



Update from the Superintendent

To: Parents and Guardians
From: Bill Husfelt, Superintendent
Date: March 25, 2022

Recently, I had the pleasure of spending some time with members of our Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) program and I am so very touched by their incredible stories of bravery, sacrifice and courage. This program supports students who are recent immigrants, many of whom arrived alone, and it has quickly become an integral part of our district.

I usually try to stay away from politics but I am going to get political here for a minute. Every single President since Ronald Reagan has pledged to “solve the immigration issue” and yet, here we are without a solution still. These children didn’t create this crisis but they are the ones suffering while the adults try to figure it out and that is just unacceptable in my book. Regardless of your feelings about immigration, I hope we can all agree that we need to do what’s right for these children who have already suffered so much!

We can certainly agree that our country isn’t perfect and many of us have LOTS of ideas about things to change or improve. However, spending just a short time with children who have sacrificed so much to just be here, in this country, is quite humbling and served as a good reminder for me about gratitude and appreciation for the rights and privileges we sometimes take for granted as U.S. citizens. You can see the hurt and the anguish in their eyes and it’s just heartbreaking.

And so, I’d like to take a few minutes to share some of their stories with you so, hopefully, you can be as inspired by them as I am. Gratitude is a great place from which to approach life and I hope reading this will give you a HUGE sense of gratitude for what we have, and for the people we have who are helping these children and their families.

While they hail from vastly different backgrounds and family structures, these students have a few things in common in that most are here to escape government corruption, violence and gang-related activities and poverty. These children haven’t just experienced food insecurity, many of them have experienced extended hunger and depravity.

Most of them also share a feeling of loss as many of them traveled here with only one parent and some came without a parent. Because they are working on English language acquisition, many struggle with loneliness and most experienced some sort of trauma while crossing the border.

There are students like Jose who arrived here from Guatemala alone and was placed with an aunt. His immigration status requires him to attend school but he’s been asked to leave his aunt’s

house because the landlord is concerned about overcrowding. This means he must work to pay his own way while trying to attend school. Our SLIFE support team is working with him to complete school online so he can work to pay his rent. Jose is 17 years old.

Patricia is 16 and came to us from Guatemala. She traveled alone and encountered many obstacles on her journey to America. She's currently living with a guardian but has no family here. With huge gaps in her education, Patricia is behind academically but is determined to learn our language and graduate with her peers.

Juan is ten years old and arrived recently from Honduras via Mexico. He and his mom lived in a temporary shelter for two years before being allowed to cross the border. He's ten years old but the last grade he completed in school was second grade. He may be a little behind but he's making great progress thanks to support from our SLIFE team.

Carlos is 16 years old and was chosen by his family to make the dangerous trek to the U.S. to avoid gang initiation in his home country of Honduras. While he knows he's safe here in the U.S., Carlos struggles with anxiety and depression because he misses his family and his home. Carlos is extremely motivated to succeed however because he knows that one day he can get a job and provide security for himself ... security that was missing in his home country.

Fernando, who attends one of our high schools, shared with us at the meeting that he's walking FORTY minutes to school each day because he's unsure of how to access bus transportation. I wanted to do all I could to help him immediately but, due to the language barrier, he doesn't know his current address. Rest assured, we immediately got to work on that to help him.

All of these students, and many more, are being supported by a team of BDS employees who are literally moving mountains to welcome them, to settle them, to encourage them and to support them in their new country and new schools. It truly takes a village in situations like these and we're so very grateful for our dedicated SLIFE employees, the teachers and other educators who have welcomed these students into their classrooms and into their hearts.

Despite their differences, do you know what ALL of these students have in common? They ALL have a strong desire and a determination to learn English as soon as possible. They just want a chance at the "American Dream" and they know that English is the way they get started on that journey. If you could see how hard they are working, in such desperate circumstances, I firmly believe you'd want to do all you could to help them too.

So if you're reading this and would like to help these students in any way, please don't hesitate to reach out to Sally Gentili who does an amazing job coordinating all of our programs for students who don't speak English as their native language. You can reach her at 850-767-3940 or by email at Gentilsr@bay.k12.fl.us.

Stay safe and God Bless!