

Supporting Your Ukrainian Families

Resources: Answering Question You Might Have

[NY State May memo: Potential Effects of the War in Ukraine on School Communities \(nysed.gov\)](#)

[ColorinColorado Partnering with Ukrainian Families](#)

[Uniting for Ukraine](#)

[Invasion and Resources for Educators](#)

[Acclimating to Life in the U.S.](#)

[What are some common needs you see for Ukrainians who have recently arrived in the U.S.?](#)

Olga: When I moved to the U.S. six years ago, my biggest need was to connect, be involved, and be useful. I felt that I needed to learn a lot about the community and find my niche in it. Being curious about the new culture, I tried to use any opportunity to talk to people. I was thrilled when strangers at the supermarket would make a comment or initiate a small talk. Things like that are not typical practices in Ukraine. It was also interesting to see that people who barely met call each other "friends." In Ukraine, friendship takes time to build and the difference is made between "friends" and "acquaintances."

Since daily routines in the U.S. are very different from those in Ukraine, it may take a few weeks or even months to get adjusted and feel confident. It would be great for newcomers to have a guide or buddy who could help them navigate the new environment. Connecting with other Ukrainians in the community is a great way to do it. Opportunities like free English classes for adults and a variety of classes for kids at local libraries or churches would also be greatly appreciated. Any ideas of how to get involved in the life of the community and opportunities to lend a hand as well as receive help may be useful.

Nadia: Besides housing, food, and basic supplies, recently arrived Ukrainians need friends. When I say "friends," I mean they need somebody who is willing to:

- listen (sometimes for a long time — many Ukrainians like to talk!)

- explain to them how to shop (not forgetting about the taxes — in Ukraine the prices on tags are final)
- teach them to drive (a lot of people in Ukraine use public transportation and don't have a driver's license)
- show how to send mail (when we arrived here, we didn't know that we could send letters from our mailbox and drove to the post office every time we needed to send our mail out)
- show them where/how to fill the gas tank, buy a phone, schedule medical and hairdresser appointments, and to do a lot of other things that people who live here just know how to do automatically.

I also say "friends" because it is not easy to gain Ukrainians' trust. (Ukrainians have been fooled so many times by their government, authorities, banks, etc. and they don't trust people easily. They will ask all the questions they have only if they consider a person to be their friend.)

Ruslana: Another most pressing need is learning English. Many Ukrainians, similar to other immigrants, are intelligent professional adults who find themselves lost, confused, and feeling "stupid" (using words of one Ukrainian professional) without being able to speak English in their new country.

Also, English is a very different language from Slavic languages. One of the biggest challenges people have shared with me is the sheer frustration that, "English makes no sense. Why doesn't one letter make one sound? Why are there so many silent letters? Why do you need them? Why is the spelling so illogical? I am a logical person and I see absolutely no algorithm to apply here."

These feelings of frustration with language are compounded by their lack of employment, which all add to a feeling of being overwhelmed, disillusioned, and hopeless for their future. On the other hand, one mom with her two children arrived here speaking English really well, but her frustration is waiting for work authorization so she can work in the U.S. (It's important to know there are other Ukrainians who came here with English skills and their children ace the ACCESS language proficiency assessment and do not qualify for ESL services.)

Oleksandr: We need to know how to open a bank account, how to get a driver's license, how and where to buy a car, how and where to repair it, how to pay bills, and what to do when there is no electricity at home. It is very difficult to start if there is no one to answer these simple yet very important questions.

Editorial note: Ukrainians arriving in the U.S. may be taking on new family roles while adjusting to a new culture and may need additional guidance on where to accomplish daily tasks as needed.

Educational Systems

What do Ukrainian families need to know about the U.S. educational system?

Oksana: It's very important to explain how the K-12 educational system in the U.S. works. Ukrainians are great at adapting to different situations, but they need to know how the educational system is different.

