# Older Refugee Youth with Interrupted Schooling in Smaller Communities in Manitoba

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# About The Authors and Contributors

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kimberly Browning has an extensive background working in the K-12, post-secondary, and international education fields for the Government of Manitoba and in the private sector. She received her PhD from the University of Manitoba in 2018. Her research interests include prior learning assessment and recognition, foreign credential recognition, international education policy, and refugee resettlement. She worked as a Research Associate alongside Dr. Ray Silvius at the University of Winnipeg to conduct this project.

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## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Kathleen Vyrauen came to Canada at the age of four, emigrating from Georgetown, Guyana with her family. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Rights and Global Studies from the University of Winnipeg and began her career working with newcomer, immigrant, and refugee communities almost 10 years ago. Kathleen has worked in varying capacities from frontline service delivery to administration and management within the sector, currently as a Project Manager at Immigration Partnership Winnipeg and the Ethnocultural Council of Manitoba – Stronger Together Inc. Kathleen oversees all research activities at the organization, and she coordinates and participates in initiatives related to education and community safety.

Don Boddy began his work with MANSO in March 2017. Before that, he was the Settlement Services Coordinator at the Newcomer's Welcome Centre (Portage Learning and Literacy Centre) in Portage la Prairie. Don has lived in rural Manitoba for more than 30 years and has worked and volunteered in the non-profit/volunteer sector for more than 20 years. Along with his work, he has been an active member of a local refugee sponsorship group that has been involved in bringing five refugee families to his community. Don understands the value of expanding this capacity through building a network of professional peers, organizational partners, and a "constellation of mentors." During the time that Don has been working and walking with Newcomers to Canada, his life has been changed by the gifts of wisdom, courage, and kindness he has received from this work.

# List of Acronyms

**BVOR**    Blended VISA Office-Referred

**CBPR**    Community-Based Participatory Research

**CYRRC**    Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition

**EAL**    English as an Additional Language

**GAR**    Government-Assisted Refugees

**INS**    Intensive Newcomer Support

**IPW**    Immigration Partnership Winnipeg

**IRCC**    Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

**LAL**    Literacy, Academics, and Language

**LIP**    Local Immigration Partnership

**MANSO**    Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations

**NEC**    Newcomer Education Coalition

**PSR**    Privately Sponsored Refugees

**PTSD**    Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

**RAP**    Resettlement Assistance Program

**SIFE**    Students with Interrupted Formal Education

**SPO**    Settlement Provider Organization

**SWIS**    Settlement Workers in Schools

**UNHCR**    United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees

# Executive Summary

Refugee youth are an integral part of our social fabric, and investing in efforts to increase their educational attainment benefits the wider society, as educated populations are better able to contribute to the economic and social growth of a country. Attaining higher education plays a pivotal role in the integration and inclusion of refugees into Canadian society.

As Manitoba continues to accept increasing numbers of refugee families, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of refugees' experiences as they attempt to settle into smaller communities. Research can assist in identifying local awareness of priorities for developing policies, programs, and services to address the ongoing needs of refugee youth with interrupted schooling.

If Manitoba's smaller centres are to provide environments in which refugee youth and their families may flourish, all levels of government, as well as the community itself, must be prepared to support success in education for refugee youth. In order to achieve this goal, the formal education system should be considered within the context of the broader settlement service providing community, and mutual learning and collaboration between the formal education system, including teachers, staff, and administration. Moreover, the education of refugee youth can be considered along what we refer to as the "continuum of settlement, integration, and inclusion" (a term we describe below).

## METHODOLOGY

Using a community-engaged participatory research methodology, this study gathered data from four cohorts that included senior administrators, school personnel (educators), refugee youth, and Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS). Smaller communities were broadly defined as those with a population of 55,000 or less. Data was collected from smaller communities in three geographic regions in Manitoba that had higher concentrations of refugee youth and a federally funded immigration services centre with SWIS. The three regions included Central Plains, Pembina Valley, and Westman.

## FINDINGS

### Pre-Migration Experiences

Many refugees reported that they had had limited or no formal schooling experiences before arriving in Canada. Some participants who had attended school in refugee camps reported that there was overcrowding, and that punishment was used as a form of discipline in the school. Syrian refugee youth interviewed for the study, had been displaced to Lebanon during the civil war and before arriving in Canada. These students did not have positive schooling experiences while in Lebanon and endured stressful situations. Displacement and temporary residence in one or more countries contributed to interrupted and/or irregular education (See Displacement to Lebanon subsection in the Pre-Migration Experiences section for further details).

### Refugee Resettlement and Newcomer Service Provision in Smaller Communities

The impending arrival of newcomers to smaller communities elicited a strong public response, with many local stakeholders joining together to welcome refugees and their families and provide formal and informal settlement supports. These included schools, educational institutions, municipalities, faith-based groups, private businesses, and volunteer

networks such as Build a Village. Social and personal connections, and wider social support networks that later yield practical advantages, are an important community resource for resettled refugees and are vital to successful resettlement. This kind of partnership and collaboration was clearly evident in the approach taken in the local communities.

Settlement efforts in smaller communities are structured in part by the Welcoming Communities model, which involves building community capacity to meet the needs of newcomers, including refugees, along the continuum of settlement, integration, and inclusion. They involve collaboration amongst a diverse range of stakeholders - including government-funded newcomer service provider organizations (SPOs), Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), umbrella groups, and a wider array of agencies and individuals who have an interest in and responsibility to enhancing the well-being of newcomers in communities but whose mandate is not exclusively focused on newcomer settlement, integration, and inclusion. In addition, ethnocultural organizations and communities support settlement programs and associations, and they are vital to meeting the needs of newcomers in developing Welcoming Communities and providing adequate supports and resources.

Such efforts are particularly important in smaller communities that have a lesser density of newcomer- and refugee-specific services, and service provision in general, relative to larger urban centres. For the purposes of our study, meeting the educational needs of refugee youth and their families necessitates mutual learning between personnel in the formal education system and the wider "settlement, integration and inclusion ecosystem" in the context of Welcoming Communities. The educational successes of refugee youth and their families necessitate the mobilization of the full array of public supports available within the Welcoming Communities paradigm. [1]

## Settlement Workers in Schools Supporting Refugees

Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) play a vital role in supporting the successful integration of refugees and their families into the community. SWIS are generally one of the initial points of contact when refugee families first arrive to help them settle and connect with services. SWIS worked closely with educators and helped organize essential tasks and activities, including intake and registration, school orientation, information sessions, cultural events, and many other activities.

## SWIS and School Collaboration

There were strong, collaborative, and close-working relationships between SWIS, school divisions, and schools in supporting refugees, although some communication concerns were raised. Examples of collaborative programs and activities are peer mentorship/leadership, Lunch and Learn, After School, Summer Team Camp, and cultural events.

## Post-Migration and Resettlement Experiences

The pre-migration (before migration to Canada) challenges and resettlement experiences of refugee youth can lead to issues and problems when students arrive in their host country. Having already experienced war, trauma, violence, or difficulties in refugee camps, many refugees with interrupted or no formal schooling are faced with additional barriers such as language challenges, financial stress, and social isolation after arrival to their host country. Refugee children and youth relocated to a country of asylum may face additional stressors such as discrimination and isolation.

Many refugees faced academic challenges because of consequent disruption to access to formal schooling in their country of origin, in refugee camps where they have been displaced, or in their arrival to their country

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1    See Esses et al., (2010), for a description of 17 characteristics of a Welcoming Community.

of resettlement. These included language barriers, being negatively impacted with age-appropriate grade placement, inadequate staffing resources and programs for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Literacy, Academics, and Language (LAL) learners, being granted E-credits/designations that do not permit access to post-secondary institutions, navigating unfamiliar pathways, and information barriers.

Older refugee youth (defined in this study as those between 16 and 25 years of age) experience a considerable increase in family responsibilities following migration, having to become interpreters, service navigators, and caretakers for their families. Economic considerations and the immediate need to earn a living often overshadow longer-term goals of accessing post-secondary education at college or university and developing English language skills, which can lead to lower income and fewer advancement opportunities over time.

Refugee youth who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events in refugee camps or in conflict zones can develop psychosocial challenges including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that may remain with them in the post-migration context. Traumatic events can manifest themselves in several different ways and can impair social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. Some psychosocial challenges experienced by refugee youth in the study included triggering events, isolation, loneliness, difficulty forming friendships, racism and bullying, a need for safe spaces, and a reluctance to access mental health services.

### Building Hope and Rising Expectations

Despite the many challenges that refugee youth may experience, refugee youth were optimistic, ambitious, and motivated in their learning, and held high expectations for their future. As well, parental expectations were high. They were deeply grateful for their new lives in Canada, to be safe from violence and war, and to find teachers and classrooms that are supportive, caring, and welcoming.

### Embracing a Culture of Caring, Integration, Inclusion, and Diversity

Educators are invaluable in providing supports to help students adjust and in creating a safe and welcoming space. As the study found, they are advocates for their students and provide an important link between refugee youth, and their families, to supports offered in the wider community by providing referrals to appropriate services. They embrace a culture of caring, inclusion, and diversity in their teaching approach to refugee students. The ongoing support of Manitoba Education was also recognized.

### School-Based Programs, Approaches, and Strategies

Examples of program models, pedagogical practices, and teaching tools that educators use to help refugee youth with academic and social integration within the school community were highlighted in primary and secondary research conducted for this report. These include the EAL Bridging and Transitioning Program for Newcomer Youth at Prairie Hope High School, the While You Were at School Narrative Writing Project, and student presentations based on the book Refugee, written by Alan Gratz in 2017, (for more information, see https://www.alangratz.com/writing/refugee/). Strategies and approaches that educators would like to do, or have more of, included greater access to technology-based programs, apps and devices, an onsite school for language learners, an intensive orientation arrival program, and more opportunity to work with students individually as well as in groups.

### Gaps in Services and Supports

Participants identified gaps in services and supports that pose serious barriers to further progress, particularly in smaller communities. Adequate services and supports are critical for refugee youth to make successful transitions through the education system to their future lives and long-term integration outcomes.

These included more funding needed for EAL and LAL programs and staff, mental health supports, professional development to raise awareness about refugee students' needs, and use of culturally responsive teaching strategies and trauma-informed care techniques, funding for more SWIS staff, and the need to restore funding reductions in programs and staffing that negatively impact refugee students.

## Challenges Facing Smaller Communities

Retaining newcomers is a key challenge for smaller communities due to factors such as fewer employment and education opportunities, lack of affordable housing, need for more settlement services, and lack of amenities such as ability to find cultural foods and places to worship. Given these conditions, smaller communities will be challenged to find strategies to retain refugees and their families. Smaller communities often lack the density and variety of newcomer- and refugee-specific services available in larger centres. Research suggests, however, that although Canada's major centres have been the main beneficiaries of international migration and economic growth in the country, these trends are showing some change as more newcomers are deciding to settle in smaller centres.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A set of recommendations are proposed to improve programming, services, and staffing, expand information and education outreach, and extend collaboration among government, schools, and community stakeholders.

# Introduction

Historically, Manitoba has been a welcoming destination for immigrants and refugees[2] fleeing wars and conflicts around the world, seeking peace and the chance at a better life for their families. In 2021, the province welcomed more than 16,000 newcomers[3] (immigrants and refugees) and as of November 2022, more than 12,000 people fleeing war in Ukraine, the overwhelming majority of which arrived via the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET; see Government of Manitoba, 2022a).[4]

Over the last decade, increasing numbers of refugees have been coming to Manitoba. According to the Manitoba Immigration Facts Report 2021 (Government of Manitoba, n.d.), as shown in Figure 1, there were 18,480 resettled refugees and protected persons admitted to the province between 2011 and 2021, with 11,310 or 61% arriving between 2016 and 2021. In 2016, Manitoba received 3,730 refugees—an exceptionally high number—largely due to the province's strong response to the Syrian civil war (Al-Ubeady et al., 2016). The Manitoba Immigration Facts Report 2021 also showed that in 2020 the number of refugees admitted to Manitoba suffered a devastating drop to 605, down from 2,045 refugees in the previous year, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant travel restrictions. This number has since rebounded to 1,235 in 2021. While Winnipeg continues to attract the largest share of newcomers (about 91%), some smaller urban centres have also been welcoming refugees into their communities (see Table 1).
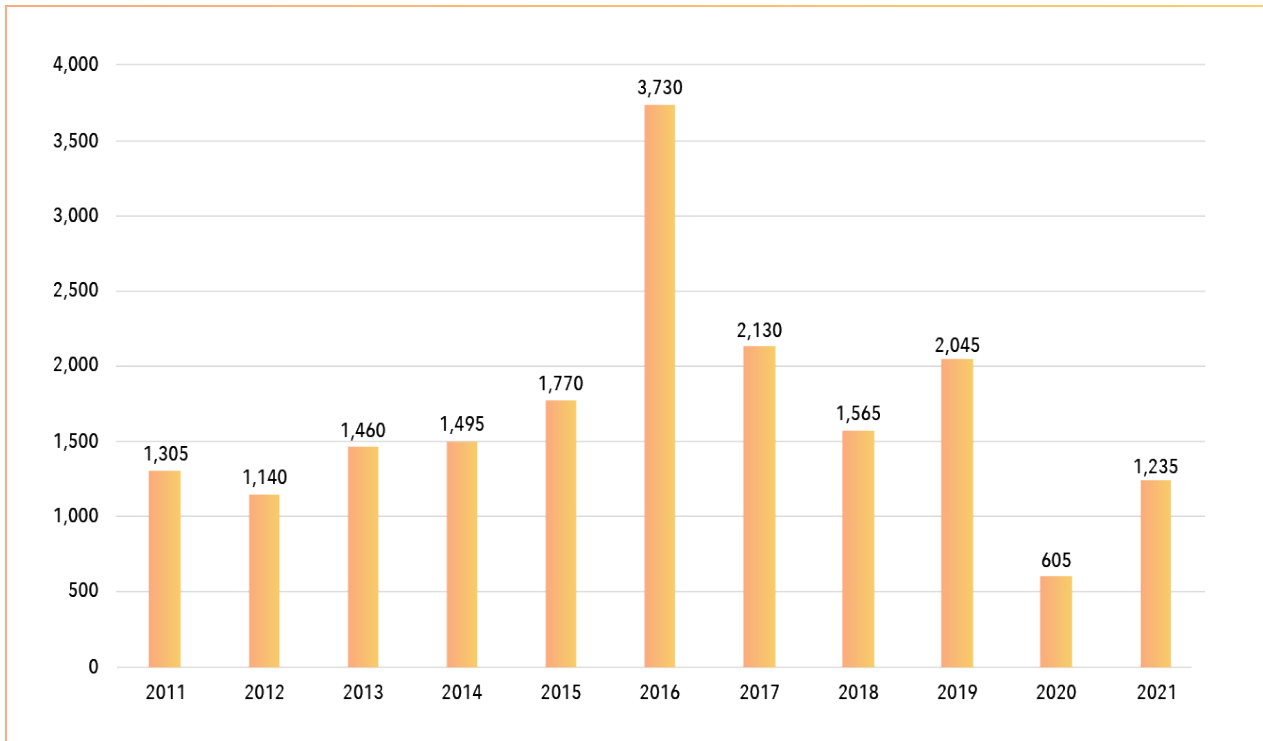
The two largest categories of refugee admission classes in Canada are Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) and Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) (for a review, see Garcea, 2017). Under Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)'s Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), GARs are entitled to a maximum of one year's worth of income support, which largely corresponds to provincial social assistance rates (Alboim & Cohl, 2012). They may access additional financial supports including a shelter allowance—a monthly amount for rent and utilities corresponding to provincial rates—and a basic allowance – which, determined by family size and age, corresponds with provincial Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) rates, and includes a monthly food and incidentals allowance. Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) have their initial well-being determined largely by private financial contributions, albeit as mandated by the Canadian government as a condition for sponsorship. Private sponsors can forward the name of the refugee(s) they wish to sponsor, and the intention is that PSRs will obtain a direct support network through their sponsors. Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs),

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2   Refugees are those who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], n.d.)

3   As of May 2023, the number of Ukrainians arriving to Winnipeg was more than 21,900 (see Rollason, 2023).

4   As this study commenced prior to beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, it does not include the experiences of Ukrainian youth who arrived in Manitoba via the CUAET. Also, the CUAET is a novel Visa category within the context of Canada's immigration system. As it pertains to their education and settlement experiences, youth displaced from Ukraine during the conflict that began in 2022 may exhibit circumstances and tendencies similar to those belonging to Canada's established refugee categories. However, as the CUAET is a novel VISA category, and the long-term settlement expectations and relation to Canada's formal settlement sector of those arriving by way of it remains understudied, this study's findings are not readily applicable to recently arrived Ukrainian youth.

**FIGURE 1:** *Admissions to Manitoba of Resettled Refugees and Protected Persons in Canada as Permanent Residents (2011 - 2021).*

**TABLE 1:** *Admissions to Manitoba of Resettled Refugees by Census Division and Census Subdivision, January 2015-April 2023*

| LOCATION | NUMBER | PERCENT |
|---|---|---|
| Winnipeg | 13,075 | 90.7 |
| Altona | 80 | 0.6 |
| Brandon | 760 | 5.3 |
| Dauphin | 25 | 0.2 |
| Portage la Prairie | 30 | 0.2 |
| Steinbach | 55 | 0.4 |
| Winkler | 135 | 0.9 |
| Other | 250 | 1.7 |
| **TOTAL** | **14,410** | **100** |

their affiliates, Groups of Five (5+ Canadian citizens or permanent residents), and community sponsors—some of which are community organizations—can privately sponsor refugees and are mandated to provide basic needs for the PSR during their first year in Canada (Alboim & Cohl, 2012). Private sponsorship is a significant mechanism for refugee resettlement in smaller communities in Canada (Haugen, 2019). The Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program was created in 2013 (see Labman, 2016; Labman & Pearlman, 2018). In it, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-referred refugees are selected by the government and matched with private sponsors—hence, sponsors do not have the ability to name their "preferred" candidate, but the costs of resettlement are shared by government and private sponsors. The BVOR program is considered a three-way partnership between the Government of Canada, the UNHCR, and private sponsors. The UNHCR identifies the refugees, the Government of Canada provides up to six months of income support through the RAP, and private sponsors provide an additional six months of financial support and up to a year of social and emotional support (http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/vor.asp).

