

THE FIVE ATTRIBUTES OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS

Issue 10 Resources What's New

September 28, 2016



Students across the globe need effective schools. Sure, the context of schooling will impact attributes that contribute to effectiveness in specific schools. But at the same time, there are attributes that contribute to effectiveness across schooling contexts. If we understand the attributes of effectiveness, we can observe which attributes exist at successful schools.

There are five common attributes that make up an effective school.

Leadership

The first attribute is quality leadership. Students perform better when the principal and school board members provide strong leadership. Effective leaders are visible, can successfully convey the school's goals and visions, collaborate with teachers to enhance their skills, and are involved in the discovery of and solutions to problems.

High Expectations

The second attribute is having high expectations of students as well as teachers. High expectations of students have repeatedly been shown to have a positive impact on student performance. Students are somewhat dependent on the expectations placed on them during this period of their lives, as they are still shaping their personal sense of ability and esteem. Teachers who are expected to teach at high levels of effectiveness can reach the level of expectations, particularly when teacher evaluations and professional development are geared toward improving instructional quality.

Ongoing Evaluation

The third attribute of a successful school is the ongoing screening of student performance and development. Schools should use assessment data to compare their students with others from across the country. Effective use of assessment data allows schools to identify problematic areas of learning at the classroom and school levels, so that teachers can generate solutions to address the problems.

Goals and Direction

The fourth attribute of a successful school is the existence of goals and direction, According to research, the successful school principal actively constructs goals and then effectively communicates them to appropriate individuals (e.g., students, teachers, and the community at large). School principals must also be open and willing to incorporate innovation into goals for school processes and practices. So it's important to invite input from all stakeholders in the process of developing school goals. Student performance has been shown to improve in schools where the entire school community works toward goals that are communicated and shared among all in the learning environment.

Secure and Organized

The fifth and final attribute of a successful school is the extent to which the school is secure and organized. For maximum learning to occur, students need to feel secure. Respect is a quality that is promoted and is a fundamental aspect of an effective and safe school. Successful schools also have a number of trained staff and programs, such as social workers, who work with difficult or troubled students before situations get out of hand.

Apart from the five attributes of a successful school already mentioned, the size of the school seems to be an attribute in the school's effectiveness. Research has found that the smaller the school, the better students perform, especially in the case of older students. This is the rationale behind the concept of schools-within-schools. Students in smaller learning environments feel more connected to their peers and teachers, pass classes more often, and are more likely to go to college. Schools-within-schools involve creative use of the same teaching workforce to provide additional opportunities for learning for smaller groups of students or specialized teaching to students who require extra attention.

This environment could be created in the form of divided streams for mathematics education. Students who want to pursue studies in the humanities would need a mathematical education grounded in statistics and graphical representation, because this focus will be more relevant and prevalent during their postsecondary education career.

Students who intend to pursue a career in engineering or applied physics, for example, would have completely different needs, such as a greater focus on calculus and highly theoretical mathematical concepts like number theory. Creating schools-within-schools for these students would have lasting and measurable benefits for them, as well as benefits for the teacher, who could teach smaller groups of students and offer greater individual attention to student queries and difficulties.

A number of school districts view preschool education as an attribute that will influence overall effectiveness across all schools located within the district. Evidence suggests that children with preschool experiences fare better academically and socially as they enter kindergarten and beyond. Experiences in literacy and numeracy among early learners not only prepare preschoolers for a kindergarten curriculum that has heightened expectations of prior knowledge, but also help identify early learners who need additional support to ensure they have positive learning experiences later.

Additional attributes that influence effective schools include time to learn, teacher quality, and parental trust. Research supports the view that the more time a student spends learning, and the more efficiently that time is used, the higher their achievement. Schools that find creative ways to extend learning time will likely be more effective. Furthermore, schools with high-quality teachers also tend to be more effective.

Schools able to hire teachers from high-quality teacher education programs are more likely to be effective. But school effectiveness can also be influenced by the frequency, relevancy, and quality of the teacher professional development offered by the school or school district. Teachers who haven't had the opportunity to attend prestigious teacher education colleges still have several opportunities to develop after embarking on their professional career. Support for these initiatives at a school or school district level tends to improve overall teacher quality, regardless of their college of origin.

