

## Transition Supports for International Secondary School Students

It's not enough to just provide orientation and give them the basics. We need to look beyond orientation -- how do we continue to meet their needs once the 'honeymoon period' has worn off? Getting used to a new culture and a new academic system can be quite challenging.

Darla Deardorff, Executive Director  
Association of International Education Administrators

**S**chools across the U.S. experience new arrivals from a variety of countries. One group are *international students* who, unlike immigrant students, are temporary visitors.

Nearly a million students from more than 200 different countries came to study at U.S.-based institutions in the 2021–2022 school year. According to IIE's spring **2023 Snapshot** on International Educational Exchange, international students added \$32 billion to the U.S. economy in 2022.

A shared concern for all new arrivals is transitioning into a new society and culture. This resource highlights a sample of supportive interventions for international secondary school students (and other newcomers). While research is somewhat limited, participant comments are positive in suggesting the supports promote understanding of the new situations, facilitate connection with others and with resources and activities, reduce anxieties, and promote feelings of well-being.

### Framing and Implementing Transition Supports

Schools at all levels devote some efforts to facilitating transitions. Such activity is one of the many student/learning supports needed to address barriers to learning and teaching. And analyses find that current school approaches to supporting transitions require reframing in terms of both breadth of focus and staffing that ensures effective implementation.

#### **Broadening Transition Supports and Embedding them into a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports.**

One of our Center's six domains of learning supports is devoted to transitions. Our broad focus encompasses and expands the specific interventions designed for international students (and other newcomers). While international students need immediate information about basic matters such as school enrollment and living arrangements, transportation, campus life, places to buy groceries and clothing, etc., transition needs continue daily and over the course of a school year (e.g., supports for daily transitions before, during, and after school, accessing special assistance and services). In addition, other barriers to learning and teaching must be addressed. See **International Students: Addressing Barriers to Successful Transition**.

**Dedicated Institutional Staff.** Effective implementation of any student/learning support requires leadership and staffing with assigned responsibilities for carrying out the interventions. Such staff uphold the vision for the work, work on improving it, and are accountable for its outcomes. See ***Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide***.

---

\*The material in this document builds on work done by Lucy Chang as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2023.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

## A Sample of Transition Interventions for International Students

The following range of interventions are illustrative of those that are used widely. However, only a few may be in play at any given school. And while research has long emphasized the value of staff who are equipped to comprehend multicultural and diversity concepts and identify and assist students encountering barriers and challenges, such personnel remain a scarce commodity in many schools.

**Parent Meetings Abroad.** Some secondary schools in the U.S. send school staff to the home countries of their international students to meet with parents. The focus is on clarifying educational policies affecting international students, describing the school a student will attend, discussing challenges about and supports for living in the U.S., and gaining a better understanding of the student and parent involvement. The hope is that the exchange will reduce parent concerns and develop an ongoing pattern of communication and support that is not characterized as overly involved with and burdensome to the student.

**Welcoming and Orientation.** As the number of international students in the U.S. has increased, many schools have introduced orientations specifically designed to welcome and address the transitional difficulties faced by these students. Such interventions may be offered before or after or in place of the regular new student orientation. Concerns have been raised that not including international (and immigrant) students in local student orientations has a negative impact on social integration.

**Student Packet.** In addition to general orientations, student packets provide more detailed information and are available for future reference.

**Peer Mentor-mentee Programs.** Experienced and supervised peers provide advice and facilitate connection with resources and activities. The interactions can mutually benefit mentors' and mentees' cultural understanding and their, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes. Mentors may be international students who having the same or similar cultural background with their mentees. Former newcomer students at the school such as immigrant students could also be mentors. Having been "through it," a mentor can empathize and understand what an international student is experiencing and needs in the way of support. Although there are language barriers and cultural differences, pairing an international student with a local peer mentor also is used. Staff supervising the program provide specific objectives and guidance and ensure the process is working smoothly.

Concerns that have arisen include some mentees sticking too closely to their mentors and not connecting contact with other peers. Another problem has been that some mentors have made mentees feel slighted and excluded.

**Discussion Boards.** Though face-to-face or in-person interaction between international and local students is desired, a virtual forum can effectively encourage exchanges. A discussion board can be hosted on a platform such as Reddit, or the school can establish the online forum.

**Parents Message Center/Group Chat.** To aid in ongoing communication between parents and the school, a virtual channel can be developed. Parents can send inquiries through a message center on a school's website or mobile app. Group chats can be organized on an app such as GroupMe, Line, and WeChat to enable parents to ask school staff questions and communicate with each other.

While the above activities underscore that some attention is being paid to transition supports for international students, the reality is that too many newcomers do not have the supports needed to make a successful transition.

## Concluding Comments

Schools across the U.S. are recruiting increasing numbers of international students. This trend calls for paying greater attention to improving how barriers to a successful transition are addressed. Many of these barriers are predictable and preventable. Moreover, many schools have laid a good foundation upon which to enhance a set of interventions that will improve the transition process not only for international students but for all students.

## References Used in Developing this Resource

- Alsafar, T. (2015). *The influence of a peer mentor program for international students on domestic peer mentors and their intercultural development*. Memorial University of Newfoundland. <http://research.library.mun.ca/id/eprint/8518>
- Archival, J.A. (2021). *International students' adjustments to U.S. high schools and helpful school supports for their social-emotional and academic needs*. Dissertation online at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4628531>
- Boening, C.H., & Miller, M.T. (2005). New student orientation programs promoting diversity. *The Community College Enterprise*, 11, 41-50. <https://www.schoolcraft.edu/pdfs/cce/11.2.41-50.pdf>
- California Department of Education. (2023). *Newcomer Students*. Online at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/newcomerstudnts.asp>
- Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. *Cross-Age Peer Mentorship Programs in Schools*. Online at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mentoring.pdf>
- Homeland Security (2023). *Your guide to studying in the states: Kindergarten through Grade 12*. Online at <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/guide/f-1/f-1-kindergarten-through-grade-12#:~:text=Only%20school s%20certified%20by%20the>
- Herrera, C., DuBois, D.L., Heubach, J., & Grossman, J.B. (2023). Effects of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America Community-Based Mentoring Program on social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes of participating youth: A randomized controlled trial. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 144, 106742. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2022.106742>
- Luz, H., & Thomas, J. (2023). Meaning making as a moderator in international students' acculturative experience. Special Issue: *Lifelong and Life-Wide Learning in Various Contexts: From Theory to Practice*, 60. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pits.23014>
- Martirosyan, N.M., Bustamante, R., & Saxon, D.P. (2019). Academic and social support services for international students. *Journal of International Students*, 9, 172–191. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i1.275>
- Shu Su, Xi Lin & McElwain, A. (2023) Parenting, loneliness, and stress in Chinese international students: Do parents still matter from thousands of miles away? *Journal of Family Studies*, 29, 255-268, DOI: 10.1080/13229400.2021.1910540
- Thomson, C., & Esses, V. M. (2016). Helping the transition: Mentorship to support international students in Canada. *Journal of International Students*, 6, 873-886. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i4.323>
- Special Resource: International Student website: <https://www.internationalstudent.com/>