Due to the steady growth of refugees to Manitoba, there are increasing numbers of students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), especially in high schools. Interrupted schooling refers to "students who had limited access to education as well as students who may have had more continuous, but inadequate quality of schooling, and, as a result, may lack language literacy" (Drake, 2017, p. 338). While some refugees have had formal schooling, others may never have attended any kind of formal schooling before and therefore may have differing levels of first language as well as English language literacy. Due to their unique backgrounds in education, refugee youth are more at risk with respect to school performance and general well-being within the high school population as a whole (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Hos, 2020).

Having experienced war, trauma, violence, or difficulties in refugee camps prior to arrival, refugee families experience additional challenges after resettlement. Many issues may emerge after arriving which may include post-traumatic stress and mental health challenges for people who witnessed or experienced violence as well as difficulties adjusting to a new culture, language, and social life in the host country (Bokore, 2018; Fruja & Roxas, 2019). Upon entering school in their host country, refugee youth often face challenges with adapting to a new school system and having to become familiar with new procedures, routines, and expectations (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021). These experiences suggest that refugees may experience greater difficulties adjusting to and integrating into a new society and may take longer in learning academic concepts, skills, and a new language (Kanu, 2008). Schools therefore play a major role in addressing challenges as refugee youth become acclimatized to the language and culture of the host country.

In addition to these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the inequities for refugees related to health and socioeconomic status as many have faced forced migration, substandard living conditions, and limited healthcare. Layered onto pre-existing trauma and other post-migration stressors, the pandemic amplified the health and social inequities by bringing about further loss of access to settlement services, loss of employment and income, prolonged social isolation, and family separation (Arya et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2021).

The pandemic impacted rural newcomers harder with struggles arising from closed borders, economic hardship, and problems created by social distancing in places with reduced access to settlement and other public services, and often with limited or no high-speed internet access (Helps et al., 2020; 2021). Additionally, the uncertainty around immigration processes such as refugee claims and sponsorship applications were likely to make rural refugees more vulnerable to social isolation and poor mental health (Helps et al., 2020; 2021).

While most refugees tend to settle in Canada's larger centres, smaller communities are significant hubs of diversified economic activity, including agriculture, tourism, high-tech, manufacturing, and many other sectors (Government of Canada, 2019). As such, they have become increasingly significant as destinations for refugee resettlement. While the overwhelming majority of GARs end up in Canada's metropolitan centres, smaller communities have become increasingly important destinations for GARs in recent years. There are three Manitoban SPOs that host RAP programs and are therefore equipped to support resettling GARs (Accueil Francophone, Regional Connections, and Westman Immigrant Services, with the latter two being outside of Winnipeg; personal communication with S. Oumer, July 2023). Moreover, smaller Canadian communities are active in resettling and integrating PSRs (see Haugen, 2019). Smaller communities, however, face ongoing challenges such as skill shortages, an aging population, population decline, and fewer services which can create difficulties in attracting and retaining newcomers over the long term (Esses & Carter, 2019).

The Rural Development Institute's (2016) case studies of five rural Manitoba communities with refugee resettlement found that refugees were facing several challenges that impacted the ease of resettlement, including fewer post-secondary education and employment opportunities, fewer local services and less access to childcare, lack of public transportation and affordable housing, and the necessity to travel to a larger centre to fulfill cultural and religious needs. While these challenges present barriers for refugees, the study found that local citizens work hard to address and overcome them through the strength of community support networks and collaborative partnerships.

These networks, established through settlement agencies and ethnocultural organizations, become a source of social support for refugees, decreasing their feelings of loneliness and providing much needed orientation and settlement assistance (Bucklaschuk & Sormova, 2011). As Haugen (2019) noted, "rural communities can often utilize social capital and community networks to address adversity and create sustainable, welcoming communities, and refugee newcomers can be a part of this process" (p. 55). In addition, refugee families can add cultural diversity to smaller communities, bringing new resources, skills, and innovative ideas into the community (Haugen, 2019).

## SMALL-CENTRE RESETTLEMENT AND SETTLEMENT SERVICES[5]

According to the UNHCR, resettlement specifically refers to "the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them, grant them the right to permanent residency and, eventually, offer them the chance to gain a new citizenship" (https://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/unhcr-role-resettlement/refugee-resettlement/). The organization of government-funded activities to support foreign-born newcomers of all designations, including refugees, is referred to as the "settlement" sector. Hence, while refugees are undergoing "resettlement" to Canada, they arrive in a specific community and are entitled to certain "settlement services." Therefore, in keeping with the convention of the settlement sector, we will refer to those services that refugees receive to aid them upon arrival in a Canadian community after they have "resettled" as "settlement services."

Resettling refugees is one part of a broader strategy found in small Canadian communities of turning to Canada's immigration system to address demographic challenges, shrinking or stagnant populations, and labour market needs. Attracting newcomers to smaller communities and retaining them necessitates

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5    This section is derived from Silvius & Boddy (2023), [forthcoming], except for where otherwise stated.

considerable efforts by multiple agencies and individuals (Carter et al., 2008). This may be referred to generically as creating a "welcoming community," and it necessitates the coordination and collaboration of different actors at local, regional, and provincial levels to develop initiatives that engage various organizations as well as newcomers and established community members to create inclusive spaces and programming to facilitate settlement and integration (Guo & Guo, 2016).

In Canada, the concept of welcoming communities has been an integral component of the federal government's strategy to accept and integrate newcomers into a wider array of Canadian communities. This began in 2009 as the "Welcoming Community Initiative," an undertaking funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC; now Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC]), as part of a broader array of immigrant attraction and retention strategies designed to address demographic challenges and facilitate community economic development in smaller Canadian cities and towns. Welcoming communities initiatives have been typically comprised of two steps. The first is the development of localized, "place-based" initiatives to attract newcomer individuals and families; the second is undertaking ongoing community-based efforts to retain them (see Brown, 2017; Derwing & Krahn, 2008; George et al., 2017; Walton-Roberts, 2011;). Notably, welcoming communities are important in areas with less of a recent history of receiving newcomers and in which the settlement sector and/or newcomer-related services may be less comprehensive than conventional newcomer destinations (Depner & Teixeira, 2012).[6]

Settlement and Integration Services are at the heart of the Welcoming Communities Initiative. The primary bodies through which federally funded settlement services are organized and delivered are settlement service provider organizations (SPOs). In these agencies, settlement workers conduct client needs assessments and referrals, help newcomers develop settlement plans, and assist with some of the more immediate needs upon arrival in Canada–finding an initial job, housing, schooling for children, and other family needs. SPOs typically prioritize the short-term settlement needs of newcomers in the community in which they reside while also directly supporting some longer-term integration-oriented services which respond to ongoing needs exhibited by newcomers after immediate needs have been addressed.

However, as some contributors to this report have argued elsewhere (Silvius & Boddy, 2023, forthcoming), the long-term well-being of newcomers in small centres and a given community's ability to retain newcomers (including refugee families) are predicated on successfully supporting the long-term inclusion of newcomers, which entails achieving a desired quality of life and a level of social and civic inclusion that approximates those of the Canadian born. Inclusion for newcomers implies a deeper degree of material, social, and psychological comfort, acceptance, and equity. We therefore refer to this spectrum as one of "settlement-integration-inclusion."

In the same source, we have argued that achieving such an outcome in smaller communities is impossible without the full mobilization of community resources and broad government support towards this end. This means supporting the formal settlement sector in smaller communities to develop local capacity in settlement service provision while benefitting from know-how and resources located outside of the community. And it means ongoing collaboration and mutual learning between formal settlement agencies and those who do not cater exclusively to newcomers but who, nonetheless, have increased responsibility to offer their supports and services in a way that meets the specific needs of newcomers.

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6    Esses et al. (2010) describe 17 welcoming community characteristics.

Two government-funded entities play broader supportive, "mobilizing," and coordinating roles that exceed the mandates of individual SPOs and are central to the broader welcoming communities initiative: local immigration partnerships (LIPs) and umbrella groups. Both serve to coordinate various community stakeholders in policy and programming for the purposes of creating a welcoming community (Agrawal & Rutgers, 2014) and facilitate complex multi-level coordination, capacity building, and information sharing amongst non-government service-providers, interested organizations, government-supported service providers, and municipalities, counties, townships and provincial levels (see Gibson et al., 2017; Ma, 2017; Silvius & Annis, 2007).

LIPs are intended to facilitate community-based partnerships aimed at developing capacity towards newcomer immigration, settlement, integration, and inclusion. LIPs are not "direct" settlement service providers: they offer indirect services, knowledge, and capacity building, and a framework for cooperation on the part of multiple organizations, community groups, and individuals; they are focal points for information sharing and coordinated action by these stakeholders, who may or may not be exclusively involved in newcomer settlement, integration, and retention (for example: police services, health service providers, education, and chambers of commerce). Through participating in these initiatives such stakeholders develop knowledge and capacity to offer their services in a manner that is more "newcomer friendly," contributing to newcomer settlement, integration, and inclusion. There are currently five LIPs in Manitoba, located outside of Winnipeg: Steinbach (https://www.erip.ca/), Portage la Prairie, (see Insert A), Pembina Valley (https://pvlip.ca/about-us/), Dauphin (https://dawcc.ca/about-us), and Brandon (https://mansomanitoba.silkstart.com/companies/brandon-local-immigration-partnership). All have been established within the last five years.

To support newcomers who wish to settle in Manitoba's francophone community, the Manitoba Francophone Immigration Network (Réseau en Immigration Francophone du Manitoba) or RIF MB (https://rifmb.ca/en/) is an IRCC-funded network of organizations and institutions in community partnerships that offers a range of services related to reception, settlement and integration, language, health, employment, and education to welcome French-speaking newcomers. RIF MB is one of 14 Welcoming Francophone Community initiatives in Canada, outside Quebec.

In support of Manitoba's smaller centres, the Seine River (Riviere-Seine) region in south-east Manitoba has been officially selected to deploy the projects on Welcoming Francophone Communities and includes the following major communities: municipalities from Taché and La Broquerie, as well as the town of Ste. Anne. Many services and supports are offered to welcome newcomers to this region. More information is available at: https://rifmb.ca/en/welcoming-francophone-community-manitoba/.

Similarly, provincial umbrella groups have a mandate to support the actions of SPOs and to offer guidance, knowledge sharing, and connecting "above" the level of settlement service provider organizations. Like LIPs, they may involve additional stakeholders who are not formally part of the newcomer serving sector as well. Manitoba's umbrella group is the Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO). Comprised of nine staff members, it is the amalgamation of two organizations: the Manitoba Immigrant and Refugee Settlement Sector Association (MIRSSA, established in 2007) and the Manitoba English as an Additional Language Organizations (MEALO, established in 2012). As indicated on its website, "MANSO acts as a voice for the Manitoba settlement and integration sector… supporting our members through communication, networking and professional development activities." Its mission is "to facilitate newcomer integration by providing leadership, support and a unified voice for settlement and integration organizations." It operates according to the vision that "Manitoba welcomes, supports and engages newcomers" (see https://mansomanitoba.

).

For the purposes of this report, schools, school divisions, and other bodies responsible for supporting the educational pursuits of refugee youth in Manitoba's small centres may be considered as stakeholders who have a responsibility in offering newcomer-,and specifically refugee- oriented services and may stand to benefit from mutual learning and capacity building through collaborating with SPOs, LIPs, and umbrella groups. Meeting the educational aspirations of refugee youth and their families is a crucial component of the settlement-integration-inclusion spectrum. Arguably, it is an ongoing process that begins with a refugee family's immediate arrival in a community but continues for some time thereafter. However, schools in small communities have varying levels of experience and capacity when it comes to meeting the needs of refugee youth. Moreover, education remains a provincial jurisdiction, whereas formal settlement supports are overwhelmingly organized and supported by the federal government. Therefore, ensuring positive educational experiences for refugee youth in Manitoba's small communities necessitates broad-spectrum collaboration and mutual learning between formal SPOs, the wider array of non-refugee and non-newcomer-specific agencies that are responsible for rural and remote service provision, other groups and individuals that can positively contribute to a "welcoming community" for refugee youth and their families, and the provincially-funded education system.

This study provides greater insight into the larger contexts of refugee youths' schooling, including their backgrounds, lives, and family circumstances, their pre- and post-migration experiences, the many challenges they face, as well as their dreams and aspirations for future educational success. As well, it is important to gain the perspectives of senior administrators, educators, SPOs, and policy-makers to determine what improvements can be made to better meet the needs of refugee youth with interrupted schooling. It is crucial to share the many stories coming from

the smaller communities as they are becoming an increasingly larger part of refugee resettlement. More research is needed on the challenges and successes of refugee youth both pre- and post-migration as many smaller communities are working to create welcoming spaces for refugees and their families, many of whom have decided to build new lives in their new homes.

This research was conducted in collaboration with the Newcomer Education Coalition (NEC), Immigration Partnership Winnipeg (IPW), and the Manitoba Association for Newcomer Settlement Services (MANSO) to explore schooling practices and develop recommendations for improving programs, services, and staffing, expanding information and education outreach, and extending collaboration among stakeholders in addressing the needs of SIFE. With a focus on smaller communities in Manitoba, the research considers the roles of schools, educators, senior administrators, and SPOs, as well as the collaborative relationships established with community stakeholders in support of refugee youth and their families.

The report begins with a summary of the methodology, a community-based participatory research approach that is grounded in the thoughts and concerns most important to those in the smaller communities. Next, is a presentation of the results, based on the analysis and interpretation of relevant literature and the development of themes and subthemes. To support the analysis and thematic ideas, direct quotations are cited to reflect a range of participant perspectives.

The findings begin with the pre-migration experiences of refugee youth, followed by refugee resettlement in smaller communities, SWIS supports for refugee youth and their families, and collaborations between SWIS and schools. The sections that follow cover post-migration and resettlement experiences, an in-depth exploration of the many challenges facing refugee youth, and a section on building hope and rising expectations. The focus then shifts to the role of educators and schools with a section on inclusion

and cultural diversity followed by examples of school-based programs, approaches, and strategies. The remaining sections identify gaps in services and supports followed by the challenges facing smaller communities with a focus on retention of refugee youth.

The report concludes with a discussion of the findings, suggestions for further research, and a set of recommendations.

# Methodology

## RESEARCH APPROACH

The study employed a community-engaged participatory research methodology to conduct a literature review, analyze statistics from provincial and federal government databases, and gather data from four cohorts that included educational administrators, school personnel (educators), refugee youth, and Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS). Smaller communities (referred to alternatively as "small centres" in the newcomer settlement service landscape) were broadly defined as those with a population of 55,000 or less. Data was collected from smaller communities in three geographic regions in Manitoba that had higher concentrations of refugee youth and a federally funded immigration services centre with SWIS. The three regions included Central Plains, Pembina Valley, and Westman.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach to research that emphasizes the importance of creating partnerships between researchers and the stakeholders for whom the research is ultimately meant to be of use to the "knowledge users" such as school administrators, educators, SPOs, and the refugees themselves (Jull et al., 2017).

This project emerged out of an early report titled, Supported Transitions: Effective Educational Approaches for Older Refugee Youth with Interrupted Schooling. Supported Transitions focused on schools based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Newcomer Education Coalition (NEC) and Immigration Partnership Winnipeg (IPW) identified the need to conduct a similar study in Manitoba's small centres, which were home to increasingly larger numbers of refugee families and saw increasing numbers of refugee youth in their schools. Ray Silvius at the University of Winnipeg obtained a grant from the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) in collaboration with IPW and NEC. A researcher was hired and employed by the University of Winnipeg to conduct the study. The project was conducted entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing restrictions.

A research steering committee and a community-based advisory committee with regional representation of members from education and refugee settlement backgrounds helped guide the study from the early stages of research design. These committee members were essential to the process of engaging potential study participants. A list of the steering and advisory committee members can be found in the Acknowledgments section.

The project reflects the principles of co-creation at all stages of development, beginning with the early observations and needs expressed by IPW and the NEC. Importantly, the IPW and the Manitoba Association for Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO), the provincial "umbrella group" for newcomer settlement SPOs, identified the need to consider the schooling experiences of refugee youth in the context of the newcomer settlement service landscape in small centres in Manitoba.

## RESEARCH PURPOSE AND PROCEDURE

The purpose of this research was to build on the

previous CYRRC-funded *Supported Transitions*[7] project and the partnerships already established with IPC and NEC to gather insights, strategies, and suggested best practices from participants on ways to address interrupted schooling among refugee youth in smaller Manitoban communities. The research was strengthened by hearing the perspectives of refugee youth in their own words, sharing their stories, their life and school experiences, their challenges and successes, and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

The research was guided by four main questions:

1.  What existing practices and models exist within Manitoban small centres' schools to address interrupted schooling for refugee youth?

2.  How can small centres' schools and educators be better supported to connect older refugee youth to classrooms to prevent further interrupted schooling?

3.  How can refugee families be better supported to combat interrupted schooling for refugee youth in small centres?

4.  What is the relationship between the formal education system and the wider resettlement environment in small centres?

## DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected in spring 2022 and included 1) semi-structured interviews with refugee youth, school administrators, and educators (mostly English as an Additional Language [EAL] teachers), and 2) interviews and a focus group with SWIS. The recruitment for potential participants was done through the advisory committee. Scheduling of additional focus groups with participants other than SWIS was desired, however this was not possible due to scheduling difficulties. All groupings (cohorts) of participants were representative of the three regional areas except for school administrators. The researcher conducted all interviews and the focus group by Zoom.

