

7. INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS

Ranya Khan: Newcomer parents face many challenges and have many questions about their new homeland. It is essential that they are well-informed and feel confident to make decisions about their child's schooling. The school is a valuable resource for cultural, social and academic knowledge that can support the newcomer parent and child's integration into Canadian society. Many families recognize that schooling in their home countries is significantly different than the Canadian school system. Initially, the differences may cause frustration, insecurities and reluctance on the part of the parent to trust that their child is receiving an adequate education. Schools play a crucial role in ensuring that newcomer families are fully informed in all aspects of their child's education and are empowered as a result of this knowledge. This section describes some of the perceptions of newcomer parents and common concerns that have arisen as well as the school's responses and attempts to inform parents and the ways parents utilize this knowledge. An area of concern for many parents is the issue of homework and academic assessment.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: The biggest change I notice is "Ah, how come there is no homework? Isn't there too much leisure time for the child at home with no or little homework?" "Could the teacher please give more homework to my child?" I did talk with the teacher and asked her if she could give some extra work for my child to do. But my request was not responded as I wished. In fact, you see, we think differently. I agree with the notion of learning here. I know their notion is good. However, I think, for newcomer parents, they don't know at all about your education system. They don't know at all that reading is homework. My daughter's teacher said so too, that reading was homework. She asked my daughter to change a book every day. I think it really depends on the teacher as the child spend most of the time at the school. The parents don't see what the child is doing at the school at all. It is very crucial whether the teacher is responsible or not. If the teacher is good, the child will be so interested in learning.

Urdu Speaking Parent:: We don't know how they educate in the school and after we have some experience. After the children's admission, it's only after their admission that we know how they educate here, the way they teach. It's very different from Pakistan, here there is no homework. I used to worry, in Grade 6 I went to the teacher twice, I think once with you and once with the person from the Board, I took that person. I only had one issue: 'Why don't you give him homework in Grade 6, and he doesn't bring homework back?' So he said, 'No, I have given him assignments to do.' Slowly I understood also that the way they teach here does not burden the child. They do it happily, and they feel happy and find it easy, and they are ready to prepare for school. All they want to do is go to school and there they would cry, 'If we get a day off it will be good, let it be a holiday today.' There was two months vacation, and my children felt it a lot, their class, their school.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: So, I think we need to let newcomer parents understand that reading is homework. This is important. Also the children need to be pushed. For example, my daughter is in a gifted class and she has more homework than a usual class. It doesn't mean that she has too much homework to do. She feels that she needs 45 minutes to finish her homework. In this way, the child finds it interesting and she feels busy. Otherwise she would feel bored and would go to the Internet everyday. If you didn't push her, she would feel she had nothing to do. So she

would get on the Internet and play video games, it is a waste of time. Therefore, I would give her some additional work to do, for example, some simple math work. My daughter cannot remember the multiplication table. Children in China in grade 4 can memorize the whole multiplication table. Even children at Grade 2 in China memorize the multiplication table. However Grade 4 children here still cannot memorize it.

Educator: They, of course, because the first thing they ask me is "Do they have homework today?" and then I would say, "Yes, we have spelling and we have to try to study spelling words or we have reading, we would like them to practice reading." And they would say, "But I can't help them, because I can't read myself." And so you have to explain to them that children, how children can help themselves. So, how to study and how to study spelling, how to do the math, and where to get help if they cannot understand. For example, in our community we have all kinds of community support, we have the Ralph Norton Centre for example and the Riverdale Library. If they don't have computers they can go to the Riverdale Library and use the computers for their projects. They have the Ralph Norton Centre, they have volunteers there to help the second language learners, they also have programs for the new language learners. I have these papers and I sign them up to go, to participate.

Ranya Khan: Information about provincial testing is essential for newcomer parents to fully understand the motivations and reasons behind the assessment, as well as how it impacts their child's academic success.

Educator: You have to keep trying, the frustration on the child's part, they were doing so well, the whole skill set they need to deploy is different than it is over there, and they were doing so well and now they have to start doing well here and they've got their parents looking over their shoulders trying to use those old strategies and they're really stuck. How do we, without getting involved in the parents' home life, how do we help them get control over their kids. Because they're not going to learn it unless they watch TVO, they're not going to learn how to do it in our style.

