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To: BOCES District Superintendents
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From: Kathleen R. DeCataldo

Subject: Potential Effects of the War in Ukraine on School Communities

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Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created the fastest and largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. Over 5.2 million Ukrainians, mostly women, children, and the elderly, have been forced to flee their homes to neighboring European countries. In March, President Biden announced that the United States would accept up to 100,000 refugees¹ fleeing Ukraine. New York schools will play a significant role in supporting the education, mental health, and well-being of the refugees seeking a haven from war. Schools need to be prepared to address the effects of the violence in Ukraine on our students, schools, and local communities. These could range from fostering refugees in our communities and schools to supporting students and families dealing with vicarious or secondary trauma.

Undoubtedly, many children in our schools will be impacted by this crisis either directly through family connection or indirectly through exposure to the violent and inhumane actions occurring in Ukraine. Some children may be more vulnerable to the stress and effects of the war being played out in inescapable and disturbing images on television and social media. Children of refugee or immigrant families, children with depression, anxiety, or other mental health concerns, and children who have a history of traumatic experiences may all be more vulnerable. Students may experience symptoms such as grief and loss, sadness, fears of dying, separation anxiety or other anxiety symptoms, sleep difficulties, and depressive symptoms. Children and adults can be deeply affected by images and knowledge of war. Schools will want to be prepared to offer additional help in understanding and processing information about current events.

¹ Jordan, M., Kanno-Youngs, Z., & Shear, M.D. (2022). [United States will welcome up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees.](#) *The New York Times*.

Supporting Refugees from Ukraine

New York State currently has the largest Ukrainian population in the United States, with the majority of New York's Ukrainian population residing in New York City². More than ever, our schools will need to be trauma-responsive to the challenges these young people and their families face. The following tips can be generalized to all children who are experiencing stress, trauma, or historical crises.

General Tips for Minimizing Trauma from the Ukrainian Crisis

- Take cues from the child; [share information based on the child's developmental level](#); share information calmly and hopefully; ask them what they have heard.
- Look for signs of anxiety or distress: irritability, clinginess, stomachaches, and mood changes; refer to support personnel as needed.
- Do not bombard children with news; be mindful of the impact of negative images and news footage; be selective with your sharing of facts, images, and videos.
- Suggest smart and age / developmentally appropriate media choices for the child.
- Ask questions to understand their perspective of the conflict; look for irrational beliefs and do not be dismissive of feelings.
- Help students develop their sense of agency by figuring out how they can help; find agencies or charities that students can engage with and support.
- Focus on the helpers in the situation; reassure students that adults are trying hard to resolve the conflict.
- Use maps to teach geography.
- Use books, stories, and history to address understanding of refugee life and experiences.
- Develop strong relationships with your students to build on their strengths and interests.
- Most importantly: help students feel safe and heard.

In addition, classroom circles can engage students in conversations about their thoughts and feelings regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is an opportunity for school personnel to validate students' concerns, clarify any misunderstandings or wonderings, teach and model coping strategies, and identify unmet needs of students, families, and communities. Community circles can also be held with families and community members to build relationships with newly arrived Ukrainian refugees and Russian immigrants who may be experiencing scapegoating.

For more information, please visit [The Child Mind Institute](#), the [National Association of School Psychologists](#), and the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#).

² Leland, J. (2022). [‘A time of worries’: New York City’s Ukrainians are anxious and afraid](#). *The New York Times*.

Partnering with the Community and Local Organizations

The resettlement of Ukrainians displaced from their home country remains unknown. School districts, especially those serving communities with a high population of people from Ukraine, can partner with the community and local organizations to assess current resources and identify community needs including services related to job placement, legal consultation, adult learning and English as a New Language, mental health, and medical care. School personnel can share the responsibility of addressing the Russia and Ukraine conflict with credible messengers including community leaders, local organizations, faith-based organizations, businesses, and cultural institutions. Sharing the responsibility can prevent compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma of school personnel.

It is important to link new refugees to community agencies who specialize in helping refugees and immigrants. NYSED maintains regional [Guides to Community Based Organizations for Immigrants](#) which provides a list of organizations that offer services such as advocacy and community engagement, health care and insurance, housing, labor & employment, legal services & lawful status, public assistance, safety, and youth & education. In addition, the [New York State's Regional Bilingual Education Resource Networks](#) provides school support, professional opportunities via distance learning, guides, instructional materials, and resources for ELLs (English Language Learners). The Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages (OBEWL) has ensured that the [Home Language Questionnaire](#) for all new students and the ELLs' [Parent's Bill of Rights](#) are both available to download in languages most spoken by Ukrainian students. Finally, New York state, with the support of Governor Hochul, created the [New York State Stands with Ukraine: Resources for Ukrainians and How New Yorkers Can Help](#) website that offers a wide range of aid including immigration assistance and emotional support.