To maintain anonymity, the participants and their communities are not identified. The project received approval from the University of Winnipeg Research Ethics Board. Due to the possibility of refugee youth being re-traumatized during interviews, and as per the University Research Ethics Board, provisions were made to refer youth to counselling services, if warranted.

### Interviews with Refugee Youth

Interviews were conducted with 11 refugee youths–five women and six men ranging in age from 17[8] to 24 years of age. The participants came to Manitoba from various countries of origin that included Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Ethiopia (two participants), Ivory Coast, Somalia, and Uganda. Four youths were originally from Syria and had sought asylum in Lebanon before arriving in Manitoba.

The interviews were conducted in English. However, interpreters were retained for two participants upon request so they could be comfortable in their native language.

Prior to settling in Manitoba, the students had varying levels of experiences with interrupted schooling. Some had received four years of education or less, while others had lived in refugee camps and had none or very little schooling. Syrian youth had higher levels of interrupted schooling after being displaced to Lebanon and, in most cases, could not

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7   The *Supported Transitions: Effective Educational Approaches for Older Refugee Youth with Interrupted Schooling* project was conducted on cohorts based in Winnipeg.

8   Parental consent was obtained prior to conducting the interview.

attend school there for various reasons (see Findings Section on Academic Challenges). After arriving in Manitoba, refugee youth were currently in school and/or working. The length of time the refugee youth had been in Manitoba ranged from five months to seven years. One participant was working and attending college part-time. Refugee youth were given a $25 honorarium for their participation.

Refugee youth were asked questions about their pre-migration schooling experiences in their country of origin as well as post-migration experiences since arriving in Manitoba. They were also asked about the challenges of going to school, the supports that they received, and their plans for finishing high school, as well as future goals in terms of working, pursuing post-secondary education, and career aspirations.

### Interviews with School Administrators and Educators

Six educators were identified by the advisory group members and were interviewed based on their willingness to participate. The educators included four EAL teachers, one consultant and one coordinator. All three regions were represented by the educators. Interviews were also conducted with two school administrators, as selected by the advisory group, representing two of the three regions.[9]

The interview questions focused on their knowledge and experiences working with refugees with interrupted schooling, as well as strategies, programs, best practices, or teaching tools they used or were aware of to address interrupted schooling. They were also asked how they could be better supported to address interrupted schooling as well as what they considered the most significant challenges facing SIFE as well as the successes.

### Interviews and Focus Group with Settlement

### Workers in Schools (SWIS)

Interviews were conducted with two SWIS participants from two regional SPOs, and a focus group was conducted with four SWIS representatives from an SPO in the third region.

The interviews and focus group discussion explored open-ended questions such as knowledge of instances of refugee youth experiencing interrupted schooling; strategies, practices, or models to address interrupted schooling; and how SIFE and refugee families can be better supported.

Ethnocultural organizations or sponsorship groups were not included in the study.

### DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The researcher (Browning) reviewed the entire data set several times and used inductive coding to identify emerging codes, categories, and subcategories. Similar codes were then grouped together to form emerging themes and subthemes (Creswell, 2014).

The draft report was shared with the steering committee and then finalized in summer 2023.

### LIMITATIONS

The research is limited by the small sample sizes of cohorts and the short time period for data collection and, therefore, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the scope of the study. The study may also be limited by sampling bias. Although rapport was established with all participants, some may not have felt comfortable about sharing their personal opinions and experiences. The participation of individuals from other backgrounds may have yielded different

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9    Attempts were made to interview the third school administrator, but interview requirements could not be finalized in time to meet project deadlines.

results. In addition, obtaining the views of the parents of refugee youth would have provided an added perspective to the interrupted schooling experiences of their children, as parental engagement has been identified as a key to effective education for refugee youth (Block et al., 2014; Ennab, 2017; Kanu, 2008). Despite these limitations, the study builds upon prior research and expands our understanding of interrupted schooling among refugee youth in smaller communities while conceiving of schooling within the broader context of newcomer settlement, integration, and inclusion in Manitoba's small centres.

# Findings

This section presents the findings beginning with the pre-migration experiences of refugee youth, followed by refugee resettlement experiences and the mobilization of community stakeholders in welcoming refugees to smaller communities. The next section discusses refugee resettlement and newcomer service provision in smaller communities, describes the role of SWIS in helping refugees settle and integrate, and provides examples of SWIS and school collaborations in supporting refugee youth. Next, post-migration and resettlement experiences are covered, followed by separate sections on academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges, and then a section on building hope and rising expectations. The focus shifts to the role of educators and schools with a section on caring, integration, inclusion, and cultural diversity followed by school-based programs, approaches, and strategies. The remaining sections discuss gaps in services and supports followed by the challenges facing smaller communities with a focus on retention of refugee youth.

## PRE-MIGRATION EXPERIENCES

It has been observed that "refugee youth sit at the intersection of 'youth' and 'refugees,' two groups variously identified as vulnerable and facing unique challenges" (Morrice et al., 2020, p. 389). As they flee conflict and persecution in their home countries, refugee youth often experience a variety of traumatic events. Many will have experienced war, violence, torture, multiple losses, exploitation, and ongoing instability. They have been uprooted from their friends and communities, and, in some cases, their families. They have travelled in dangerous circumstances to seek asylum, and they may have lived in a settlement or refugee camp for years before resettlement to Canada (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016, 2021; Hadfield et al.,

2017). Conflict and prolonged displacement mean that refugee youth can experience severe disruption to their schooling prior to resettlement (Manitoba Education, 2012; Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015; Morrice et al., 2020; Stewart, 2012).

Displacement and temporary residence in one or more countries prior to permanent resettlement can contribute to an uneven and interrupted schooling history for refugee youth. Refugee youth who arrive in Canadian schools have often therefore experienced multiple contexts, schools, systems, languages of instruction, and cultures of learning prior to being faced with the task of navigating the culture and expectations found in Canadian school systems. A participant described the interrupted schooling experiences of refugee youth before arriving to Canada as follows: "*Our Syrian students … have come … via Lebanon or Jordan or even some northern African countries where clearly for three or more years they've struggled, been intermittent in attending school, or not even been able to attend school*" (Educator Interview).

One participant who had lived in a refugee camp before coming to Canada recounted the following horrific pre-migration experience:

*"Where I'm from, it was really bad–dangerous and scary. My life there was horrible. I hardly had any food to eat…. I was born and raised in a refugee camp and seeing dead bodies everywhere and people dying and people getting shot in the head."*

– Student Interview

Another participant who had experienced interrupted schooling described the dangerous conditions due to the Syrian civil war before the family fled to Lebanon:

*"Our house in Syria was very close to the international airport in Damascus so it was a very sensitive area at that time. People would shoot on the airport…. People hide and run away…. We had a farm. They destroyed the farm in Syria. My mom had a store, they told her if you don't close, we want to burn it…. Then … we go to Lebanon."*

– Student Interview

Many refugees reported that they had limited or no formal schooling experiences before arriving in Canada. As one student explained: *"I had to immigrate to different countries because my family were being hunted by government officials…. I was kidnapped for a long time so kind of on my own, and after … I got back with my family" (*Student Interview).

Another participant explained through an interpreter that they did not attend school for five years because there was not enough money to pay for school:

*"Our parents were deceased…. They used to live with their grandma and they also have younger siblings. They couldn't find any support, so they had to drop out and start working, and they were able to afford their younger siblings going to school."*

– Student Interview

Some participants who attended school in refugee camps reported that there was overcrowding and that punishment was used as a form of discipline in the school, as this participant recalled: *"If you miss one day, they will punish you and it's like you don't have freedom to speak your opinion and you won't understand anything about it because one classroom has almost 150 people" (*Student Interview). Another participant explained that they experienced interrupted schooling because of poor treatment and lack of money: *"School back home is not good because how they treat people. They treat students very bad and sometime … we don't always go to school because of money and how teachers treat students" (*Student Interview).

## Displacement to Lebanon

The Syrian refugee youth interviewed for the study had been displaced to Lebanon after fleeing the war and before arriving in Canada. These students did not have positive schooling experiences while in Lebanon and experienced stressful situations. Many refugees are not permitted to attend school in asylum-seeking countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, or Turkey and those who do attend typically struggle and then leave the system (Stewart et al., 2019).

Research on the displacement of Syrian refugee youth to Lebanon suggests that they face many challenges in accessing education including affordability, language difficulty (curriculum is taught in English or French but not in Arabic), deficits in teacher training, discrimination by teachers and administrators, weak state authority, as well as lack of support in dealing with psychosocial trauma (Abu-Amsha & Armstrong, 2018; Buckner et al., 2017; Deane, 2016; Hamadeh, 2019). One participant explained that even getting to school was challenging: *"I tried as much as I could not to miss school [but]the only school I attended was … very far from us. I had to walk three km every day, get onto a bus … and then that was at night … from afternoon till night" (*Student Interview).

Another Syrian refugee described a bitter experience in Lebanon.

*"I was the second good one in the class and at the end of the year if you are the first or second-best one who [receives] the best grade, then you wouldn't do the final exam. I was the second one but for some reason … they put a Lebanese one. I went to the principal [to ask] how [did] her mark increase? What happened? And [the principal] said … my mark … was higher than her. The teacher [gives] one or two marks extra, except she gave [the other student] five or six more. I [asked] 'Why? Did you see this?' And then [the principal] laughed and said, 'Oh, in the government, they cheat. Cheating is everywhere.' I'm like, 'Really?'"*

– Student Interview

## REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AND NEWCOMER SERVICE PROVISION IN SMALLER COMMUNITIES

This section builds on the material contained within the introduction, situating the educational pursuits of refugee youth within the broader context of refugee resettlement and newcomer service provision in smaller communities, including the roles played by a wide array of service providers, individuals, and agencies in contributing to newcomer/refugee well-being along the "settlement, integration, and inclusion" continuum.

Settlement efforts in smaller communities are structured in part by the Welcoming Communities model, which involves building community capacity to meet the needs of newcomers, including refugees, along the continuum of settlement, integration, and inclusion. They involve collaboration amongst a diverse range of stakeholders–including government-funded newcomer service provider organizations (SPOs), Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), umbrella groups, ethnocultural organizations, and a wider array of agencies and individuals who have an interest in enhancing the well-being of newcomers in communities but whose mandate is not exclusively focused on newcomer settlement, integration, and inclusion.

This approach to newcomer settlement service provision is reflected in the Canadian government's "whole-of-society" approach to refugee resettlement. Such an approach sees the federal government's efforts augmented by an array of non-governmental organizations, citizens' groups (including those engaged in private refugee sponsorship), other agencies, and for-profit organizations. Such a broad-spectrum approach positively orients Canadian society to the complex tasks associated with refugee resettlement. However, to be successful, governments must ensure that the core tasks associated with refugee resettlement remain properly funded, staffed, and supported, and that successful refugee re-settlement is not predicated on private or voluntary contributions alone (see Silvius, 2020).

Cross-sector, collaborative efforts are particularly important in smaller communities that have a lesser density of newcomer- and refugee-specific services, and service provision in general, relative to larger urban centres. For the purposes of our study, meeting the educational needs of refugee youth and their families necessitates mutual learning between personnel in the formal education system and the wider "settlement, integration, and inclusion ecosystem" in the context of Welcoming Communities. The educational successes of refugee youth and their family requires mobilizing the full array of public supports available within the Welcoming Communities paradigm.

The study found that the impending arrival of refugees to smaller communities awakened a strong public response with many local stakeholders joining together. These included schools, educational institutions, municipalities, church groups, private businesses, volunteers, and others. Research shows that the arrival of many refugees over a short period of time can mobilize a community towards a group response with numerous groups, organizations, and individuals coming together to welcome and integrate newcomers (Janzen et al., 2021).

The Rural Development Institute study (2016) found that partnerships in smaller Manitoba communities were one of the key successes during the refugee resettlement process, particularly the coordination between different sponsorship groups, community stakeholders, and settlement provider organizations. Another success was the mobilization of community support and the dedication of local volunteers. To be successful, settlement efforts require a coordinated approach among stakeholders (Stewart et al., 2019).

Smaller communities generally have enhanced social capital, defined as "the connections among individuals–social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them"

(Putnam, 2000, p. 19). The presence of social capital and social support networks in a community are an important resource for resettled refugees and are vital to successful resettlement (Bucklaschuk & Sormova, 2011; Haugen, 2019; Wilson-Forsberg, 2012).

This kind of collaboration was clearly evident in the approach taken in the local community. As one participant explained: *"It is truly a community-based effort to support the students and families, whether it's being supported by a church or a different group in the community. … We can't do it alone. It's certainly a team effort"* (Administrator Interview). The participant then gave an example of a contact family as part of a "community-based team effort" who can be a direct support to the refugee family where the benefit is "*that there is someone who is from the community who is familiar with the system, familiar with the community outreach that they could access"* (Administrator Interview).

The federal government, through IRCC, funds Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP) in over 70 communities across Canada to build partnerships involving local organizations across public, private, and non-profit sectors (see Insert A). LIPs engage local stakeholders to help communities welcome and support the integration of newcomers moving to the area. In describing the success of their community's LIP, a participant shared the following:

*"A lot of community happens informally because of the LIP. … It's been really very, very successful for Community B and we're certainly seeing … more and more newcomers settling in Community B … and then there's a lot of sharing that goes on through this LIP network."*

– Administrator Interview

Program funding from IRCC for other refugee resettlement programs has also played an important role. A participant recalled how the opening of a Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP)[10] at an immigration centre in the local community had been instrumental in bringing about a larger number of refugee families, whereby "t*he transition really changed the landscape of programs in school because once we had that program in Community C, we did start resettling a lot of refugees in our community*" (Educator Interview).

Build a Village is a charity that was started voluntarily by Ray Loewen, a local volunteer, in 2001 (see Insert B) to help refugees establish a better life in Canada. The organization has sponsored many refugee families to come to the Pembina Valley region, including five Syrian families in 2015. A participant described the role the organization played in welcoming the Syrian families in greater detail:

*"There's a lot of support that's provided. When we had five families coming from Syria, Build a Village coordinated with five different churches, community volunteers who became those families' support networks for at least their first year. And they picked up where formal services left off. Those volunteer networks ensure that people have a place to live when they arrive, that they have what they need in their homes, in terms of furnishings. … They often support transportation during that time period where people are without driver's licenses. … There are settlement workers who are connected to Build a Village which is also helpful … so there's a good integration of services."*

– Educator Interview

Regional Connections (see Insert C) is an SPO located in the Pembina Valley region described as "a one-stop shop" that provides services, resources, referrals,

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10    The Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) is a Government of Canada program that helps government-assisted refugees (GARs) and other eligible clients when they first arrive in Canada by providing direct financial support, and funding the provision of immediate and essential services.

and programs for newcomers.[11] Funded by IRCC, Regional Connections offers settlement services and resources for newcomers, including an intake process and development of a settlement plan, in addition to information sessions, employment referrals, language classes, and many other supports. Regional Connections includes SWIS personnel (see Insert F) who are part of the larger Settlement Services Program and supports refugees and their families to successfully integrate in their new community. Comprised of offices in multiple communities, Regional Connections demonstrates the advantages to a regional approach to newcomer service provision, whereby numerous communities can benefit from the organizational capacity of one organization and tap into resources that may not be available to one community working on its own.

This participant described how SWIS supports refugee families and enables their children to stay in school:

*"When the family comes in, we're able to support many of the different needs … they have as opposed to referring the family to other separate organizations that might be across the city. … So that's a big benefit to families because we can get the kids in school. We think about the kids then in terms of continuity in the school system. The parents can come and get other supports that they need while their kids can stay in school. … We have seen that the kids are used by the parents to do translations for … appointments. … If we can try and supply interpreters for the family that are not their children, then it does help encourage their kids to stay in school."*

– SWIS Focus Group

A community's response to newcomers can sometimes begin by leveraging its own history as a springboard for adapting its system of refugee support. As Janzen et al. (2021) noted, "How a community attracts and

retains newcomers can be viewed as a historical continuum where past community practices inform successive action" (p. 1236). Speaking within the context of supporting newcomer resettlement, a participant explained how their community had a history of working together:

*"One of the things that is unique about the settlement services and Community A would be … a strong history of if we think it's important, then we're going to collaborate to figure out how to make it happen rather than ping-ponging responsibility between systems. We'll put our heads together and figure out who can do what part … to address the issues or the problems that we're experiencing."*

– Educator Interview

Participants also made references to stakeholders in the community pulling together to create "a holistic approach" with "wraparound supports" to help families settle. A "holistic model" of education "recognizes and addresses the multiple and complex learning and social and emotional needs of asylum seeker and refugee-background students" (Block et al., 2014, p. 1340). As one participant acknowledged: "*I feel we have truly wrapped around these families and are working together and that … feels like it's been way more supportive for the students in school*" (Administrator Interview).

Another participant spoke of a "wraparound protocol" involving the school division and a committee in town that meets to draw on different areas of support to help meet the needs of a family, including "*mental health, police, schools, Regional Connections, and so if circumstances come up for a family or one of their kids, they can pull together that committee, and it's designed to support all the needs of the family*" (SWIS Focus Group). However, there are limits to what wraparound supports can provide, as this participant

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11 The other SPOs included in this study are The Portage Learning and Literacy Centre (see Insert D) and Westman Immigrant Services (see Insert E).

pointed out: "*Most of our supports have been more holistic and supporting a feeling if we can encourage a sense of belonging and security. It's more of an umbrella, but it's not intensive professional support that we're able to provide*" (SWIS Focus Group).