Differences between Ukrainian and American schools

Responses are compiled from Olga, Nadia, and Oksana:

- Kindergarten is attached to State pre-school. Kids spend their time playing with their peers.
- Kids in Ukraine do not start school at age of 5. Instead, they go straight to first grade, so it's crucial to place children in the correct grade level here in the U.S. Most students attend school when they are 6-17 years old (for 11 years).
- The grading system is from 1 to 12 (12 is like an "A" grade in America). GPAs will be new to students and families.
- Elementary students are in cohorts that are often together for many years. As a result, families may not know that students will have a new class and teacher each year (and they may think that entering a new class is due to a problem).
- Elementary school is similar to American one, but in Middle and High school, students have the same schedule during the year (they don't have electives), and the whole class goes to different classrooms to have different subjects. As a result, students have the same classmates for many years and develop strong relationships and connections.
- In Middle and High school, students have up to 14 subjects during the year. Some of the classes are every day while others are twice or three times a week. They have from five to seven classes every day (usually for 45 minutes each with a 10-20 minutes break between them). For example, students may have literature twice a week and math four times, etc. Students in Middle School study physics, chemistry, and biology.

- Ukrainian students don't have lockers. They carry their school bags with them or leave them in their homerooms.
- Students take State tests only after the 4th, 9th, and 11th grades and usually take them very seriously.
- Students do a lot of memorization.
- Students probably don't have experience with project-based assignments. Families and students will need some guidance on how to complete these assignments.
- AP and International Baccalaureate programs will be new to families and need some introduction and explanation.
- Sports aren't emphasized as much as they are here. Families may not know about the opportunities available around sports and extra-curricular activities.
- Families may be very hesitant to accept special education services. They will need a lot of information and trust-building to learn more about the special education system here in the U.S.
- Hallway rules and routines differ: students are allowed to play in the hallways or outside on the playground during 10-20 minute breaks unsupervised. So, walking along the hallways "hips and lips" may be a little weird to them at first and/or cause "behavior issues." In general, students are given more independence in the school building, so I would suggest teachers go over the expectations with parents to avoid misunderstandings.
- A lot of kids in Ukraine attend specialized schools, lyceums, and gymnasiums with various areas of specialization: science, math, languages, etc. It is very common for kids to attend a number of extra-curricular classes, such as foreign languages, dancing, music, and art.

Ruslana: Ukrainians use numbers to refer to grades in High School. Using words like Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior will be confusing. As a mom of a "Senior" in High School, I am still confused what grades correspond to Junior and Sophomore. I still prefer to say, "When my son was in 10th or 11th grade" instead of Sophomore or Junior to avoid mistakes. Also, saying Middle School may be easier to understand than "Junior High," which almost sounds like "High School Junior" to me.

[What can you tell us about family roles in education?](#)

Nadia: Ukrainian parents are usually very engaged in school life and decision-making processes. For conferences, parents come at the same time and decide together with a teacher how to organize a field trip or a party for

their kids or how to decorate or remodel the classroom. They decide how much money they are ready to spend to cover these expenses. When we moved to America, we were surprised that we didn't have to pay for anything in our son's school.

Some parents might also complain about the quality of food in the cafeteria or a teacher's ways of teaching. Their classroom teacher tries to solve these problems with administrators after the conference and reports about the solution. It's important to understand that Ukrainian parents who approach their child's teacher with suggestions or complaints are not disrespectful; they are used to doing it that way in Ukraine.

[What kinds of mental health resources are necessary to have available for families?](#)

Nadia: When people move to a new country, they have different experiences of adjusting to their new life. Some people do better making friends, finding a job, and speaking English fluently. Others may get depressed. Therefore, they need to have some contacts available in case they feel depressed, stressed out, or overwhelmed. It can be even a stranger who will listen to them and give a piece of advice.

Oleksandr: Families need to be involved in community life. Very often they struggle, because in Ukraine they had some communication and were needed but here they are practically alone and it takes time to find new friends and get involved in the life of the community.

[Language Instruction and Considerations](#)

[What should schools know about determining students' language and educational backgrounds?](#)

Olga: Most schools offer English as a foreign language starting in elementary school. Some schools in Ukraine offer several foreign languages. Those are mostly the specialized schools called gymnasium or lyceum. In fifth grade, students may start a second foreign language. It is also not uncommon to study regional languages, like Polish and Romanian, at schools.

