

August 2024
Vol. 15

This Practice Brief is the fifteenth in a periodic series published by the National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE) to build awareness of research and promising practices in the field of school-age child care.

The goal of NCASE is to ensure that school-age children in families of low income have increased access to quality afterschool and summer learning experiences that contribute to their overall development and academic achievement. For more information, contact us at ncase@ecetta.info.

NCASE is funded by the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.



Serving Special Populations Effectively in Out-of-School Time

All children deserve access to high-quality out-of-school-time (OST) spaces. Understanding and addressing the unique needs of special populations that exist within OST ensures support systems are provided to create welcoming, inclusive, and equitable environments. This practice brief will explore specific groups within the special population context and identify ways to authentically encourage their engagement in OST activities.

Consideration of Special Populations

Special populations is a broad term that encompasses students with identified challenges that place them at an increased academic and developmental risk. These students often require additional assistance to ensure equity and accessibility in the learning experience.¹ Further, special populations are also inclusive of many who have historically been identified as belonging to underserved groups.² These include but are

not limited to English Learners, immigrants, refugees, and children with disabilities.

English Learners/Dual Language Learners

English learner (EL) is defined as an individual with a significant challenge in reading, writing, speaking, or understanding English that inhibits their ability to learn effectively.³ *Dual language learner* (DLL) is a further distinction for young children ages 0–8 years who are currently learning English in addition to their native language. They may or may not be classified by schools as ELs.⁴

1 Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2020). *Supporting special populations*. <https://oese.ed.gov/resources/supporting-special-populations/>
 2 National Center for Homeless Education. (2023). *Advancing equity in homeless education: Serving students in historically underserved populations*. <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Historically-Underserved-Populations.pdf>
 3 National Center for Education Statistics. (2024, April). *Glossary*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/glossary#>
 4 New America. (2024, April). *Education policy*. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/topics/english-learners/key-definitions/>

ELs represent 10 percent of all public school students and encompass students with varying languages, cultures, and backgrounds. They are also a rapidly expanding demographic.⁵ While ELs have significant cognitive and linguistic potential, many struggle academically.⁶ Inequities in the quality of academic content available to these students are a contributing factor. The stigma associated with underperformance can negatively impact students' "positive identity development, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and confidence."⁷

Spotlight on Columbus State Community College

Columbus State Community College in Ohio assists refugee and immigrant children identified as ELs, by offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes through its ESL Afterschool Communities (ESLAsC) program. By addressing systemic educational barriers related to language, culture, and access, ESLAsC assists with integration and academic improvement. Core curricula incorporate specialized social-emotional learning programs and extracurricular engagement activities. Program sites are intentionally located within communities where students reside to encourage engagement and increase family interaction.⁸ ESLAsC also implements a unique collaborative education approach where OST staff spend time during the school day in students' classes to better align academic resources. Parental engagement is also deeply embedded within the program design with parent liaisons conducting home visits and providing families with translation services.⁹

Immigrants and Refugees

Immigrant is a comprehensive term that is applied to any individual who has migrated from their country of origin for a variety of reasons.¹⁰ *Refugee*, however, is a special category of immigrants characterized as persons who were forced to migrate due to conflict or persecution.¹¹ Forty percent of all U.S. refugees are identified as children or adolescents.¹²

Acclimating to the culture of a new country can be stressful for immigrant students as they try to adapt while also holding on to their own culture and heritage.¹³ In addition, individuals exiting immigrant and refugee situations frequently carry a substantial amount of post-traumatic stress related to their experiences.

Immigrant students often need extra help to navigate the unique challenges of migration and adaptation to new school and community environments. A useful resource to assist teachers and school staff in supporting the positive integration of refugee children is [Refugee Children in U.S. Schools: A Toolkit for Teachers and School Personnel](#),¹⁴ created by Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS).

5 White, R. S., Schneider, J., & Mavrogordato, M. (2023). bELonging: Do students classified as English learners feel included? *AERA Open*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584231179171>

6 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures*. The National Academies Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>

7 Porter, L., Vazquez Cano, M., & Umansky, I. (2023). *Bilingual education and America's future: Evidence and pathways*. The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, UCLA.