In smaller communities, volunteer networks are also an essential part of the refugee support network, and can be invaluable, as highlighted by this participant:

*"We're dependent on volunteers. So, getting people to appointments or to classes, transportation is a challenge for many … families. For after-school programs and things, you have seven children, they're all going to different programs. … It's a logistics nightmare if you have one vehicle and a job, so having volunteers cover that … has been of benefit."*

– SWIS Focus Group

Faith-based groups, including churches, have historically played a significant role in supporting generations of newcomers to Canada (Janzen et al., 2016; 2020). A participant clearly illustrated the role churches play in the local community in creating partnerships:

*"Churches have a desire to be helpful and supportive and … they [refugee families] have also really benefitted from the partnership between Build a Village and Regional Connections … because often churches … provide the volunteer base. But they also create an avenue for Regional Connections to be supporting, to have a better understanding of how to be welcoming to people who are coming from different cultures."*

– Educator Interview

Refugee youth, in turn, commented on the warm welcome received and friendships made within the community:

*"Build a Village is the community that supported us to come to Community A. They were very helpful, very nice. They said after one year, 'We are supporting you*

*… but we got to know you and we really like having you in our community. We would like you to be, we want to be a friend forever. … We're not just [supporting you] … for work only, we are a real friend now.'"*

– Student Interview

There was also a close sense of community forged among refugee families, as expressed by this participant: "*Everybody knows each other here. If we went to [the] city, like [there are] too many people, nobody care[s], this is strangers. … My parents feel, here, comfortable. The culture is very similar to us*" (Student Interview).

Another positive outcome of smaller communities' efforts to welcome refugees is that they wanted to stay:

*"People are coming from Muslim communities or countries and staying here. Thats partly because the people who are interested in supporting their settlement are also interested in learning about what they bring to our community. … There's been some good community understanding built that has meant that many people stay."*

– Educator Interview

## SETTLEMENT WORKERS IN SCHOOLS SUPPORTING REFUGEES

Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) play a vital role in supporting the successful integration of refugees and their families into the community. SWIS are generally one of the initial points of contact when refugee families first arrive to help them settle and connect with services. SWIS work closely with educators and help with essential tasks including registration, school orientation, information sessions, organizing cultural events, and many other activities.

A SWIS participant summarized their responsibilities as follows: *"Our job is to help newcomer families and students to settle in the school division. We help them right from the start, from registration up to graduation, and we support students from Kindergarten to Grade*

12" (SWIS Interview). Another participant described their role: *"We work as a team … to plan events for kids and programming just to help students connect to their school … and the community in general here"* (SWIS Focus Group). Another participant pointed out that establishing contact was essential because: *"Every family is different,"* and so it was important to *"get to know the family and what are their best wishes and what they hope for their kids and for their family"* (Administrator Interview).

An important task that SWIS conduct when refugee youth first arrive is a prior knowledge assessment or an inventory of knowledge and experiences to determine numeracy and literacy levels, create an EAL profile, and identify translation requirements. This information gathering was very helpful, as this participant explained:

*"We are able to learn a lot about where the student is at and … what factors will influence their success. That baseline information is compiled into a report … so we have a sense of who is coming through our door before they come. It's a nice snapshot and it gives me time … and so I can plan for that."*

– Educator Interview

Building relationships between SWIS and refugee families can help build trust and offer a source of guidance and support, as this participant pointed out:

*"Sometimes [families] are nervous to call the school, to come into the school, so they will reach out to that SWIS employee and then they can re-assure them or they can talk to them and it helps to build that bridge, to build that positive relationship."*

– Administrator Interview

Another SWIS participant spoke about the many pressures that families face in transitioning to a new culture:

*"You have all the pressure of what's going on at home and … eventually you just feel like you can't do it or*

*you're ready to give up. And sometimes if we hear about those situations, then we can come alongside and offer some encouragement."*

– SWIS Focus Group

Sometimes, a kind gesture can form the basis for building a relationship, establishing a connection and level of comfort. As this participant recalled:

*"When I first started, I was lucky to work with a very connected person … so … we went around to the clients' homes at Christmastime and we delivered [food hampers] for [refugee families]. They were very happy, very grateful. Some of the clients started sending messages … because they've got that comfort, they know that you can … help. That is huge."*

– SWIS Interview

## SWIS AND SCHOOL COLLABORATIONS

Many participants spoke of the collaboration and close working relationships between SWIS, school divisions, and schools in supporting refugees. In referring to the "community support network" to assist newcomers, one participant acknowledged that:

*"[SWIS and the school division] have this foundation of planning together that is built on strength that already existed and has allowed [SWIS] to expand that model into our communities in our region. … In terms of coordination, we do have at least four meetings scheduled per year … to communicate about what's happening in the school division and with … Settlement Services and that leads to responsive problem-solving and planning."*

– Educator Interview

Another participant gave an example of how SWIS and the local school division collaborated to make exceptions to the bus transportation policy so refugee students could be picked up by the school bus and driven to school during their first winter because *"winter is a factor for our newcomers"* (SWIS Focus Group). One participant noted that their school division

was instrumental in helping to bring SWIS to the community, and pointed out the important role that SWIS plays in helping to support refugee students: *"[SWIS] work closely with our EAL person to … ensure that they're not only succeeding academically, but socially and emotionally as well"* (Administrator Interview).

There were many examples of how SWIS and school staff support refugees and their families by working closely together to offer programs and activities to help them settle and integrate into the local community. These programs contribute to greater cultural awareness and understanding, recognizing the social nature of language learning and importance of facilitating peer relationships between school-age participants and their Canadian friends. As one SWIS participant noted: *"[Schools] provide us space. We share information on an as-needed basis and then we interpret as well, so we are two entities, but we work as one entity to help the students"* (SWIS Interview). One participant elaborated further on the language interpretation services offered: *"The SWIS … is a team that they have with people working and they speak different languages. So, we have people speak Tigrinya, Arabic, … and Spanish. And they paired up with the school and came … at least once a week"* (Educator Interview).

## Peer Mentorship

Peer mentorship/leadership is a SWIS program that involves the participation of peer mentors who were once newcomers themselves. The mentors provide one-to-one support for refugee youth to facilitate positive transitions into schools and the local community. One participant provided further details on how the program helps refugee youth get settled in their school:

*"One of the SWIS … recruits … senior EAL students, and they are the ambassadors for the new refugees. … They are paired up and in that way they are not lost. As soon as [refugee youth] get here, they get linked to another student. It's usually one who speaks their*

*same first language. They meet at lunchtime, they get some tutoring. … They get informed about activities. They even build a relationship sometimes with them."*

– Educator Interview

## Lunch and Learn

The Lunch and Learn Program is another SWIS and school-coordinated activity that allows newcomers to meet new people and make some connections. A participant explained how beneficial the program is to refugee youth:

*"Kids in small groups could come together who had similar experiences and didn't feel so intimidated by being in larger groups where their language skills were just developing and that they would be able to meet in a school environment. But at the same time, [refugee youth] … could be learning and building confidence and have those … gatherings with people that had a similar experience to theirs."*

– Administrator Interview

Another participant remarked on the beneficial aspects of the Lunch and Learn Program: *"It feels good when the kids are able to be in that environment, where they're just kids, and just having fun"* (SWIS Interview).

## After School

SWIS and the schools also collaborated to develop an After School Program as another opportunity for newcomers to gather, and, as one participant put it, *"to incorporate those things that are helpful and important without making it sound like we're doing school again"* (SWIS Interview). Another participant described how the After School Program evolved from a time for learning and homework to a time for more fun and recreational activities:

*"We very quickly realized that after they had been in school for six hours … their brains couldn't handle any more. So, we planned simple things like gym nights, craft times … being able to play … to paint … to just learn … or play some games that … just allowed them*

*to be free of all the pressures that had been going on in their day. Slowly, this became … a safe place for them, they started to open up … to ask questions about some of the things that … they didn't understand."*

<div align="right">– SWIS Focus Group</div>

### Summer Team Camp

Summer field trips were another SWIS-and-school-partnered activity that enabled refugee students to stay connected to their language development and integration over the summer. According to one participant, the "Summer Team Camp" was a six-week program with an EAL instructor that was described as *"very much based on opportunities [refugee students] were interested in, so it was language learning but very experiential"* (Educator Interview). The Summer Team Camp program also included opportunities to try new Canadian experiences, such as making pizza or hiking, that not only provided a new learning experience but a safe environment while developing language.

Other collaborative activities between SWIS and schools were cultural events such as "diversity nights" that brought refugee families together, where, as one participant described, *"We would have a large selection of different cultures come and we would have food and dances and games"* (Educator Interview). Another participant described how sporting events such as playing soccer were an opportunity for SWIS and school collaboration.

SWIS have also provided support to parents by scheduling information sessions to explain report cards and the high school course credit system. A participant pointed out that following up with families was important, *"especially in cases of interrupted learning where needs are ongoing"* (SWIS Focus Group). In summing up the relationship between SWIS and schools, a participant put it this way: *"[SWIS] are the main key partners in Community C … and they are really linked to all of the schools. … With School C they have a really good relationship and … have done a lot for refugee students and all immigrants in general"* (Educator Interview).

### Collaboration Challenges

By most accounts, there were very positive working relationships and experiences between SWIS and the schools, but there were some concerns raised as well. One participant described the challenges they faced trying to gain cooperation in working with a school:

*"[It would be helpful if] the school can have a liaison person that is willing to work with the SWIS worker because there is nothing as bad as when you go to a school, two, three times and by the fourth time, you're thinking, 'No, this is just not working, and I don't know what it is. I don't know if it's me.' And then, you don't even get to see the person that you're supposed to be working with."*

<div align="right">– SWIS Interview</div>

When asked what the next steps might be, the participant responded that they *"will continue doing it for a little bit longer, just because it's for the kids and I don't want it to end up … when somebody says, well, you did not try hard enough"* (SWIS Interview). This suggests that the participant felt a responsibility to work with and support the students in spite of the difficulties in gaining access to them. In another instance, a participant expressed frustration that refugee students had to be concerned about finding adequate housing and supports for their family, and they questioned why the SPO was not being more helpful:

*"I have said to [refugee students]: 'This isn't your job, this is the job of your parents of the settlement provider organization.' Who is advocating for them? … Government isn't doing what needs to be done absolutely. … At the end of the day, I can't make dad go after the landlord, … and that's so frustrating. … I shouldn't have to go to a settlement worker, … and say, 'Look, this family's struggling, somebody needs to reach out.' [The SPO] should just be reaching out."*

<div align="right">– Educator Interview</div>

Another participant appreciated the work that SWIS does but had a concern about their understanding of schools and having the necessary skills:

*"We have SWIS who mean well and … they are active and they're doing things, but there are also times … where it feels like … they don't necessarily have the organizational tools. It feels like they don't understand how [school] works. … So, it's not just good intentions, you need to have some skills to do it."*

– Educator Interview

The realities and challenges of settlement impact a student's performance in school. There is a mutually supportive relationship between achieving settlement success and educational success for refugee youth. Similarly, there is the need for mutual adaptation, collaboration, and learning between personnel within the education system and the broader settlement community.

## POST-MIGRATION AND RESETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES

The pre-migration challenges and resettlement experiences of refugee youth discussed earlier can lead to barriers for students in their host country. Having already experienced war, trauma, violence, or difficulties in refugee camps, many refugees with interrupted or no formal schooling are faced with additional barriers such as adjusting to a new language and culture, having to develop linguistic and academic skills, resulting trauma, financial constraints, negative stereotypes, and racism and bullying (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Hos, 2020; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

Refugee youth who witnessed or experienced traumatic events in refugee camps or conflict zones may develop psychological stress and mental health challenges that can interfere with being successful in school (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016, 2021; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Shakya et al., 2012). Refugee children and youth relocated to a country of asylum may have additional stressors such as discrimination and isolation (Stewart et al., 2019). As McWilliams & Bonet (2016) note, "A line of precarity runs through their pre-migration histories from pre-displacement, displacement, to their selection for third country resettlement" (p. 14). When asked how their family was adapting to life in Canada, a participant responded as follows:

*"My family was the same as me and had trouble getting used to places … to friends, or even school. My brother went to school and had trouble because he also spoke French, so he had trouble understanding the teacher and making friends. He also got bullied in school and my mother has trouble getting jobs because her English is not very [good]. I'm happy to be here anyways because I'm not dying, but as far as jobs and adjusting to things, it's been really hard for us."*

– Student Interview

Another participant highlighted how refugee youth may continue to experience difficulties after arriving in their host country:

*"Sometimes they'll have a headache … and then you start talking and they're stressed out about, like, life in Canada is hard. Not only is it the stuff that happened before, but life is expensive and they're worried about how they're going to pay for things, and mom and dad are talking about are we going to move … and we've got five siblings and two want to go and three want to stay … and they're trying to figure out all those difficult pieces of living in Canada."*

– Educator Interview

Research on refugee youth and their families that settle in Manitoba suggests there are multiple complex factors that interact to create challenges to successful schooling (Ennab, 2017; Jowett, 2020; Kanu, 2008; Rural Development Institute, 2016; Stewart, 2012; Stewart et al., 2019). As Kanu (2008) pointed out, academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges, compounded by real or perceived attitudes of racism and marginalization, can interfere with refugee youths' social integration and educational success,

thereby setting the stage for feelings of rejection, marginalization, and frustration, as well as the desire to drop out.

These research findings are consistent in calling for more economic, social, and school-based supports such as language programs, staffing, and interpreters for refugees in Manitoba, as well as more culturally appropriate and inclusive approaches. With increasing numbers of refugees arriving in Manitoba, educators and administrators need to be well-informed about the challenges facing refugees as they can determine how best to meet the educational needs of these students (Stewart, 2012; Stewart et al., 2019).

## Academic Challenges

The particularities of displacement and resettlement make the school experiences of refugee youth unique. However, refugee youth may exhibit commonalities with other students whose education is negatively impacted by multiple barriers. Rural education in Canada is beset with challenges particular to geography, size, and population density: schools are insufficiently funded, staff and administrator recruitment and retention are unsuccessful, amenities and activities cannot be offered at a level approximating that of their urban counterparts, and that the promises of citizenship–including an ability to obtain minority language education–are difficult to realize (see Macleod, 2022).

Many refugee youth face academic challenges because of disrupted access to formal schooling in their country of origin, in refugee camps where they have been displaced, or in their arrival to their country of resettlement. Even for youth who had access to high-quality education prior to displacement, periods of interrupted schooling can result in large gaps in academic content knowledge and difficulty with learning English (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Fruja & Roxas, 2019; Kuzhabekova & Nardon, 2021). One challenging aspect of the current classroom context for refugee youth is the ability to adapt to the pace of curriculum content. One participant shared the

following example:

*"I would like to maybe have some help in science, but I actually stopped my science class because I couldn't continue … because if you fall behind, the teacher won't stop for one student because all the class have to keep going and move on, and she can't do it just for one person. So, if you are not keeping up, you will definitely fall behind, and when you do that, that will affect your mark."*

– Student Interview

### *Language Barriers*

Learning English has been identified as one of the primary barriers for all non-English-speaking refugees coming to Canada (Dodd et al., 2021; Hos, 2020; Kirova, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). One participant who had fled the civil war in Syria recounted how their knowledge of English had been lost and the difficulty experienced in re-learning English once they arrived in Canada:

*"In my country, we study English from kindergarten until we graduate, so any of the English that we had, it didn't stick to our mind because we went through war and then we were getting out of the country … when I was in Grade 6 … and then no more school, so nothing stuck in my mind. …When we came to Canada, it was 'Hi,' 'Hello,' 'Canada,' and that was it. … And then speaking to the guys on my team, I was for a year just nodding my head and saying 'yes' and smiling, not understanding what they were saying to me."*

– Student Interview

Another participant explained that, despite being multilingual, they *"didn't speak any English … so it was hard to understand math and science because I have no [idea] what they were saying"* (Student Interview).

Experiencing language barriers can contribute to a lessened sense of belonging, inhibiting integration (Dodd et al., 2021; Morrice et al., 2021) and the ability to make friends, and that can contribute to

low self-efficacy (Kirova, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019) and increased risk of dropping out of school (Hos, 2020; Fruja & Roxas, 2019; Kanu, 2008; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019). A participant described how struggles with learning English can lead to discouragement and dropping out of school:

*"The first year or so they're learning English and maybe it's going fairly well for them.  But with all the other things that they're also experiencing, they become very discouraged … that they're not picking up things quick enough. And so that discouragement sets in, they don't want to be embarrassed by their peers to say that they're not doing well. And so, they start missing classes or … they drop out. … It's such a huge hill to climb when you haven't had schooling and you're trying to look like every other high school student who's been in school from Grade One to Grade 12."*

– SWIS Focus Group

### Grade Placement

Refugee youth who have missed several years of schooling due to displacement are challenged to start school at a much higher level than their last attended class, and they may find it difficult to keep up without extra support (Miller et al, 2018). Students must then cope with two aspects of learning at the same time: learning English and learning the material they had missed during the years of displacement (Stewart et al., 2019).

In Manitoba, under The Public Schools Act, a person who turns 21 as of July 1st of that year no longer has the right to attend school. This can create situations where refugee youth struggle to complete high school before turning 21 without having the academic skills or language ability to enable progression in education and pursuit of career aspirations (Kirova, 2019; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Morrice et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2019). Manitoba Education's[12] policy

on determining age-appropriate grade placement has some flexibility for SIFE. For example, the *Assessment of EAL and LAL Learners for Senior Years* (grades nine to 12) recommends placement of students in "courses that reflect their previous academic achievement, background knowledge of a subject area, and English language skills" (Manitoba Education, 2021a, p. 7), while a document on *Evaluating Non-Manitoba Course Completions for Senior Years Credits* advises that "a general rule of thumb is to place arriving Senior Years students in Grade 9 as an initial placement" (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017, p. 7). Despite the apparent flexibility in the government's policy, some participants did not have positive experiences with grade placement:

*"I was put in Grade Eight, which was not fair for me because I did not know how to read. … It was kinda hard to even pass my school so I feel like the best thing I could have done was to start from a grade a bit lower down so I could learn more and more English and get adjusted to things before going up into high school."*

– Student Interview

In another example, a participant described how grade placement and aging out of school disproportionately impacted older refugee youth:

*"Some students in my class never attended school before so it's like getting here, being already 18 or 19 years old, being placed into a Grade 11 or 12 class, but having their first experience with school. And, of course, they are illiterate in their first language. … Some of our students, sadly, will not be able to graduate from high school because it's … what we call 'bad timing.' They just arrived being over 19 years old, so two years being exposed to an educational system without having any previous experience is not enough."*

– Educator Interview

### Programming for EAL and LAL Learners

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12    Manitoba Education has been renamed to Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning.