Trust and parental participation are also features of a successful school. Trust between all parties of the school community is vital for enhancing the school's effectiveness because it supports the prospect that parents and teachers believe in each other's motives and actions. Parental participation is also important because it sends the message to ^{[[SEP]]}students that the adults in their lives—both teachers and parents—believe ^{[[SEP]]}in the importance of education and are willing to make time to support ^{[[SEP]]}students' educational experiences and efforts.

How well does your school embody the five attributes of a successful school?

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BOMB SCARE: HOAX OR REAL DANGER?

Issue 10 Resources What's New

September 28, 2016



School leaders grapple with reactions to bomb threats

When school officials received a bomb threat at Massachusetts' Medford High School in February, they leapt to action. Well-rehearsed protocols included an assessment of the threat's credibility, a search of the building, and consultations with local law enforcement.

In the end, judging the threat a likely hoax, officials continued classes and ended the school day normally, albeit with heightened vigilance. Learning was not disrupted, and many in the community were unaware anything was amiss until parents received an automated telephone call from the school that evening.

Yet, the incident did not pass without comment. In the days that followed, school officials received an earful from some parents, who sharply criticized the district for waiting too long to make them aware that their children had been under a threat.

"Some parents," admits Superintendent Roy Belson, "were unhappy they weren't informed earlier."

Under the circumstances, such criticism was a relatively small price for the district to pay. Although nearly all bomb threats are a false alarm, such incidents exact a price: The potential for serious injury to students and staff demands a diligent response, which means the work of administrators and key staff is immediately disrupted.

If the threat is deemed serious enough, the school may be evacuated at the cost of lost instructional time and community panic.

There can be a hefty financial cost, as well, if police and other emergency services are deployed, and in some states, lost classroom time can impact state funding.

Earlier this year, when the Los Angeles school system closed its campuses in response to a threat of attack by gunmen and explosives, one estimate of the cost to the district and police department topped \$29 million. Even for a small district, the deployment of police and a bomb squad in response to a threat can cost a community thousands of dollars.

All of this underscores the need to be well prepared for a bomb threat—particularly as the number of threats aimed at schools is on the rise. In the first four months of the 2015-16 school year, the Educator's School Safety Network (ESSN), a non-profit group focusing on school safety training, identified more than 740 bomb threats aimed at schools, a 143 percent increase over the same period three years ago.

"This is something that has been under the radar for quite some time, but now there's been this really exponential increase in some states," says Amy Klinger, ESSN's director of programs. "In Massachusetts, we've had such a dramatic rise ... we're averaging 10 to 11 bomb threats a day."

There is, however, some good news on this front. School officials are increasingly diligent about planning and training for safety threats, and many are handling bomb threats with growing competence. "These threats have to be taken seriously, but if there's one thing we've learned, we don't have to totally disrupt what's going on in schools," says Mo Canady, executive director of the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO).

Getting ready

Responding appropriately—judging the credibility of a threat, ensuring the safety of students, and not allowing a false threat to disrupt the school day—is well within the capability of any school district, Canady says. It simply requires a well-planned and well-rehearsed set of procedures. "It's all about preparation," he says.

The protocols for handling a threat already should exist as part of a district's emergency management plan. Hopefully, it was developed in partnership with local law enforcement and incorporates research and recommendations available from the FBI, Secret Service, and numerous school safety organizations across the nation.

A more likely failing, if one exists, is that these plans are gathering dust on a shelf, Canady says. Schools often are diligent about fire and tornado drills—and, more recently, about dealing with an armed intruder. However, bomb threats aren't always given the attention they deserve. "One of the mistakes that is seen too often is a school working hard to write and develop a really good safety plan, but they never practice the components of it," he says.

That oversight can lead to unnecessary disruptions to the school day when a threat is received—and can put students at risk even during a hoax, says Ken Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services.

