



MEMORANDUM

February 24, 2016

TO: Teachers and Administrators in Schools Welcoming Syrian Refugee Students
FROM: Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association
RE: Information for Teachers

The NLTA is aware of challenges that have arisen in schools that are supporting and integrating children of Syrian refugees into the NL school system. We have brought a number of concerns and suggestions to the NL English School District (NLESD) and the Department of Education based on our conversations with teachers and administrators. This memorandum is intended to inform teachers of the major issues of which we have become aware, the suggestions that we have made to help address these issues, and the NLESD response to date regarding these suggestions.

The NLESD, teachers and administrators are welcoming the children and families of Syrian refugees to our schools. Teachers and administrators are doing everything they can to meet their needs and to support and integrate the students, recognizing the unimaginably difficult circumstances many of these children and their families have endured prior to arriving here. The NLTA has emphasized and will continue to emphasize to the Department of Education **that the school district requires immediate additional personnel and resources to allocate to schools** to meet these emerging additional needs. The NLTA has often stated its concerns over the inadequate resources for the inclusive education initiative in general, and the failure of the current needs-based resourcing model to respond to emerging needs. We have emphasized that reallocating existing personnel that have previously been deployed to help other students is not sufficient or appropriate, and additional resources are required if we are to be successful in providing the support that students require and deserve.

Based on what we have heard to date from teachers and administrators, we have categorized the current issues and needs into the following four main areas.

1. TRANSITION

CHALLENGE: New students have arrived in some schools with very little notice.

■ NLTA Suggestion

A slower transition is needed for both government-sponsored and privately-sponsored refugee children. There should be greater coordination with privately-sponsored families.

■ NLESD Response

The NLESD had developed a protocol with the Association for New Canadians (ANC). As part of that protocol, the ANC informs the District of children designated for a particular school once their residence has been determined. The Family SEO then contacts the principal to inform him/her of the new arrival(s) and that the ANC will be following up to arrange an intake meeting. A profile of the student's family and educational background is provided to the school.

Some private families/sponsors were showing up at schools without any advance notice. The ANC has been contacted about these situations and has agreed to inform the privately

sponsored families with which they are involved that they need to contact the District prior to their child attending. Schools have been informed that if they encounter the situation of a privately-sponsored family showing up at school without prior notice, they should continue to provide a welcoming environment but convey to the family/sponsor that the District needs to be informed so that a transition plan can be developed and an intake meeting arranged. While some of the first arrivals did attend for the full school day following their orientation, we have since advised schools and the ANC that a transition plan needs to be developed for each student and their attendance at school will be determined based on their capacity to adjust. In cases where students are already enrolled and still experiencing difficulty with transitioning, accommodations have been made and in some cases the student's schedule has been adjusted.

CHALLENGE: Many of the primary- and elementary-age children have no experience with formal schooling.

■ NLTA Suggestion

We suggest that students with no previous formal school experience initially only be in school for partial days so that they can gradually get used to being at school and adjusting to the school routines.

■ NLESD Response

As indicated above, the attendance of each student will be determined based on their capacity to adjust to the school setting. In some cases, this may mean that students cannot immediately attend school and the transition will occur over time and may include partial days.

■ NLTA Suggestion

We suggest that students with no previous formal school experience spend some time at District School, perhaps with their parents present for part of the time, as part of a formalized transition program. This would allow for certain supports and resources (e.g. ESL teachers, translators) to be concentrated for that period of time, with a gradual introduction to the school they would be attending on a regular basis. The classroom teachers responsible for the students could/should attend some or all of these sessions. It is our understanding that this would be similar to the approach taken in the transition program of the Toronto District School Board.

■ NLESD Response

The District is confident that our professional staff can assess students as part of the transition and provide appropriate supports for students who have not been a part of the formal school process for some time. While we also believe that transition to their regular school setting as soon as possible is important to ensure a smooth transition to school and the school community, the suggestion of the NLTA to use an alternate facility as part of a transition plan is being considered and the actual logistics will be discussed with the various partners involved.

2. SCHOOL-LEVEL SUPPORTS

CHALLENGE: Schools that already have very high needs and sparse resources have received minimal, if any, extras supports with the influx of these new students.

■ NLTA Suggestion

Additional ESL teachers and professional supports (assessment) are required.

