

# Mentoring for resettled youth

Lauren Markham

**The resettlement experience often pits high expectations against harsh realities. The greatest pressure to 'succeed' in this new world is often shouldered by the younger generation but one-to-one mentoring by community volunteers can support them in a variety of ways.**

What does success look like for newly resettled refugees? While exact expectations differ from country to country, self-sufficiency is the main goal, and the path to self-sufficiency must happen fast – often inordinately so. In the US, direct services provided by resettlement agencies generally last four to six months but can last as little as one month. Government aid runs out after eight months. This timeline for achieving self-sufficiency is short at best.

For school-aged youth, the primary channel for success is school. Indeed, parents often count the school system as one of the primary factors in their choice to resettle their families. Youth, with their greater facility for language acquisition and their daily immersion in the resettlement culture, are relied upon for the family's navigation of the new cultural landscape (translating at doctors' appointments, negotiating landlord disputes, translating at parent-teacher meetings and writing cheques for the monthly expenses, for example) and are the hope upon which the family's future success is pinned. It goes without saying that, though understandable, this is a significant set of pressures placed on youth.

Success in school does not come easily. Refugee youth arrive with a myriad of challenges including a history of interrupted or little formal education, limited literacy skills, past trauma, gaps in understanding about the school regulations and expectations in their new country, and parents with a limited capacity to help with school and homework. Students arrive far behind and, without the proper support structures, can fall further and further behind. Schools may not have systems specifically designed for students who have suffered trauma or proper structures to support newcomers, while teachers may not be trained to meet diverse learning needs.

School-aged refugee youth in the resettlement context have three main goals:

- **Social integration and inclusion:** Whether it is a sense of belonging in a maths class or the soccer team or as a member in a violent gang, it is the immediate sense of belonging, of mattering, that rules much decision making. If their energies are not properly channelled, newly arrived refugee youth can seek and find both belonging and achievement in activities, groups and

or places that jeopardise both their safety and their futures.

- **Language development:** Acquiring a new language is difficult, particularly for students who speak their native language at home and with their friends. Students need additional support – often one-to-one – and the incentive to practise outside the classroom.
- **Academic achievement:** Academic achievement is important not only for practical reasons but also for psychological health.



Refugee Transitions tutor, Zack, teaches map-reading skills to a student from Burma at the annual Refugee Transitions summer camp.

## Supporting newcomer youth

The agency Refugee Transitions based in San Francisco, California, has a model for working with newcomer youth and adults that matches community volunteers – one-to-one or sometimes in pairs and small groups – with newly arrived refugee youth. Working with the student for a minimum of two to four hours per week for a period of at least nine months, the volunteer tutor/mentor goes to the student's home and/or school every week to practise English, help with homework and catching up on essential skills, work with parents on school engagement and, above all, make students feel successful and supported. Resettled families gain a trusted bridge to the outside world, someone with the key to the puzzle-like world they must now navigate, while students have gone on to improve their grades and their English, graduate from high school and pursue higher degrees and/or get jobs to support their families.

Using community volunteers offers a promising practice for supporting resettled youth but is not simple. Any such mentoring system requires not only the usual commitments to training, screening, matching etc but also a well-articulated and enforced mission of exchange and support (rather than a top-down model of 'helping') and a clearly agreed scope and length of commitment by the volunteer. Refugees have already undergone a great deal of transition and adding another transient figure is not useful.

Lauren Markham [laurenmarkham@oaklandinternational.org](mailto:laurenmarkham@oaklandinternational.org) is Community Programs Specialist at the Oakland Unified School District in California. She previously worked on resettlement for Refugee Transitions and the International Rescue Committee.