One of the main challenges of classroom contexts for refugee youth is the ability to adapt to curricula that are taught in a language most are still trying to master to academic levels and which also reflect prior content and cultural knowledge many youth do not possess (Fruja & Roxas, 2019). Students with interrupted schooling have more positive learning experiences when they are taught in a developmental manner and are allowed to build on their existing knowledge (Hos, 2020).

In 2021, Manitoba Education released three documents of *Curriculum Frameworks for English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Literacy, Academics, and Language (LAL) Learners Programming*.[13] In the Senior Years (SY) document, LAL learners are defined as "learners in the Middle and Senior Years who have significantly interrupted, limited, or no prior schooling experience and therefore their literacy skills and school-based knowledge are well below an age-appropriate level" (Manitoba Education, 2021b, p. 1).

LAL learners are expected to develop foundational literacy, numeracy, and academic/subject area knowledge and skills at the same time they are acquiring foundational English language competency, and they need programming that will be more intensive and of longer duration. LAL learners are expected to transition to EAL programming to continue their education and linguistic development, and, therefore, there are some components of parallel programming.

Although participants were not asked directly about the curriculum frameworks documents, there were some indications that the EAL and LAL programming was not always succeeding in meeting the needs of learners with interrupted schooling. Educators faced difficulties in teaching LAL learners, as this participant explained:

*"Academic language takes five-to-seven years for EAL learners to acquire. The LAL population comes in age-equivalent Grade 10. How on Earth are they supposed to get that? … They're not; they're LAL. There is a space for the LAL student, it gives them more time in learning. So, before the end of June when that grade is given, I have to advocate that all of them get out of the EAL [class]. … So, what is the … purpose in that? You get them the credit, you get them out of school. I'm not saying that was the motivation behind it, but that is the reality of what will happen."*

– Educator Interview

Another participant described the challenges of teaching EAL and LAL learners together with limited staffing resources:

*"We put [in] our small school all the EAL and LAL learners together in one room. … I'd like to have more of me. … There's one of me, and 20 students and a couple of [educational assistants] … and I'm teaching three levels of EAL … and we need more staff. Rurally, what I hear from my Winnipeg colleagues is they've got a class of LAL learners. I have a class of everybody."*

– Educator Interview

This participant elaborated further that with not enough staffing resources and teaching LAL learners with language barriers, refugee students were not getting the needed attention:

*"There are kids who will recede into the background and … teachers gravitate to the kids who are more active and vocal … but that kid that's disappearing probably needs more attention and yet you're not getting to them because somebody else is asking you a question."*

– Educator Interview

### E-designated Grade 12 Courses

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13    The three Manitoba Education documents are Early Years (K to Grade 3), Middle Years (Grade 4 to Grade 8), and Senior Years (Grade 9 to Grade 12). More information is available at: https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/eal/framework/index.html

The E-course designation identifies any curriculum developed or approved by Manitoba Education in which 50% or more of the learning outcomes have been rewritten to include language and culture learning outcomes drawn from the EAL and LAL curriculum frameworks for EAL students at a specific stage of development (Manitoba Education and Training, 2019). The EAL or "E"-course designation[14] also signifies that learning expectations of a course have been substituted to facilitate language acquisition and to assist students making the transition to high school programming.

Students may use E-designated Grade 12 courses toward graduation, but post-secondary institutions will not accept them for admission (Manitoba Education and Training, 2019). Manitoba Education recommends that students be made aware of the limitations of the E-designation before beginning their courses. However, the study found that this was not always the case. A former student, now working in carpentry, recalled the following:

*"I was 19, I was graduated as a mature student. I did get an E-credit and a transcript and everything, but not with 30 credits. But I was too old … and then I didn't know. I should have staying [sic] in school just to get more knowledge so it will help me through life with the reading and writing."*

– Student Interview

In another instance, a participant stated that the students *"don't understand … and they get really upset,"* when informed that their E-credits could not be used to apply for university. Another participant strongly disagreed with their school's policy of assigning E-credits (calling them "dud-credits") so students would graduate at 18 without the necessary preparation to transition to post-secondary education: *"You can stay till you're 21 if you haven't graduated,*

*but we're going to give you the credits to get you out the door"* (Educator Interview).

There were instances, however, where educators found ways to work with LAL students and help them graduate. As one participant explained:

*"We manage their credit acquisitions so that we can keep them in the room longer, working cooperatively, collaboratively with the resource department and … our administration, we will stretch … how long it takes them to earn a credit. We're thinking about them eventually graduating, but we want them to graduate legitimately with skills. So … we'd be upfront with parents and students that … we're keeping you in this credit for a full year … because we want to make sure you reach the outcomes and … in a language-enriched environment. … We're … trying to communicate clearly what's happening while also helping students graduate."*

–Educator Interview

Other participants indicated that LAL learners were made aware that they could continue in high school until 21 to learn English and then seek other options such as upgrading with language courses at college or taking literacy classes at an SPO. Nevertheless, the pathways to graduation for refugee language learners, as one participant described it, *"often feel like a huge mountain"* (Educator Interview), having to develop English language skills as well as catch up with curriculum content.

### Navigating Unfamiliar Pathways

Refugee youth with interrupted schooling face multiple challenges accessing education and training, and they often need support in navigating a complicated and unfamiliar education system (Morrice et al., 2020). Language is often a barrier to pursuing career aspirations or attempting post-secondary education

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14   The E-course designation is also referred to as E-designation or E-credit. More information is available at https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/eal/promising_pathways/full_doc.pdf

despite learners' motivation (Dodd et al., 2021; Kirova, 2019; Yohani et al., 2019). As McWilliams & Bonet (2016) note, "A tension exists between refugee youths' expectations for educational opportunity and the reality of narrowed pathways through which those opportunities are realized" (p. 14). Due to these unique educational gaps, refugee youth are more at risk of dropping out of school (Bajwa et al, 2017; Hos, 2020; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). One refugee participant who was planning to enter university outlined the difficulty in making the decision about pursuing further education:

*"It's very challenging. It's usually two options: one of them is to continue studying, and the other is to quit school and just work, and from other people I have known, only one of them has made it to university yet, and the others are either quitting or changing their mind."*

– Student Interview

Refugee youth who attended school in their country of origin may be unable to locate documents such as transcripts or proof of achievement, and this creates difficulties in applying for post-secondary education (Bajwa et al., 2017; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Morrice et al., 2020). One participant explained how the lack of documentation presents difficulties for refuge youth:

*"Post-secondary institutions should try to … create clear pathways for newcomers whether they are in high school, or who finish high school back home who want to go to university here. The pathways need to be more clear for some students who come from countries that are unable to bring their documents. Universities here don't tolerate that … so that creates another burden and then [refugee students] are forced to go back to high school here."*

– SWIS Interview

A participant spoke about consulting *Promising Pathways*[15] (Manitoba Education and Training, 2019) so refugee youth could become aware of the options available to further develop English language skills and explore other education pathways–rather than dropping out and being pulled toward getting a job and earning money: *"I really wanted them to find the joy in education and that education could open a lot of doors for them"* (Educator Interview).

With the many barriers confronting SIFE learners, such as developing language and academic skills and fulfilling graduation requirements, there is sometimes a mismatch between students' future aspirations and the reality they are faced with (Hos, 2020; Morrice et al., 2021; Shakya et al., 2010). As one participant explained:

*"They come here with really high expectations of what's going to happen with their lives, which is great because they are running away from instability and … fear and a place that is at war. They see Canada as their rescue boat which is great, but when they come here, they think it's going to be easy. They have the expectation, … all of our students … they're going to be doctors or nurses. And they come with that dream … but they don't have the clear idea of how long that will take them, if they ever get to that."*

– Educator Interview

Discussing the envisioning of career opportunities, another participant stated that some SIFE youth might be *"aspiring a bit high at this point"* given that:

*"They've come from cultures where … they would expect that the system would work for them … and that they could find a way to plug in and they're not*

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15   Promising Pathways presents various high school and adult education programming options for newcomers who are new to the Manitoba education context. More information is available at: https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/eal/promising_pathways/full_doc.pdf

*finding it. … The adult learners struggle to find a sense of who they are and how their life is going to look."*

– Educator Interview

### Information Barriers

Refugee youth have also faced difficulties in getting information and guidance that would enable them to make informed decisions about their educational pathways (Bajwa et al., 2017; Hos, 2020; Morrice et al., 2020; Shakya et al, 2010). Participants recognized the need for SIFE to be better informed about potential pathways and opportunities, including a *"clearinghouse…consortium or some body organizing information that demonstrates the relevant circumstances in high schools and universities and options for students"* (Educator Interview).

Another suggestion was to provide an arrival or orientation program about attending school: *"If [refugee students] were … put into an intensive course where they can be … getting to know a little bit more about … Canada, or the English language before being put into a school and then go from there"* (Educator Interview).

This participant elaborated further by providing an example of the need for such a program:

*"I have kids who open up, but I also had [a kid] in my room that, if they saw a police officer in the school, which is kind of normal … she will just shut down and just cry and be really intimidated. If they could get a program just to start with and once they do that, they can transition to the school system."*

Educator Interview

Not having a peer mentor for SIFE learners who could provide advice, guidance, and encouragement in how to navigate the education system was also a barrier. *"They don't have a role model, they don't have someone close enough to navigate [for] them. We try, but it's not the same as having a family member who's already been there"* (SWIS Interview).

There was also a notable gap in knowledge about obtaining financial support to attend a post-secondary institution while struggling to balance the demands of work and study, as this participant revealed:

*"More scholarships [should be available] to people that encourage them to study … because I needed more money. Here, universities are expensive. This is what takes me longer. … I need to stop, work, get money, then go back [to school], but if there's more scholarships … more helping, that would be better. … I have tried … and I don't know, maybe how or [why] I wasn't accepted [for a scholarship], because I was thinking to quit [work] and go to study."*

– Student Interview

### Economic Challenges

One of the key findings in the study is that SIFE experience a considerable increase in family responsibilities following migration. Lower levels of education and English language fluency among parents and other family members contribute to greater responsibilities as older refugee youth often find themselves acting as "cultural brokers" and becoming interpreters, service navigators, and caretakers for their families (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016, p.2).

Refugee youth often must step up and enter the labour market to support their families, undertaking a reversal of roles, assuming the adult role as breadwinner but often at the expense of compromising their education (Hos, 2020; Kanu, 2008; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Shakya et al., 2010). In addition, the scarcity of economic resources available to refugee youth and their families often impacts resettlement:

*"Older refugee students … face challenges as being the breadwinner of their family, of taking responsibility of their parents, where the power dynamic shifts. … So, some of them have faced challenges, coming to a new country, learning the language, becoming the lead of the family."*

Refugee youth, in turn, often feel a strong commitment to helping their families. *"Family comes first,"* and *"No one would even think twice that you wouldn't do that for your family"* (SWIS Focus Group). In addition to assuming adult responsibilities, this participant was working, finishing high school, and planning to attend university:

*"I work two jobs now. … My father has a disability and he don't [sic] speak English so he doesn't work. My mom don't [sic] have English also, but she take care of the kids and the house. … I'm also going to be leading the family, and my brothers are also following me to university. So, some who will be in high school now and would be studying, and I have to help them all as soon as they finish high school."*

– Student Interview

Economic considerations and the immediate need to earn a living often overshadow longer-term goals of gaining further education. Earlier entry into employment is generally at the expense of developing English language skills, which leads to lower income and fewer advancement opportunities over time (Hyndman & Hynie, 2016; McWilliams & Bonet, 2016). Morrice et al., (2021) describe this situation as a kind of paradox where refugee youths' poor language skills are a main barrier to employment while gaining employment is one of the key barriers to continuing to learn and improve their English language skills. These concerns were echoed in this participant's comments:

*"There's often a strong feeling that students have to hurry up their education and join the workforce. … [There is] also the importance of building a foundation of English, and so, not trying to rush it because that will influence the jobs that they're able to access. It's important for them to maybe not be so determined to immediately graduate so that they can just work."*

– Administrator Interview

Another participant explained how refugee youth felt compelled to enter the workforce once family support payments (such as the Child Tax Benefit) were no longer being issued. This pressure may be faced by male children in some family structures.

*"Once they turn 18 it's like, 'Okay, I need to work. I need to contribute to the household.' … That is a real challenge, where they could stay in school and prepare for higher learning or maybe more job readiness in a high school trades program."*

– SWIS Focus Group

Educators suggested that refugee students having to work long hours and go to school interfered with their academic success. According to this participant: *"We have students who have decided to go and work … at nighttime, and then they come to school and then they don't progress as you expect them because they are tired … but they don't have a choice"* (Educator Interview). Another participant described how students were drawn to drop out of school to work and earn money, leaving them without the English language preparation and academic skills needed to go on to further study:

*"I lose a lot of my students to work. Several of the students who started with me got drawn into working at Company A, and Company A is a really physical job that can really make you tired. They need money. They look at the fact that … 'I haven't earned as many credits as I need. I'm going to be 21 soon, I'm just going to quit school and go work.' … Most likely they're working in a job where they're not using any English. They're just doing something physical, and that's the thing I see them struggle with: the need for money."*

– Educator Interview

Another participant pointed out that, to stay in school longer, refugee youth should be encouraged to focus more on their own lives and to take a longer-term perspective:

*"It's also about helping them to be a little bit selfish and looking also at their own life as well. And … to*

*help them understand that it's okay to stay in school till you're 21. … But it just would be nice if there was a way to reach them … to look more than just a year or two down the road."*

<div align="right">– SWIS Focus Group</div>

## Psychosocial Challenges

Refugee youth who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events in refugee camps or in conflict zones may develop psychosocial challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that may remain with them in the post-migration context (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Hadfield et al., 2015; Manitoba Education, 2012; Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Yohani et al., 2019).

Traumatic events can manifest themselves in several different ways and can impair social, emotional, and cognitive functioning (Bajwa et al, 2020; Dodd et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2019; Walker & Zuberi, 2019). There are effects of trauma on cognitive faculties, learning aptitude, and ability or drive to pursue educational opportunities in the host country (Bajwa et al., 2020). From this participant's recollection, it was evident that the initial suffering and trauma they experienced had continued after arriving in Canada, and that these traumatic memories were still vivid:

*"When I came here, I had trouble because I would have flashbacks of those dead people that I'd seen in the war. It has been a real struggle since coming to Canada. I still have nightmares … when I think about it. It just scares me and I don't think about it."*

<div align="right">– Student Interview</div>

Another participant who worked closely with refugee youth spoke about the *"lasting trauma … that can resurface years later. … It's a part of people's reality and it will be for the rest of their lives, especially these children, it's been part of the initial development"* (SWIS Focus Group). Refugee youth who have had traumatic experiences often keep these issues inside as they continue to suffer quietly (Manitoba Education,

2015; Shakya et al., 2010; Stewart, 2012), as this participant shared:

*"My life changed since I was back home and I'm … in Canada right now, which is a better place, but [I am] still trapped, still trapped in my mind. … When you have family suffering or dying and stuff, you can't really explain [what is] inside you."*

<div align="right">– Student Interview</div>

In this excerpt, this participant described the emotional experience of a first meeting with their class of refugee youth:

*"The first time I met this group [of students] … I was so moved. I could have cried. I just looked in their eyes … and all I could say to them, all the humanity I had to give them was 'You belong here … the rest doesn't matter, the rest we'll work our way through.' I'm not sure why that's so emotional to me, but those eyes were eyes of pain."*

<div align="right">– Educator Interview</div>

### *Triggering Events and Need for Safe Spaces*

Traumatic events can still be vivid in refugee students' minds, and triggering events such as loud noises, fire drills, or lockdown drills can be very alarming (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2012). As this participant explained, students should be informed ahead of time because *"we want to make sure that they're not alarmed by that, that they know this is a routine and its just for safety"* (Educator Interview). Another participant explained that their students preferred to stay in the classroom at lunchtime rather than visit the cafeteria because *"it feels unsafe to them, it is triggering for a couple of students. … I understand if it's overwhelming"* (Educator Interview).

Many participants spoke of the need to create a safe space where, over time, refugee students can feel comfortable to share their past experiences:

*"There's a level of vulnerability, and maybe it's self-*

*protection … but it's hard for them to talk about [past trauma], they don't really want to. When they finally do start to talk about these things, it helps a lot if we ask them to write the story of how they came here."*

– Educator Interview

Another participant spoke about their class watching the video *Becoming Canadian*,[16] reading books, as well as sharing a personal story about coming to Canada as a refugee to help students open up and share experiences:

*"That's how the conversation comes up … because if they get the connection, they will share … and then they just open up and talk and talk. … It's just conversation that pops up, and it's always really powerful, and they feel now safe and more comfortable. At the beginning, I don't think they would have shared any of that."*

– Educator Interview

Refugee youth exposed to high levels of trauma may face additional challenges in school (Hadfield et al., 2017). Educators need to be aware that students may need to deal with trauma first before being able to concentrate on school. As this educator explained, it was important to be *"patient and considerate, [and understand] that today a student just isn't [focused], because there's somewhere else they need to be in their brain, in their heart, and in their soul, and to allow space for that"* (Educator Interview). Speaking about a particular student, this participant remarked that *"we've had small conversations about mental health and … until you clear up what's going on in [their minds], there's not room for math"* (Educator Interview).