He tells the story of a "less seasoned" principal who received a bomb threat and rushed to evacuate the school before determining if the threat was credible. During the evacuation, an unattended autistic child

wandered down the road. Thankfully, the student was found—but school officials and parents didn't know his whereabouts for some time.

Such missteps are less likely if each school has a threat assessment team to determine the appropriate response to a threat, Trump says. Years of experience have allowed school safety experts to develop solid criteria for determining a threat's credibility. A vague threat scrawled on a restroom wall, for example, is not as alarming as a phone call with an adult voice on the other end of the line. A vague threat is less worrisome than one that cites specifics about the school, an individual, or a motive for the threat.

A threat assessment can be completed relatively quickly and with some confidence, particularly if school officials stay in close contact with police and district officials, Belson says. As part of Medford's safety protocols, school leaders go a step farther than most: They stay in touch with police and key community leaders on a weekly basis to review potential problems in the community.

"We want to know what's going on in our environment," he says. "Is there something festering out there in the community? Are there angry people or angry kids who might be talking about violence?"

Don't overreact

During its bomb scare, Medford High School officials followed the district's crisis management protocols and handled the incident efficiently, Belson says. The threat was delivered via an automated phone message—and it lacked any details. A call to the police for their input revealed that other districts had received a similar call. All of this strongly suggested the threat was a hoax.

With the building secured, school personnel, trained for the task, conducted a visual search of the campus and reviewed security camera footage, while students were kept in classrooms with a minimum of fuss, he says. Ultimately, school leaders felt confident the school day could continue safely.

"Our basic premise," Belson says, "is to keep these situations as normal as possible and try not to excite people or create any kind of chaos."

This low-key approach not only minimizes any disruption to the school day, it also defeats a major incentive of most threat-makers: to disrupt learning and upset the community, say school safety experts. Mitigating the visible impact of a threat also goes a long way toward discouraging repeated threats or copycat attempts.

Yet, when weighing an evacuation, school officials also keep in mind another, more sobering reason for caution: Taking students out of a secure building puts them outdoors—where a sniper or car bomb could await. It's not a baseless concern, Canady says. In 1998, an 11-year-old assailant set off a fire alarm in a Jonesboro, Arkansas, middle school and then waited in ambush outside with his teenage accomplice and a cache of firearms. Four students and a teacher were killed as they exited the building.

"There are a lot of things that can go wrong with an evacuation," he says. "It's completely necessary in some situations, but there are situations when you should just continue with classes ... there has to be some thought given to the situation."

It's not clear that all school officials are prepared to make this decision. Approximately 30 percent of bomb threats studied recently by Trump ended in schools being evacuated.

Another 10 percent resulted in the school's closure that day or the next.

That's not to say all those decisions were a mistake, but, from Trump's observations, at least some appeared to be made "in a knee-jerk manner, unnecessarily or prematurely, because school administrators were responding to the pressures of the crisis or community anxiety but not on the actual credibility of the threat."

If school leaders are going to make this tough call, they need to ensure administrators have the training and necessary planning to evacuate students safely, he says. There should be steps in place to check the school grounds before moving students out of the building, and there needs to be a secure location for students to go.

Depending on circumstances, such as the age of children or the distance to a secure location, it might be appropriate to arrange for buses to pick up students rather than have them walk. Coordination with police and other emergency responders also should be well planned and implemented with speed and efficiency.

Community reaction

As school officials scramble to deal with the threat itself, they also should be prepared to address the reaction of parents and the media when news of the crisis reaches the community—particularly if that news leaks prematurely.

It can greatly complicate the work of staff and emergency responders if the school office telephone lines are inundated with calls, or parents show up to take their children out of school.

A district's crisis communication plan should guide school personnel on when to make an announcement of the incident. However, it's important for personnel to be ready to act expediently—through the traditional media, automated phone calls, and social media—to get accurate information to the community.

If an announcement must be made while the incident is still under way, "one thing that should be communicated is that the school is the worst place for parents to come to," Canady says. "By doing so, they can block emergency traffic and unintentionally interfere with emergency responders."