Educator: Our parents expect a lot of sit-down homework, they want the kids to be sitting and working and writing so if there's any kind of an academic problem or a learning problem, "just give them more homework, just give them more homework," so that seems to be that they want the children to be working by themselves, just writing away. And Mary and I have had EQAO evenings, information evenings for the parents with the Grade 3 and 6, the Ontario testing, and we have our biggest crowds for those because the parents are really stressed and they really want their children to do well and we emphasize that it doesn't affect their grades, it doesn't affect their standing, it doesn't affect really much of what they're doing at our part of the school. And they want to know about tutors, and a lot of them do have tutors, and they want to know about extra work they can do with their child to bring them up to standard before the test, and so it's a great deal of stress on the child, a big emphasis on the child, because I guess at home there must be leaving exams or exit exams that children might have at the end of a grade or.

Ranya Khan: Information regarding the placement of students upon their arrival can be confusing for parents and may be detrimental to students' current and future academic pursuits.

Somali Speaking Parent: I would like to add we have in this country age appropriate placement. A teacher might get a child who is 10 years old and never have been in school, cannot read and write and does not speak the language. This child will be assessed and labeled as having learning disabilities and his future will be destroyed. The teachers have to know the background of the students, check the records, meet with the parents before destroying his records and placing him in a wrong school and a wrong class. They should see the student's needs and give him the support the child needs. So we would request the Toronto District School Board to plan a special ESL school where they learn the language and inform the teachers on immigrant children's needs. If there's two are not done the children will lose a lot. Many children are wrongly assessed and sent to the schools for children with special needs.

Urdu Speaking Parent: Yes, it has been good from the junior classes Grades 1 to 8 but after that my two children, that is they have had a loss. The first problem is that of an interpreter, that it's a language problem, that they, we say something, they don't understand or we can't explain, so this is the biggest problem. Then my younger children, the one in Grade 6 got admission easily, that was good, she is studying nicely, that child and the one in Grade 8 that one, though she went to Grade 8 there in Pakistan, here also they took her in Grade 8, so she too was alright. Other than this, my four children, my three children, two were in Grade 12, in college, and one in Grade 10 but the Assessment folks after assessing they sent them to a good school, Laurier [CI]. There at Laurier no one would listen to us, so everyone at Laurier refused to listen to us and immediately sent us to Borden [BTI]. And Borden was not acceptable to my children, it was not suitable for them and because of this one of my sons has been turned off from studying, for six months he stopped his education. But now we have explained to him, encouraged him, so he has started again. So this was our loss, for the older children, but for the one in junior school it has been good.

Urdu Speaking Parent: The school the Assessment folks sent us to, that school didn't listen to us and instead sent us to another school. Because we were new here we didn't know which school was better. At that time, we went again, my husband went, but they didn't talk, they said we sent you to another school and that is where your children should go. I mean, they scolded us. So my husband and children came back and obviously because we were new here we couldn't say much. So three children were given admission in Grade 9.

Educator: Well I wouldn't really say reluctant, but in my opinion I see the parents most cases are defensive in their points of view, if they feel there are problems with the kids, problems academic-wise. So what happens is mostly the kids back home they are doing very well, and then they are coming into the Canadian education system and there could be like a sister or two sisters or a boy and a girl, and one of them is doing well and the other one is not doing okay at all at the school. And then the parent comes and they are very upset and they think that there is a lack of attention dealing with the issue. Their standpoint is that if the kid was doing that well back home in school, then they should be doing as well here in Canada. And also the issue of the Canadian system where it's based on age, not on grades, so basically the kid is placed at a certain grade and they are not able to cope with it and there is no way they can sort of bridge the gap. I think that this sort of... the culture differences between the school environment and the different expectations, like the parents they have expectations from the school based on expectations back home and the school have expectations from the parents based on the Canadian way and they

don't know that they are actually different expectations most of the time until there is a clarification.

Urdu Speaking Parent: Like I told you, there are good arrangements from the Board for newcomers, at least in my experience. My son who was in Grade 5 was finding it hard. From there they sent this lady, she was an Urdu speaking Pakistani. There were other children she tested too, so after that they observe the children, judge how much effort the child can make to get ahead, and if he can he work hard. They look at the homework regularly every day. In this way, after observing in this way, they decide and then it's not hard for the parents. They do everything themselves, so I had no difficulty.

Educator: I had called his father at the start of the year and he said his child didn't need special ed, he was going to "work harder!". And I find that with a lot of the immigrant parents they right away say there's nothing wrong with my child, he just needs to work harder. And trying to get across that he was working hard and it just wasn't happening. So, a teacher came in and often the parents will say "Oh no I don't need an interpreter, I speak English okay." But in those cases where it's really important that I know that you understand I call in an interpreter, but there is a barrier.

