

## Notes from March 31, 2010 Quarterly RSIG Network Teleconference

- Greetings and introductions (BRYCS and ORR)
  - Laura Gardner from BRYCS
  - Mitiku Ashebir and Pamela Greensmith from ORR
  - Approximately 18 states + DC on the call – 11 state refugee offices, 5 state departments of education, 10 local refugee resettlement agencies, 9 local school districts, and a handful of ethnic community based organizations.
- Review purpose of call and agenda (BRYCS)
  - To provide grantees and subgrantees with another way to communicate, collaborate, and share ideas (besides email, discussion listserv, program descriptions on the BRYCS website, etc.)
  - To discuss successes and challenges related to working with refugee children in the schools that are not state-specific (or school district specific) and are likely applicable to most if not all on the call
- Topic of the Quarter: Bullying
  - **Laura Gardner, BRYCS, Washington, DC** – Brief comments on the relevance of bullying to Refugee School Impact Grantees
    - Laura briefly mentioned the research coming out on the importance of school-based relationships with academic engagement and achievement. For example, Dr. Carola Suarez-Orozco's book called [\*Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society\*](#). And she made the point that when it comes to bullying and hate violence, if kids don't feel safe, then how can they learn?
  - **Katherine Engel, Amphitheater School District; Tucson, AZ** – Bullying scenario and how their district responded.
    - Budget cuts = larger ESL classes.
    - Traditionally mostly Mexican students, but Iraqis and Nepalis started enrolling last year and sometimes outnumbered Mexicans.
    - Lots of tension in class. Iraqis tend to be better educated and very self-confident; Nepalis tend to have excellent work ethic; and the Mexican boys started to feel threatened.
    - Behaviors observed: Teasing, giggling, mockery. Talking loudly in a different language in front of others. One friendly Iraqi student told Katherine, "If I saw these guys in Iraq, I would shoot them all." Fights sprang up.
    - The Iraqi boys also "went crazy" in response to the Mexican girls, who dress differently than the women in Iraq who wear scarves, etc. They were aggressive and straightforward to the horror of the Mexican girls.
    - Then Somali Bantu girls started to get angry – possibly fueled by low grades on progress reports. Tension developed between them and the Mexican girls.
    - Some of the steps Katherine took:

- Asked principal for help, thinking that a school-wide tolerance program would help. The asst principal came to the classroom and told students they would be expelled for inciting racial problems. Talked about zero tolerance policy, but at the time, many of the bullies were suspended.
  - Katherine had discussions with her students about the racial issues.
  - Got input from her department. Dept head suggested that tolerance classes are needed, but no particular curriculum was suggested or developed yet.
  - Designed groups so that students from different backgrounds had to work together.
  - Considered adding books to the curriculum
  - Helped students to become proud of their cultures and worked hard at replacing students' fears of new cultures with interest
  - With time, people have been warming up to each other
- **Robin Fleck, Auburn Schools; Auburn, ME** – Response to scenario and how their district has addressed bullying in collaboration with the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence.
  - Robin is ELL Coordinator for her district.
  - Auburn is sister city with Lewiston, which has many Somalis. Auburn gets the overflow. Many Somalis started arriving in 2001. Before then 99.9% white. Big change for their community and schools.
  - Adjustment period difficult - misunderstandings, myths, rumors, and hate.
  - Students were on the “front lines” dealing with this on everyday basis.
  - Fights in hallway. Female administrator who tried to diffuse situation got punched in the face. What they had been trying to do wasn't working.
  - Contacted Steve Wessler at the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence. He went into the schools and led intense small group discussions with students, had city-wide meetings for parents, and provided response training for teachers. He also created a student leader program and encouraged students to stand up for their harassed classmates, which helped change how students related to each other. The small group conversations weren't easy, but they also talked about real issues. At first things were worse, but then better. Slowly the fights stopped and students started respecting each other (even if didn't agree with each other). There were 25 students at the high school in the student leader program, but collectively, they had conversations with 150 other students.
  - Bates College professor studied this intervention and found that:
    - 61% decrease in violence
    - 63% decrease in threats
    - 81% decrease in verbal harassment
    - 44% decrease in absenteeism

- Since that time, the district has continued the work. They don't have staff from the center running the groups anymore, but their own staff trained. They have the Unity Project – several schools in the state involved. Same idea – student leaders and the students are very involved in the climate of the school. Still a work in progress.
- **Marilyn Chillis, NY's Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA)** – View public service announcement from NY's Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA) called "Don't Hate, Be Kind" that was developed as a part of their governor's Hate Crimes Task Force. Q & A with BRIA staff.
  - Marilyn Chillis gave brief background – she's the program manager for the Refugee School Impact Program in NY state. In 2009 Governor Patterson convened a Hate Crimes Task Force, which included representatives from various state agencies, including BRIA. The task force was charged with creating a comprehensive strategy for addressing bias based crimes in response to a few highly publicized attacks in Fall 2008. The task force focused on enhancing prevention and responses to hate crimes based on race, religion, sexual preference, country of origin, or native language. As an active participant in task force, BRIA created materials to accompany their [Welcome to Our Schools Toolkit](#). The additional materials included a module for students on hate crimes, a module for parents called "learning about hate crimes" and a professional development PowerPoint on bias related incidents. And of course, the Public Service Announcements, such as the one just seen. If anyone would like a copy of the Welcome to Our Schools Toolkit and/or the PSAs, please contact Marilyn Chillis at [Marilyn.Chillis@otda.state.ny.us](mailto:Marilyn.Chillis@otda.state.ny.us).
- **Open Discussion on bullying**
  - Mirjana Olujic from the Jewish Family Services in Denver shared some information about their [International Kid Success](#) program. She talked about their weekly cultural adjustment groups that they run in collaboration with several schools. She talked about how part of adjusting to life in the U.S. is learning about diversity. They focus a lot on helping students get to know each other because the less kids know about the other person, the easier it is to violate that person's rights. She talked about how they handle the logistics – basically their schools do block scheduling and they divide up classes with the ESL teacher. Since it lightens the load of students from the ESL teacher, there's "buy in" there.
  - Helena Gandell from Duval County, FL and Marilyn Eaton from Colorado asked about the challenge of getting buy-in from administrators. Sometimes administrators are reluctant to let students out of the classroom ever to do the kinds of things we're talking about. Teachers are forced to teach to the test. Has anyone had success in helping change the mind of an administrator on that?
  - Ruslana Westerlund from the MN Department of Education: If difficult to find time during the school day, one can consider after school programming. The

Rochester, MN schools have high percentage of refugees and immigrants and have a program called the Homework Assistance Peer Tutoring Program (HAPP) which pairs refugee and non-refugee students together. The goal is to provide homework support; however, it provides much more. Many cultural conversations occur that break down xenophobia. They found that these pairs often turned into friendships. They have conduct contracts and learn how to handle certain situations. They've had this program for about 10 years. No matter when this type of intervention takes place (during or after school), the benefit is evident. Plus, it's preventative as opposed to reactive.

- Robin Fleck commented on getting support from administrators – consider offer before school or after school, offer food – results are so dramatic so quickly that it validates your request to use school time.
- More than one person mentioned the need for an anti-bullying curriculum
- BRYCS' comments and resources on bullying
  - BRYCS shared resources from the BRYCS website, including a recent [List of Highlighted Resources on bullying](#)
- Announcements (BRYCS and ORR)
  - ORR announced that the RSIG RFP has been approved and it should be online in the next couple of days
  - Please read carefully and take note of changes from the last RFP
  - Mitiku Ashebir provided his number for any questions (202-205-3602)
- Concluding remarks (BRYCS and ORR)