Once the immediate crisis is resolved, school officials may find their decisions criticized. Some parents will be convinced that continuing school despite the threat has put their children at unnecessary risk; others may criticize an evacuation as hasty and encouraging threat-makers.

Still others may criticize the school for denying parents access to the school to remove their children.

Such second-guessing made national headlines earlier this year, when nearly identical threats of a school attack—and explosives already planted—were emailed to school officials in New York City and Los Angeles.

But while New York City officials quickly concluded the threat was a hoax and continued classes, Los Angeles officials decided to err on the side of caution and closed down the district's 900 schools for a day.

Officials in both cities stood by their decisions, but some questioned Los Angeles' position, including New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton, who called LA's decision a "significant overreaction."

Such Monday morning quarterbacking goes with the territory, says ESSN's Klinger. All school officials can do in these situations is make the best decision they can and later "look people in the eye and say, 'Here's why we chose this option, why it made the most sense. It's not about flipping a coin. It's a very deliberate decision based on a number of factors.'"

A savvy school leadership team also can use public concerns as an opportunity to engage parents and the community in a post-mortem of the district's actions.

That's exactly what the Medford schools did. As it happened, when the district's latest threat was deemed a hoax, the school principal decided to wait to inform parents of the incident until the evening, when they'd be home to receive an automated phone call from the district. That seemed reasonable to school officials at the time, but parents saw it differently, with some quick to complain that they should have been notified immediately.

Rather than simply get defensive, school officials conducted a public forum to hear the views of parents, Belson says. But, at the meeting, school administrators also firmly laid out their stance—that their first responsibility is to deal with the threat to students, and that they didn't want any distractions from that duty.

"We said we wouldn't compromise on safety, but we did agree that—once we had stabilized the situation—we could respect the wishes of those who wanted to know sooner," he says. "Every community has its own threshold, and you need to understand what the community expects of you. Then you've got to think collectively."

Almost all bomb threats are hoaxes ... and yet

The vast majority of bomb threats are nothing more than that: an empty threat. Yet, school leaders cannot ignore the reality that there are disturbed individuals in society who are ready to take matters beyond perpetrating a hoax.

There is little information on the actual risk that a bomb threat is real, but a now-outdated 2002 report, still cited by the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, estimates that 5 percent to 10 percent of bomb threats involve real bombs. A review of bomb threats this year by American School Board Journal suggests that, while the number of threats received is climbing, the risk of an actual bomb being involved is significantly lower.

But, as school leaders must understand, there is always some risk. Last spring, two 19-year-olds were arrested after detonating a pipe bomb near an Indiana high school football field, and two Kansas high school students—ages 14 and 15—were arrested for allegedly planning to detonate pipe bombs at school.

A few months earlier, a pipe bomb was found in a dumpster near an Indianapolis elementary school.

The first—and still most deadly—school bombing in U.S. history was in 1927 in Bath Township, Michigan, when a local farmer secretly placed more than 1,000 pounds of explosives in Bath Consolidated School. After the explosion, the farmer drove up to the school and set off a second explosive in his truck.

The two explosions killed 38 elementary schoolchildren and six adults, and injured at least 58 others.

Another serious—and more recent—use of explosives in a U. S. school occurred during the Columbine High School massacre in 1999 that killed 12 and injured more than 20.

In addition to firearms, the two teenage assailants carried a number of pipe bombs and at least two fire bombs, several of which were thrown by the teens as they moved through the campus attacking students and teachers.

Searching a campus

Long before a bomb threat is received, a district's leadership team should ensure that its emergency management plan prepares selected school personnel to conduct a search of a campus under threat.

This search does not mean school employees are moving around boxes or suspicious items, say school safety experts.

It means a visual search for anything out of the ordinary. A review of recommendations offered by school security organizations and law enforcement agencies offers some basic answers to questions school leaders may have, although a school's emergency management protocols should be developed after extensive research and collaboration with local law enforcement.

What are we looking to find?

