



SPRING 2009 SPOTLIGHT:

The Refugee School Impact Grant: Facilitating the Integration of Refugee Children into American Schools

In Federal Fiscal Year 2008, 24% of all refugees¹ resettled by the United States were school-aged children between the ages of 5 and 18 years.² The need to provide services to this population is tremendous as many face significant challenges adapting to American schools, whether academically, culturally, or psychosocially.³ Teachers and school personnel do their best to accommodate refugee students, but often without much preparation as refugees are typically resettled with little advance notice. Refugee parents support their children to the best of their ability, but cultural, linguistic, and other barriers may prevent them from being involved in their children's education in the way that teachers expect them to be.⁴

Overview of the Refugee School Impact Grant (RSIG)

Recognizing that schools serve a key role in the integration of refugee students and their families into American society, the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) created the Refugee School Impact Grant (RSIG) in 1998. The purpose of the grant is to provide support to local school systems that are affected by significant numbers of refugee children. The Office of Refugee Resettlement's Refugee School Impact Grant is intended for the following activities: after-school programs that focus on helping students understand and complete assignments; after-school/summer programs that support remedial work or promote school readiness; programs that encourage high school completion and full participation in school activities; parental involvement programs; interpreter services for parent/teacher meetings and conferences; and bilingual/bicultural counselors and aides.

The Refugee School Impact Grant is a 15 million dollar program with 35 grantees. The grantees are agencies of state governments who are responsible for the refugee program or Wilson-Fish agencies, which have state-wide responsibility for the resettlement program instead of the state. Each grantee is encouraged to collaborate with their state's Department of Education to implement their RSIG program. In some cases, the grant funding is distributed to the state's Department of Education, which then sub-grants the funding to local school districts. Other grantees provide sub-grants to local refugee resettlement agencies to support the local schools in their efforts to meet the needs of refugee students.

Thus, at the local level, RSIG programs operate out of both schools and refugee resettlement agencies. In some states, the sub-grantees are all school districts; in other states, the sub-grantees are all refugee resettlement agencies; and some states sub-grant to both entities. States may only have one sub-grantee, such as New Mexico, whereas others have as many as ten sub-grantees, such as California. Some grantees, Departments of Education, or contracted agencies are very involved with coordinating the work of and facilitating information-sharing among their sub-grantees. Examples of this type of coordination include the [Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants](#), the [Indiana Department of Education](#), and [School's Out Washington](#). New York's [Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance](#) even developed a curriculum for their sub-grantees to use, so there is a degree of consistency among the programs throughout the state.

Refugee School Impact Grant Programs at the Local Level

Though each state manages the program differently, the services provided to refugee students, their parents, and school personnel are relatively similar at the local level throughout the country. There are several components of programming that are used by the local grantees:

- **Home/School Liaisons** – Programs use what they call “home/school liaisons” or “cultural brokers,” to facilitate communication between the students, their parents, and school personnel. Typically, programs hire former refugees for these positions so they can bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps between the home and school. Some RSIG programs using this model are [Refugee Family Services in Georgia](#) and [Rochester City Schools in NY](#).
- **Parent Workshops** – Programs have workshops, orientation sessions, or focus groups for parents to learn about their children’s school. RSIG programs with such workshops include the [Manchester Schools in New Hampshire](#) and the [Boise School District in Idaho](#).
- **Newcomer Programs** – School districts with large numbers of refugee students who have interrupted formal education use the RSIG funds to support Newcomer Programs designed for this population. Two RSIG sub-grantees with large numbers of Burmese students using this model are the [East Allen County Schools](#) and the [Fort Wayne Community Schools](#) in Indiana.
- **Academic Enrichment** – Programs provide academic support through tutoring during or after school, such as [English Express in Colorado](#) and the [Pambazuka Project in Chicago](#).
- **Summer Programs** – RSIG sub-grantees host summer programs for refugee children for academic enrichment and recreational activities. Examples of such RSIG programs include [Lutheran Social Services of Michigan](#) and [Refugee Student Services Program in New Mexico](#).
- **Psychosocial/Mental Health Services** – Programs provide individual and group counseling to help refugee students adjust to their new home and school. For example, [International Kid Success in Colorado](#) and [Refugee Support Services in Texas](#).
- **Professional Development for Teachers and School Personnel** – RSIG sub-grantees provide workshops and training for teachers and school personnel on incoming refugee groups, the impact of the refugee experience on refugee students’ behavior, and more. Two RSIG sub-grantees that do such workshops are the [Rochester City Schools in NY](#) and the [Refugee Student Services Program in New Mexico](#).

