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Calgary Board
of Education

Refugee and Immigrant Counselling in Schools: Innovating ways to address gaps in service for immigrant and refugee teenagers in schools

PETER DRIFTMIER, MSW, RSW
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The need

What we do

How we work

Our successes

What we've learned

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Calgary school boards assess thousands of refugee students arriving since July

Eva Ferguson

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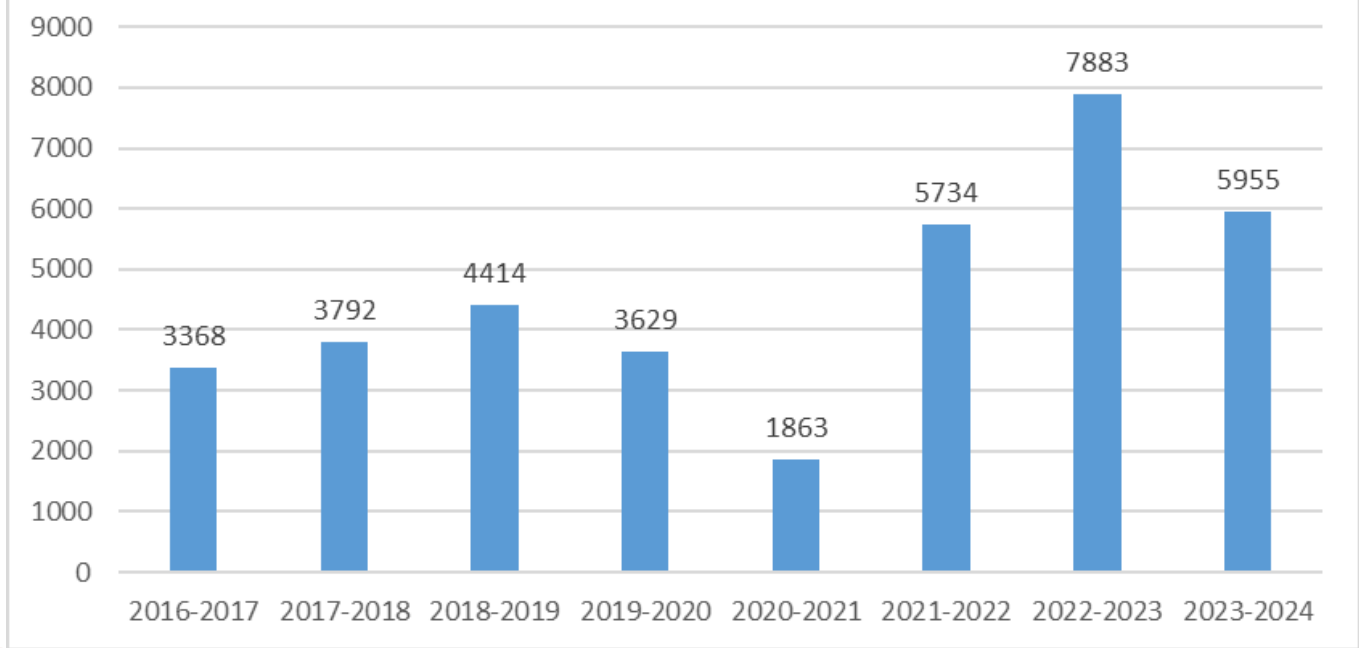


Calgary Board of Education officials are expecting more than 7,000 new students this fall, a number that could get higher as more refugees arrive daily at the CBE Welcome Centre, which supports them through language assessments and program placements throughout the system.

“Last year, we saw an unexpected increase in students registering through the Welcome Centre — about 37 per cent more students than in the year prior,” said CBE spokeswoman Joanne Anderson.

This year, she added, “we are seeing similar registration numbers through the Welcome Centre, about 70 registrations per day.”

Non-Canadian Total Registration by School Year



2023-2024 Welcome Centre registration numbers as of September 28, 2023.

Grades 1 – 12 Registrations 2023-2024	
Registered WC Complete	4172

Kindergarten Registrations 2023-2024	
Registered WC Complete	1477

Included in the totals above are 582 refugee students and 565 students from the Ukraine.

Public schools supporting more refugee students than ever in unique program

[Calgary Herald](#)

Unique programming supports refugee students in public schools as more newcomers arrive

Eva Ferguson

Published Oct 23, 2023 • Last updated Oct 23, 2023 • 5 minute read



LEAD teachers (L-R back row) Aliya Haji, Ellen Braaten and Carla Belanger with students Zulekha Sediq (L) and Aman Gebreheit at Forest Lawn High School. Eva Ferguson/Postmedia

As global instability rises — wars raging across Ukraine, sub-Saharan Africa and now the Middle East — public schools are supporting a growing number of refugee students in a unique program addressing their complex needs.

In the past month, the Calgary Board of Education has gone from 31 to 38 classrooms offering LEAD (Literacy, English and Academic Development) programs for newcomers facing exceptional challenges around poverty, trauma and learning.

