Phila. Summer program helps refugees conquer English

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Body

First, Fareed Hamraqul and his family left Afghanistan, fleeing the Taliban for Uzbekistan in 1992. Then, five months ago, they left home amid more unrest, this time ending up in ***Philadelphia***.

Hamraqul, who will be a junior at Northeast High School in September, now spends sweltering ***summer*** mornings soaking up his fifth language. The bright teen's ***English*** is halting, but his message is clear.

"Every day, students ***help*** me, teachers ***help*** me," Hamraqul said yesterday through a translator. "Thank God I am here."

Here is the ***Philadelphia*** School District's ***summer*** ***refugee*** ***program*** at Northeast, one of four around the city. It's a free, intense ***summer*** class designed for high school students who are new to the country or who want extra ***help*** with ***English***.

For the last six years, many new immigrants have spent their ***summers*** learning ***English***, making up credits, and working to feel more comfortable in an American classroom. The school district uses the word ***refugee*** loosely, and most often it is not referring to those who seek political asylum in the United States.

The stakes are high. Immigrant students tend to stay in school and graduate, said Ana Sainz de la Pena, who directs ***English*** as a Second Language and bilingual education for the district. By contrast, many American-born ***English*** language learners struggle and drop out.

More than 13,000 of the district's 167,000 students are not native ***English*** speakers, and the number has held steady, Sainz de la Pena said. While most schools have some ***English*** language learners, Northeast is a magnet for many immigrant groups, as is Washington High in the Northeast and Edison and Kensington elsewhere in the city.

In Uzbekistan, Hamraqul had to deal with not just the fallout from a peripatetic, violent early life, but also a system he couldn't understand.

"My brothers went to school, people made fun of them," he said. "My parents didn't learn Russian because there was no one to ***help***."

Just a few months into his American experience, Hamraqul has been bolstered by his school experience, and has a plan. He wants to become fluent in ***English***, earn his high school diploma, and study at community college, then a university. He wants to teach ***English*** to other immigrants. He dreams of being a family man.

"I want to be the best support to my children," he said.

Philadelphia's ***refugee*** ***program*** ***helps*** bridge many gaps. Academics and social skills are key, but there are also community meetings where parents can ask questions - in their own language - about the school system. They are also pointed to resources for adults and families.

More than 400 students around the city attend the month-long ***program***, for which they receive credit. The 120 students in the Northeast ***program*** speak a wide variety of languages - including Spanish, Chinese, Creole and Persian - and take subjects such as ***English*** and American history. Their fluency varies widely.

Sandra Kern, a district school growth coordinator who oversees ***refugee*** ***summer programs*** citywide, called the ***programs*** "a way to catch kids who fall through the cracks."

During the school year, many students in the ***program*** sit in classrooms with American-born students, and that can overwhelm them, she said.

"Here, there's always someone who speaks their language," Kern said. "Sometimes, American-born students make fun of their accents, and they get comforable here, get acclimated."

Jiali He, a slender, shy 20-year-old who came to America four months ago from China, entered the ***refugee*** ***program*** to earn credits toward graduation next June.

"I want to improve my ***English***," she said.

But there's another reason, He said - confidence.

"Here, I've made a lot of friends from different countries, and we talk together in ***English***," she said. "It ***helps***."

In math teacher John Roman's classroom, students sat in bunches, laughing, talking, bent over worksheets. The teenagers, who had flunked math the first time around, tackled algebraic equations confidently.

"Often, they could do better, but they fail math because their ***English*** is a problem," said Yana Ratmansky, a bilingual counseling assistant for the ***program***. When one young woman stumbled over a problem, Ratmansky talked quietly to her in Russian. The student smiled, nodded, and began figuring it out.

"This gives them a comfort zone," said Roman. "Everyone's new. They're learning together."

But learning how to be American teenagers? No instruction is necessary there, Roman said.

"They soak that up the first day," he said, pointing to a room full of teenagers wearing brand-name clothes, with iPods and cell phones peeking out of book bags and purses.

Jovany Thomas, 16, fits right in with his black Chuck Taylor sneakers, loose athletic clothing, and talk of afternoons swimming at the rec center, playing soccer, and hanging out with friends.

But he remembers when things weren't so calm. Thomas left a turbulent Haiti a year and a half ago.

"There was a lot of insecurity, and sometimes I didn't get an education, when they threatened the school," Thomas said nonchalantly of his former life. "They were shooting people, kidnapping kids."

His parents got three of their four children out of the country: Jovany came to ***Philadelphia*** to live with his godmother, a brother landed in England with another relative, and a third sibling is living in Canada.

So while he's not big on school - "I hate it," he said, his shrug the universal symbol for teenage cool - he shows up at the ***refugee*** ***program*** every day, perfecting the ***English*** he speaks at home along with French and Creole.

"I talk to my parents every week," Thomas said. "They made me promise to come and learn ***English***, to have a better life."

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Graphic

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