

*Onondaga Citizens League  
2012 Study Committee Notes—Meeting on July 25, 2012  
Meeting held at PEC, 620 James Street, Syracuse*

*Attendees: Muna AlAny, Paul Ariik, Valerie Crowell, Zach Gilbert, Sean Haley, Pam Heintz, Melissa Hidek, Colleen McAllister, Nancy McCarty, Sarah McIlvain, Brian Moore, Peter Sarver, Lois Schroeder, Dzenan Selimovic, Olive Sephuma, Jai Subedi, Marsha Tait, Gregg Tripoli, Lisa Warnecke, Nicole Watts, Nancy Zarach.*

*Presenters: Jackie LeRoy, ESL teacher with the Syracuse City School District (SCSD); Pothwei Bangoshoth, international worker with the SCSD; Felicia Castricone, Catholic Charities; Tara Causgrove, Refugee Youth Case Manager, Northside CYO; Syracuse Police Officer Kenn Burdick, Butternut Community Police Center; Chantal Iradukunda (Burundi), Henninger High School student; Keshab Bhattarai (Bhutanese), Nottingham High School student; and Yassin Hussein (Ethiopian), Fowler High School student. Nancy Zarach, a retired math teacher, facilitated the discussion.*

*Co-chairs: Heidi Holtz*

*OCL: Sandra Barrett, Becky Sernett*

#### OCL Study Committee Schedule

The next OCL study committee meeting will be held at 12 Noon on Wednesday, Aug. 22, at the United Way, 518 James Street, Syracuse. The panel presentation will be on other community programs and services for refugees (including ethnic community based organizations and Hopeprint) . Nicole Watts of Hopeprint will chair and a planning session will be held Wednesday August 8 at 3:30 pm at Hopeprint.

#### Future Events

Fall Film Festival—Heidi Holtz announced the refugee film schedule—October 2, 16 and 30. Film showings will be free and open to the public. They will be held at Progressive Expert Consulting's Inspiration Hall (formerly St. Peter's Church), located at the corner of James and Catherine streets in Syracuse.

Book Club—A book club—led by OCL 2012 Study Committee member Amy Thorna—will be reading and discussing, Dave Eggers' *What Is The What? The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*. More information on the club will be available, and the public is invited to participate.

OHA Oral History Project—In partnership with OCL, and for a February 2013 exhibition about Syracuse's immigrant and refugee populations, Gregg Tripoli, executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association, will be conducting an oral history of local refugees. These stories will be made available to OCL and the Study Committee. The Oral History Project is made possible by a grant to OCL from the Gifford Foundation.

#### Summary

The Refugee Youth and Education subcommittee presented information on how students in the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) who are English Language Learners (ELLs) are integrated into the classroom and what special services are provided to help them succeed. The discussion included an overview of afterschool activities, and three refugee students who participate in Northside CYO's programs shared their experiences. Also, Syracuse Police Officer Kenn Burdick offered a review of the afterschool activities at Butternut Community Police Center, which he manages.

## Refugee Youth and Education

Jackie LeRoy, an ESL teacher with the SCSD, said the district expects that 14 percent of its students will be ELLs this fall. “There’s been tremendous growth of ELLs in our district,” she said. The majority of ELLs are: refugees, secondary refugees/migrants, immigrants, and individuals who were born in the United States, but grew up in a home in which a language besides English is spoken. Of smaller numbers are foreign-born children who are adopted by U.S. parents, and children of professionals from another country who are temporarily living in Syracuse for professional/educational reasons.

There are 2,462 ELLs out of 20,754 SCSD students. They speak 74 languages and represent 80 countries. Spanish is the number one language spoken (29.2 percent of ELLs speak Spanish), and this is why SCSD offers a bilingual Spanish–English elementary education program at Seymour Dual Language Academy. There are also newcomer programs for ELLs that focus on English literacy, and students in these programs will transition to a regular classroom when they are ready. For ELLs who may be too old to earn the number of credits required to graduate high school by the time they are 21 (the age at which NY says a student can no longer be in high school), SCSD offers a career academy. This provides vocational as well as literacy training. For example, a refugee who enters the district at the age of 19 with no high school credits would be recommended to this academy. It would be “impossible” for this student to earn the necessary 22 credits within two years as he/she learns English, LeRoy said..

ELLs’ No. 1 country of origin is Puerto Rico (29 percent). This population offers challenges in that the students frequently move back and forth between Puerto Rico and Syracuse, and so they are constantly transitioning into the district. The No. 2 country of origin is Myanmar (Burma) with 16 percent. As new refugee populations come into the city, the district’s ELL population changes.

When a student transitions into the district, a history is taken to determine what type of education the child has had. LeRoy said this takes a “great deal of work”. Research for this usually includes a review of the student’s records (if available), and interviews with the family by an SCSD international worker. Students are screened before enrollment and given a home language survey as well as an initial LAB-R (Language Assessment Battery-Revised) test. Once the student is enrolled in the district, he or she will be assessed each spring with the NYSESLAT (New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test).

The district needs to determine not only the student’s English language proficiency, but also his/her academic content knowledge. “Are they at grade level?” LeRoy asked. “We make no assumptions about them.”