Educator: One of the areas that we've had difficulty with the Somalian parents is, for example, the area of special education, not wanting their children tested for special education. But, you know, and the reason being largely because well, "what are you going to do with that information?", somehow that's negatively going to affect my child, and my child is going to end up in a lesser program, or whatever. So we've done a lot of educating with parents and we're now sort of starting to break through that wall because parents are starting to understand, when we say "test your child", we want to test them to help them, to support them.

Ranya Khan: Parents of students who have not have previous experience in the Canadian school system require specific information in regards to academic planning and course selection. Many mistakes can be avoided with the presentation and the dissemination of appropriate information.

Urdu Speaking Parent: I think there are two main differences. In Pakistan I didn't have as much interaction with the teacher as I do here. Maybe teachers are more willing. I only have experience of this school and I know that this is a very good school and teachers want to share a lot with you. Academically in Pakistan, we knew what was going on in the class. We had books, we had some sort of a syllabus, and we knew that even if the child was falling behind, instead of going to the teacher, we would try to help him ourselves, because we knew what's going on. Here, we don't have anything, neither do we have books or a syllabus, anything like that. Obviously, then, we have to go to the teacher. As far as this school is concerned, they're very helpful. They tell you at the end of every term and even in the middle, if you want to go it is very possible to have interaction and have meetings. Whenever you want to you can meet. There, I didn't do this, apart from the meetings they would have at the end of the sessions, I didn't go to the school.

Russian Speaking Parent: It's just that since we've gone through two different school systems, we

expected to find the same system here. Honestly, we couldn't even imagine that the system would be so different. So drastically different, that it was already too late when we realized the mistakes we had made. We found out too late that everything we had done was wrong. But we had such a great trust in the system, trust in teachers, trust in people who take the child in and are responsible for his future in present. We just didn't have any information. As a result, 1.5 years later we found out that we had done everything wrong. No one talked to us, and we generally experienced very neglectful attitude.

Russian Speaking Parent: In Canada people are not so poor, they are a lot better off than in Russia. Yet we want the school to give the knowledge that we are used to and that we expect from it. However, we don't see it here, that's why this conflict has no resolution today. Because the curriculum is created by the teacher, and the child has the opportunity to choose the courses and there is no holistic system. Because of what we are used to we can't even help him, because often times we don't know how to deal with that. We are used to one thing, and we can't really understand the system. We can't understand it for one reason - because our personalities had been already formed. I have an experience of studying in a college. It was a distance-learning program, although it was full-time, so in my understanding it was a slightly different system. When I look at high school, I see the same thing. Children of this age shouldn't be given this curriculum.

Urdu Speaking Parent: By speaking, I mean that we didn't argue with them. We didn't know about the law here, what it is, how we should express ourselves, how we should behave. In my country, if this had happened we could have even come to blows. But here they said, No, there is nothing here, go to such and such a school. We quietly picked up our bags and left, and went to the other school. Because of this my children suffered a loss in education. Even now my daughter wants to go to a Collegiate Institute. I mean that she has taken courses for a Collegiate that she didn't have to take but she took them as extra. now she will have to stay back a year because of her grades so she can go to a Collegiate. This is the loss we had at secondary school. But up to Grade 8 it was fine, it was very good.

Russian Speaking Parent: When you told us not to name the teachers or the school, I smiled, because up to this day I don't remember either the name of the school, or the names of any of the teachers. When we first arrived to Canada, I talked to someone, I don't know who it was. She didn't really introduce herself, she just said her name. Eventually it turned out that the courses for my child weren't selected correctly. So in Grade 11 we found out that because the course selection was wrong in Grade 9, she has to take Grade 13. That is to say no one explained to us the school system, or the credit system, nor how things are done. The school system is completely different in the country where we are from. We are used to trusting the teacher's word, because he or she is a person in a certain position of authority, and they know what they are doing. So now we are faced with great problems, we lack three points, and we'll have to take Grade 13.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: Yes, there are curricular expectations that define what students should learn at each grade. So the Chinese language teacher can take a break after 45 minutes with the kids. There is a lack of teachers. In China, the Chinese language teacher would go back

to her/his office after the language class. So the Chinese language teacher can take a break after 45 minutes with the kids. Then the math teacher comes. After another 45 minutes the math class is over and the math teacher would take a break. Then the Phys-Ed teacher comes. The teachers here have to face a lot of difficulties even though they seem to have a high salary. They have to teach Math, language, Art, everything. On teacher has to teach everything. What is more, the teacher has to be with the class from 8 o'clock in the morning to 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The teacher has to be with the group of kids together all the time. Therefore, no matter how patient and how energetic the teacher is, he/she wouldn't be able to handle that much.