Most bombs are “of the simple pipe bomb form that is concealed in an ordinary-looking bag or some everyday object,” reports the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Bombs may be hidden inside a backpack. School staff also should be on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary, as well as for suspicious packages, such as those that are oddly shaped, stained, emit a strange odor, or appear overwrapped with tape or string.

Where do we look?

Bombs usually are placed in an easily accessible but out of sight location. Among the strategies recommended by various school security groups:

Start outside the school, as bombs are three times more likely to be found outside than inside a school. Check the grounds and parking lot.

Inside the school, the most likely locations for a bomb are a restroom or a student locker.

Search trash cans, air conditioners, and window and door areas—both inside and outside.

Inspect rooms slowly from floor level to high shelves and ceiling, including air ducts, window tops, and light fixtures.

Look for signs of forced entry.

Watch for objects that are inconsistent with their surroundings.

Search for mailed or delivered packages that, as previously described above, appear suspicious.

What if something is found?

Never touch or move a suspicious object. Report the object immediately, and leave it to appropriate authorities to investigate.

Del Stover is senior editor of America School Board Journal.

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ROOTED IN ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND COMPLIMENTED BY MODERN RESEARCH: FILMS FOR FIRST NATION PARENTS DEVELOPED IN PORT ALBERNI

Aboriginal Education Issue 10 What's New

September 28, 2016



The parenting traditions and wisdom of the Nuu Chah Nulth peoples have been practiced and passed down from time immemorial, from “?iikmuut”. These practices nurtured respectful, capable, responsible and compassionate young people. Colonization and the establishment of residential schools was a horrendous disruption to family life and traditional practices. Today First Nations families are committed to overcoming those harms, and striving towards healing and reawakening their traditions.

A group of First Nation parents and professionals living in the Port Alberni area became aware of the lack of resources for First Nation families who were interested in strengthening, relearning and developing positive parenting skills consistent with their cultural beliefs and values. Producers Kerry Robertson (retired SD 70 teacher) and Juliana McCaig (retired parent educator) had the privilege of working with the group to create the resources they believed First Nation families would want and appreciate. The result is a series of three DVDs, the most recent one aimed at parents of children 11 to 14 years old.



From the DVD, “Parenting Path: Parenting Your Young Teen”
Doug Sam, Tseshah Nation, and his daughter Harlee

“The Parenting Path: Parenting Your Young Teen” is a unique and encouraging resource for parents who are or who will soon be raising young teens. It presents modern families – parents, grandparents, and teens – who talk about the traditional ways of the Nuu Chah Nulth First Nations and how those traditions are shaping their parenting today. The film is true to life; it presents the real challenges of parenting in today’s world, but it is also filled with hope, humour and the joy of teenagers. Current research affirming that the traditional practices remain optimal for the healthy development of young people today is also presented.

A key theme of the film is how First Nation families help their children develop a strong sense of belonging, connection and the deep knowledge that they are loved and valued. Also teachings about “?iisaak” – “respect” for family, for others and for the natural world – are presented throughout the film.

The film also addresses some of the fears and anxieties many First Nation parents have about going into a school to talk with teachers or administrators about their children’s progress or challenges. In a straight-forward manner it acknowledges the past harmful effects of residential schools and the racism parents may have experienced as children. The film gives good examples of how parents can get the support they want so they can advocate for their children.

Other topics presented include setting limits for teens, teaching teens problem solving for everyday needs, and the necessity for parents to take care of themselves so they are better able to take care of their children.



Irene Robinson, Cultural Historian, Tseshaht Nation

The narrators of the film are Irene Robinson, Cultural Historian, Family Support Worker, mother and grandmother, and Dennis Bill, Educator in School District 70 and father. Both Irene and Dennis are members of the Tseshaht First Nation.

See Irene and Dennis talk about the film: <https://vimeo.com/160425895>

“The Parenting Path: Parenting Your Young Teen” is not only a valuable resource for First Nation families, its core messages are applicable to all parents of teens. The film would also be appropriate for PACs, teacher Professional Development, School Trustees, and community groups for its rich presentation of traditional First Nations beliefs and practices. Although it presents traditions and teachings specific to the Nuuchahnulth people, the film has received considerable feedback confirming that the core values resonate with other First Nation peoples across BC and Canada.

