

Syrian Refugees: A Guide for Educators (Spring 2016)
PowerPoint Notes

These notes accompany the *Syrian Refugees: A Guide for Educators (Spring 2016)* PowerPoint available on the Vancouver School Board DRPC website at:

<http://go.vsb.bc.ca/schools/drpc/Parents/resources/Pages/Elementary-resources.aspx>

<http://go.vsb.bc.ca/schools/drpc/Parents/resources/Pages/Secondary.aspx>

<http://go.vsb.bc.ca/schools/drpc/Pages/Welcome-Syrian-Refugee-Students-and-Families!.aspx>

Slide #1

- This power point is intended as an educational guide for those receiving Syrian refugee students within VSB schools.
- We would like to acknowledge the Burnaby and West Vancouver school districts for their thoughtful contributions to this presentation.
- Though we join the world in responding to the Syrian crises be aware that within the VSB we receive and serve refugee students from all over the world on an ongoing basis.

Slide #2

- Refugees have little control in choosing a country of sanctuary, time line of travel or opportunity to gather resources and say farewell to those they leave behind.
- Immigrants on the other hand get to pick their new country, city, and area of residence. They get to research and plan their journey at length, say goodbye to family and friends and consolidate and transfer their personal wealth and belongings to their new life.

Slide #3

- More than 10 million Syrians (45 per cent of the country's population) are displaced.
- 6.5 million are on the move, seeking safe havens within Syria.
- 3.5 million have sought refuge throughout Europe and within the Americas.
- Canada is a leader among nations having welcomed 25,000 Syrian refugees with a promise to support more.

Slide #4

- Syria is 1/5 the size of BC.
- Very diverse geography.
- Climate:
 - Along the Mediterranean coast summer temperatures are in the 20 C range but can go down to -3 C in winter.
 - However, in the desert, temperatures can climb into the high 40's.
 - In addition, desert communities may experience severe, potentially lethal sandstorms which halt all activity in times of both peace and war.

Slide #5

- The Jabal al Nusayriya mountain range.
- Bashar al-Assad created a militia, called the "Shield of the Coast" to guard access from the Mediterranean.
- Steppe and desert lands form the **Syrian Desert** . Bedouin tent in the desert of Syria.
- Damascus, the capital city is an oasis in the desert.
- Aleppo, the largest city is more than 4,000 years old.

Slide #6

- The majority of Syrians are Arabs and are practicing Muslims.
- There are minorities of Arab Christians and Arab Jews within Syria.
- Kurds, Assyrians, and Armenians are ethnic minorities. They speak their own language and don't necessarily identify themselves as Arabs as their native tongue is not Arabic.

Slide #7

- Conventional social roles and rituals are often separate for men and women in Syria.
- These roles are well defined within both the family and the community.
- In Syria, a hand raised to the head or heart along with a small bow is a regular gesture of greeting.

Slide #8

- The *Great Mosque of Aleppo* was destroyed in 2013. It was/is a Sunni Temple.
- The Zaynab Mosque in Damascus is a Shia Temple.
- Greek Orthodox and Syriac Christian Churches serve approximately 2.3 million Arab Christians within Syria.
- Krak des Chevaliers – preserved Crusader castle in the Homs Gap

Slide #9

- Syria was under French control for 27 years (1918-1945).
- In 1946 Syria achieved Independence from France.
- Ba'ath established a secular, socialist Arab Republic within Syria in 1963.
- In 1970, the Assad family took control of Syria. After Hafez's death leadership went to his youngest son Bashar in 2000.

Slide #10

- Syria's pre-war economy was strong in relation to the other middle eastern countries it borders.
- Syrian livestock included mainly sheep followed by goats, cattle, camels and buffalo.
- Major crops included wheat, cotton, tobacco, sugar-beet, and citrus.
- Some Syrian industries included petroleum, textiles, food and tobacco processing, mining, and automobile assembly.
- Currently 57% of Syrian's are unemployed.

Slide #11

- Historically, Syrian men paid all the bills in the family even if the woman worked. Women kept their earned income as her own. Today's Syrian families share their incomes much the same as we do in Canada.
- Syrian families can be large as can be their homes. There is a saying in Syria, "If your family fits the size of your heart vs the size of your house, all is good."