BRYCS’ Technical Assistance to Refugee School Impact Grantees

This focus on assisting Refugee School Impact Grantees builds on BRYCS’ ongoing work with refugee and mainstream community agencies that serve refugee children, youth, and families, including the schools. However, the requests for technical assistance from Refugee School Impact Grantees at both the state and local levels have grown tremendously over the past few years. RSIG program managers expressed a need for descriptions of “what works” so they could build upon what had successfully been done in other parts of the country. Furthermore, service providers requested resources, such as parent manuals and school orientation materials, in order to avoid “reinventing the wheel.” In October 2008, in partnership with the Office of Refugee Resettlement, BRYCS formally began providing technical assistance to Refugee School Impact Grantees.

This new technical assistance initiative includes:

- **Consultations** – BRYCS will continue our [usual methods of technical assistance](#), such as phone and email consultations, for questions related to specific students/families, locating resources, program development, etc.
- **Refugee School Impact Grantee Listserv** – BRYCS is working closely with ORR to respond to questions posed on the RSIG listserv (moderated by ORR) and to facilitate information-sharing.
- **Outreach** – Though most of the RSIG programs are generally familiar with BRYCS, we are conducting outreach with as many RSIG programs as possible to describe this new initiative and to learn about the strengths and challenges of each program.
- **Documentation of RSIG Programs** – BRYCS has begun documenting RSIG programs in order to facilitate information-sharing of promising practices and resources and to demonstrate the impact of these programs. These programs are shared through the RSIG listserv and are also available in the BRYCS Clearinghouse online.
- **RSIG Resource Collection** – During conversations with grantees, BRYCS staff are collecting resources that local programs have created and, whenever possible, adding them to the BRYCS Clearinghouse so others can easily search for them by keyword and view them online. For a preliminary list of resources produced by Refugee School Impact Grantees, see [here](#).
- **Toolkit** – BRYCS staff have begun working on a Toolkit for those working with refugee children in the schools, which will include the descriptions of RSIG programs, resources for working with refugee children and their families in the schools, answers to common questions and programmatic challenges, and information on promising or evidence-based practices.
- **Web page** – BRYCS will add a page on our existing Web site that is for RSIG staff and others working with refugee children in the schools.
- **Site Visits** – BRYCS will conduct a limited number of site visits to RSIG programs, in conjunction with ORR monitoring visits, to provide technical assistance on site.

For questions on BRYCS' technical assistance for Refugee School Impact grantees, contact Laura Gardner at info@brycs.org or 1-888-572-6500.

For More Information

The current Refugee School Impact Grant period is five years. The grant period began in Federal Fiscal Year 2005 and the new awarding year will be Federal Fiscal Year 2010. For more information about the RSIG program, contact Olivia Byler at the Office of Refugee Resettlement at Olivia.Byler@ACF.hhs.gov.

For service providers and teachers working with refugee students in areas of the country that are not currently being funded by the RSIG program, stay connected with BRYCS. Most of the lessons learned and resources created for this initiative will be shared on our Web site and accessible to all. Please be sure to sign up for our [monthly email Bulletin Alert](#), if you have not already, to learn about these resources.

¹ For this article, the term "refugee" includes all populations eligible for ORR benefits and services, including refugees, asylees, Cuban-Haitian entrants, Amerasians, victims of trafficking, Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrants, and Lawful Permanent Residents who have held one of these statuses in the past.

² ORR Refugee Arrivals Data System, FY 2008.

³ For a brief overview of the importance of successful school adjustment, see the BRYCS Spotlight article on [Welcoming and Orienting Newcomer Students to U.S. Schools](#)

⁴ For more information on refugee parent involvement, see the BRYCS Spotlight article on [Involving Refugee Parents in their Children's Education](#).