

CONGRATULATIONS!

You have been selected

to be a

**Peer
Mentor**

**for a new refugee student
in our school.**

Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA)
New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

IMAGINE . . .

Imagine if you walk into a new school and everyone is speaking a language that you don't understand.

The halls are crowded and noisy. Everyone is moving quickly and seems to know where they are going.

You have no idea where you are supposed to go and what is expected of you.

Someone takes you to a class and you don't know where to sit. Everyone is staring at you.

Perhaps, you haven't seen textbooks, pens, calculators, or notebooks before. Maybe you've never been to a school.

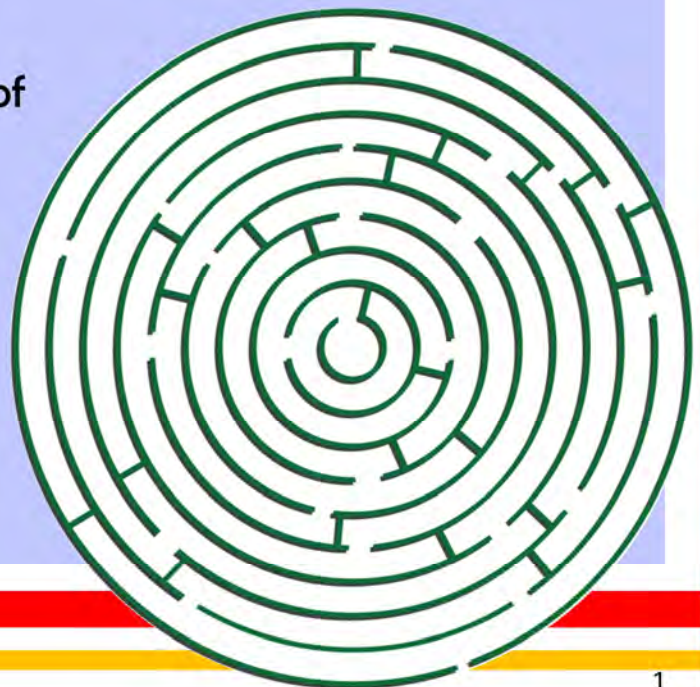
Everyone talks and laughs until the teacher begins the lesson. You have no idea what they are all talking about.

You feel anxious and bewildered – maybe a little scared.

But you also feel excited. You can't believe that you are in an American school.

If you are a refugee, your first day of school can be overwhelming.

Wouldn't you need someone to help you?



Refugees



Refugees flee their native country because it's not safe to live there.

They may have been living in the middle of war, famine, violence, or persecution for race, social group, political views or religion.

Refugees have managed to escape, but often without family members and personal belongings.

Some refugee children have witnessed terrible violence and have lost friends and family.

Some refugees had been living comfortably in their hometowns, and had busy lives with school, jobs, and social activities. But suddenly their lives were disrupted and they had to run in order to stay safe.

Many refugees have experienced living in a refugee camp in or near their home country. These camps are often overcrowded and have limited water, food, and other resources. Some camps have schools but they may not have supplies or conditions that encourage learning.

Not all refugees are able to relocate to another country such as the United States. It can take years to get permission to enter a new country.

Refugees who arrive in your town are expected to become employed, find housing, and enroll children in school. There are organizations and volunteers who help refugees resettle in their new country.

Your role is to help student refugees become comfortable in their new school.

What do peer mentors do?

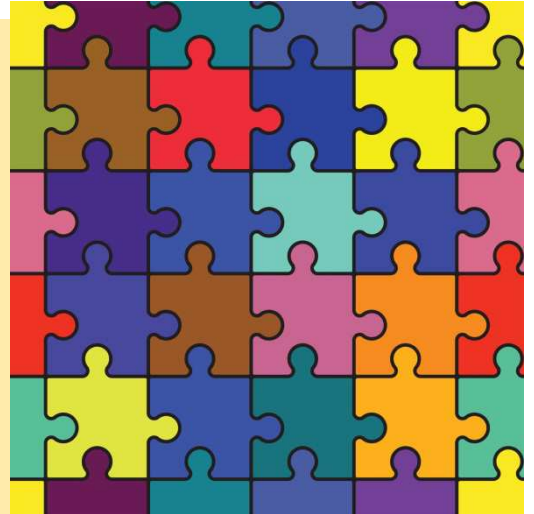
It's an honor to be identified as a student who can help a refugee adjust to an American school. You have been selected because you can be trusted to provide information and support and serve as a positive role model.

Peer mentors provide assistance to a new refugee student for as long as necessary. This means helping the student understand what happens during a typical school day.