Slide #12

- The first six years of Syrian schooling are both mandatory and free and takes students to the equivalent of our Grade 7.
- The Syrian Government offers Middle and Secondary schooling though neither are mandatory.
- University is free though admission is both tough and competitive.
- High scores on your first try at the National Exam gain you free lodging at University and priority access to the most sought after faculties.
- Technology is important in Syria.
- The Assad Regime controls both TV and radio but Internet access is provided by international carriers and is outside of Assad's control.
- Cell phones and computers have become important tools. They are used as compasses to move toward safety and freedom and to access uncensored national and international news.

Slide #13

- Generally, the period between 6 months to one year is a typical low spot for refugees in their move to freedom. Reality of the move has set in and the unfamiliarity of their new country and situation can create hostile feelings toward their new situation. (see p.16 of above source)
- The peaks and troughs of each refugee's journey from Syria to Vancouver have been seen to vary in intensity and time.
- Their wish to get on with life is a huge motivating factor and when it is stalled, life can get hard.

Slide #14

- The authors of this book, Sylvia Helmer and Catherine Eddy both worked for the Vancouver School District.

Slide #15

- Vancouver's Syrian refugees may be assigned to any VSB school. It is dependent upon housing availability.
- Cecilia Tagle (SWIS) helping a refugee family.

Slide #16

- These actions that welcome our newcomers are instrumental in creating an educational setting that promotes safety and success for all learners.

Slide #17

- The supports we will provide our Syrian refugees will be the same as those we provide to all of our students.
- However, it will be the potential urgency of those needs in conjunction with the lack of Arabic speaking supports to be found within the community that will pose the greatest hurdles.

Slide #18

- Be patient and allow for adjustment time.
- Differentiated instruction is critical.
- It's okay to go slow.

Slide #19

- The average VSB Settlement Worker's caseload can be up to 300 students.
- VSB Multicultural Workers serve between 250-1500 students.
- Large numbers of refugees coming into our system at once will put a strain on all facets our operation.
- Know that our SWIS and MULTI's, as they are affectionately called at the DRPC, work hard and are valuable assets. Please call them.

Slide #20

- These are cautions not "will happens".
- Be watchful and make no assumptions re a refugee's understanding of our language or word meanings especially in the beginning.
- Sometimes interpreter availability is scarce.
- Be cautious re the sensitivity and confidentiality of the information being shared and with the individual refugee's comfort level when using volunteer interpreters.
- Our new curricula is awesome, it gives more license to use critical thinking and cooperative learning strategies. These strategies may be hard for new Syrian students to employ being more used to a "Big Jug-Little Mug" learning experience.

Slide #21

- Umbrellas should not conjure up scary recollections.
- The second pair of photos evoke very different notions of the word "detention".
- "Camps" aren't fun for everyone.
- Volunteers/buddies may be helpers but they can also provide an opportunity for bullying.

Slide #22

- Practicing Muslims do not eat pork so you may need to look to alternatives on hotdog days.
- Have you ever eaten Halal food? Do you know where to purchase Halal food in Vancouver? Check out your local Superstore.
- The VSB's school lunch programs do not provide Halal meals. Please share this with your Syrian parents that they may provide appropriate lunch foods for their child if they follow this protocol.

- Also note, that during Ramadan, one of the five pillars of Islam, students may be fasting during daylight hours for for a period of one month. Ramadan dates change each year as it falls during the 9th month of the Islamic calendar. Daytime fasting may affect student performance at school.
- When it comes to the importance of clarity in communication home let me share an actual story that unfolded with in one of our VSB schools.

A new refugee Mom received a newsletter/notice home from the school re “Dressing up tomorrow”.

The refugee mother’s only frame of reference for the term “dressing up” was from watching “Mr. Dress Up” on TV.

Mom wanted to do things right, so spent the night making a clown costume for her little boy only to find out the next day was actually school **picture** day not costume day! The school was most accommodating. The little guy was happy to be captured by the photographer in costume. All went well with great memories being made all round.