Contact juliana.mccaig@gmail.com for more information about “Parenting Your Young Teen.” Parenting Path Group Productions offers two previous films, one for First Nation parents of young children and a documentary about First Nation teens who are pregnant or parenting. Parenting Path Group Productions is a non-profit collaborative. The DVDs cost \$10.00 each.

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO WELCOMING SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN

Issue 10 Resources

September 28, 2016



On November 24, 2015, the federal government announced its plan to welcome 25,000 Syrian newcomers to Canada. As of January 20, 2016, 11,613 Syrian newcomers had arrived in Canada on 44 government-organized flights. There were 5,833 refugee applications finalized, but they had not yet travelled to Canada. There were 14,733 refugee resettlement applications in progress.¹

In preparation, the Ontario government has been working with municipalities to identify provincial resources to support the settlement of the newcomers. Of particular importance will be integration of the new permanent residents into Ontario's education system. ²

By the end of 2016, it is expected that approximately 10,000 new Canadians will resettle in areas such as the GTA, Hamilton, Mississauga, London and Ottawa. In terms of financial assistance, the government of Ontario is investing \$10.5 million over the next two years to deliver support for refugees and organizations that are privately sponsoring them. In addition, the provincial government has already provided \$330,000 to Lifeline Syria, which assists in the recruitment and training of private refugee sponsors. ³

Civil War in Syria

Syria is a country in the Middle East with a population of 22 million. It is very diverse, both ethnically and religiously. Most Syrians are ethnic Arab and will follow the Sunni branch of Islam, however, there are also minorities such as ethnic Kurds, Christian Arabs and some Jewish Arabs. ⁴

The UN reports that more than 10 million people have fled Syria since the civil war began in 2011, most of them women and children.⁵ This represents one of the largest refugee movements in recent history.

A March 2015 report published by the UN estimated that four out of five Syrians were living in poverty. 6

The majority of Syrian newcomers are living in Jordan and Lebanon, the region's two smallest countries, which are under enormous stress. An increasing number of refugees are fleeing across the border into Turkey, creating considerable tensions and overwhelming host communities. 7

School age children from Syria may have had years of lost or interrupted schooling. The Syrian children who have attended school in asylum countries may have been targets of bullying, violence and prejudice.⁸ Children who were born in refugee camps may have health issues, poor nutrition, limited food and inadequate hygiene for prolonged periods of time.

Syrian life centres around family life, with particular value placed on children. The separation of children into the education system, even only during the day, may be extremely difficult for some children and parents.

Culture Shock in Young Refugee Children

A publication by Childminding Monitor Advisory & Support ("CMAS") entitled "Caring for Syrian Refugee Children: A Program Guide for Welcoming Young Children and Their Families" reviews the impact of the refugee experience on children.

The CMAS Guide indicates that entering a new culture is often very traumatic for young children.⁹ Research indicates that emotional regression is very common.

"Children's emotional expression may be quite volatile or they may experience extreme anxiety when separating from their parent. The child may use physical force or act aggressively when fearful. Alternatively, they may become very apathetic even when strongly provoked. They may easily tune out adults who try to guide their behaviour."¹⁰

The research indicates that in the early stages of culture shock, children are often unable to play and may be disinterested in the play of others. From an intellectual perspective, a child may have weak concentration and become easily frustrated. Secondly, a child may become dependent on one caregiver and seem unable to build a relationship with others.¹¹ The research indicates that the children may be fearful, especially in the early stages of settlement.