### Isolation, Loneliness, and Peer Relationships

Once resettled, SIFE may feel social isolation and loneliness as sources of psychosocial stress, resulting from leaving family behind and not knowing where they were going to be resettled (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Dodd et al., 2021; Hos, 2020; Kanu, 2008). While peer relationships are important in promoting the well-being of refugee youth, research indicates that newcomers struggle to make friends outside their ethnic group due to mental health challenges, inability to speak English, and lack of social skills and self-confidence (Hadfield et al., 2017; Kirova, 2019; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019).

In response to a question about having friends, a participant responded as follows: *"Most of my friends, they're gone. … I just like doing my own thing, you know, I just don't want no friends anymore"* (Student Interview). Another participant described their difficulty in making friends:

*"It wasn't at the beginning easy to find friends. It feel like school should be also some part of [making] friends that makes it easy … especially when I was in Grade 10 and I was 18. … I'm older than [other students], but at the same time, I ask them for help. It was a little bit hard for me [to] get along with them. I felt more mature than them. …Most of my communication was with teachers."*

– Student Interview

The difficulties that older refugee youth discussed in establishing peer relationships was echoed by other participants: *"Our younger students are able to come in and form those peer connections so quickly, but refugee youth coming in Grade 10 and Grade 11, it's a little bit harder to connect them to their peer groups"* (Educator Interview). Another participant stated: *"By the time kids get to high school, often their relationships are formed, and so [it is a challenge] trying to provide supports that don't feel artificial, but can grow those relationships"* (Administrator Interview).

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16    Becoming Canadian is a video that includes learning about Canada, its languages, the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen, and taking the oath of citizenship. More information is available here: https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/video/becoming-canadian-students.html

Participants also spoke about the positive aspects once peer relationships are formed. As one participant noted, *"Their confidence really rises"* (Administrator Interview). Another participant described how a newcomers' group with refugee youth inspired confidence and gave them a voice:

*"A newcomers' group … gave [refugee students] a place to connect … and then over time as our relationships built, they were able to share things with myself or with the group. A group of the girls did a presentation for our trustees one evening on their journeys … and so it just gave them a voice with each other … a voice in their school."*

– Educator Interview

There were also examples of attempts to integrate refugee youth into school activities to make social connections, either through sports or extra-curricular activities. A participant gave an example of how refugee students taking an Indigenous Studies course offered multiple benefits: *"[The course] gives them opportunities to mix with other students, make friends … use the [English] language in real hands-on, authentic ways, and then they're learning more about Canada as well … about our history in a diverse way"* (Educator Interview).

### Racism and Bullying

Racism, bullying, and discrimination have been identified as sources of psychosocial stress (Kanu, 2008; Kirova, 2019; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Stewart, 2012). This can have adverse effects on psychological well-being (Hadfield et al., 2017) and has the potential to negatively impact academic achievement (Shakya et al., 2010; Walker & Zuberi, 2019; Wilkinson, 2002). This participant shared their experience as follows:

*"One kid in school called me the N-word and that was not a very nice experience. … I didn't like to be treated unfairly and differently from other people just because of my skin colour. It was really kind of hard for me … I was really sad, because I didn't have any friends, like I*

*lose my friends because I was darker."*

– Student Interview

Another participant seemed almost resigned to have to suffer discrimination: *"When I was at school my friends and stuff, sometime we kinda get racial profiled … but, you know, I gotta accept that it will happen. That's the most [difficult challenge] about school"* (Student Interview).

### Reluctance to Access Mental Health Services

Generally, Canadian rural residents have greater difficulty accessing mental health services than their urban counterparts (Friesen, 2019). Refugees experiencing psychosocial issues tend to underutilize mental health services due, in part, to cultural differences (Stewart et al., 2019; Walker & Zuberi, 2019). As Hadfield et al. (2017) reported, "Refugees are often distrustful of authority figures such as counsellors due to negative experiences premigration, which may affect their uptake of available services" (p. 197). According to one participant: *"Sometimes, it's just that [refugee youth] need to have a safe space to talk because seeing counsellors or anything like that … they just don't see that as something that they will go and do"* (SWIS Focus Group). This participant provided another example:

*"The challenge is to convince them that that [mental health support] is what they need … because I think a lot of them do need it but they manage. There is a community here and they do find support either here … or with relatives or other communities at a mosque in Winnipeg. So, they are helping each other."*

– Educator Interview

Another participant explained that sometimes families were a support network for mental health services in a smaller community:

*"Your culture could be for families. That is your support network for mental health because we don't see people going for professional counselling. … How*

*mental health is even regarded can be very culturally sensitive as to whether people access it or know that they're accessing it."*

– SWIS Focus Group

## BUILDING HOPE AND RISING EXPECTATIONS

Despite the many challenges that SIFE may experience, a disproportionate focus on such issues can easily overshadow the many strengths that refugee youth and their families bring with them that demonstrate hope, ambition, and aspiration. Research shows that refugee youth highly value education, are optimistic, ambitious, motivated in their learning, and have high expectations for their future (Bonet, 2018; Hos, 2020; Manitoba Education, 2012; Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Walker & Zuberi, 2019).

In this study, refugee youth expressed their desire to complete their education and fulfill their future goals, as one participant stated: *"I want an education to have a future job, and not just something that doesn't require any study"* (Student Interview). Another participant, who was working part-time and attending college, expressed high hopes for their future: *"I really like to study, and I think education is very important. … I like the people [at work], but it's not my dream to be there. … I hope one day I finish my certification and work in accounting"* (Student Interview). One educator described their students' participation in a project that fosters a positive school culture as follows:

*"You want to know what resiliency is; they have it in spades. You want to know what engagement and learning is; they have it in spades. You want to know what dedication to self-community is; these are the leaders."*

– Educator Interview

When asked about the successes of older refugee youth in school, a participant responded as follows:

*"Their resiliency and … that they are so driven … the attributes they bring, their work ethic, their ability to … really focus, and … really work hard is amazing to me. … I look at the potential of this group of students, given opportunities and the right environment, they can achieve so much in such a short amount of time. … Their work ethic, and the ability to really put everything they have into achieving something, is one of the greatest reasons why they find success."*

– Education Interview

### Gratitude and Appreciation

In response to the trauma and interrupted schooling encountered while living in war-torn countries or in refugee camps, refugee youth often express a deep gratitude and appreciation for their new lives in Canada. In addition, they are grateful to be safe from violence and war, and to find teachers and classrooms that are supportive, caring, and welcoming (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Oudshoorn et al., 2019; Shakya et al., 2010; Stewart, 2012).

When discussing their learning experiences in school, it was apparent that refugee youth were grateful for the effort and support offered by their teachers: *"I like to have positive people, so in this school we have many teachers [who] are positive, welcoming you, respect you, and talking to you, [show] kindness, yeah"* (Student Interview). Further into the conversation, this participant described how helpful teachers were in understanding body language:

*"In Canada, the teachers are professional … and they have experience and can understand what you are saying and they know body language when you use your hands, when you want to describe something. They will say 'use your hands,' even if you can't remember what you want to say … they have skills."*

– Student Interview

Another participant shared the following: *"They teach us good and they show us love and they give us everything. They teach us so carefully. That's what*

*I really like about this school"* (Student Interview). Educators also commented on how the classroom provided a safe and happy place for their refugee students: *"What is most wonderful about what I do is that when they come to my classroom … they know that here it's about them … and learning English. It's a happy place actually, and … a safe place"* (Educator Interview).

## Parental Expectations

Refugee youth often attribute their hopes and aspirations in education to the involvement of their families, which can be in the form of advice and encouragement to stay in school and an emphasis on the value of school (Agrawal & Sangapala, 2021; Kanu, 2008; Stermac et al., 2012; Stewart et al., 2019). One participant stated that their parents *"wanted to see me do something and not nothing. … That's my main thing for them, I want to do like, not just for me [but] also for them. I want them to be proud of me"* (Student Interview).

After attending school in Syria, and experiencing disrupted and then lack of schooling in Lebanon, this participant shared the following:

*"My mom was [saying to me], 'Okay, you were one year off. I need you to go to school. … You study, your education is your weapon. Nobody will look after you when you're older … you'll have to take care of yourself.'"*

– Student Interview

Another participant commented on the parental expectations about academic achievement and encouraging influence on their children:

*"In their cultures, it's really ingrained that[refugee youth] have to go to school and … do well. So, our kids, they never miss school … even in the stormy days, they are always here … that's their role in the family. It's the parents [who say] 'Your job is to go to school and get a better future.'"*

– Educator Interview

In addition to parental expectations, many refugee youth aspire to become successful professionals, to contribute or give back to society (Shakya et al., 2010; Stewart et al., 2019). McWilliams & Bonet (2016) have noted that refugee youth may feel a "moral obligation" to help others through educational attainment (p. 8). As one refugee participant noted: *"If I have money, I want to go to college. I'd like to be a policeman. I like helping people so much"* (Student Interview). An educator shared a similar perspective about refugee students in their class: *"They know they need to do something for Canada as a payback … so they are always asking for opportunities to [give] something back, like to volunteer, to do stuff in the school. They really want to be involved"* (Educator Interview).

## EMBRACING A CULTURE OF CARING, INTEGRATION, INCLUSION, AND DIVERSITY

The arrival of refugee youth and families in smaller communities has created critical opportunities and challenges for schools which are at the forefront of educational policies, programs, and practices designed to facilitate successful integration and inclusion (Block et al., 2014; Dodd et al., 2021; Hos, 2020; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Although educators cannot influence past issues that refugee youth may have experienced, they are invaluable in providing supports to help students adjust and in creating a safe and welcoming space (Hos, 2020; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Stewart et al., 2019; Walker & Zuberi, 2019).

We use the term "inclusion" to reference the step beyond integration. It refers to a point at which newcomers are fully accepted in local and Canadian society and barriers to full social, economic, political, and community participation are eradicated. It signifies the ability to participate in local life in a manner that reflects goals, needs, and aspirations. Notably, IRCC's settlement model views settlement and integration as key components of its service model, invoking

both government-funded settlement services and the wider society to this end. The settlement-integration-inclusion continuum exceeds newcomer- and refugee-oriented services and entails the ongoing task of creating an inclusive society (see Silvius & Boddy, 2023, forthcoming). Early and continuous supports for education are crucial components in achieving this task.

## Teachers as Advocates for Students

Educators play a key role in advocating for their students (Fruja & Roxas, 2019; Gagne et al., 2018, Hos, 2016). As Taylor and Sidhu (2012) pointed out, "Advocacy can be viewed as a critical dimension of creating a culture of inclusion" (p. 49). One educator interviewed worked tirelessly to educate their students that they have a right to be in school until the age of 21. Correspondingly, they performed advocacy for their students in the education system so that decision-makers recognized this right as well, noting that they *"worked hard to have the body politic understand this isn't just a peg in a hole, these are peoples' lives. They have the right to have the education they need to be successful."*

Educators can be an important link between refugee youth and families to supports offered in the wider community by providing referrals to appropriate services. As Stewart (2012) notes, the people who support refugee youth are "those who take the time to personally connect with students and who exhibit perseverance, patience, and kindness" (p. 184). One educator mentioned how they connected refugee youth and their families to essential services, including youth employment centres and food kitchens. They added that *"a caring adult making that connection makes them feel like, 'I can do this.' If I can do it with them the first time, they can do it the next time. They know what to do … where to go … who to talk to."*

This same participant cautioned, however, that more effort could be made to establish community connections to access resources to help "build those bridges" for students: *"Schools and … teachers take*

*on a lot. … We think we're responsible for everything and we are not. … Schools like to be little islands sometimes … it's sometimes very inefficient."*

## Promoting Cultural Diversity

While the lack of recognition and understanding of cultural diversity is a barrier to building networks of community supports (Morrice et al., 2021; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009), providing culturally relevant learning opportunities and promoting cultural knowledge in a supportive environment offers effective educational experiences, not only for newcomers but for all students in the class (Ayoub & Zhou, 2021).

According to Taylor and Sidhu (2012), "Inclusive education is about valuing and responding to diversity, and ensuring that schools are supportive and engaging places for all students" (p. 53). The celebration of cultural diversity and an ethos of equity and inclusion are identified as fundamental to successfully supporting refugee students (Block et al, 2014). In describing the successes affecting older refugee youth in the community, a participant shared the following:

*"The diversity in the school is so good for the school culture. … It's very good for the community to be reminded that we are not all the same. … It is built into our school system that we believe in that diversity and try to foster it. It is also making us better teachers. … Cultural diversity is good, educationally it challenges us. I feel enriched just listening to all these other stories."*

– Educator Interview

Another participant spoke about cultural diversity's benefits to the local community:

*"Our community is richer because of our involvement and our community has become more diverse. I love seeing refugee kids on the baseball field … and in the swimming pool and in the recreational activities. When that integration is successful and our refugee kids and their families feel like part of the community, then I*

*feel like that was a really big success."*

<div align="right">– Educator Interview</div>

## Supports from Manitoba Education

Many participants spoke about the supports received from Manitoba Education in terms of sharing information and providing resources pertaining to refugee students. As one participant noted: *"We have great support from … Manitoba Education. If we ever have any questions, I know that I or anyone from our school can pick up the phone and we're going to get connected with somebody who can help"* (Educator Interview). This same participant acknowledged the support of the Intensive Newcomer Support (INS) Grant[17]: *"We know that there is some contingency funding that we can access to get the right supports into place"* (Educator Interview).

There were also positive reflections about participation on curriculum development committees. With reference to work on the Manitoba Curriculum Framework for EAL and LAL Programming committees, this participant pointed out: *"I'm really happy, excited about the way the curriculum is going at the department. … It's going to be a good resource"* (Educator Interview). The department's sharing of support documents with smaller communities was also recognized: *"For us, who are small compared to [other school divisions], that's instrumental because we don't have the capacity to build some of those documents or do some of that work on our own"* (Administrator Interview).

### SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS, APPROACHES, AND STRATEGIES

Some educators provided examples of program models, pedagogical practices, and teaching tools that they use to help refugee youth with academic and social integration within the school community. A participant working for a transition program articulated the approach they employ:

*"We make sure we get to know each student and not make assumptions … because they all come with such very different experiences and knowledge. We do our very best to … know what they can do … what experiences they had and we honour those experiences. … We give them credits for the languages they speak. … When they're working, we'll give them an employment credit. We're very efficient in how we're teaching but with practical content which is going to be useful in their lives moving forward."*

<div align="right">– Educator Interview</div>

Below, we highlight specific approaches and programs in the smaller communities under discussion, drawing from our interviews and focus groups and/or publicly available information.

- **The EAL Bridging and Transitioning Program for Newcomer Youth**

The EAL Bridging and Transitioning Program, based at Prairie Hope High School (see Insert G), is a self-paced program with flexible scheduling and a lower student-teacher ratio, providing the opportunity to learn English and earn a Mature Student Diploma. Designed for students aged 18 to 21, the program is tailored for young adult newcomer students who can work towards high school credits while also accessing Brandon School Division and community supports for EAL, literacy, and academic learning. Students attend classes with direct instruction while also working at their own pace. When arriving to Canada as young adult EAL learners, they may not have time to complete a regular Manitoba High School Diploma before

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17   The INS Grant is funding provided to Manitoba school divisions who submit proposals for developing intensive specialized programming for newcomer adolescent and young adult learners in Grades six to 12 with significantly disrupted/limited education due to war, civil conflict, poverty, or cultural backgrounds. More information is available at: https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/support/ins_grant/docs/guidelines.pdf.

turning 21, therefore the program helps students work towards earning a Mature Student Diploma.

Part of the program focuses on offering students support in accessing employment services, while also engaging in class discussions and embedding employment topics into class assignments. Students are also encouraged to participate in partnerships already established with local post-secondary institutions to learn more about opportunities in their areas of interest. Volunteer opportunities are offered, providing Canadian work experience and situations for using language. When students are ready to transition out of the program, they receive supports to help them bridge to other services or enter the workforce.

- **While You Were at School Narrative Writing Project**

This narrative writing project was developed as a teaching tool for LAL learners to share their past experiences and life stories of what they were doing while age-equivalent Canadian students would have been in school. As part of the project, the main character in the book *Homes: A Refugee Story*[18] was incorporated as a mentor guide for students. This participant explained how the project was a beneficial learning experience for one student in particular:

*"For him, to sit one-on-one and have his story shared … to be able to give life to his lived experience and have it received was monumental, a lightbulb went on for this student … as far as understanding his value and worth in the classroom."*

– Educator Interview

This participant elaborated further as to how the project enabled refugee students to "bring their voices forward" in sharing their life stories:

*"They're the knowledge holders, [they] see themselves as teachers … and make their stories comprehensible to a large audience … and those stories are powerful. … If these students … can take a story about themselves or their culture or their religion and build that narrative piece … in a way that can be shared … then that's how we build awareness."*

– Educator Interview

- **Student Presentations Based on the Book Refugee**

For a class project, students were instructed to read the book *Refugee*[19] and then give presentations on one of the three historical moments as described in the book. The educator explained that one of the students was a refugee from Syria who was very fearful when they first arrived four years ago, but who was now prepared to make a presentation and share personal experiences about their life in Syria and link it with the character in the book. Reflecting on the student's progress, the educator commented: *"That tells me that there's a lot of courage in her to be able to now open up and talk about what happened"* (Educator Interview).

Other strategies and approaches for newcomer students mentioned by participants were to garden in the classroom as a strategy to deal with trauma, and to provide Welcome Backpacks that were filled with items such as numeracy and literacy pieces, alphabet tiles, money manipulatives, and games for learning as well as enjoyment.

There were also approaches and tools that educators would like to have had more of in working with refugee students. These included greater access to technology devices, teaching programs, and apps; a half-day onsite school for LAL learners; an intensive course about Canada and learning English upon arrival; more opportunity to work one-on-one with students; and

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18    *Homes* is the true story of how a 10-year-old boy, Abu Bakr Al Rabeeah, emigrated with his family from a war zone in Homs, Syria and ultimately found safety in Canada. More information is available at: http://winnieyeung.ca/homes-a-refugee-story/

19    Refugee (2017), by Alan Gratz.  More information is available at: https://www.alangratz.com/writing/refugee/

being able to do more group work with students to learn more about working cooperatively and problem-solving. These were important skills to learn because, as one participant put it: *"Those are very Western kinds of concepts that a lot of [students] struggle with and need more practice with"* (Educator Interview).