■ NLESD Response

*The District is in the process of hiring additional human resources. Program Specialists throughout the District have been designated and dedicated as Regional Coordinators of Syrian Refugee programming. The coordinators are:
Labrador Region – Roxann O’Quinn*

Western Region – Darlene Smith-Osmond

Central Region – Lorna Fudge

Eastern Region – Christine Greene

As per our regular process of identifying and addressing the specific needs of individual students, teachers make contact with their school administration and Service Delivery Team and this will allow the District to implement a transition plan for students with appropriate supports.

■ NLTA Suggestion

Additional IRTs and student assistants are required.

■ NLESD Response

The District is in the process of hiring additional human resources to help schools and support Syrian students adjust to the school setting. At this time we have hired an ESL teacher, one LEARN teacher and two Itinerant Instructional Resource Teachers, and the human resource staffing process is continuing. Further, an additional Grade 4 teacher was hired due to enrollment exceeding class cap.

■ NLTA Suggestion

Engage with the Association for New Canadians regarding obtaining a SWIS (settlement worker in schools) worker for each school with Syrian refugee students.

■ NLESD Response

The District has discussed this suggestion with the ANC who indicates that SWIS workers should be provided in all cases of Syrian refugee students attending school.

■ NLTA Suggestion

Initiate a coordinated search for a pool of potential interpreters and make interpreters available to the relevant schools.

■ NLESD Response

The ANC has advised the District that it has a pool of interpreters and the District will work closely with the ANC to ensure these services are provided within our schools as required.

3. TRAINING/INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

CHALLENGE: Teachers are not always included in initial meetings with parents and school administration when interpreters are present. ESL teachers are not always involved/consulted in District meetings with the ANC, SWIS workers.

■ NLTA Suggestion

Teachers should be present for initial and other meetings with parents when interpreters are present so they can hear information first hand and ask questions while someone is present to assist them in communicating with the families.

■ NLESD Response

We have discussed this matter with a number of our school administrators and they will work to involve teachers in the meeting where possible. Additional discussions with other school administrators will continue as Syrian refugee students are scheduled to attend other schools.

■ NLTA Suggestion

ESL teachers interacting directly with the students should be lead consultants for the District on these matters, not personnel who are not dealing directly with students.

■ NLESD Response

ESL teachers will attend meetings with parents and interpreters as possible. The District does believe that the experience and perspective of Family of School SEO's is of great value to this process, as is the involvement of the District coordinators for Syrian refugee student programming.

Most teachers responsible for these students have received no training relevant to how to work with or integrate them into their classrooms in a way that is sensitive to their needs, culture, and life experiences.

■ NLTA Suggestion

Scheduled time – a morning or afternoon per week – should be arranged for all classroom teachers with Syrian refugee students to come together to share suggestions and resources ideas, and seek solutions to issues that arise. This could be in conjunction with the day in which the children are brought together, perhaps in District School.

■ NLESD Response

This idea is being explored. A focus group meeting has been held with school principals to examine the challenges and possible strategies to support both students and teachers and this feedback is important to helping inform this process as we move forward.

4. COMMUNICATION

CHALLENGE: Teachers want to know what the District's plan is for transition and integration, to understand what the process is, who they should contact for information, if/when interpreter services will be available, etc.

■ NLTA Suggestion

The District should hold an in-service/information session as soon as possible for all teachers responsible for services to children of Syrian refugees.

■ NLESD Response

Additional professional learning for teachers involved with refugee students will be a part of the plan as we move forward. The District will work with the schools involved and

ESL teachers to provide professional learning. A professional learning plan will be developed for these schools in the short term, with a view to how we can better support teachers in the long term. Led by the program specialist assigned to helping refugee students integrate into our system, we are working on improvements to our response and the supports required. This will be done in consultation with our principals, our ESL teachers, and the Association for New Canadians as we continue to provide a positive learning environment for the students coming to our province and school system and further information to support the transition of these students will be provided to the schools and staff involved.

CONCLUSION

More Syrian refugee families and children are expected to arrive in NL over the coming weeks and months. The NLTA and its teachers and administrators look forward to assisting the children to adapt to their new home in NL and to provide a welcoming, safe, and supportive school environment. The NLTA will continue to lobby and attempt to ensure that the Department of Education does provide the sufficient additional personnel, resources, and supports to the school district and its teachers that will enable them to meet the needs of the incoming refugee students, along with meeting the ongoing needs and challenges of all students in the inclusive classrooms.