The CMAS Guide also confirms that a child's self-esteem is impacted by culture shock. "This may decrease their confidence to try new things. They may look for more assistance and reassurance from adults about how to play with things. Children who feel insecure may also need extra support."¹²

The research indicates that because many Syrian children have witnessed violence or were victims of violence, they may have some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.¹³ The CMAS Guide states that traumatized children may be unresponsive and almost catatonic and may not have words to express their trauma. "Children who are 'wooden' and despondent are more at-risk than those who cling to their parent and cry for attention. Traumatized children may refuse touch or other comfort, even from family members."¹⁴

The CMAS Guide indicates that education was highly valued in Syria, and many families may become anxious for their children to succeed in school. In light of interruptions to the schooling of most Syrian

children caused by the war, it is anticipated that many Syrian school age children may be at an increased risk for failure.¹⁵ The CMAS Guide states:

“They may have difficulty focussing, listening and absorbing information, even in their home language. They may show outward signs of understanding (e.g., smiling, head nodding) but they may not be absorbing anything.”¹⁶

Creating a Safe and Welcoming Environment

Educators will play a significant role in the newcomer’s transition from refugees to permanent residents. Under the Education Act, a principal has a duty to maintain proper order and discipline in the school¹⁷. The principal also has a duty to provide for the supervision of pupils during the school day.¹⁸

School board policies on equity and inclusive education are designed to foster a positive school climate that is free from discriminatory or harassing behaviour.

A positive and inclusive school climate is one where all members of the school community, including the new Syrian children, feel safe, included, welcomed and accepted.

Refugee children coming into Ontario schools face a range of significant challenges, such as a language barrier, anxiety issues and dramatic cultural and social differences. Their new school will be completely foreign to them and, as they must adapt, so must the other students. School administration and school staff should monitor the attitudes and behaviours of other students to ensure that the new students are not the subject of bullying, harassment or xenophobia. Some students may make inappropriate comments that while not typically bullying, can be extremely detrimental to the new student’s development (i.e. asking the child if any member of their family has died or what the child has seen in their home country). In this regard, it is important for school leaders and teachers to ensure that the new students feel welcome, included and accepted and encourage empathy and compassion for these new Canadians.

Immunization and Health Concerns

Each student is required to be immunized against certain designated diseases in accordance with the Immunization of School Pupils Act. Parents are expected to ensure that their children are immunized before being admitted to school, unless an exemption for medical, religious, or conscientious reasons applies.¹⁹ The principal has a duty to give assiduous attention to the health and comfort of students under his/her care.²⁰

The immunization of newcomers can be challenging due to the lack of medical records, language barriers in explaining medical history, and a home country’s different vaccination schedule.²¹ Getting a newcomer’s immunizations up-to-date is critically important as a Canadian study showed that one third of new immigrants/refugees, particularly women, are susceptible to vaccine preventable diseases, such as measles, mumps, or rubella. All refugees will receive medical check-ups and be screened for infectious diseases before they arrive, but vaccinations will have to be completed after they relocate.²² The Canadian Collaboration for Immigrant and Refugee Health has emphasized that vaccination will be a key health initiative and they are expected to vaccinate widely as soon as the refugees begin arriving.

The World Health Organization says that children who have been living in refugee camps outside Syria are considered to be a risk for chronic disease and “psychosocial and violence-related illness” due to the lack of medicine and poor conditions in some camps.²³ It is expected that children will require health services as they have likely missed basic check-ups and vaccinations during the war in Syria and while living in refugee camps.

Educators should follow their normal process regarding immunizations. Public health agencies across Ontario are working closely with other health care providers to ensure they can support the Syrian newcomers the way they support all their patients. The Ministry of Health is developing a registry of health care providers who are able to provide health care to the Syrian newcomers. In this regard, there is a multi-lingual, 24/7 Refugee HealthLine (1-866-286-4770) to connect refugees to health care providers for transitional health care and services.

Special Education Issues

Some students have special needs that require support beyond those ordinarily received in a school setting. In Ontario, students who have behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities, may have educational needs that cannot be met through regular instructional and assessment practices. These needs may be met through accommodations and/or an educational program that is modified above or below the age-appropriate grade level expectations for a particular subject or course.

The Education Act requires school boards to provide special education programs and services for its exceptional students. Specific procedures for the identification and placement of exceptional pupils are set out in Regulation 181/98. Under the legislation, school boards are required to develop an Individual Education Plan (“IEP”) for every identified student. School boards also have the discretion to develop an IEP for students who have not been formally identified as exceptional but who are receiving special education programs and services.