Students may know a lot more in English than they will show in the first weeks. It is quite common for students labeled as "low" to show significant growth in the following months. Just like newcomers from any other country,

Ukrainian students may be going through the "silent period" of language learning. Bear in mind that test scores do not necessarily reflect their actual abilities. Talk to parents to find out more about their background and education.

Ruslana: The silent period may have a lot to do with the period of sense making, cultural adjustment, and negotiation of students forming their identities as much as it is about their English language proficiency. Supporting students during this phase is critical as it may contribute to the degree to which students integrate into the classroom community. Social language is critical to develop during this phase.

While many believe that social language is easily picked up, social language is culturally-laden and presents challenges because it is the language of relationships and belonging. Even those students who come with some English language skills will need to go through a period of translation and transition to learn how children of different ages communicate in English in their new classroom micro-cultures and peer groups.

Oksana: I would add that trauma may also impact the silent period. And it's important to know that many Ukrainian students learn British English and may need some help understanding an American accent or learning different terms ("apartment" vs "flat").

Nadia: When students learn ESL in Ukraine, they often gain language skills in four domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) separately and out of context. They might have rich vocabulary and know grammar rules (sometimes better than the native speakers do), but they might struggle with applying this knowledge to real-life situations. Besides, their reading and writing skills are usually developed better than listening and speaking ones, because they don't hear or speak English daily. They will need some time to organize and structure their knowledge in their heads before they will be able to add something new. Be patient and they will surprise you!

A lot of students have background knowledge in many fields (as they have up to 13 different subjects every year). Most Ukrainian parents understand the importance of education; for example, those who are able to invest time and money might sign up their kids for preschool courses where they learn how to read, write, speak English, and develop their motor skills. When their kids are in school, parents may hire tutors to increase their kids' academic performance or to prepare them for the State test. They will pay for after-school activities that their kids choose to develop their talents or to gain some skills. Another characteristic of Ukrainian education is that new material has to be often learned by heart. As a result, a lot of students have

a good memory. However, they might struggle with applying their knowledge to real-life situations.

Strengths and Assets

What are some areas of strength you would like to highlight?

Nadia: Historically, Ukrainians have been fighting for their independence for centuries. As a result, they have a strong will and they value their and other people's freedom very much. They are also hard-working. In rural areas, almost every family has a garden and they grow their own fruits and vegetables. Kids often help their parents and grandparents and are not afraid of any hard work.

Ruslana: Ukrainians are the most freedom-loving people you'll ever meet. Freedom is at the level of safety and security in Maslow's hierarchy of needs for Ukrainians. Our love and desire of freedom and being free gives us strength to persevere decade after decade and through centuries. That's where our resilience and strength comes from: it comes from within and it comes from generational struggle for freedom for our dignity and sovereignty to have the right to exist as a people.

Another area of strength Ukrainians have is in their creativity, resourcefulness, and inventiveness. Ukrainians can repurpose any discarded object into something useful. The older generation who grew up in Communism learned how to be inventive because, as we say, necessity is the mother of invention. That inventiveness carried over from the older generation to the new by creating something out of nothing.

Ukrainians are also resilient. Many shake off their trauma and pick up a paint brush and paint flower petals around the bullet holes in their fences and gates around their house without waiting for someone to come and give them money to replace the gate. People learn how to move on without attending to trauma because, some have told me, they have no time for that.

Oleksandr: Also, Ukrainians would try to fix everything themselves first before calling services and they are very good at it. And Ukrainian students are very practical and can solve problems very quickly for their age.

Oksana: I agree that Ukrainians are resilient, can adapt to other situations, and are not afraid to work. They will keep working and fighting and will not give up easily. That's what makes our people so strong.

What are some ways to beat stereotypes about Ukrainian students and see them as individuals?