Moving well beyond academics, teachers say LEAD programs are havens for refugee students, many of whom are suffering a multitude of difficulties that come with fleeing the atrocities of war in their former homelands.

“Before teaching these students, the priority is safety, making sure these kids can come to school and feel safe,” said Aliya Haji, a LEAD teacher at Forest Lawn High School, which has the CBE’s largest intake of refugee students.

What is RICS

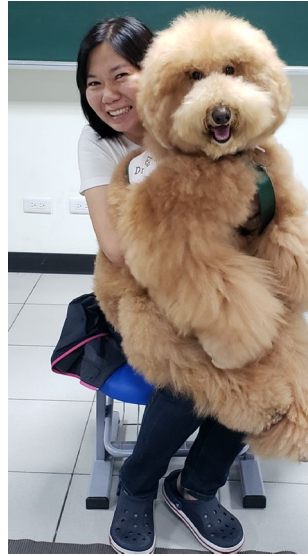
A growing program, now with 8 counsellors (7 FTE)
based *in* the school.

10 schools (5 high schools, 5 middle schools)
mostly in the Northeast of Calgary

We are part of an ecosystem of safety & connection



All in for Youth



Service model

Goals:

1. Immigrant and Refugee Youth Experience Positive Mental Health
2. Safe, Inclusive, and Supportive Schools with High Levels of Mental Health Awareness
3. Immigrant and Refugee Youth have Access to Timely Mental Health Service



Service model

RICS COUNSELLORS PROVIDE:

1. One-time counselling, focused on strategies to reduce distress.
2. Longer-term counselling, focused on goals to improve mental health, including addressing trauma.
3. Consultation and capacity building within the entire school system on mental health topics to foster a culture of awareness and reduce stigma in accessing support.

Interpreters are arranged by the counsellor, allowing students and caregivers to receive service in the language most comfortable for them.



Feedback Informed Treatment: Making sure the client is heard

Looking back over the last week, including today, help us understand how you have been feeling by rating how well you have been doing in the following areas of your life, where marks to the left represent low levels and marks to the right indicate high levels. *If you are filling out this form for another person, please fill out according to how you think he or she is doing.*

Individually
(Personal well-being)

I-----I

Interpersonally
(Family, close relationships)

I-----I

Socially
(Work, school, friendships)

I-----I

Overall
(General sense of well-being)

I-----I

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How are you doing? How are things going in your life? Please make a mark on the scale to let us know. The closer to the smiley face, the better things are. The closer to the frowny face, things are not so good. *If you are a caretaker filling out this form, please fill out according to how you think the child/youth is doing.*



Me
(How am I doing?)

I-----I



Family
(How are things in my family?)

I-----I



School
(How am I doing at school?)

I-----I

Everything
(How is everything going?)

I-----I

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Feedback Informed Treatment: Making sure the client is heard

Please rate today's session by placing a mark on the line nearest to the description that best fits your experience.

How was our time together today? Please put a mark on the lines below to let us know how you feel.

Relationship

I did not feel heard, understood, and respected.

I-----I

I felt heard, understood, and respected.

Goals and Topics

We did *not* work on or talk about what I wanted to work on and talk about.

I-----I

We worked on and talked about what I wanted to work on and talk about.

Approach or Method

The therapist's approach is not a good fit for me.

I-----I

The therapist's approach is a good fit for me.

Overall



There was something missing in the session today.

I-----I

Overall, today's session was right for me.

Listening



did not always listen to me.

I-----I
 

listened to me.

How Important



What we did and talked about was not really that important to me.

I-----I
 

What we did and talked about were important to me.

What We Did

I did not like what we did today.

I-----I
 

I liked what we did today.

Overall

I wish we could do something different.

I-----I
 

I hope we do the same kind of things next time.