8 Columbus State Community College. (2024, May). *ESL afterschool communities*. <https://www.csc.edu/community/eslas/>

9 Afterschool Alliance. (2017). Afterschool spotlight: Columbus State Community College's ESL afterschool communities. http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/issue_briefs/ELL_Spotlight_ESLA.pdf

10 World Bank. (2023). *World development report 2023: Migrants, refugees, and societies*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2023>

11 UNHCR. (n.d.). What is a refugee? <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-refugee>

12 Connor, P. (2017, October 12). U.S. resettles fewer refugees, even as global number of displaced people grows. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/10/Pew-Research-Center_U.S.-Refugees-Report_2017.10.12.pdf

13 National Center for Homeless Education. (2017). *Supporting the education of immigrant students experiencing homelessness*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED590725.pdf>

14 Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services. (2024, May). *Refugee children in U.S. schools: A toolkit for teachers and school personnel*. <https://brycs.org/toolkit/refugee-children-in-u-s-schools-a-toolkit-for-teachers-and-school-personnel/>

Spotlight on New American Pathways—Bright Futures

New American Pathways implements the Bright Futures afterschool and summer enrichment program serving resettled refugee and immigrant families. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, the organization operates programming within the DeKalb County school district and focuses on providing students with both social and academic opportunities.¹⁵ Bright Futures works from the premise that refugee youth often experience issues with learning loss and language acquisition and require specialized assistance to meet learning goals. The program also implements a school liaison initiative for families to assist them in better understanding and navigating school-based environments within the United States. New American Pathways upholds the idea that refugee youth do well in both the school and community when they receive direct assistance and structured social aid.¹⁶



Students with Disabilities

An individual with a disability is characterized as someone who has a physical or cognitive condition that restricts their ability to engage in major life activities.^{17,18} An estimated 7.3 million students with disabilities were enrolled in American public school programs in the 2021-2022 academic year.¹⁹ A significant population of these students receiving special education services were identified as having “specific learning disabilities” (32%) and/or “speech and language impairments” (19%).²⁰ While they may need additional provisions, students with disabilities and their families should have the same access to quality OST programs as they do to school-day programs.

Within afterschool programs, 19 percent of parents reported having a child enrolled with a special need or diagnosed disability.²¹ Enrollment of students with disabilities in OST continues to grow, but barriers to increased participation still exist and include issues such as a lack of inclusive classes, limited qualified staff, and challenges with transportation.²² Resources such as the *Inclusion Tool Kit*²³ from the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Their Families are useful in helping programs to create and expand inclusive practices in OST.

- 15 Georgia State University. (2021). *Nita M. Lowey 21st century community learning centers bright futures: Summative report* https://newamericanpathways.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/21st-CCLC-New-American-Pathways_Bright-Futures_-_Summative-Report-FY21_6.23.2021.pdf
- 16 New American Pathways. (2024) *Education and youth*. <https://newamericanpathways.org/our-programs/#education>
- 17 U.S. Department of Education. (2008). Protecting Students with Disabilities. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>
- 18 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). Disability and Health Overview. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html>
- 19 U.S. Department of Education. (2023). OSEP Fast Facts: IDEA Section 618 Data Collected on Children with Disabilities Served under IDEA, Part B During the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/osep-fast-facts-idea-b-section-618-data-covid19-pandemic>
- 20 National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Students with disabilities. *The Condition of Education 2024*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>
- 21 After School Alliance. (2021, September). *America after 3PM for children with special needs or disabilities*. <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2020/AA3PM-Special-Needs-2021-Brief.pdf>
- 22 National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability. (2023, April). *Inclusive out-of-school time*. <https://www.nchpad.org/1294/6047/Inclusive-Out-of-School-Time>
- 23 Special Needs Inclusion Project. (2010). *Inclusion toolkit for after school programs*. <http://www.snipsf.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/v2010Inclusion-Tool-Kit-Sept-update1.pdf>

Spotlight on Cambridge Department of Human Services Programs Inclusion Initiative

Within Massachusetts, the Cambridge Department of Human Services Programs (DHSP) ensures children with disabilities are uniquely provided for in OST programs serving children ages K–8 years. Through the creation of the Inclusion Initiative, DHSP oversees the provision of reasonable accommodations for students with approved Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). DHSP Inclusion Initiative staff work collaboratively with families using a student’s IEP as a baseline to determine eligibility and to assess what is needed to provide qualified access to learning and engagement experiences.

Provisions may include the following:

- » Increased program staff
- » Modification of program policies and procedures
- » Diverse formats for written resources
- » Changes or modifications to identified physical impediments
- » Provision of auxiliary aids and services

Additionally, the Inclusion Initiative ensures that staff working in OST programs are well-trained in assisting children with disabilities. Professional development through coaching and specialized training is offered to enhance program frameworks and interactions with students.²⁴

Highly Mobile Youth

Highly mobile youth is a subset of students within the special population category who encounter frequent changes in their living conditions. These students often experience education disruption, lag behind peers academically, and struggle to form meaningful connections to their school and community environments.²⁵

Homeless

Data from the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) reveal that 1.2 million children enrolled in public schools were affected by homelessness during the 2021-2022 school year.²⁶ *Homeless children and youth* are defined by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.”²⁷ Higher rates of student absenteeism are correlated to homelessness and can lead to an increased risk of school failure.²⁸ It is also important to note that ELs and students with disabilities represent the largest subgroups of students identified as homeless, even though they represent a smaller percentage of the overall student population.²⁹ For more contextualized information on understanding homeless youth in OST, see the [North Carolina CCR&R School Age Initiative toolkit](#).³⁰