Ranya Khan: Resources for newcomer parents include community members, such as other parents, who have had similar experiences and understand the challenges faced by these families.

Somali Speaking Parent: The problem of the Somali community is we all came to Canada at the same time. There were no Somali people here before us who knew how the system works, so nobody was in the position to help anybody else. We came to a city whose culture, habits and religion we did not know. We faced lots of problems; even those who were speaking the language were affected by the problems. It would have been better that the government would come with a better service for us. As my sister before me said, hire people who understand the system and could help the others. The government did not hire anybody, our children suffered a lot, the parents got depressed and many children ended up in jails.

Somali Speaking Parent: My kids went to three different schools. I had good relationships with all three of them. I cannot forget one principal, the high school principal. He made extra effort to welcome the parents and help them in the school. When he noticed the problems with the Somali boys, he asked parents the reason why is this happening. The parents replied and told him that they're scared to discipline their children because of the Children Aid Society. He organized a session for the parents and invited the Children's Aid Society to attend. Parents learned what the role of the Children's Aid Society is, when they can come in the homes and when they cannot, when can they remove a child from home and when they cannot. He was a very good principal and always worked hard to improve the relationship between the school and the parents. He used to tell us if the community is not involved in the school, the school will not be effective. He contributed a lot. He used to tell us if the community is not involved in the school, the school will not be effective. He contributed a lot.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: Second, I know the teachers are very busy. I once went to a seminar introducing a good example of a school with a mentor program. At some North York schools, they have such a program. Every morning, 15 minutes before class, a teacher would talk briefly with the students what they are going to do that day and then to summarize it at the end of the day. They call this a mentor program. I think they can do even better. They can let every newcomer student find a mentor from their peer students, or they could find a higher grade student to be their mentor. I think it is very important. This makes a pair. For example, the mentor could help my daughter with her English, as her English is bad. My daughter's math is very strong. She could help the other student with his or her math. So the school needs to help the students have such a peer mentoring program. They may also help the parents meet. Of course, it could mean too much work for the school.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: When the newcomers first arrived, they need some directions. It doesn't mean that you have to tell them every detail. You just tell them the major directions they need to follow. First, if possible, you can give a brief introduction to the newcomers about the schooling here. Maybe the teacher cannot do it, but people like us who have had such experience are very willing to help newcomers. However, we do not know who we should talk to so as to help them. So, at the time if I had had someone like them, the other parents to tell me their experiences, I may have been able to find a shortcut to understand the system. The newcomers have language barriers and also do not have the time. Nor do they have the network. Chinese newcomers need help. So do people from other ethnic groups. If you put this into the agenda at the Council meeting, newcomers wouldn't have time to go and also even if they went, they wouldn't understand what was being discussed. In a foreign language environment, you do not understand what they are talking about. So, I think it is important to find a good way to help the newcomers. I've been here for 5 years. Of course my English listening is much better than before.

Ranya Khan: Schools cannot make the assumption that parents have the cultural knowledge and confidence to begin building relationships with their children's schools. In order to fully develop a relationship, both the school and the family must work together to establish the relationship that facilitates communication.

Urdu Speaking Parent: Has your experience in Pakistan affected you here? No. You didn't feel anything?

Urdu Speaking Parent: What she said is right. There you don't have as much contact with the teachers. You go to the main office if you have a complaint or if you have to say something you go to the main office and speak with the Principal and leave, there is no direct contact with the teacher. Or, if somebody's child has failed then maybe the teacher will speak with you, otherwise not. Here they keep in touch in a very nice way. In the smaller grades, especially up to Grade 6, parents and teachers maintain excellent contact and because of this children are successful.

Educator: One thing that's helped me is my own background, my experiences with my parents. And that's why I make it a point whenever I contact the parent through the phone or in person, I make it a point of asking: "What is your goal for the child? What is your dream for the child?" And then I look at the child's... I ask the child: "What do you want to be when you grow up? What are you good at?" And then I make it a point, I sit down with the parent over the phone, I spend some time in the parent-teacher interview, explaining as to what is required for the position, what skills do you need, and if the child is not good at math don't push him too hard to do that. There are other things that he's good at, or she's good at that they can explore, and very promising professions that he or she can go into, not just being a doctor, not just being a lawyer or an engineer. So that helps a lot in terms of making that connection.

