

Educating unaccompanied children in US shelters

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Educational services provided to unaccompanied children in government-funded shelters in the US must be examined more critically in order to better meet the children's varied needs – and federal standards for public education.

Since 2014, more than 250,000 unaccompanied children have arrived at the south-western border of the United States (US) in search of protection.¹ Upon arrival, most unaccompanied children are placed in the custody of the US Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR), and transferred to government-funded shelter facilities. Shelter facilities are contracted by HHS/

ORR to provide unaccompanied children with services including medical and mental health care, case management, recreation and educational programming. Since unaccompanied children are not permitted to enrol directly in the public school system while living in shelters, children must be offered on-site schooling that provides them with the knowledge and skills necessary to transition into a local school² when they

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leave the shelter to enter the care of a vetted caregiver.

Educational requirements in shelters

In the US, all children, regardless of their immigration status, are entitled to access free public primary and secondary education. There are specific guidelines setting out the minimum educational standards and services for unaccompanied children who are detained in shelters. These have been adapted by HHS/ORR into its Unaccompanied Children Program Policies and Procedures (herein referred to as ORR Guide).³ According to the ORR Guide, permanent shelter facilities must provide:

- an initial educational assessment within 72 hours of a child's admission to determine the child's level of academic development, literacy and linguistic ability
- educational services with six hours of instruction per day, Monday to Friday, to take place in a structured classroom environment, throughout the calendar year
- instruction in basic academic subject areas including science, social studies, mathematics, reading, writing, physical education, and English language development
- academic reports and progress notes for every student
- educational and classroom materials that are reflective of the children's diversity and that are sensitive to differences
- materials in all native languages represented at the facility
- curricula that include remedial education, after-school tutoring, and opportunities for academic advancement, such as special projects, independent studies and preparation courses for the General Educational Development (GED) test which provides certification equivalent to the US high school diploma.

Practices and challenges

HHS/ORR currently operates more than 100 permanent shelters across 17 states,

which vary in size from fewer than 30 children to over 400 children. While these shelters must comply with the minimum educational requirements established by the ORR Guide, various factors including the facility's physical size, staff expertise, lack of a standardised curriculum and degree of support from the local school district mean that educational programming differs across shelters. With limited assistance from HHS/ORR, many shelters struggle to find the time and resources that are required to adequately develop curricula and implement creative educational services.

Shelters are often limited in the physical space they have available and must make adaptations to provide education to all children. Some shelters navigate this issue by organising schooling into shifts; however, finding teachers for the extended day can be a struggle. Shelters may also increase student-teacher ratios to accommodate more students. Whether students are grouped by age or according to academic development and linguistic ability is a decision taken by the shelter teachers, and both options pose challenges for classroom instruction.

A qualified teacher may not always be available to complete the initial educational assessment, meaning that a lesser-trained staff member may step in. When there are vacant teaching positions, candidates who do not meet all the ideal criteria (bilingual, certified to teach English language learners, and with knowledge about unaccompanied children) may be offered positions to prevent a gap in educational services to children.

Developing curricula to meet the diverse educational needs of unaccompanied children in shelters is a constant challenge. According to the ORR Guide, curriculum content should be based on local educational standards, be consistent with that facility's average length of stay and be tailored to the specific level and ability of each child. However, classrooms host students of varying ages and educational backgrounds who enter and exit care at different times. These factors – combined with behavioural issues, fluctuating levels of interest in education, and trauma responses – often

restrict the teachers' ability to adequately prepare students for entering a local school system after release. Individual students' needs can easily go unaddressed. Students who remain in care for longer than the average length of stay may repeat the curriculum if shelter staff cannot arrange new learning opportunities for them, which puts some students at risk of becoming disengaged and missing out on educational advancement.

As federally contracted facilities which receive financial grants, shelters should comply with federal laws and standards designed to protect students with disabilities, special needs or limited English skills, and take into account other factors such as race, gender identity and age. Although most unaccompanied children arriving at the south-western border are Spanish-speaking, some speak indigenous Mayan languages, and others are from countries such as Guinea, Ghana, India and Bangladesh, leading to linguistically diverse classrooms. Locating interpreters and culturally relevant materials for less widely spoken languages can be difficult, which hinders students' access. Furthermore, although federal law protects the rights of individuals with disabilities, students in shelters may not be properly diagnosed due to limited access to qualified and certified assessors. Without an accurate diagnosis and access to necessary support services, students with disabilities may struggle to learn.