## GAPS IN SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

As Jarman and Foster (2022) contend, establishing "the right to be rural" necessitates ongoing advocacy. Seeking the rights and opportunities that are implicit and explicit in universal models of citizenship–healthcare, education, livelihood, representation, mobility, policies, and public services–requires practical solutions in rural and remote areas, particularly when such areas remain governed by larger centres in important ways.

While the study identified successful programs and strategies for working with refugee students, gaps in services and supports were identified that pose serious barriers to further progress, particularly in smaller communities. Adequate services and supports are critical for refugee youth to make successful transitions through the education system to their future lives and long-term integration outcomes (Kanu, 2008; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Morrice et al., 2020). These gaps are identified as follows:

### • EAL and LAL Programs and Staff

Participants spoke of the need for more EAL and LAL teaching staff, especially as greater numbers of language learners are entering the education system. The lack of adequate teaching resources can leave educators feeling unprepared to address the complex needs of their students, as this participant–who had a combined class of 25 EAL and LAL students–explained:

*"To do good work, you just need more people … one teacher per 10 students would be a much better teacher/student ratio than no teacher/student ratio. … People need to be pushed to do … good work. Sometimes, there needs to be resources thrown at it …*

*that means dollars to fund positions."*

– Educator Interview

There were also indications that not enough resources were being made available to provide separate/sheltered programming for LAL learners and that it could be viewed as an "add-on."

*"There is a need for an additional layer of support. … We often feel like we're kind of scrambling in rural areas to do the best we can with what we have. [LAL learners] are not in separate segregated environments because we just can't … do that. We couldn't provide the professional staffing … there's a risk of it being seen as an add-on or something separate, and yet the reality is that our context creates the pressure that we have to figure out how to include kids in schooling because they can't be separate."*

– Educator Interview

### • Mental Health Supports

As discussed above, refugees tend to underutilize mental health services due to cultural differences, but, at the same time, there exists a lack of adequate resources and services to meet needs. The adequate provision of mental health services will increase the well-being and safety of refugee students and decrease their level of psychosocial stress (Kanu, 2008). According to one participant:

*"Mental health supports are a challenge in rural Manitoba … it's a great struggle right now in post-COVID 19 and even beforehand. So, resources are definitely limited … the availability of mental health resources is probably the biggest thing that's lacking in rural areas."*

– Administrator Interview

Another participant expressed concern about not being able to meet refugee youths' mental health needs: *"We have to assume that [mental health needs are] out there because this is affecting a lot of people. … If we don't have … help or support helping the*

*refugees … then we are not fully fulfilling our purpose"* (SWIS Interview).

## • **Professional Development/Training**

Educators can feel challenged in meeting the learning needs of their refugee students as they are often not fully aware of their past experiences, learning challenges, and emotional distress (Ayoub & Zhou, 2016; 2021; Gagne et al., 2018; Kanu, 2008). Raising awareness among school staff about refugee students' needs through professional development (PD) opportunities can be a crucial factor in facilitating changes to school practices (Block et al., 2014; Stewart, 2012). One educator pointed out that having some background information beforehand about their students, as well as professional development, would have been helpful.

Providing PD opportunities in culturally competent teaching strategies and techniques for instructing refugee youth helps educators develop a knowledge base and pedagogical skills that will support their work with students (Gagne et al., 2018; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Stewart et al., 2019). A participant in a SWIS focus group wondered if they could have been provided with a "cheat sheet" to learn how schools are run in their students' countries of asylum or home countries.

Educators have also felt inadequately prepared to work with refugee students who have experienced trauma and that training in trauma-informed care and treatment interventions can enhance their effectiveness in addressing their needs (Dodd et al., 2021; Kirova, 2019; Walker & Zuberi, 2019). As one participant pointed out:

*"Professional development could be helpful. Oftentimes, teachers in rural areas may not fully understand the complexity and experiences of trauma that children have gone through … and how that may impact their learning. They may also not be familiar with the type of education system the students had studied in previously [and] how different the Canadian*

*system is. So, just a greater awareness and … perhaps more empathy and understanding of the complexities of a student who has not been in formal education for some time."*

– Administrator Interview

## • **Additional SWIS Staff**

Although SWIS staff and settlement services are funded by IRCC, concerns were raised about the need for additional staff and interpreters, as this participant indicated:

*"We have a couple of students who have no English at all … and somebody has to be there to [interpret] whatever they are trying to say in English. Even if there[are] two settlement workers, that is good, but one does not cut it."*

– SWIS Interview

During an interview, an educator suggested that refugee students can become lost in the system with many schools and not enough SWIS, noting that four full-time SWIS felt "overwhelmed" being responsible for 20 schools in the division. They asked, *"How can four individuals really serve the needs of all those newcomer families?"* They wondered if newcomer students and families were underserved because they are not "the squeaky wheels."

## • **Restore Funding Reductions**

In addition to the need to address the funding gaps in services and supports, there were also challenges created from funding reductions to programs and staffing that impacted refugee students and their families. For example, there were staffing cuts to the EAL Welcome Centre that had responsibility for registering newcomers with schools, conducting prior knowledge assessments, and preparing reports for EAL teachers. As one participant noted:

*"I don't know what assessment will look like because right now we have consistent assessments with one location and one person doing the same assessment*

and getting reports as teachers. That was huge because I was prepared. But moving forward, I'll do all of that with my new students and as will every school."

– Educator Interview

There were also funding reductions to EAL and LAL programs and staffing as it was deemed to be no longer needed, as this participant explained:

*"There was a time in the school division where … we had multiple stages of language learning, sheltered content classes … a full suite of EAL programming, but in recent years we've pulled that back to say, 'Well, now everybody should know how to do this because this is not new for us.'"*

– Educator Interview

Another participant spoke about the funding reductions to EAL classes and wondered who would make the adaptations for LAL learners. One educator reported that they saw the number of EAL classes reduced from five to three, meaning students enter mainstream classes prematurely: *"The expectation then is on teachers to do the adaptations for language learners or the LAL population. If you don't understand trauma … who is going to [make adaptations]? Who?"*

There were also concerns that funding reductions created inconsistencies in language program offerings that ultimately impacted refugee students:

*"I wish we would be a bit more consistent in our long-term thinking about how we're working with these student groups because we know it takes … five-to-seven years to become proficient [to learn English], even longer when they've got gaps in their academic content. Sometimes, we are short-sighted in our programming. We put something in and then pull it out … and then that creates lots of inconsistencies in how our kids are experiencing high school."*

– Educator Interview

## CHALLENGES FACING SMALLER COMMUNITIES

Smaller communities offer the potential for strong community support networks and social supports that provide a safe and welcoming space for refugees (Haugen, 2019). Newcomers are attracted to smaller communities because of the friendliness, lower crime rates, shorter travel distances, and the overall high quality of life (Esses & Carter, 2019). But attracting and retaining newcomers is a key issue as factors such as fewer employment and education opportunities, lack of affordable housing, and need for more settlement services are major barriers (Agrawal & Sangapala, 2021). Further, the lack of amenities can contribute to out-migration to larger centres. For example, newcomers are readily able to find cultural foods and places to worship in larger centres, as well as larger cultural communities that they can relate to and interact with (Esses & Carter, 2019).

Some participants expressed concerns about whether refugee youth and/or their families would remain in their smaller communities:

*"The chances of [refugee families] staying in this town past their children graduating from high school is low. They end up going to a major centre where there are other supports, you know, fellow Arabic-speaking. … We want to keep them here, but we're not surprised if they head to a larger centre where there's someone who can hire them from their own culture."*

– Educator Interview

According to an educator, it was up to the local community to determine how to keep refugees living there, viewing newcomers in general as a community "resource" and "investment." They witnessed their students move to larger cities, which were "more enticing culturally" and offered amenities that their community could not. Retaining them was a community effort and *"not something schools can do alone … our community has to have the foresight to figure out how we are going to help them feel like this*

*is a good place to stay."*

While participants acknowledged the smaller population base and fewer resources available compared to a larger centre like Winnipeg, they identified specific challenges in their communities pertaining to educational programming for refugee youth. Most frequently cited, as discussed earlier, was the lack of programming for language learners, as this participant pointed out: *"We … have to be creative about how we're providing sheltered programming … because we can't provide all day, all the sheltered programming"* (Educator Interview). Another participant explained that their community would benefit from something like the BridgES Program[20] housed at Seven Oaks School Division: *"I'd love to be able to extend my program beyond 21 because I've had many students who definitely would have continued … and gotten their credits"* (Educator Interview).

Participants pointed out other concerns about not being able to provide educational services to newcomers in smaller communities, in addition to the inadequate mental health services discussed earlier. These included the lack of a centralized approach and after-school programming, and the need for more communication about when newcomers are arriving to a community—including the numbers that are arriving, their needs, and language levels. As one participant keenly observed: *"Teachers are doing their best, but as we get more and more newcomers into our area, definitely … I can see [a] strain on resources"* (SWIS Focus Group). This suggests that there are limits to what smaller communities can provide to newcomers given existing resources.

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20    BridgES is an IRCC-funded bridging program housed at Seven Oaks School Division's Adult Learning Centre. The program focuses on transitioning older youth aged 18-25 from high school to further education or employment.  More information is available at: https://www.7oaks.org/school/adulteducation/Registration/Pages/BridgES.aspx#/=.

# Discussion

Increasing scholarly attention is being given to the settlement experiences of refugees in smaller communities across Canada as these areas have attracted more refugees in the last decade (Agrawal & Sangapala, 2021; Fang et al., 2018; Haugen, 2019, 2022; Perzyna & Agrawal, 2022). According to research from The Conference Board of Canada (McIntyre & Antunes, 2023), the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst in shifting migration patterns among newcomers away from Canada's major cities[21] to the smaller centres. The research also notes that many of Canada's smaller centres have tighter labour markets, providing an opportunity to ensure labour-market success for newcomers. While the reversal of pandemic trends will increase growth once again in the major cities, some pandemic-related effects will persist that will enable smaller centres to increase their contribution to economic growth. The authors conclude that attracting and retaining newcomers is key to ensuring growth by marketing the benefits of living in smaller communities, building public awareness about immigration, and providing a welcoming environment and appropriate settlement services.

Given this type of scenario and the rising numbers of refugees coming to Manitoba, coupled with a growing labour market demand, the province has a stake in the educational success of refugee youth who arrive in smaller communities to settle. Research studies of refugee youth, in particular, are essential because there are substantial transitions occurring at this life stage that impact resettlement outcomes later in life.

The study begins with a focus on refugee youths'

pre-migration experiences before they resettled in Manitoba. They have been uprooted from their friends, communities, and–in some cases–families, with some having lived in refugee camps in dangerous circumstances before resettlement in Canada. Others have been exploited and marginalized while seeking asylum in a transition country.

The collaborative partnerships and cooperative networks among community members–including settlement services and SWIS, LIPs, schools and school divisions, local government, and faith-based and volunteer organizations (such as Build a Village)–are critical in welcoming refugees to their communities and supporting their successful integration. Facilitating the adaptation of refugee youth to school routines and practices, and ensuring their sense of belonging, would not be possible without the cooperative efforts between SWIS and educators in the schools, as illustrated through the many examples of learning opportunities. It is recognized, however, that there were some communication challenges, and that smaller communities face concerns with retention of refugees and their families as they are often attracted to larger centres.

The study found that refugees face many barriers with resettlement, confirming the statement that "resettlement is not the end of the refugee experience and education and other challenges continue long after resettlement" (Morrice et al., 2021, p. 401). Refugees with limited or no formal education before settlement are often limited in their ability to acquire English language skills. Study participants raised concern that, with limited English language proficiency

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21    Canada's four largest census metropolitan areas (CMAs) are Toronto, Vancouver, Montréal, and Calgary.

and having to assume many family responsibilities, it is not uncommon for refugee youth to opt out of school, leaving them with minimal training. This, in turn, will limit their future opportunities to earn more than minimum wage. A consequence of this situation is that poor language skills are identified as a main barrier to employment, yet gaining employment is, ironically, one of the key barriers to continue to learn and improve English language skills.

Another complicating factor is that, due to the grade placement policy and, in some cases, missing transcripts, refugee youth may not have the chance to earn a high school diploma before turning 21–at which point they will age out of the public school system. Oftentimes, students are being issued E-diplomas that limit entry to post-secondary education as they are not recognized by post-secondary institutions.

The study showed that LAL learners are particularly challenged to learn English and attain proficiency before aging out. Therefore, more funding should be prioritized for intensive language training, as well as for more EAL teachers and programs. In addition, funding reductions to EAL staff and the services provided for intakes, assessments, and preparation of reports as newcomers first arrive should be restored, and these responsibilities should not be offloaded onto teachers, as they will be stretched even further to take on these added tasks as they fulfill their ongoing responsibilities.

The recent Manitoba government funding announcements of a $900,000[22] increase in supports to the Intensive Newcomer Support Grant (Government of Manitoba, 2022b), a $100 million increase in operating grants to school divisions (Government of Manitoba, 2023a), and $4 million to support projects with the Newcomer Community Integration Support Program (Government of Manitoba, 2023b)

are certainly a welcomed and encouraging start to put resources where they are needed. However, some school divisions, including those in smaller communities, have expressed concerns that current funding levels are not keeping pace with rising costs and years of chronic underfunding, and they will be forced to cut programs, services, and staff (Gowriluk, 2023). As one school division representative from a smaller centre explained: "Anytime a position in the division is eliminated, the workload for that position doesn't go away. It just gets spread amongst the staff that remain. Over time, this workload becomes unmanageable" (Darbyson, 2023, p.3).

Refugee youth exposed to mental and physical trauma due to war, conflict, or time spent living in refugee camps can experience social isolation, loneliness, racism, and bullying that can have adverse impacts on learning capacity and psychological well-being following resettlement. Refugees tend to underutilize mental health services due, in part, to cultural differences. At the same time, there are inadequate resources and services to meet mental health needs of refugee youth in smaller communities. To enhance the integration of refugee youth and their families into their communities, adequate funding must be provided for mental health services.

Many participants expressed gratitude for feeling safe in their new country and being back in school; however, they also experienced isolation and discrimination. They were ambitious and motivated and held high aspirations for completing school, with expectations that it will likely lead to better jobs and a bright future. Additionally, many felt a "moral obligation" to those left behind to make the most of their educational opportunities. But many participants expressed concern that economic considerations and the immediate need to earn a living to support their families were overshadowing refugee youths' goals of

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22    For the 2023-34 school year, the Manitoba government announced that the total Intensive Newcomer Support Grant to schools and school divisions will be increased to $2.4 million due to an influx of newcomers from Ukraine (Government of Manitoba, 2023c).

gaining an education.

Schools are critical for promoting successful settlement outcomes and social inclusion, and, as the study found, educators are advocates for their refugee students and take the time to create a safe and welcoming environment, foster their development, and help support their academic, social, and emotional integration. The adoption of an inclusive teaching approach, the promotion of cultural diversity in a supportive environment, and the ongoing support of Manitoba Education will facilitate positive educational experiences and outcomes. More EAL academic bridging and transition programs, such as the Prairie Hope High School model and the teaching strategies and pedagogic practices discussed in this report, are strongly encouraged as they are instrumental in building relationships and inspiring confidence among refugee youth as they work towards fulfilling their educational goals.

The "scalability" of services and programs for refugee youth is a question of ongoing importance when seeking to enhance the educational outcomes of refugee youth in smaller communities. Urban contexts have a greater population to enable the creation of "magnet schools" that offer specific services–including those for EAL, refugees, and newcomers–to a wider geographical catchment. Urban population density theoretically enables the creation of sophisticated programming on this basis, serving students from multiple neighbourhoods, if not school divisions. While smaller communities face challenges in achieving "economies of scale" in service funding and provision, the challenge to do so is worth undertaking, particularly if smaller communities are able to offer paths to full social inclusion for refugee youth and families. It is critically important that refugee youth and their families living in small communities are not underserved by the public systems that are essential for their short- and long-term well-being.

Similarly, direct and indirect settlement services along the continuum of settlement, integration, and inclusion are needed for refugee families in smaller communities. Efforts are required to raise overall community familiarity with the realities of resettled refugee families. Administrators and educators in small centres should continue to be welcomed into mutual learning and capacity-building networks, including SPOs, LIPs, ethnocultural community organizations, and umbrella groups.

The study identified gaps in supports and services that should be addressed in order to remove barriers to meeting the needs of refugee youth. Most noticeable was the inadequate supports provided to LAL learners before they age out of the system. More needs to be done, with new approaches to support the process of language acquisition with a longer-term strategy that invests in English language education to better meet the individual needs, capacities, and career aspirations of refugee youth.

Educators did not feel sufficiently informed about the backgrounds of their refugee students nor adequately prepared to deal with complex trauma resulting from pre-migration experiences. Educators should receive more professional development pertaining to culturally responsive educational practices and trauma-informed approaches to support their work with refugee students.

While this study presents a snapshot of interrupted schooling among refugee youth, further research should be conducted to better understand these issues. Longer-term settlement needs and educational outcomes are difficult to predict without further investigation. Smaller communities rely on local support networks, government-funded immigration partnerships, and SPOs to assist with refugee settlement and integration, but if funding for these services does not rise in proportion to the increasing numbers of arriving refugees, these supports are unlikely to be sustainable, over the longer term, to meet the needs of the refugee population.

There is merit in returning to the refugees interviewed

and asking questions similar to those posed in this study. This would help determine if their challenges have shifted and their educational goals are being realized, and–more importantly–if they are still residing in their original communities. Additionally, data on high school graduation and retention rates and other related issues should be collected and shared to better inform educators and policy-makers on how best to help refugee youth succeed and fulfill their aspirations.

