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## Orientation for students

It's often a good idea to have the student start school the day after the initial assessment so that there is time to provide some information for teachers before they meet their new students. The following day, the newcomer might spend an hour with a student guide who provides a tour of the school and introduces the newcomer to key personnel. The student guide can also be an important resource during the next few weeks as the newcomer settles in.



### Student Guides

Student guides need training for their role in welcoming newcomers and introducing them to the school. For example, as part of the first training session, they can discuss how they might feel during their first few days of school in a new country. Some of the guides may be newcomers who have already successfully made the adjustment and can draw on their own experiences to help others. These students may also be able to help newcomers in their own languages. Most student guides and newcomers will be more comfortable with someone of the same sex and close to their own age.

The duties of student guides may include taking newcomers on a guided tour of the school as well as introducing them to their new teachers. In middle and secondary schools, student guides can explain how to read the timetable and escort newcomers to each class for the first full cycle, helping them with routines such as getting a locker and using a combination lock, getting a bus pass, using the cafeteria or lunch room, and signing up for an extracurricular activity.

In some school districts, many immigrant families arrive during the school holidays. This provides an ideal opportunity to set up reception and orientation programs for students before the start of the new school year. In Ontario, the province that receives more than 50% of Canada's immigrants, several newcomer orientation programs for students aged 11 and up have been established with funding from the federal government department responsible for immigration and settlement. These programs operate the week before the start of school. Teachers and student mentors provide an in-depth orientation to the school system and help newcomers feel confident as they prepare for this major transition in their lives. The student mentors are also recent newcomers who speak community languages and have successfully made the transition a year or two earlier.

## **Orientation for parents**

Like their children, newcomer parents need basic orientation at the very beginning and ongoing orientation over a more extended period of time. It can be very helpful to have some print or online material in various languages giving basic information about the admissions process, the school day, required equipment and clothing, and contact information. School districts can develop a template that each school can adapt with information that is specific to the school, such as the daily timetable, the name of the principal and the child's teacher, and the name of the language teacher or community worker who may be available to help the student. This material can be given to the parents at the end of the initial interview, along with a basic explanation from the interpreter.

Orientation videos can be produced with the participation of students, parents, and teachers, can be equally helpful. Newcomer parents and students who have been in the country a year or two often have keen insights into the immediate and ongoing challenges facing newcomers, and can suggest the kind of information and advice that would be most helpful. They can also provide the voice-over narrative for different language versions of the video.

Newcomer parents can also receive valuable support from parent networks that draw on resources within the immigrant community.

### **How to set up a parent network**

At the beginning of the school year, hold a special meeting with parents. Make special efforts to reach out to parents who speak various languages or who have immigrated from other countries.

Invite parents to volunteer their support for other parents who are new to the school community. Those who speak a community language will be especially helpful to newcomer parents from other countries or who speak a language other than the language of the school. Discuss with the volunteers the kind of help that newcomers most often need, drawing on the experience of the group.

When a new family arrives, give the parents the name and contact information of a parent volunteer who can help them. As far as possible, match immigrant parents with someone who speaks their language or is from the same country.

The parent volunteers may also be willing to facilitate ongoing communication: for example, by phoning to invite newcomer parents to meetings and perhaps offer to accompany them to meetings and special events at the school. (But remember: it's not a good idea to ask parents to interpret or translate private or sensitive information for their neighbours.)

At the end of the year, hold a special celebration for the volunteers and all the families who have arrived during the year. Perhaps some of this year's newcomers will be ready to volunteer for the parent network next year.

It can also be very helpful to hold special meetings with newcomer parents. These meetings can specifically address the concerns of immigrant parents, using interpreters, school-community workers, and volunteers to communicate with the parents in their own languages. For example, a meeting on "Parenting in a New Culture" would be of interest to many immigrant parents.