Care and clarity are everything when it comes to sending communications home to families new to Canada.

- Devout Muslims pray up to five times per day. Families vary in their adherence to strict religious practice. Do check with them.
- School Codes of Conduct provide structure and rules around respectful behaviour for our students, our parents and and our staff. It is always good practice to review these with new members to your school community.

Slide #23

- Some Syrian schools are segregated others are not. If you ask them, families will let you know re their comfort levels re gender issues.
- Syrian kindergarten girls may feel uncomfortable being seated boy-girl-boy.
- Syrian boys are afforded much more latitude and are held less responsible than girls re adhering to rules and completing tasks (especially at home).

Slide #24

- Of course, reactions to triggers if any will vary between individuals.
- One cultural difference can be noted in eye contact. In Syria, children who look their Teachers in the eyes may be seen as disrespectful.
- In Syria, students who listen with their arms folded and heads bowed are showing signs of good listening and respectful behaviour.

Slide #25

- Harsh conversations and arguments may be scary to traumatized refugees.
- Fireworks, as well as Code Red/Code Yellow, Fire and Earthquake Drills may create anxiety.
- Fire Truck, Police Car, and Ambulance sirens may bring back memories of dangerous times.
- Camo clothing may remind a student of the militia they feared back home.
- Adults in uniform in a school in Canada are usually there to be seen as a resource but may bring back dark memories from home.

Slide #26

- We know that you will work magic, doing what you do best...making a difference on behalf of others.
- Know that you, your time, and your efforts are appreciated.

Slide #27

- While being sensitive to your student's needs do focus on their strengths.
- Remind yourself to take more time for the refugee student to learn English and/or move through curricula.
- Know that the use of cell phones or tech may feel more important to Syrian children/families than for their Canadian counterparts. Tech may have been used as a tool of escape from danger and currently to stay connected with loved ones still in harms way.
- Create a "go-to" booklet with your SWIS to meet the needs of your students/parents.
- If you have enough lead time consider building a welcome board, or planning a welcoming assembly or making up "Swag Bags" for your new students.

Slide #28

- Red flag behaviours may come from meeting one or more of the challenges in dealing with a new living arrangement, culture, climate, cuisine, language and or social structure.
- They may be the result of trauma experienced back home vs a cognitive or social emotional dysfunction.
- Communication with parents and support staff is critical to successful transition.

Slide #29

- You will watch your students closely on start up. Their successes and developing independence will dictate the frequency of your need check-in down the way.
- The "Buddy Activities" you create for your new students such as reading groups, recess and/or lunch time partners, student helpers tasks or whatever scenario you create will be very helpful.
- Participation on sports teams, in activity groups, and or social clubs are a great way for refugee students to connect with others and stretch beyond the classroom into the wider community.
- Try to communicate with parents on every occasion that presents itself. It doesn't have to be verbal. A smile, a gesture, a shared piece of student work can put emotional credits into that shared relationship bank account we all try to build with our parents.

Slide #30

- What a great opportunity.
- The more we look at other cultures the more we find there are always more similarities than differences in people.

Slide #31

- Have fun.
- Make it a game. Bingo?

Slide #32

Please consider:

- Creating a team to look at planning for success in transitioning refugee students into your school.
- Calling DRPC for suggestions/help.
- Enjoying the experience and appreciating what you are doing for others in need.

Slide #33

- Use old school, small town Welcome Wagon greeting activities to create connections with your new family.
- Appoint a “Go-To’ person on your staff and/or within your PAC to liaise between your school and your newcomers.
- Bring up “refugee progress” as a topic at your monthly staff meetings.
- Use the refugee experience as opportunity for professional growth. We can always learn more on how to deal with trauma and change.
- Personalized photo books that show case your school are appropriate for students and parents alike.
- Swag bags containing items like pens, pencils, school agendas, treats, or other bling you may have on hand always make the recipient feel appreciated and welcomed.
- Once more, give yourself and your new students time to acclimatize.
- Celebrate. Know that you make a difference for others each and every day.
- And for that the VSB says, “Thank You.”

Slide #34

Acknowledgements

Slide #35

References

Slide #36

References