

Talk

about Today's Public Schools

Editor's Note:

STRAIGHT Talk is a publication of Northside ISD (San Antonio, TX) that contains one of a continuing series of articles that is meant to enlighten the public and staff about a variety of issues. STRAIGHT Talk content is either written by NISD or copied with permission from other sources.

For more information, write info@nisd.net.

Refugee students deserve real chance for success

September 5, 2008

One of the things I love most about Northside is its diversity. NISD students represent more than 100 different countries, and it heartens me to know there are multicultural lessons going on in our classrooms every day.

But with great diversity also comes great challenges.

Over the past several years, Northside has been receiving an influx of students who are refugees from war-torn African and Asian countries, including Somalia, Nigeria, Kenya, Burma, and Ghana. With assistance from the federal government, thousands of these refugees are being brought to various cities in the United States, including San Antonio.

Here in San Antonio, Catholic Charities sets up housing and social services for these families and enrolls school-aged children in public schools, mostly in the Northside and North East school districts. Since 2004, about 270 refugee students have been enrolled in NISD schools, primarily in Colonies North and Mead elementary schools, Rudder and Hobby middle schools, and Clark and Marshall high schools. More are expected.

Before I get any further, I want to emphasize that these are wonderful children and we welcome all of them into our schools with open arms. We are committed to providing these children with a quality education.

But the state of Texas and the federal government need to address the fact that these children require academic and social services well beyond the typical student, and even the typical immigrant student.

These are students who have had limited or no formal schooling. Many don't know their age or how to write, even in their own language. They don't know how to use a restroom or a water fountain. Until their arrival in the United States, they've

continued



Northside ISD

5900 Evers Road, San Antonio, Texas 78238, 210-397-8500

never held a pencil or scissors in their hands or seen a television. And worse, many of them have endured violence and the deaths of friends and family members, leaving them with emotional scars that need to be addressed.

The schools these children attend require extra staff, including English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and translators. Our ESL teachers need additional training and staff development because at Mead Elementary alone, students speak 24 different languages and dialects. The financial impact is huge; for example, the school takes \$6,000 a year from its Title I funds to pay for a part-time Mai Mai translator.

Unfortunately, Catholic Charities provides no financial support to school these children. Northside does receive a small amount of extra funding (about \$250 per student in 2007-08) to serve its immigrant students, but after three years, this funding is halted because the state no longer identifies these children as immigrants.

And that loss of immigrant status has a profound impact academically.

Three years after their arrival to our schools, these students are expected to pass the TAKS test, something that's a challenge for even some of our native English-speaking students. Their progression over the course of three years could be nothing short of miraculous, yet, if they can't pass the TAKS, they - and their school - could be deemed a failure. It just isn't right to penalize the very schools that are serving and helping these students.

I am sure when legislators and policymakers were drafting No Child Left Behind, they did not imagine how it might impact students like Vincent, a 10-year-old refugee, who watched as 160 women and children from his village were rounded up and massacred. Fortunately, he was rescued and he now is prospering at Colonies North Elementary School.

Our refugee students have made amazing leaps and bounds since arriving at our schools, and what our teachers and staff have done for them is phenomenal. But the state and federal guidelines need to be more flexible, to give these students more time to acclimate to their new lives. By no means am I suggesting that we not be held accountable for the education of these children, but I do think we need to have realistic expectations.

I, along with other Northside leaders, recently met with Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott to discuss our concerns and our needs and am hopeful that they will be addressed.

If state and federal education officials are unwilling to relax testing requirements, then at the very least, provide us the resources we need to give these students a real chance at success. With almost 300 students already, and more expected, we need funding for additional teachers and the special services these students require.

If the goal of bringing these children to the United States is to give them a chance for success, why set them up for failure?

By John M. Folks, Ed.D.
Superintendent, Northside Independent School District

Northside ISD

5900 Evers Road, San Antonio, Texas 78238, 210-397-8500