School-age children coming from Syria have usually had many years of lost or interrupted schooling. The high level of stress and trauma suffered by these children could have long-term consequences and could have an impact on their learning skills.²⁴

In light of the cultural shock these children have gone through, they may have weak concentration, and difficulty focussing, listening and absorbing information. Researchers indicate that another sign of cultural shock is extreme anxiety. In certain cases, separating from a parent may be an intense and traumatic experience.²⁵

Many of the Syrian students may have special needs that require supports beyond those ordinarily received in the school setting. In this regard, educators will need to undertake a thorough assessment of the student’s strengths and needs that affect their ability to learn. Where appropriate, an IEP will be prepared describing a special education program and/or services required by a particular student. In some cases, a student’s program will include, in part or in whole, expectations derived from an alternative program, such as social skills, communication or behaviour management.

The school leader will work in concert with school board personnel, such as speech and language pathologists, educational assistants, child and youth workers and/or social workers to provide supports required for relevant children. The principal will also meet with parents or guardians to inform them

about the services, accommodations and programs that are available based on the individual needs of their children.

In communicating with parents about school services, principals may suggest that a family member or friend attend the meeting to assist as an interpreter. It is recommended that the school leader try not to overwhelm the parents with too much paperwork and enrollment information.

Welcoming Refugee Families

After the trauma of fleeing their home country, it is important that Syrian families feel that the school is a safe and welcoming environment. Practical steps that school leaders can take to reduce stress and help ease the difficult transition for families are as follows:

Ensure all staff have the information they need on what to expect regarding these new Canadians. Provide information to the staff on culture shock, its stages and strategies to address it.

Assign one staff member to take the lead with the family.

Identify strategies for communicating with parents. Take the time to learn some words in Arabic or other languages spoken by the Syrian refugees in the program, to support early communication with parents and children.

Have translated materials available to parents, written in simple English or with visuals.

Find out basic information about the child but avoid asking too many questions or being intrusive about their past.

Share simple information on the child's activities, mood and achievements. Match your language to that of the family. Keep your speech simple and speak slower for parents with less English.²⁶

On December 10, 2015, when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau greeted the first group of Syrians who arrived in Canada, he spoke eloquently about the values of Canadians. The Prime Minister said, "This is something that we are able to do in this country because we define a Canadian not by a skin colour or a language or a religion or a background, but by a shared set of values, aspirations, hopes and dreams that not just Canadians but people around the world share."²⁷

Consistent with these values and aspirations, our schools are committed to working diligently to welcome Syrian refugee families to Canada and help them settle successfully. Children coming from Syria as refugees at this time will have experienced traumatic events that will affect them in many different ways. School boards should provide their administrators, teachers and school staff with the knowledge and facts they will need to better understand and respond to the unique experiences and needs of these new Canadians.

1 Government of Canada, "#Welcome Refugees".

2 Ontario Government, "Ontario Preparing to Welcome Syrian Refugees", November 24, 2015.

3Ibid.

4 CMAS, "Caring for Syrian Refugee Children (2015)" at page 5 ["Caring"], p. 5.

5 Caring, at p. 7.

6Ibid.

7 Caring, at p. 9.

8Ibid.

9 Caring, at p. 15.

10Ibid.

11Ibid.

12 Caring, at p. 16.

13Ibid.

14Ibid.

15 Caring, at p. 11.

16Ibid.

17 R.S.O. 1990, c. E2, section 265(1)(a).

18 R.R.O. 1990, Regulation 298, section 11(3)(e).

19 R.S.O. 1990, c. I.1.

20 R.S.O. 1990, c. E2, section 265(1)(j).

21 Public Health Agency of Canada, "Canadian Immunization Guide" (September 4, 2013).

22 CTV News, "What kinds of health-care needs will Syrian refugees have?" (November 24, 2015).

23Ibid.

24 Caring, at p. 9.

25 Caring, at p. 17.

26 Caring, at p. 19-20.

27 New York Times, The Editorial Board, "Canada's Warm Embrace of Refugees" (December 11, 2015).

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