Lastly, because educational programmes in shelters typically do not receive state or local funding and are not legally required to adhere to state educational standards and guidelines, the state is not involved in monitoring these programmes. Instead, HHS/ORR conducts minimal monitoring. Students do not participate in national or state standardised assessments and no uniform learning criteria or benchmarks have been developed for these programmes.

Despite these challenges, we offer several recommendations and opportunities to encourage student success, both while in shelter schools and when they transition to local schools.

Introduction to shelter school

Unaccompanied children come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds and most are unfamiliar with educational norms and practices in the US. The classroom environment may be unlike anything the student has ever experienced before, especially if they did not attend school regularly in the past or if their school in their home country had severely limited resources. Teachers in shelters should help students to understand the rules, norms, practices and expectations of US schools. Students who do not learn how to act appropriately may be labelled negatively and be removed from the classroom once they transition to a local school. It is therefore important to teach positive behaviours from the outset. Providing individual or small group classroom orientations led by a teacher's assistant or other support staff that take place outside the main classroom can be beneficial in welcoming new students and helping them adjust while avoiding the scenario in which, with arrivals of new children occurring many times per week, children receive the same orientation multiple times. We also recommend that teachers incorporate daily living skills and US social norms into their teaching, as the students may not have previously been exposed to this information.

Assessment and learning

Assessments for a student in a shelter should focus on the strengths and abilities of the student in his/her native language, rather than highlight knowledge gaps or lack of English language skills. These assessments should be thoughtfully designed to capture all the necessary information. We recommend that assessments are administered by a qualified educator who has the resources and training to appropriately identify a student's needs. An interpreter may be necessary to properly assess some students. Furthermore, shelters should avoid offering self-guided instruction unless the student completes the shelter's standard curriculum or is academically advanced. In these cases, distance learning programmes that allow students to gain secondary school

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credits are recommended, provided the coursework is overseen by a shelter teacher. For students with limited English or literacy skills, online language learning platforms and audio learning tools can reinforce what they learn in the classroom.

Partnerships

Some shelters have explored establishing partnerships with their local school districts to assist with the provision of educational services to unaccompanied children.⁴ These partnerships can expand access to qualified teachers, special education services and experienced evaluators of educational needs and disabilities. Partnerships with school districts may also offer students who stay for an extended period in a shelter access to enhanced curricula and the opportunity to obtain credit for the classes they pass. This increases the likelihood that they will complete the secondary school course requirements before they reach the upper age limit to obtain a secondary school diploma (age 21 in most US states). Partnerships with local school districts may also increase general monitoring of educational programming in shelters and help to ensure that it aligns with state requirements. Given that local school districts are not obliged to educate students in shelters and do not receive state funding to do so, we recommend that HHS/ORR provides financial support to boost and sustain this collaboration.

Local school districts

The full range of professionals who are involved in education for unaccompanied children should advocate for the quick and fair enrolment of students in local schools once they have left shelters. Once enrolled, we recommend that an orientation is provided and that the student is assessed in order to properly determine class placement and necessary support services. Shelter teachers can support these efforts by sending detailed educational records and recommendations for specific services or an Individualized Education Plan with children when they leave the shelter. Caregivers should be instructed to bring this paperwork both when

they enrol the child and for the teacher on the child's first day at school. Additionally, schools must adhere to guidance issued by the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights⁵ and ensure that documents are translated and interpreters are offered for sponsoring guardians with limited English proficiency so that they can actively engage in their child's education. Lastly, we recommend that educators and other service providers continue to seek new strategies for successful outcomes and advocate for fair treatment for all unaccompanied children in their communities.

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1. A child under the age of eighteen who arrives at the US border without lawful immigration status or a parent or legal guardian to provide care and physical custody is considered an unaccompanied child.
2. In the US, public schools are grouped into school districts, which are governed by school boards. Each district is an independent special-purpose government, which operates under the guidelines of the US federal government, each US state government, and its local school board.
3. Office of Refugee Resettlement (2015) *ORR Guide: Children Entering the United States Unaccompanied* bit.ly/ORRguide-UAC-2015
4. Ho S (2018) 'US school districts weigh duty to youth migrant shelters' bit.ly/BostonNews-US-schools-districts-shelters
5. US Department of Education (2018) *Schools' Civil Rights Obligations to English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents* www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/ellresources