The No Child Left Behind Act and state academic assessments place additional burdens on the district in that it needs to ensure the students attain English proficiency and also perform at a high academic level. “We keep the bar high for them and make sure they have access to all grade-level appropriate instruction,” LeRoy said.

The district tries to place students in their home schools, but if there isn’t an ESL program, or if that school is full, it places them in the next closest school. It also asks the parents whether or not they want their Spanish-speaking child to attend Seymour.

Pothwei Bangoshoth, a Nationality Worker with the SCSD from Sudan, assists the district in evaluating and enrolling ELLs (mostly refugees, he said). He works out of the Centralized Registration Center where students are enrolled. He speaks English, Dinka and Arabic. Three

retired teachers (at the elementary, middle and high school levels) also help with the academic assessment process. A school nurse oversees the health portion of enrollment. Once a student is placed at a school, he will deliver the student's folder (containing all his/her information) to the school office and will follow-up with the student's family to ensure everything is ready for the student to start school. In addition, he liaisons with the CYO. "We do what we need to do so every child is getting his education," he said.

LeRoy said there are six Nationality Workers; five are refugees. They speak more than 12 languages. They help with the transition and provide follow-up support. For example, a school may contact her to say a student has been absent for several days, and she will notify an international worker to contact the family.

How long does it take for an ELL to attain fluency? LeRoy said there are two types of fluency: conversational and academic. Conversational can be acquired within two years; academic may take five to seven years. And, if the student has had no formal schooling, academic fluency may take seven to ten years. To help illustrate fluency, LeRoy showed an "iceberg" chart. The top one-third of the iceberg represents social fluency. From the outside, she said, a student may seem fluent: He or she can carry conversations and communicate well. But, the cognitive literacy component—the bottom two-thirds—requires much more time, and this is often unseen in regular, daily interaction.

Some students facing academic literacy challenges (along with U.S. culture shock and the transition to a new home, with new peers, etc.) become withdrawn in the classroom, and this can puzzle some teachers. The teacher may think the student has developmental learning differences, but this student's behavior is normal for an ELL. Another challenge an ELL may bring to the classroom is the tension of wanting to become "American" and abandon his/her culture, when his/her parents prefer to retain their culture.

The factors contributing to an ELL's success include the learning environment and the ELL's background, and "these variables are constantly changing," LeRoy said.

According to the district's English Language Arts (ELA) assessment tests, former ELL students outperform native English speakers, and the same is true for math scores. Most districts with ESL programs nationwide reflect these statistics, LeRoy said. Last year 6 of the 8 salutatorians/valedictorians in the district were either ELLs or former ELL students.

Felicia Castricone, the program director for Catholic Charities' refugee resettlement program, provided a brief history of the Northside CYO. It was formally formed in 1991, and since this time it has had one designated refugee youth worker. It will soon be hiring another. The majority of the children it serves are refugee youths. During the summer, it offers a refugee academy for six weeks. This introduces children to school and prepares them for the fall. Students are taught basic English expressions that would help students navigate school those first days—how to say, "Hello," ask where the cafeteria is located, etc. A shortened version of the academy is also offered during the school year. Refugees can arrive at any time during the year.

The CYO acts as a liaison between teachers and families, similar to SCSD nationality workers. Tara Causgrove, refugee youth case manager at Northside CYO, usually escorts children to school the first day to make sure they're settled. Parents sometimes come along, because it

may be the only time they get to see the school (transportation/work issues can prevent them from being able to visit the schools at other times).

A large portion of the CYO's work the first few weeks of school is making sure students get on the right busses, Castricone said. Many bus routes have multiple busses traveling them, and it can be difficult to know which side of the street to stand on and which bus to get on. Before Catholic Charities escorted students to the busses, many would get on the wrong busses and show up at the wrong schools. Then the days were spent "trading kids," she said.

Causgrove said the Northside CYO has anywhere between 30 and 50 kids on a daily basis, Mondays thru Fridays, from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. The focus is recreational. There may be cooking programs, field trips, etc. A teen program recently partnered with the Syracuse University to teach teenaged girls soccer. Teenaged boys have had the opportunity to visit St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church and watch movies, play foosball, etc.

Because there are so many different languages spoken by the children, the dominant spoken language at the center is usually English - this helps the kids learn faster.

Syracuse Police Officer Kenn Burdick said the Butternut Community Police Center offers "safe recreation" to youth and some tutoring help. It is housed in an 800-square-foot facility rented from Father's Heart Ministries at 907 Butternut St., and there are more children who need services than it can accommodate. The center has been looking into a larger, 8,000-square-foot space on the Northside, which would allow it to offer multiple classes, a stage for performances and an outdoor fenced area.

During the summer, the center offers field trips. This summer, children will be taken to Green Lakes State Park, Oneida Shores, 9 Mile Creek and Beaver Lake Nature Center. Anyone interested in becoming a chaperone on these trips is invited to contact the center.