Additionally, districts supporting refugees can refer to the [Educational Services for Recently Arrived Evacuees, Refugees, Immigrants and/ or Unaccompanied Children](#) memo from the New York State Education Department (NYSED) for additional guidance and resources on providing educational services to evacuees. More specifically, the Memo clarifies the educational rights of students who are evacuees under the McKinney-Vento Act.

The McKinney-Vento Act

Many of the children and youth displaced by the war in Ukraine are eligible for protection under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (McKinney-Vento). Under McKinney-Vento, homeless children and youth are entitled to immediate enrollment in school even if they lack the records normally needed for enrollment, including, but not limited to, proof of immunization and/or a physical exam. McKinney-Vento requires each school district to have a homeless liaison to serve as the primary contact between homeless families and school staff, district personnel and local social services agencies and other programs providing services to homeless students. A school district's homeless liaison is responsible for ensuring, among other things, that homeless students are identified by school personnel and through coordinated activities with other entities and/or agencies; enrolled in and have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in school; and receive education services for which

they are eligible and are referred to health, mental health, dental and other appropriate services. Additionally, under McKinney-Vento, if homeless children or youth need to obtain immunizations, or immunization/medical records, the enrolling school must immediately refer the children's parent(s) or guardian(s) to the school district's homeless liaison, who must assist the children's parent(s) or guardian(s) in obtaining the necessary immunizations or immunization records. More information is available from:

- [New York State Technical and Education Assistance Center for Homeless Students \(NYS-TEACHS\)](#):
 - o 800-388-2014
- New York State Homeless Program Coordinator:
 - o conappta@nysed.gov (subject line: homeless)
 - o 518-473-0295

Immunizations

Schools should keep track of the immunization status of these students. The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) [Catch Up Immunization Schedule](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should be followed for students who do not meet the [Child Care Programs, Schools and Post-Secondary Institutions Requirements](#). Schools can reach out to their [NYS Regional Field Office Bureau of Immunization](#) for assistance with translating immunizations from other countries.

Further detailed recommendations from the New York State Department of Health's (NYSDOH) Bureau of Immunization are available on their department's Health Commerce System which can be accessed through your school district's Health Provider Network Account (HPN).

Physical Exams

Parents and caregivers are urged to have a medical exam done on each of their children as soon as possible. The NYSDOH Refugee Health Assessment Program offers the recommended medical exam to these children. They may be seen free of charge, if seen by an approved Refugee Health Assessment Provider within 90 days of arrival into the US and prior to any official determination of Medicaid eligibility. Refugee Health Assessment Providers are available in many areas of the state, although these sites may not be conveniently located for all children involved.

Parents and caregivers may choose to have their children seen by local clinics or private healthcare providers; in which case they may be responsible for the cost of the exam. More information on the Refugee Health Program along with a list of the Refugee Health Assessment Providers is available by contacting the Program at 518-474-4845 or rhp@health.ny.gov.

School nurses are reminded that although these students may enter school without the required health documents, students can be assessed by a school nurse for the presence of any acute condition and should not be in school if clearly ill (just like any other child in

the district). Otherwise, they should have their medical assessments expedited, with attention to all health care needs and be attending school.

Supporting Active-Duty Families and Their Children

During times of war or geopolitical crisis we must also support students in military families. Deployment and relocation of a military family member can leave feelings of anxiety and uncertainty whether the service member is involved in the conflict or not. Family members who are deployed abroad leave behind families that are often eager to see them return and must adapt to the changing landscape of the family unit. The deployment and subsequent separation of a parent from their children can lead to detrimental outcomes if not properly supported by schools and community supports. Children and family members may experience anxiety, depression, or unforeseen stress at any point in the deployment process. Deployment of a parent or family member may also cause other issues to arise such as poor emotional regulation of the student and may affect schoolwork. Deployment may also affect home situations, potentially causing decline in caregiver mental health, economic hardship on the family, and new family roles that develop to compensate for the missing family member.

It is important for schools and community providers working with the family to be aware of students with deployed parents so that signs of stress can be identified and supported. Schools and community providers will want to encourage these students to engage in enrichment activities and community engagement that can facilitate the student's resilience. Supportive adults may also help the student recognize that their emotions are normal and acknowledge that deployments and reunions can cause a variety of intense emotions, especially if the return is unexpectedly delayed.

For more information on free resources available to military families, visit [Military Child Education Coalition's Resources](#) webpage, the Association for Children's Mental Health's [Military Family Support](#) webpage, and Military One Source's [Deployment Resources](#) webpage.