



Educator Brief

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Series
IMMIGRATION
INITIATIVE

Supporting Black Immigrant Students & Their Families

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Why Pay Attention to Black Immigrant Students and Their Families?

Since the 1990s, the Black immigrant-origin population in the U.S. has grown to over 4.6 million people.¹ Roughly 20 percent of the Black population in the U.S. is of immigrant origin. Approximately one in every ten Black people in the U.S. is foreign-born, and another ten percent of the Black U.S. population has at least one foreign-born parent.² As a result of these demographic shifts, a growing number of Black children in the U.S. are immigrants or the children of immigrants. As a minority within a minority, Black immigrants simultaneously experience invisibility and hyper-surveillance. Programs aimed at immigrant students and families may not be inclusive for Black immigrants, and programs aimed at the African-American



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non-immigrant community may also not recognize their experiences. Additionally, Black immigrant-origin youth and families, particularly those who are also Muslim, are at especially high risk of incarceration, deportation, and citizenship denial.³ Given these circumstances, it is crucial that educators understand how to meaningfully support Black immigrant youth and families.

Beginning with Understanding: Who are Black Immigrants?

Top countries of origin for Black immigrants are Jamaica, Haiti, Nigeria, Ethiopia, the Dominican Republic, Ghana, Trinidad and Tobago, Kenya, Guyana, and Somalia.⁴ Most are concentrated within the New York City, Washington, D.C., Miami, Boston, and Atlanta metropolitan areas, although communities are growing in Maine, Texas, Vermont, Colorado, and other states.⁵ Notably, Black English learners (ELs) in K–12 schools are increasingly concentrated in places that may not be accustomed to new demographics like Maine, Iowa, and the Dakotas.⁶

Like all other immigrants, Black immigrants' pathways of entry to the U.S. are diverse and include family reunification, refugee resettlement, political asylum, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), H1-B visas, student visas, and crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, among others.⁷ The most commonly spoken languages among Black immigrants are Haitian Creole, Spanish, French, Swahili, Amharic, and Arabic.⁸

Black Immigrants Are Rarely English Learners

As a result of British colonialism, millions of Black people across Africa and the Caribbean are fluent English speakers. About 43 percent of Black immigrants in the U.S. who speak another language at home report being proficient in English.⁹ In K–12 schools, only 3 percent of Black students are ELs, and only 4 percent of EL



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students are Black.⁹

Black Immigrants Come from Highly Variable Education and Class Backgrounds

Black immigrants typically have reached higher levels of education than their U.S.-born peers, though this varies widely according to national origins as well as immigration statuses.¹⁰ Even with advanced education, Black immigrants' degrees may not be recognized by U.S. employers, or records of their studies may be unavailable due to upheavals related to political conflicts. Black immigrants in these situations are often limited to lower-wage jobs that do not align with their degree(s).¹¹

Additional training and certifications are difficult to afford out-of-pocket. Median wages are highly variable based on country of origin and immigration status. Notably, people coming to the U.S. as asylum seekers or refugees are more

likely to face economic hardships and less likely to have a post-secondary education compared to those arriving under non-crisis circumstances.²

Black immigrant Parents Value Education

Like most parents, regardless of race, ethnicity, immigration status, and language proficiency, Black immigrant parents care about their children's education. Their engagement strategies may differ from the U.S. norm because they are used to the parental engagement norms in their home countries, which typically involve trusting teachers' judgment and not pushing back.¹²

While they may not routinely call or email their child's teachers, Black immigrant parents are often involved behind-the-scenes by checking homework and encouraging reading for fun. Black immigrant parents' engagement strategies may also be constrained by work obligations, limited formal schooling, and a lack of resources at the school (such as interpreters and family outreach staff) to

support their engagement.¹³

How to Support Black immigrant Youth and Families

- ❑ Consider the compounding effects of xenophobia, Islamophobia (for Black Muslim communities), and anti-Blackness. For Black immigrants, the surveillance and criminalization of Black people can lead not just to incarceration, but possibly also deportation and family separation. Eliminating the presence of police, also called school resource officers (SROs), can help foster greater school engagement among youth and families.
- ❑ Diversify hiring streams. Actively recruit student- and family-facing staff, such as teachers, paraprofessionals, multilingual liaisons, and administrative assistants, from Black immigrant communities.
- ❑ Partner with local Black immigrant organizations to strengthen the relationship between communities and the school.
- ❑ Choose classroom media with positive, nuanced representations of Black people from across Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Additionally, avoid solely negative representations of African, Afro-Latinx, and Afro-Caribbean people: e.g. famines, disease, denigration of Islam and/or indigenous African religions, etc.
- ❑ Create opportunities for students to share their histories, cultures, and experiences year-round, not just during Black History Month or a multicultural day.
- ❑ Offer resources for students and families in languages other than English and Spanish. Hiring staff from the local community can be a great way to connect families with important resources.
- ❑ Avoid making value comparisons or creating/reinforcing a hierarchy between Black immigrants and

Black Americans (descendants of Africans enslaved in the U.S.). Some Black immigrants are perceived as “model minorities” relative to their Black American counterparts. This can create an uncomfortable and hostile environment for members of both groups, as it encourages competition instead of solidarity. The model minority myth ignores the legacies of enslavement, colonialism, and the Pan-African solidarity movement, as well as the selectivity of U.S. immigration. Instead, build an environment that encourages everyone to celebrate commonalities and historical ties, as well as what makes them unique.

Endnotes

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RECOMMENDATIONS OF CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

For emerging readers (ages 5–9):

- Sam and the Incredible African and American Food Fight**, by Shannon Gibney. This story is about a boy with a Liberian father and Black American mother choosing what to eat for dinner.

For middle-grade readers (ages 9–14):

- The Red Pencil**, by Andrea Pinkney. A story about a twelve-year-old girl fleeing Sudan, this story will help readers understand life in a refugee camp and why people leave home.

For upper-grade readers (ages 14+):

- American Street**, by Ibi Zoboi. This debut novel by a Haitian American author is about Fabiola, a Haitian girl who is separated from her mother by U.S. immigration officials. Fabiola must make some difficult decisions while she navigates life in a new country.

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About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

