

Erie City School District/International Institute of Erie Refugee Orientation Program

Target Participants

- Newly arrived refugees (attendance fluctuates from 15 to as many as 60 attendees)

Meetings

- Meetings take place twice a month for 1½ hours each
- Topics are determined based on the needs of the refugees
- Meetings are usually held at the International Institute in Erie, but when a larger group is expected the location is changed to a local elementary school; this is often necessary when visits from a firefighter or police officer are taking place
- Interpreters are present as needed

Format

- Sessions generally include discussion of school calendar and upcoming events, followed by a speaker or presentation
- Occasional field trips to local settings
- Annual picnic

Presenters and Topics Covered

- Firefighter
 - Fire safety
 - Distributed smoke detectors, etc.
- Police Officer
 - Appropriate 911 procedures
 - Motor vehicle license procedures
 - What to do when stopped by a police officer
 - Safety at home (locking the doors, etc.)
 - Travel in groups, etc.
- School Nurse
 - U.S. customs of hygiene (use of deodorant, etc.)
 - Head lice, bedbugs, etc.
 - Cold and flu symptoms (when to keep a child home from school, when to see a doctor, etc.)
 - Immunizations, etc.

- Housing Specialist
 - Fair housing information
 - Rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords
 - Public housing information
 - Available assistance for utility bills, etc.
- Mental Health Specialist
 - Symptoms of culture shock
 - Services available in the community and at schools
 - Drug and alcohol abuse
- School Teachers and Administrators
 - Meet at school computer lab
 - Using a Smart Board, teach parents how to navigate school district's website
 - Demonstrate how parents can access their children's records, grades, etc.

Holidays

- Halloween: discussed the meaning and traditions; shared pictures and Halloween treats
- Valentine's Day: made cards; discussed customs in the U.S. and in other countries and cultures
- Christmas: shared information about the symbols of Christmas; showed poinsettias, The Nutcracker, ornaments, candy canes, wreaths; wrapped gifts; visit from Santa Claus to give participants gifts

Field Trips

- To the public library
 - Toured the library
 - Taught participants how to get on the Internet
 - Each participant signed up for and got a library card
 - Explained procedures for checking out materials, etc.

End-of-Year Picnic

- Potluck: shopping and preparation of ethnic food done by refugees
- Transported by 2 school buses
- Held at local park for 5 hours
- Games, dancing, etc.

This program has been a great success. Over time, the number of attendees has increased greatly and feedback from caseworkers at the International Institute on the effectiveness of the program has been very positive. The main challenge in attendance is when the weather is bad and families have to walk in rain or snow.

On the whole, clients report a good feeling about the school district and their ability to communicate with school personnel. The number of parents attending parent-teacher conferences and general school meetings has increased since these meetings were initiated. There has been an increase in awareness of the necessity to communicate with schools about student absences, family issues, etc. The program coordinators believe the program has provided a safety net for refugees and has raised knowledge and awareness of this population amongst teachers and school administrators. The schools have demonstrated interest and generated support, facilitating success in the schools.

This success can be attributed in part to the program being geared toward full family involvement. Parents bring their children and feel secure knowing meaningful and educational activities are taking place for their children. Additionally, many sessions, such as visits from the police and firefighters, bring parents and children together.

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