# Recommendations

This study presents evidence of overall positive post-settlement experiences in which refugees are warmly welcomed to smaller communities, due to existing community networks, immigration partnerships, and strong collaborative relationships between SPOs, school division offices, and schools. While smaller communities represent a safe and caring space, many refugee youth are grappling with the impacts of pre-migration experiences in addition to a multitude of academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges.

With increasing numbers of refugees settling in Manitoba's smaller communities, the numbers and types of services and programs must be supported with adequate resources. While settlement services and schools appear to be coping with manageable numbers of refugee families at present, they do not have the long-term capacity to meet the increasing demands as the province welcomes more newcomers. Expansion of services and programs will require additional funding from federal and provincial governments and an increase in staffing levels as well.

The following recommendations are intended to assist school divisions, SPOs, and other community stakeholders in furthering education programming, services, and supports for newcomers to improve their ability to thrive in the education system. Building on the Supported Transitions report, these recommendations are based on input from the steering committee and current literature and consider the recommendations from relevant Manitoba-based reports[23] intended to improve the lives of refugees and non-refugees. Moreover, these recommendations are framed as part of ongoing discussion, collaboration, and mutual learning amongst the settlement sector, other direct and indirect services providers, LIPs, umbrella groups, ethnocultural organizations, and the school system.

## SERVICES, PROGRAMS, AND STAFFING

- Provide funding for LAL-sheltered programming, as resources have not been adequately provided to support the needs of these language learners. Without adequate LAL programming, refugee youth are often opting out of school to join the workforce, which leaves them with minimal training and limited English language proficiency and can severely constrain their future earning opportunities.

- Provide adequate funding for EAL and LAL staffing so vulnerable refugee youth are receiving the individualized attention and tailored approach as needed and not getting "lost" in the system.

- Restore funding cut from much-needed EAL and LAL programs and staffing to ensure the necessary adaptations can be made to help SIFE succeed and thrive in the education system.

- Consider developing a longer-term strategy that supports intensive language and learning acquisition that will help SIFE meet educational goals and enables them to invest in their future.

- Invest in culturally safe mental health services and programs to support SIFE who have experienced

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23    These include the Report of the Immigration Advisory Council (14 February, 2023) https://immigratemanitoba.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/immigration-council-report_en.pdf and the Final Report of the Poverty and Education Task Force (24 February, 2023) https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/action_plan/docs/petf_final_report_eng.pdf

trauma and/or are experiencing symptoms of PTSD.

- Increase awareness of SIFE reluctance to access mental health services due to cultural differences and/or negative pre-migration experiences by reducing the stigma of conducting assessments or making accommodations to student learning plans and by building a foundation of trust with SIFE and their parents.

- Invest in professional development opportunities for school staff and administrators focusing on inclusive, culturally responsive teaching strategies and trauma-informed care and practices to better understand and address the unique needs of SIFE.

- Develop anti-racist and anti-bullying programs and interventions that promote a whole-school ethos of inclusion, mutual respect, and well-being.

- Expand the academic bridging and transitional program model based at Prairie Hope High School to enable more SIFE to stay in school longer, earn credits, and obtain a mature high school diploma.

- Consider developing more pedagogical practices and teaching tools that offer meaningful learning opportunities for SIFE, build confidence, and support integration.

- Explore the adoption of a BridgES-type program with targeted literacy and numeracy supports that enables SIFE to remain in school beyond 21 and supports transitions to further education or employment.

- Invest in after-school programs to provide more flexible scheduling options for SIFE with multiple responsibilities, including the need to work to support families while attending school.

- Offer intensive arrival programs to help SIFE be better acclimatized to school practices, rules, and routines and to help prepare educators to meet individual needs, capacities, and aspirations of SIFE.

## INFORMATION AND EDUCATION OUTREACH

- Ensure that all principals and educators are aware that SIFE have the right to attend school up to age 21, and inform SIFE of other options to pursue education beyond high school (e.g., trades and apprenticeship training, English language, numeracy, and literacy classes).

- Ensure that SIFE are given accurate information early on in the development of their student learning plan pertaining to the benefits and limitations of E-credits in pursuing their educational pathways.

- Ensure that schools and post-secondary institutions do more to inform SIFE about how to navigate educational pathways from high school to post-secondary education and facilitate decision-making about pursuing educational goals and fulfilling career aspirations.

- Ensure SIFE are informed of educational options including possible career pathways, scholarships, bursaries, and other sources of financial support that may be available.

- Ensure that SWIS and schools identify role models and mentors to work with SIFE to help form friendships, navigate educational pathways, and reduce information barriers.

- Provide administrators and schools with more details, in advance of the arrival of newcomers to their communities, to enable better planning and

preparation.

## GOVERNMENT, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

- Manitoba Education should collaborate with schools to create a policy that requires schools to inform refugee youth and their families that taking E-credit courses limits opportunities for pursuing post-secondary education and that the reasons for taking E-credit courses should align with refugees' future goals, whether they be education- or employment-related.

- Manitoba Education should work with schools to review the grade placement policy so SIFE will be less likely to age out and leave school and more likely to complete courses and graduate from high school.

- Manitoba Education and schools should review the pace of covering curriculum content for LAL learners to maximize possibilities of high school completion.

- IRCC and schools should review the current SWIS staffing complement in smaller communities to ensure service provision can be maintained with the arrival of increasing numbers of refugee youth and families.

- IRCC and SPOs should ensure there are interpreters available in SIFE's first language to assist SWIS in their work with SIFE.

- Optimize communication and collaboration between SWIS and schools to ensure SIFE are best served by the supports, services, and programs available.

- Government (local and provincial), school divisions, and community stakeholders should collaborate to offer more regional incentives to augment what smaller communities can offer to improve retention of refugee youth (e.g., provisions for more cultural, religious, and family events and greater access to post-secondary education and employment opportunities).

- Collect and share data and information on SIFE high school graduation, retention rates, and career plans to inform program planning and policy-making on ways to improve longer-term education outcomes.

- Ensure that SIFE feel represented in their classrooms, and by those who support them, by working to implement employment equity policies in smaller communities and sharing data on teaching demographics vis-à-vis student population groups.

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# Appendices

## INSERT A - PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE LOCAL IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIP

The Portage la Prairie Local Immigration Partnership (PLIP), one of five LIPs in Manitoba, was established in November 2017 with a mandate to help Portage la Prairie and the surrounding area to become increasingly welcoming to and inclusive of newcomers, and to support the economic, social, cultural, and civic/political integration of newcomers. Covering multiple sectors, the PLIP involves all levels of government, newcomer serving agencies, a variety of public institutions, and other organizations and bodies in the community. It is coordinated by the Portage la Prairie Community Revitalization Corporation, a not-for-profit entity with a broad mandate to strengthen the well-being of Portage la Prairie.

Community-based LIPs were established by the Government of Canada and are funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada as part of a Canada-wide project to support the settlement and integration of newcomers in their communities.

To facilitate its work with newcomers, the PLIP Strategic Plan 2018-2020 includes three guiding principles of communication, connection, and community; five strategic directions that include language learning and educational opportunities, social integration and building a sense of community, meeting labour market needs, affordable housing, and enhancing public transportation options; and 12 goals (see: https://www.portagecrc.com/local-immigration-partnership-strategic).

The PLIP Action Plan 2020-2025 was developed to establish deliverable, measurable, and time-specific goals to guide working groups comprised of experts, stakeholders, and other community members with an interest in the five priority areas for newcomer integration: transportation, employment and entrepreneurship, childcare, public and Indigenous relations, and housing (see: https://www.portagecrc.com/local-immigration-action-plan-2020-2025).

Sources:

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## INSERT B - BUILD A VILLAGE

Based in Altona, Manitoba, Build a Village is a charitable organization with a mandate to assist refugee families in establishing their lives in Canada. It was started by Ray Loewen in 2001 after his daughter returned from a trip to Guatemala with Canadian Mennonite University's School of Discipleship, having been hosted by a local family for three weeks. As Loewen stated: "I thought, if there is a family with almost nothing in Guatemala who is willing to share what they have with our daughter, I should be willing to share a little more of what I have as well" (Canadian Mennonite, 2016).

In 2015, Build a Village spearheaded the sponsorship of five Syrian families, including 33 children ranging in age from one to 17 years, in partnership with the Mennonite Central Committee and IRCC (Seeds Church, 2015).

As Loewen explained, "the organization was one of the first rural locations in Manitoba to begin accepting asylum seekers, noting it was thought at the time that refugee resettlement needed to happen in city centres" (Pembina Valley Online, 2017). Since then, Build a Village has sponsored 25 refugee families to come to Altona from places like Colombia, Iraq, Sudan, and Tanzania (Canadian Mennonite, 2016).

In reflecting on the importance of supporting and assisting the integration of newcomer families, Loewen commented that "because no one chooses to become a refugee, so it is necessary to provide a smoother transition. Our goal is to try to give newcomer families the best possible start to their life in Canada" (Pembina Valley Online, 2017).

Sources:

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## INSERT C - REGIONAL CONNECTIONS IMMIGRANT SERVICES

Regional Connections is "a one-stop-shop that provides services, resources, and referrals for newcomers" (https://regionalconnections.ca/about-us/) with offices in Altona, Dauphin, Morden, and Winkler. The organization can therefore provide programs and services in a larger number of communities than would be possible with one single regional centre.

Regional Connections provides language training and settlement services for immigrants and refugees to the Pembina Valley region, and it can trace its roots to 1983 when the first English at Work programs were launched. Since this time, the organization has grown with the goal of meeting newcomer clients' settlement and integration needs through client-focused services and programs (see: https://regionalconnections.ca/about-us/our-history/).

Regional Connections offers four main programs for newcomers: 1) Settlement, which includes settlement needs assessment, settlement information and orientation, making connections in the community, and volunteering; 2) Employment Services to those who are unemployed or underemployed, eligible to work in Canada, and 18 years of age or older, 3) Language Learning, including Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), Learning English for Work, Adult Literacy classes, and onsite childcare; and 4) Community Connections with opportunities to make friends, establish connections and to get to know the local community (see: https://regionalconnections.ca/).

Since 1998, 15,000 newcomers from over 130 countries have been welcomed to the area. With the increasingly diverse nature of the surrounding communities, Regional Connections has prioritized hosting or co-hosting cultural events to celebrate newcomers who have moved to the area. In moving forward, "Regional Connections continues to build capacity to deliver relevant programs and services to newcomers to the region. We are building community together" (see: https://regionalconnections.ca/about-us/our-history/).

Sources:

Regional Connections Immigrant Services. https://regionalconnections.ca/

Regional Connections Immigrant Services: https://regionalconnections.ca/about-us/our-history/

## INSERT D - THE PORTAGE LEARNING AND LITERACY CENTRE

The non-profit Portage Learning and Literacy Centre (PLLC) offers a range of programs to support the literacy, education, employment, and life goals for residents of the Central Plains region. Its **Newcomer Settlement Services** include language training and community connection activities to help newcomers to participate in all facets of Canadian life. The Centre also offers formal English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and coordinates volunteers to offer informal language training (one-to-one, small group sessions, or Conversation Circles) (see: https://pllc.ca/programs/newcomer-settlement-services/).

Partnering with the Portage la Prairie School Division, the PLLC offers Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS), whose personnel assist eligible newcomer students, along with their families, to better understand the Canadian education system and smoothly transition to a new culture. A full range of settlement services for newcomers can be found at https://pllc.ca/programs/newcomer-settlement-services/.

The PLLC is is an accredited **Adult Learning Centre** offering adult education programs through a partnership with the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology (MITT). Students can earn a Mature Student High School Diploma (Mature Grade 12), including individual high school credits and upgrading, as well as enrol in an Adult Literacy Program for improving numeracy, writing/reading, and computer skills. A fully subsidized on-site daycare is available for students attending classes at the PLLC (see: https://pllc.ca/adult-education/).

**Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)** is offered to eligible adult learners. The associated ESL classes assist learners to attain the proficiency in English required for basic social interaction, to find employment, and to pursue educational goals. Before being placed in an English class within the language training program at the PLCC or through English Online, applicants will have their English level assessed, remotely at the PLLC, if needed, by the Winnipeg English Language Assessment and Referral Centre (WELARC). The test measures skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English (see: https://pllc.ca/programs/newcomer-settlement-services/).

Source: The Portage Learning and Literacy Centre. https://pllc.ca/

A not-for-profit, registered charity organization, Westman Immigrant Services (WIS) provides programs and services to newcomers throughout the Western Manitoba region. WIS is a direct service provider, offering adult English classes and settlement services, and works with community groups and organizations to build community newcomer service capacity. WIS has offices located in Brandon, Cartwright, Russell, and Virden (see: https://westmanimmigrantservices.ca/about-us/).

**Settlement Services** – WIS' settlement facilitators assist newcomers on their settlement and integration needs in their new communities. Free individual and family appointments are available at each WIS office to newcomers who are permanent residents, and WIS offers workshops, group sessions, and information sessions both in person and online. The WIS Brandon office offers childcare and interpretation services. Welcome to Brandon is a two-week settlement information and orientation program for newcomer permanent residents in the area, and it includes topics such as health, education, finances and banking, employment, and community services (see: https://westmanimmigrantservices.ca/settlement/). WIS also offers updates, information, and services to Ukrainians arriving in Brandon and the Westman region (see: https://westmanimmigrantservices.ca/ukraine/).

WIS partners with the Brandon School Division to offer the SWIS Program, a school-based settlement service that offers direct and immediate assistance to newcomers and their families. Youth program services in academic support, workshops, summer camps, sports and recreational programs, and employment are available to permanent residents (see: https://westmanimmigrantservices.ca/youth-programs/).

**English as a Second Language (ESL)** classes are available for newcomers with permanent residency, and class placement begins with an English level assessment (see: https://westmanimmigrantservices.ca/assessments/). WIS offers the Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program (CELPIP) test, a fully computer-delivered English language testing program (see: https://westmanimmigrantservices.ca/celpip/).

Childcare is available for clients attending English classes. The Welcome Here Program, a family literacy program for parents with young infant children, is offered through a partnership between WIS and the Elspeth Reid Family Resource Centre. Parents can meet other newcomer parents, learn English, and learn about parenting in Canada. (see: https://westmanimmigrantservices.ca/learn-english/)

Other WIS programs include Family and Children Programs, the Care for Newcomer Children Program, Employment Services, and the Resettlement Assistance Program.

Source: Westman Immigrant Services. https://westmanimmigrantservices.ca/.

## INSERT F- SETTLEMENT WORKERS IN SCHOOLS

Funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRCC) and part of the Settlement Services Program, Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) operates with the goal "to assist newcomer families in every way possible so that they successfully integrate into Canadian culture. We help these families to better understand the Canadian education system and are advocates in the schools and communities for these families" (see: https://eastmanimmigrantservices.com/settlement-workers-in-schools/).

SWIS works closely with schools to support newcomer students in school enrollment, orientation, participation, and success. SWIS builds cultural connections while mentoring and guiding students, supporting both students and their families in the process. For example, Regional Connections and SWIS provide information sessions on dressing for Canadian winters, how Manitoba's school systems work and how to fill out all school paperwork (see: https://regionalconnections.ca/2019/02/swis-program-is-encouraging-newcomers-in-local-school-divisions/).

The following is a list of just some of the many services that SWIS provides to newcomers:

- School Registrations

- Homework Help

- In-Class Assistance (i.e., assistance with school assignments)

- Online Assistance (i.e., assistance with school assignments via Zoom, or Google Hangouts, etc.)

- Translation/ Interpretation Services

- EAL and Literacy classes

- Assisting with Communication between Schools and Newcomer Families

- Needs-Assessment and Follow-Up

- Ensures timely referral to appropriate community services

- Connects with students on an ongoing basis

- Newcomer Awareness Presentations (in Class)

- Lunch Clubs, After-School Programs, and Sports Activities

- Peer Leadership/Mentorship Training to newcomer youth

- Summer Programming

- Promotes active participation of newcomer youth in extra-curricular activities

Sources:

Eastman Immigrant Services. Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS). https://eastmanimmigrantservices.com/settlement-workers-in-schools/

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## INSERT G - PRAIRIE HOPE HIGH SCHOOL

Opened in 2007 as an initiative of the Brandon School Division (BSD), Prairie Hope High School offers an alternative setting for students at risk of discontinuing their education. Students are self-directed and work at a flexible pace.

Prairie Hope's mission is to provide "a safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environment for students and fosters strong community relationships" with a foundation that is built on "self-paced programming aligned with provincial curricula, flexible program delivery, lower student-teacher ratio, and partnerships with community services" (https://www.bsd.ca/prairiehope/page/11154/our-vision-and-mission). Students can graduate by meeting requirements for either regular graduation (30 credits required) or mature student graduation.

The EAL (English as an Additional Language) Bridging and Transitioning Program for Newcomer Youth is designed for newcomer students between the ages of 18-21. Taking classes directly while also working at their own pace, students can work towards high school credits while also accessing Brandon School Division and community supports for EAL, literacy, and academic learning. The program helps students work towards earning a Mature Student Diploma, as young adult EAL learners may lack the time to complete a regular Manitoba High School Diploma before turning 21 (see: https://www.bsd.ca/prairiehope/page/12673/phhs-ela-program).

The program supports students in accessing employment services while also engaging in class discussions and embedding employment topics into class assignments. Students can learn more about post-secondary education opportunities in their areas of their interest, as well.

When students are ready to transition out of the program, they receive support to bridge to other services (e.g., Westman Immigrant Services, Assiniboine Community College, Brandon University, Brandon Literacy Council, or into the workforce through the support of Career & Employment Youth Services or other employment supports in the community).

Source: Prairie Hope High School. https://www.bsd.ca/prairiehope

Older Refugee Youth with Interrupted Schooling in
Smaller Communities in Manitoba