

Carrera, Catherine. "NJ immigrant students face barriers to mental health aid. What needs to change?" *Chalkbeat*. March 24, 2022.

<https://newark.chalkbeat.org/2022/3/24/22985091/immigrant-children-mental-health-aid-barriers-new-jersey-schools>

N.J. immigrant students face barriers to mental health aid. What needs to change?

New Jersey schools need more bilingual mental health staff, immigrant youth advocates say in a new report.

Catherine Carrera

Immigrant students in New Jersey need more support in schools to address their unique mental health needs, a new report from immigrant youth advocates states.

A child's experience migrating to a new country can be traumatic, isolating, and distressing — on top of that, the pandemic has caused significant loss and grief for immigrant and refugee communities.

The New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children, a coalition of legal advocates for immigrant youth, released a report last week detailing these and other findings, and focused on highlighting children's personal experiences during the pandemic that affected their mental health.

Many schools don't have enough bilingual mental health staff to work with English learners and their families, counselors tend to lack an understanding of an immigrant student's experiences, and there aren't enough programs to help immigrant students who recently arrived adjust to their new life, the report outlines.

"The unique and complex experiences of immigrant youth, as well as their limited access to mental health care, mean schools must offer culturally mindful mental health services that are more accessible to students than outside resources," the report states.

Among the recommendations the report makes are to hire bilingual mental health professionals; create student-led, teacher-facilitated community groups to help new immigrant students adjust; and require training for all staff to learn how to be sensitive to the needs of immigrant students.

Created in part by youth leaders from the organization's mental health advocates program, the report draws on interviews with immigrant students across the state, their caregivers, mental health professionals, and school staff. These interviews took place last summer in Elizabeth, Passaic, and Perth Amboy.

"I don't think most people realize that student issues and immigrant issues are intertwined," said Lady Jimenez Torres, policy director at the consortium. "If you have a student population whose needs when it comes to mental health aren't being met in school, then you're going to have issues with their entire schooling experience."

Last year, the coalition released a report that highlighted how students learning English in New Jersey were often “ignored” during virtual learning, with schools routinely failing to provide information in home languages and bilingual aides to assist with virtual assignments.

In Newark, immigrants make up about a third of the population, with the majority coming from Latin American countries. Statewide, there are about 115,400 immigrant children, a significant number of students who face these difficult experiences.

Immigrant and refugee communities have a high prevalence of post traumatic stress disorder, and often face barriers related to language, technology, and access to basic health resources. They, along with communities of color, were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

One parent, quoted anonymously from an interview last summer in the new report, said her family had recently arrived in New Jersey when the pandemic forced schools to switch to remote learning in March 2020.

“My son is alone. We don’t have a lot of family, only a nephew, but he is older,” the parent said. “He spent a lot of time locked up taking online classes and it affected him a lot.”

In New Jersey and nationwide, there was also an existing shortage of bilingual mental health professionals before the pandemic. Immigrant students in New Jersey interviewed in the report said that even in cities with large immigrant populations, there aren’t enough counselors who speak their home language.

Danna Chacon, a formerly undocumented student at Elizabeth High School, said that some of her peers who migrated from Latin American countries have shared with her their close encounters with violence and abuse that have driven their families to leave their home countries.

Despite being in Elizabeth, one of the state’s largest districts with an overwhelming majority of Hispanic students, there was only one counselor at her school who spoke Spanish, she said.

“Coming to the U.S. was a very hard transition, in the sense that I really didn’t have any support in the school,” Chacon said. “I didn’t have a counselor who guided me through what was happening. At the time there was just one counselor speaking Spanish, but I would rarely see her. She wouldn’t be available.”

Students also said there aren’t enough counselors — or any, in some cases — who understand the issues undocumented students face. This problem can deter them from seeking help again.

“I have friends that are undocumented. Even when they do get counseling, they don’t get the help they need,” one student said. “They’re educating the counselor on what it means to be undocumented. (Counselors) can’t help until they understand the issue and the student’s experiences.”

Last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics, along with other national organizations, declared a national emergency in children and adolescent mental health last fall. The organizations have pressed policymakers to increase federal funding to ensure access to mental health services and support school-based mental health care, among other initiatives.

This effort has also taken place in New Jersey, where at a meeting last week mental health advocates, professionals, and experts urged the state Senate education committee to take action.

As the push for mental health resources in schools continues to grow, Jimenez Torres hopes policymakers consider the unique needs of immigrant children in New Jersey.

“When we think about the wellbeing of a child, regardless of their immigration status, they need to have access to healthcare, a good education, and mental health support,” Jimenez Torres said. “If a child doesn’t have access to health care, then a common cold can leave them out of school for days, contributing to learning loss. If a child’s mental health needs go unaddressed, then they’re not going to be able to perform what’s expected of them in the classroom.”