Migrant

“Children of migrant workers, by their very designation as ‘migratory,’ may seem the most obvious group of students to meet the definition of highly mobile.”³¹ A migratory child refers to a child whose parent works

24 City of Cambridge. (2024, May). *Inclusion initiative human service programs*. <https://www.cambridgema.gov/Services/inclusioninitiative#:~:text=The%20Inclusion%20Initiative%20works%20with%20children%20who%20have%20a%20range,to%20families%20with%20any%20questions>

25 Popp, P., Grant, L., & Stronge, J. (n.d.). *Classrooms with revolving doors: Recommended practices for elementary teachers of at-risk and highly mobile students*. https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/eff_teach_mh.pdf

26 National Center for Homeless Education. (2023). *Student homelessness in America school years 2019-2020 to 2021-2022*. https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/SY-21-22-EHCY-Data-Summary_FINAL.pdf

27 National Center for Homeless Education. (2021). *Determining eligibility for McKinney-Vento rights and services*. https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/det_elig.pdf

28 National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment. (2019). *Aligning out-of-school-time services for children experiencing homelessness*. https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/new-occ/resource/files/voices-aligning-out-of-school-time-services-for-children-experiencing-homelessness_508c.pdf

29 National Center for Homeless Education. (2023). *Student homelessness in America school years 2019-2020 to 2021-2022*. https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/SY-21-22-EHCY-Data-Summary_FINAL.pdf

30 North Carolina CCR&R Initiative. (2023). *Homelessness in afterschool. Part 1: Understanding school age homelessness*. <https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/Homelessness-in-Afterschool-Resource-Guide-Part-1.pdf>

31 Popp, P., Stronge, J., & Hindman, J. (2003, November). *Students on the move: Reaching and teaching highly mobile children and youth*. https://www.nysteachs.org/files/ugd/10c789_d4aab8f402ea4bd5be7b0aa6c7bb8eba.pdf

in a job such as agriculture or fishing, and who has within the last three years moved from one school district to another, or within a single district, due to temporary or seasonal employment.³² Migrant children often face significant instability relative to abrupt changes in their living conditions, thereby creating opportunities for chronic stress.³³

Foster Youth

According to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services AFCARS (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System) report, there were 368,530 documented children in foster care in 2022.³⁴ State-level data show the percentage of foster youth who shifted school upon entering foster care ranges from 31 to 75 percent.³⁵ Children in foster care often face academic challenges and are at a higher risk of falling behind in school compared to their peers.³⁶

According to the American Bar Association (ABA) Center on Children and the Law, “for foster youth in particular, research identifies school engagement as a protective factor against academically threatening problem behaviors, with positive school engagement associated with many positive mental and behavioral health outcomes and academic attainment.”³⁷

Best Practices in Supporting Special Populations

It is crucial to acknowledge that students may belong to multiple special population groups simultaneously, and consideration should be paid to these overlapping identities. For example, students with disabilities may

also be experiencing homelessness, while refugees and immigrants often fall into the category of ELs and DLLs. There are no absolutes when it comes to special populations. Therefore, to effectively address student needs and provide equitable experiences, it is important to prioritize various factors.

Emphasize Student Abilities

Special populations can sometimes be characterized by their needs first, highlighting gaps in student abilities. To counter this narrative, OST program activities should offer a strengths-based approach as opposed to a deficit-oriented one. “A deficit-oriented approach assumes that youth are ‘lacking’ or ‘at-risk’ upon entering a program and that program intervention is necessary to ‘save’ or ‘fix’ these young people.”³⁸ A strengths-based approach, however, focuses on identifying the inherent knowledge and skills students bring and using those strengths and abilities as the foundation for learner engagement. This approach underscores what students can do rather than what they cannot, cultivating a positive and affirming learning environment.

Create a Sense of Belonging

Quality experiences in OST programs should complement the developmental needs being addressed in the other environments that students occupy, such as at home, in school, and in faith communities.³⁹ By providing chances for students to voice their preferences, set goals, and actively participate in decision-making processes, OST programs can cultivate a sense of belonging, autonomy, and empowerment. Allowing opportunities for youth to work collaboratively with program staff in decision-making regarding content and practices also enhances their engagement

32 Migrant Education Program. (n.d.). *Migrant education program (MEP) national profile for performance period 2021-2022*. https://results.ed.gov/files/data_profiles/2021-2022%20MEP%20National%20Profile.pdf

33 Bourland, D. (2020). The effects of an agricultural migratory lifestyle on children. *Integrated Studies*. 250. <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/bis437250>

