community.
- School districts may benefit from hiring more mental health professionals and social and emotional learning specialists to train school personnel on relevant wellness and mental health needs of newcomer students.
- Schools should consider bilingual education service delivery models that offer opportunities for both English learner and mainstream students to interact and that do not prioritize one language or culture above others.
- School personnel should acknowledge the role of systemic oppression, racism, discrimination, and xenophobia in the U.S. when educating the school community on topics pertaining to newcomer students.

### AUTHOR BIO

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