Next, three refugee youth in the SCSD shared their experiences. Yassin Hussein—an Ethiopian refugee and Fowler High School student—read a speech. He was 16 years old when he left Ethiopia, which is comprised of more than 85 tribes. Knowing English helped him socialize and adjust to Syracuse, but he said it wasn't "easy" to begin school in the United States, especially when his peers haven't experienced the same type of difficulties he has. But, he says, "I'm trying to do my best." He was happy in Ethiopia, "but this was shattered by the political strife." He left his home when he was 10 with his mother and sister, and lived in a refugee camp in Kenya. While initially happy to leave home, he soon experienced terror and anxiety in the camp because of the terror his parents were subjected to in Ethiopia. By the time he left the camp, more than 80,000 refugees were living there, representing nine countries. He attended an Islamic school, and received six years of schooling while in Kenya.

"I perfectly remember my first day in school [in the United States]," he said. He was nervous about speaking English and what other students would think about his accent, but the "massive support" from classmates and teachers helped him transition. His favorite subjects are math and science. He would one day like to become a pilot.

Next, Keshab Bhattarai—Bhutanese refugee and Nottingham High School student—shared his experiences. He was born in a refugee camp in Nepal. There are six people in his family. Entering a school in the United States was "hard"; he had six years of schooling before he came to the U.S. On his first day of school, he was "very nervous," and he didn't know what to do and what his classmates would think about him. The biggest challenge was not knowing English.

What helped him were the teachers and other immigrant and refugee students. His favorite part of school is learning new things; the least favorite part is how kids “abuse” one another and how refugees are sometimes victims of this abuse. He would like to have a career in robotics if he can’t become a professional soccer player.

Chantal Iradukunda—a Burundi refugee and Henniger High School student—said the refugee camp was “so difficult”. There was no place for parents to work, and because families have to pay money to send their children to school, many children couldn’t attend school. She lives with her mom, and she doesn’t speak English. On her first day at school in the United States, she felt “nervous” and “shy,” and she “wanted to cry.” The biggest challenge was reading and speaking in class, and having to learn everything in a new language. Northside CYO helped her; it taught her how to say, “good morning” and “hi”. The best part of school is the empathetic teachers; the worst part is when students disrespect the teachers. She would like to become a doctor and return to her country to help.

Nancy Zarach, who facilitated the subcommittee, shared a story about how challenging it can be to teach students who are learning English as they learn their academic subjects. Zarach taught math in the district, and she taught ELLs while she was at Fowler High School. One day, she was teaching a lesson on parabolas and discussing the “max” and “mins”. On her drive home, she realized that the students probably didn’t understand what “max” and “mins” meant. The next class, she asked if they had understood, and they said no. It made her realize how different academic language is, and “I’m an experienced teacher.” She said she could relate to the iceberg analogy that LeRoy used to illustrate an ELL.

Sandra Barrett asked if the district receives special funding for educating ELLs. LeRoy said, “Not necessarily.” The state provides grant money the district applies for, but this money can only be used for additional programming—not for the required instructional programming. “That’s a huge challenge for districts our size,” she said.

Castricone said that the CYO program is supported by Catholic Charities along with grants from the United Way and the Syracuse/Onondaga County Youth Bureau. It has had other funding in the past, too.

Burdick said his center receives no public funding; it relies on fundraising. The police department pays his salary, utilities and supplies. It can take up to 30 kids a day, and is often so full that kids have to rotate in and out.

Paul Ariik, a refugee from Sudan, asked why the schools couldn’t offer education in more than one language, or have teaching assistants who spoke another language to help students. LeRoy said this would be difficult to achieve. The students speak so many different languages, and an assistant must be certified by the state. The international workers are there “at times, but their primary role isn’t instructional work.” She said a volunteer could come into the classroom to help, and that some teaching assistants know more than one language. They have used translators in the past, but the problem is that they often don’t know the academic language.

Amy Thorna asked about ELL teenagers who are too old to complete high school by the time they become 21, and what happens to them. LeRoy said the career academy “doesn’t fill up,” and that the district will expand it to meet the needs. Also, she said, each student who comes in is evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Generally, the district raises the question of academy versus high school when an ELL enters it at age 18 or older. “Some parents,” she said, “don’t understand the challenge high school presents” and may push for high school when it’s

impossible for him/her to graduate in time. From the district's standpoint, if a student can succeed in high school and has enough credits, then: "Absolutely, we want them in the high school, if they want that, too."

Iradukunda said that it would be helpful to have a special biology class for ELLs, for example—perhaps with volunteer teachers—because the academic language is so challenging.

Burdick asked whether schools use students to be "buddies" for new ELLs, instead of having an nationality worker or CYO staff to escort them the first day of school. The ELL would then have a "built-in friend". LeRoy said that Fowler High School used to do this, but it wasn't a formal arrangement. Castricone said that H.W. Smith Elementary School, which has a long-standing ESL program, uses kids to escort ELLs to its classrooms. Other schools may do this, too, but it would vary from school to school. Heidi Holtz said this may be a good idea for the district to formally implement.

Brian Moore asked what we could learn from how well former ELLs perform on state tests. LeRoy said: "It's really hard to put a finger on why ELLs are so successful." The area she did point to, however, was motivation. "For the most part, [ELLs] end up becoming the role models in their schools."

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