34 Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *The AFCARS Report #30*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-report-30.pdf>

35 ABA Center on Children and the Law. (2022). Fast facts: Foster care and education data at a glance. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63dcf65b8d0c56709027332e/t/6454f88fa66ab34124a03df4/1683290255678/Foster+Care+and+Education+Fast+Facts+final.pdf>

36 Office of the Administration for Children & Families, Children’s Bureau. (2017). *Non-regulatory guidance: Ensuring educational stability for children in foster care*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/policy-guidance/non-regulatory-guidance-ensuring-educational-stability-children-foster-care>

37 ABA Center on Children and the Law. (2022). *Exploring education outcomes, What research tells us*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63dcf65b8d0c56709027332e/t/65206d213728bb028bee2ee8/1696623910191/Education%2BOutcomes%2Bfinal-combined.pdf>

38 The Wallace Foundation. (2022, April). *From access to equity: Making out-of-school-time spaces meaningful to teens from marginalized communities*. <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/from-access-to-equity-making-out-of-school-time-spaces-meaningful-for-teens-from-marginalized-communities.pdf>

39 National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment. (2021). *Addressing equity in out-of-school-time*. https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/addressing_equity_in_out-of-school_time-508c.pdf

and participation.⁴⁰ Ultimately, by embracing an asset-based approach to student engagement, OST programs can nurture students' self-confidence and their ability to advocate for themselves, thereby building agency both within and beyond the program.

Focus on Student Well-being

Many special population groups carry with them trauma from multiple life transitions, which affect their cognitive and social-emotional well-being. Interpreting the impact of this trauma becomes necessary to provide high-quality experiences to students. Trauma-informed care (TIC) is a comprehensive approach frequently employed to observe and comprehend child health and its effects. The principles of TIC include providing collaborative assistance, establishing trust-based connections, nurturing psychological and physical security, and promoting self-confidence.⁴¹ The [*Trauma Toolkit*](#),⁴² created by First Book and the Maryland State Education Association (MSEA), provides useful information on understanding the impact of trauma on students' development and learning.

Personalize Family Engagement

Families are a valuable resource and should be considered partners who can positively influence the development of highly successful OST programs. Recognizing family voice as essential in a child's education empowers families to take an active role in decision-making and planning. These relationships also assist OST staff and administrators in creating relevant, individualized programming that reflects specific family backgrounds instead of relying on generalized assumptions about families and students.⁴³

By adopting a human-centered design approach, as outlined in [*5 Benefits of Human-Centered Design Thinking for Family Engagement*](#),⁴⁴ programs can further their partnerships by building activities with families.

Build Collaboration across Education Spaces

Collaboration between OST and the traditional school day is a critical component of expanding learning opportunities for identified special populations of students. When school day and OST programs share data, it facilitates an efficient exchange of information that ensures students receiving specialized provisions do not experience a delay in acquiring needed resources. In addition, this cross-partnership presents an opportunity to further incorporate "school-day equity supports into OST programming, such as professional development opportunities, culturally responsive/sustaining programming, and mental health supports."⁴⁵

Conclusion

Knowing and understanding the special populations that exist in OST and addressing disparities increase opportunities for creating equitable programming and environments that are meaningful, supportive, and inviting to students. When students' lived experiences are considered, the quality of programming and assistance they receive can be improved. To do this effectively, students, families, and OST staff should be central to the design and delivery of program offerings.

This document was developed with funds from Contract #47QRAA22D0044 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care, by the National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment. This resource may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.

40 The Wallace Foundation. (2022). *Youth perspectives on designing equitable out-of-school-time programs*. <https://wallacefoundation.org/report/youth-perspectives-designing-equitable-out-of-school-time-programs?p=1>

41 Miller, K. K., Brown, C. R., Shramko, M., & Svetaz, M. V. (2019). Applying trauma-informed practices to the care of refugee and immigrant youth: 10 clinical pearls. *Children*, 6(8), 94. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children6080094>

42 Williams, J. M., & Scherrer, J. (2017). *Educator resource: The first book trauma toolkit*. <https://firstbook.org/blog/2019/06/27/educator-resource-the-first-book-trauma-toolkit/>

43 Holquist, S., & Porter, T. (2020). *Culturally responsive leading and learning: Addressing equity through student and family voice*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/blogs/blog27_culturally-responsive-leading-and-learning_addressing-equity.asp

44 Caspe, M., & McWilliams, L. (2019). 5 benefits of human-centered design thinking for family engagement. <http://bit.ly/GFRPHCD4FE>

45 The Wallace Foundation. (2022). *Expanding equity in afterschool and summer learning: Lessons from school districts*. <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/expanding-equity-in-afterschool-and-summer-learning.pdf>