Ruslana: One of the most harmful stereotypes about Ukrainians that I have personally experienced came from a place of ignorance when people asked me (after a fundraiser for Ukraine), "Are you from Russia?" When these questions are asked in the middle of this ongoing war, it becomes tiresome to feel responsible for educating others. I often say, "No, I have never been to Russia and I am not Russian." Yes, there are ethnic Russians living in Ukraine, but assuming that all Ukrainians are Russians contributes to the erasure of our identity as Ukrainians who are distinct from Russians and whose history predates Russia. For many Ukrainians, those are microaggressions and perpetuate old stereotypes dating back to the Cold War.

Some social studies teachers I observed in schools continue to teach the unit on Russia and when I suggested they teach a unit on Ukraine, they tell me, "We don't focus on a single country." Many American social studies teachers equate Soviet Union to Russia, perpetuating the centuries-old myths passed on by previous generations, while continuing to teach the same units that their parents learned during the Cold War.

What are some cultures/subcultures within Ukrainian culture?

Ruslana shares the following cultural nuances:

- **The culture of personal space and politeness:** Some Ukrainians who have recently arrived and are still experiencing culture shock have discovered that the personal space is quite big in the Midwest and they are confused about why people say "Excuse me" all the time. One person told me they feel like they have done something wrong when they hear "Excuse me" spoken to them, while in fact, they did nothing wrong but were standing in the grocery aisle with their cart reading labels. Newly arrived Ukrainians don't understand yet that saying "Excuse me" in public spaces serves as a warning sign that they might invade your personal space. It's very confusing to Ukrainians because our personal space is tighter and smaller and we don't mind people walking past us or bumping into each other in public spaces.
- **Spontaneity of Hospitality:** Other recently arrived Ukrainians have told me that while many Americans they are meeting are friendly, they won't invite you into their homes and hold conversations on the door step without inviting you in. They said that in Ukraine people will invite you in and feed you (even if you are not hungry) and insist on eating until you give in. In general, most Ukrainians are more spontaneous

about having people over and don't need to follow a calendar to show hospitality.

- **Direct communication:** Ukrainians are more direct communicators and have been described by Americans as "straight shooters" (we don't use that language to describe how we talk in Ukraine because speaking to the point is our norm). Those people who are not used to direct communication may find the Ukrainian communication style abrasive or even rude. It's important to understand different communication styles and not judge people's character based on their direct or indirect preferences. For example, "Let me check my calendar and get back to you," may mean people avoid meeting you for coffee, but to Ukrainians, that phrase means that people will literally check their calendar and get back to them. On the other hand, when Ukrainians say, "I won't be able to join you for coffee," it doesn't mean they are upset; they are just truthfully responding to the question without avoiding the subject. Saying "no" is not being rude in Ukrainian culture.
- **Emotions:** Ukrainians express emotions openly and truthfully, more so than other western countries. Ukrainians don't apologize for crying when feeling sad and some find it confusing why Americans apologize for crying. Also, expressing anger more openly in Ukraine is the norm because it is viewed as another normal emotion. When I have expressed frustration and anger at something, people have seemed surprised and have said things such as, "How do you really feel about that?" followed by laughter. Those reactions, even though they are dressed in humor, appear judgmental. Another area of cultural difference slightly related to emotions is when Ukrainians ask questions about overpriced items or complain about the excessive government forms, that behavior is viewed as rude, because it is expected to keep those feelings to oneself and not to express frustration openly. However, for Ukrainians, it is acceptable behavior to be open with their emotions of frustration because they are human emotions.

[Classroom resources](#) (from [ColorinColorado website collection](#))

[Discussing the conflict](#)

- [Resources for Educators and Families to Discuss the Invasion of Ukraine with Students](#) (San Diego County Office of Education)
- [What is it like being a Ukrainian refugee? — Gathering heirlooms, clothes, pets amid Russian bombardment](#) (*PBS NewsHour Classroom*)

- Class activity: Discuss how to process brutal images of war in the news (*PBS NewsHour Classroom*)
- Seven tips for spotting disinformation related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Stanford University News)
- Teachers can offer a safe space for students to talk about the war in Ukraine (The Conversation)
- Teaching Resources About the War in Ukraine (*The New York Times*)