It also means introducing the student to peers, and encouraging friends to be helpful and kind to the new student. You don't have to become an instant friend, but you should pave the way for the refugee student to develop new relationships, and introduce them to school activities.

You may have to discourage peers from making comments or asking questions that may be hurtful or offensive to the refugee student. Even if refugee students can't speak English, they can usually tell when peers are being inconsiderate or mean.

Ask how much time you will be able to spend with the student. You may need to make arrangements to be available during the school day for the first few weeks. Eventually you may be needed for questions that come up as the refugee student adjusts.



You've been selected because you understand how to navigate your school system and you will make an effort to be helpful. Take pride in your ability to help refugee students feel comfortable in their new environment.

What if the student doesn't speak English?

Mentoring a refugee student may not be easy at first, especially if the student does not speak English.

- If you speak the same language it certainly will help with communication - but try to encourage the refugee to practice speaking English so that they can develop friendships.
- Find out how much English the refugee student knows by asking directly. You might be surprised!
- Some refugee students may nod or say *yes* when they really don't understand what you are saying. They are just trying to be polite. Make sure that your words have been understood.
- Speak slowly, demonstrate, or draw pictures. There's no need to speak loudly.
- Take your time, use basic phrases, and try to avoid using slang. Sometimes you may have to use one or two words instead of a complete sentence.
- It may be frustrating to communicate at first, but remember that it's even more frustrating for the refugee student who is trying to understand. Be patient and reassuring.
- Look directly at the listener when you are speaking. If you can show what you are talking about, communication can be a lot easier.
- Let the refugee student copy you, when possible. For example, if it is time to eat lunch in the cafeteria, demonstrate how to buy a school lunch. Encourage the refugee student to carry out the same steps that you do.
- Other students can help with communication, but it can be confusing to the refugee if everyone is talking at once. Encourage your peers to help you communicate, one speaker at a time.
- If you involve your peers with helping, take the time to introduce everyone so that the refugee student can start to build relationships. School can be a lot less intimidating if the new student sees familiar faces and is greeted by new friends.



How can you help a new refugee student adjust?



- ❑ Guidance counselors and teachers, especially those who teach English as a second language, should be able to provide you with some background about the student's experience with schooling.
- ❑ Decide what you think the student will need to know right away. It may be that you need to explain about lockers, class schedules, backpacks, lunch, or the layout of the school. (Remember how *you* felt your first day of school?)
- ❑ Introduce the student to a few of your friends and to the classroom teachers.
- ❑ Find out what you can about the student's native country. Know where it is located. This knowledge will give you a better appreciation of how much their lives have changed and how far they have traveled.
- ❑ You may be curious about the refugee student's experiences, politics, and cultural traditions, but don't ask. Some memories may be painful. Eventually the student may want to share, but don't push it. Remember that even if life in their native country was difficult, they can still be homesick and miss family and friends.
- ❑ Let the student know where helpful adults are located in the building. Some refugee students may have experienced harsh teachers and may be afraid to approach adults in the school. Explain that teachers and administrators are available for help, even if they are standing in the hall yelling "Get to class!". Demonstrate how to ask for assistance.
- ❑ Show the student how to follow school rules, such as: raising hands in class, no talking while the teacher is speaking, or bringing supplies to class.
- ❑ Pay particular attention to rules that teachers and principals will enforce, such as no shouting or running, not using cell phones, and being on time for class. (Some refugee students may be unfamiliar with keeping track of time because where they lived they haven't needed to watch the clock. This may be a basic understanding that will require your assistance.)

- ❑ Make sure that you explain about fire alarm boxes and emergency drills. Some refugee students may panic at the sound of an alarm because it may remind them of dangers in their native country. You can draw a picture of what happens during a drill. Talk to teachers and peers about guiding a refugee student during a drill. If you know in advance about a drill, ask if you can accompany the student so that they can understand what is happening.
- ❑ Show the student where to go for help with academic or health issues.
- ❑ Understand that some refugees may be overwhelmed by what they see. Almost everything in the school may be a new experience, including:
 - public restrooms
 - the amount of food available in the cafeteria
 - computers and other technology
 - boys and girls interacting comfortably
 - bells and alarms
 - friendliness of teachers
 - homework and testing
 - variety of clothing styles, including shoes.
- ❑ Explain that police officers in the building are for protection and student assistance.
- ❑ If you are comfortable providing advice, alert the refugee student about:
 - how to handle teasing and bullying
 - how to stay safe in the school and community
 - gang recruitment strategies
 - social media and cyberbullying.



Peer Mentor Certificate

(Student's Name)

has been selected to assist a new
refugee student in adjusting to our school.

(Administrator/Guidance Counselor Signature)