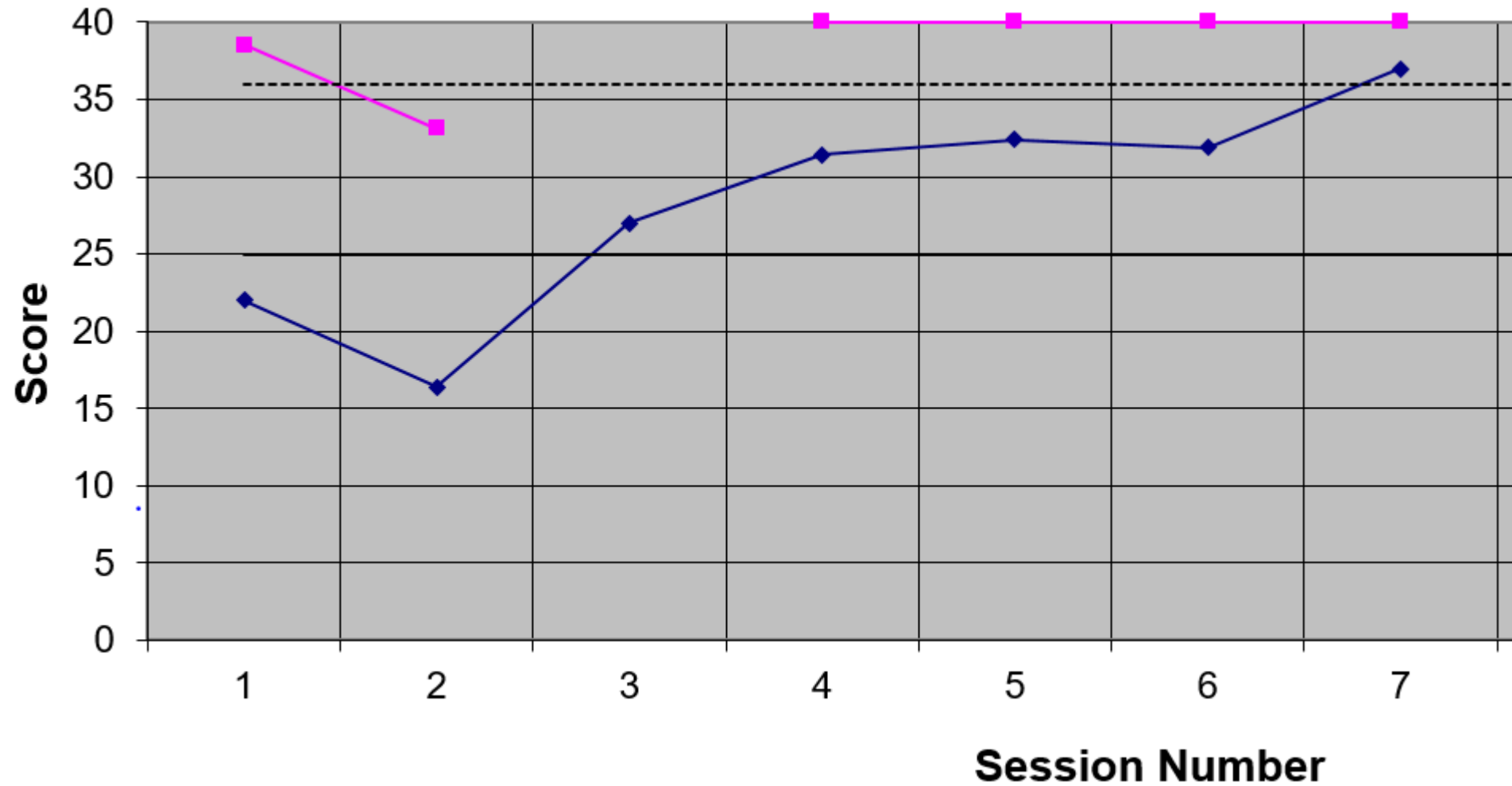
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Feedback Informed Treatment: Making sure the client is heard



Outcomes and successes

September:

- 7 RICS staff; 8 schools
- 18 single sessions
- 0 ongoing sessions
- Several presentations, including attending Meet the Teacher nights

October

- 8 RICS staff; 10 schools
- 48 single sessions
- 20 ongoing client sessions
- Presentations in schools: 165 students attended

Of 46 respondents to Impact survey (used in single sessions), the following reported agreement of improving the following metrics

Anxiety	Hopelessness	Distress	Risk
100%	97%	100%	91%

Single session themes



Ongoing session themes



Presentations and support to the school



Lessons learned: Our challenges are also our opportunities

Challenges

- Stigma and not trusting mental health professionals.
- Processes for starting service and attaining consent in a big school system and diverse needs of parents: often schools have different processes or cultures of mental health; parents diverse understandings of counselling.
- Diversity in motivation for service when students are themselves referred by teachers or parents. Student might feel like “mandated client”.
- Working through interpreters.

Opportunities

- Focus on earning trust and comfort with professionals, finding culturally appropriate ways to talk about mental health.
- Foster the relationships of the family and teachers as a natural support system.
- Support a student’s agency over what they want in counselling service. Facilitate client identifying their own needs when possible, RICS staff attention to cultural sensitivities, and/or supporting with referrals
- Strive for the value of ensuring client is heard and understood.

Lessons learned: Our challenges are also our opportunities

Challenges

- A professional culture of assuming similarities between students of the same culture, when every student is completely unique.
- Slow uptake / timing of program start
- Persisting gaps in service

Opportunities

- Support each student to be in control of telling their own story.
- Using downtime to host presentations and facilitate conversations in school with students, teachers, and parents.
- Flexibility, flexibility, flexibility.



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A photograph of three diverse students (two young men and one young woman) sitting together and looking at a laptop. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The students are smiling and appear to be engaged in a collaborative activity.

**Thank you:
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Calgary Board of Education,
Alberta Education**