Refugee Students Bring Opportunity
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Years of unrest in Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East are changing classrooms halfway around the world.

Boise, Meridian and Canyon County schools have seen an influx of refugee students from around the world, said Julie Bu, the assistant director for the Educational Talent Search at Boise State University. Educating students from refugee backgrounds poses special challenges for schools, she said, as well as opportunities for fellow students and their parents.

Bu regularly works with students in junior high and high school as part of the Educational Talent Search, which is one of the federally-funded TRIO programs that help students get on the right track for college. TRIO programs benefit students who are low-income and who will be the first people in their families to attend college.

Bu used to serve a number of immigrant children as well as children of immigrants. That population is still there, she says, but Boise’s status as a refugee center has meant an influx of students from war-torn countries. Boise, Meridian and Canyon County schools now educate students from Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran — and their experiences are wildly different.

“Some come in with education from their own countries, and if they do they’re fortunate,” Bu said. “But some have spent their entire lives in refugee camps.”

Such a diverse population creates educational challenges as well as opportunities, Bu said. A number of refugees, for example, “have very complex backgrounds and have suffered trauma and warfare,” she said.

In addition to dealing with such serious problems, students face the everyday disconnect that comes from not being a part of American culture. Bu related a story about a teacher she knows who tried to get kids involved in class by having them play a game of “Jeopardy!” — a show that is almost completely foreign to children who aren’t from the United States.

Learning about the culture takes time and experience, and that’s where native students and their parents can help, Bu said — to everyone’s benefit.

Small things add up. Bu suggests taking time to say hello to the parents of immigrant and refugee children. Driving the student to soccer practice, helping him or her join a club, volunteering in the classroom or simply including a child on an outing can go a long way toward setting an example for your child.
“They are going to learn there are other people who may not look like them, but they will learn acceptance and trust,” Bu said.

Schools are trying to keep up with the growing immigrant and refugee population, Bu said, but it’s difficult — and the schools can’t handle the responsibility alone. “If you embrace these students, it’s a gift,” Bu said.