Updates on Ukrainian children and students

- This school takes kids from the most traumatized parts of Ukraine — and offers hope (NPR)
- Millions of Ukrainian children are still in school despite the war (IdeaStream Public Media)
- Nearly two-thirds of Ukrainian children displaced by war, U.N. says (*The Washington Post*)
- A teacher set up a school for Ukrainian refugee children in Romania (NPR)
- What Ukrainian children told AFT's President Randi Weingarten: "Tell American children to be grateful" (*Education Week*)
- Polish schools expect as many Ukrainian refugees as there are students in Los Angeles (*The Washington Post*)
- Ukrainian oral history: Documentary and lesson plans



- Experience first-hand accounts of Ukrainian oral history through video clips from the documentary film, *Baba Babee Skazala: Grandmother Told Grandmother*, of children who, along with their families, were

forced to abandon the lives they knew to become refugees in order to ensure their safety during World War II.

- Related [videos](#) and [lesson plans](#) are available from PBS Learning Media's "Ukrainian Oral History: World War II to Present" resource collection. This film was created by Matej Silecky, a professional figure skater-turned-filmmaker who wanted to capture this important history [from his family's home country](#).

Discussing Ukraine: Resources for Families

- [Talking to your child sensitively about Ukraine](#) (PBS NewsHour)
- [How to talk to kids about the Ukraine invasion](#) (PBS SoCal)
- [How to talk to kids about Ukraine](#) (*The New York Times*)
- [How to talk to children about Ukraine](#) (The Guardian)
- [Your kids are hearing about Ukraine. How to help them understand](#) (*The Washington Post*)
- [When kids have questions about nuclear tensions](#) (PBS NewsHour)

Tips about news and media coverage

- [Fred Rogers Talks About Tragic Events in the News](#) (PBS Parents)
- [Meet the Helpers](#) (Public Media)

Talking about tough topics

- [Guide: After a Loved One Dies](#) (National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement) | [Spanish & Japanese versions](#)
- [A Child in Grief](#) (New York Life Foundation) | [Spanish version](#)
- [Sesame Street Resources on Grief](#) | [Spanish version](#)

Resources for military families

Students in military families may be navigating feelings about past deployments or anxiety about the future. See these resources for more information:

- [The Crisis in Ukraine: Resources for Our Military Community](#)

The Military Child Education Coalition has also compiled [these resources](#) to support Ukrainian families.

What is your advice for schools that are welcoming students who are arriving from Ukraine?

Oksana: First, schools should know that Ukrainian families may speak Ukrainian, Russian, or both languages. It's important not to make assumptions about which languages families speak. Ask families which language they prefer for interpretation and written translation.

It's also important to give families space and time to share when they feel comfortable talking about their experiences. Rather than asking a lot of questions at the beginning, offer your support and let them know you are available to talk or answer their questions at any time.

But at the same time, be ready to hear your families' stories, because each family's story will be unique and schools need to hear these stories in order to provide correct support and services. For example, I have talked to many different families who are arriving during the war. Some families that come from the eastern part of Ukraine have totally different experiences from families that come from central or western parts. I have learned that:

- Some families have seen violence, bombing, and casualties.
- Some families have been stuck underground or detained.
- Some families left Ukraine immediately and saw very little conflict.
- Some families have moved around or have been in other countries after leaving everything behind.
- The issues and hardships on the ground affecting civilians and daily life may vary by city or region.
- Many families have loved ones, including fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons, still in Ukraine.

For everyone that has left, their hearts are still in Ukraine. And there is so much trauma, but not everyone is coming with the same traumas. Some students are experiencing PTSD when they hear sirens, alarm bells, or airplanes, or even while they are on their flight here. And some young women have been the victims of sexual violence.

What are some examples of trauma-informed practice that can support Ukrainian students who have left Ukraine?