Educator: And I think that when I say that parents need to understand, I think schools have a really, really important role and obligation to provide parents with a forum or ability to gain the knowledge that they need. I don't think school's can make the assumption that parents, especially immigrant parents, have that knowledge. And so I think we have to provide an opportunity for that to happen. I think that's part of our responsibility and part of our role is to put it out there

and provide it, whether it is through workshops or newsletters or whatever it may be, but to put it out there and to put it out there in a form that is understandable to parents if there is a language issue then that language issue has to be taken into account whenever you're putting that information out there. So I think schools have a real role to play, and again I go back to the beginning, it's a community thing. There's that old African proverb that it takes a whole village to educate a child, well I guess I'd like to think that that's what we're trying to put into practice here, and I think that there's a lot of truth to it.

Educator: I guess, let parents know at the beginning of the school year what is expected of them, they're rights and responsibilities. We know that they're new to the country, new to a system, but taking the first step to inviting them in, school's expectations of them, school's expectations of their kids, making sure that they understand their roles, having a translator if the language is the problem, and again introducing the teachers to them through parent-teacher interviews, teachers taking that step of phoning them in and saying "I'm your child's teacher, you child's English teacher and please come in, I would love to meet you on the parent-teacher interview night." Having a translator there if language is the problem.

Educator: And I realize it's a difficult task to understand a whole new educational system and everything, but maybe the question that we need to ask is, what is the cost of not understanding it? And what is the cost of not learning to relate to each other? I don't think as parents, anybody believes in throwaway kids. And so if we sincerely believe that then we all have a role to play in understanding and, you know, there are always ways to gain that understanding and that knowledge because knowledge is something that we all need if we truly want to help our children. So I think it's really important to gain the knowledge that allows you to participate in your child's education.

Urdu Speaking Parent: I get to know more about what my children are doing. It comes back to the same thing, that we don't have a curriculum here like they did there. At the beginning of the year we got all these books, and we know what the child is studying, what we have to teach. Here we don't have anything like that. Okay? It's more beneficial for you if you maintain contact with the teacher, even if you are an old parent. If you have been here for many years, you should not think that if your interaction with the teacher is less that your child is fine. With children, whether they have been here long or not, you must have an interaction with the teacher. The teacher herself always knows I'm here to come and meet. So that's a little about the home environment, and they also see that you are more interested in the child. It's not that he is left out, that mother works, papa is at work, no one is going to look after the kid, it shouldn't be like that.

Russian Speaking Parent: I would like to suggest the following: To start from square one, from where we began. I would like to make a suggestion for the future, so that others get a head start. I would suggest that some seminars be conducted for the newly arrived parents, seminars that would teach about the school system, about what is necessary in order to get into college, into university, what kind of system that is, what's its structure. Because when we come here, most of us don't know this system. I would give credit to anyone who has done their research. That's why we have conflicts with our kids. The tell me, you don't understand anything. And I say, that's

impossible, I have a university degree, how can I not understand? That's why maybe even the vice-principal could arrange some group courses for parents. So that the parents could find common grounds with their kids, since the kid sees a certain picture, but we have a different picture in mind. There could also be meeting with teachers, and some parent trainings about the educational system in Russia.

Arabic Speaking Parent: At that time, what steps did you take to improve the relationship between you and the teacher or the principal?

Arabic Speaking Parent: I will not answer directly to your question. I will respond in a different way. If I were to go back and correct what happened, I would make time, myself and give more effort, and try to be there in the school. Even on a daily basis to support my daughter and be there for her because there wasn't anyone else for her. That is how we felt. We felt that she was neglected and our needs were not met by the administration of that school. We didn't understand it then because of our, you know, differences in cultures. I thought a lot about the issue. And I think the solution is to have more meetings, more discussions between the administration and the parents. One parent meeting per year to give out marks and discuss the academic things is not enough. For the new arrivals to a new culture put them in ESL classes, put them anywhere you want, but they need more orientation because some students do not need ESL, they are okay in English, therefore there should be, for the best interests of the student, an ongoing dialogue, open dialogue and communication between the parents and the teacher. To get the mutual understanding of where these parents are coming from and where the school is coming from. That means to narrow the gap between them.