Nadia: First of all, I would recommend that teachers create and maintain an environment where Ukrainian students would feel safe (e.g., some students don't mind answering their peers' questions about the war, while for others these questions can trigger sad memories). Trusting relationships have to be

established and sustained with students. In addition, teachers should watch carefully for trauma symptoms and address them right away.* Even checking in with a student might help a teacher understand better what the student is going through, but trust must be established prior to such conversations.

Ruslana: Most Ukrainians do not talk about trauma, PTSD, and depression for two reasons. One is cultural: caring about their psychological wounds and talking about one's grief or loss of a loved one is not common practice among Ukrainians. In fact, I struggled to find the Ukrainian word for "grieving." At the same time, Ukrainians have generational trauma from [Holodomor](#) (which was an artificial famine orchestrated in 1932-33 as a genocidal attempt to starve out Ukrainians); people were not allowed to talk about it in order to process it after it was over. So, processing trauma verbally and intentionally does not happen naturally.

The second reason is priorities. My nephew who still lives in Ukraine said that many Ukrainians he met do not have a roof over their house because it was damaged during air strikes, so they cannot afford therapy or talking it out because they need to fix up their homes and gardens so they can survive the winter.

Ukrainians who arrived as refugees (in the every-day sense of the word because they are technically not refugees), unfortunately, will find themselves having to prioritize seeking employment, adjusting to their new culture in the U.S., and providing for their families over attending therapy, even if they are aware of the need for self-care and their mental health. Understanding these reasons will help teachers and social workers have a more informed empathy.

***Editor's note:** *Educators are encouraged to seek additional support for students where needed, as well as training in trauma-informed practice if they have not received it within their school setting.*

[How can schools work with the community to support families who are arriving?](#)

Oksana: Ask them what help they need and tell them about different kinds of help that are available. Learn more about your local/regional Ukrainian community through churches, schools, and clubs.

Olga: Many Ukrainians coming to the U.S. these days do not have refugee status but instead have temporary protected status (TPS). Community resources would be extremely helpful and much appreciated by most.

Ruslana: The [Uniting for Ukraine \(U4U\)](#) program is truly a unique program designed quickly to respond to the unprovoked and unexpected Russian invasion. Ukrainians who arrive under this program are not refugees and are not processed by the refugee resettlement agencies. Instead, they are placed into temporary sponsor or host homes. Because of this, the refugee resettlement agencies do not know about them or their needs and have no established method for reaching out to them and connecting them with services.

Several Ukrainians I have met told me how they do not know how to fill out basic forms (or which forms to fill out) and how to obtain basic hygiene or dental care. It is very important that social workers in school understand these basic facts about Ukrainians who have arrived through the U4U program so that schools can be proactive in meeting their needs.

Oleksandr: Ukrainian people with TPS are allowed to apply for a work authorization, but the wait is roughly a year and a half currently. And even with work authorization papers, people also have to wait a long time to renew their work authorization. As for newcomers under the U4U program, the biggest concern is getting their SSNs and work authorization. This can also cause U.S. sponsors to hesitate to agree to sponsor others since the waiting period is so long.

[What more can you tell us about how these programs work?](#)

Ruslana: Ukrainians arriving under U4U are parolees and are granted a temporary parole which allows them to stay here for two years. The expectation is that then they return home. Many are in limbo because they did not choose to be here and can't plan their future. Ukrainians are allowed to apply for work permits who come under the Uniting for Ukraine program; however, the wait is long (up to six months) and many lose hope that they will obtain employment.

One lawyer explained to me that these work permits are not unique to the U4U program. The entire system for all those who seek employment authorization currently has a massive backlog. This waiting period is stressful and psychologically challenging because Ukrainians are hard-working, educated, and highly skilled. Many owned businesses back home but find themselves unable to work in the U.S. Many feel disillusioned and can't plan their future without employment.

Some have told me that they expected to arrive in the U.S. and immediately resume employment and found themselves waiting without permission to work. On the other hand, while parents are anxious about their future, their

children may feel like they'd like to stay here long-term because they like their school and they have made new friends. However, because of the temporary parole, the moms feel torn; even though their children want to stay, they can't plan their life in the U.S. because they might have to return after the temporary parole ends.

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