

# CLOSING THE GAP:

## Stakeholders and Newcomer Youth's Perspectives on Education in Calgary, Alberta

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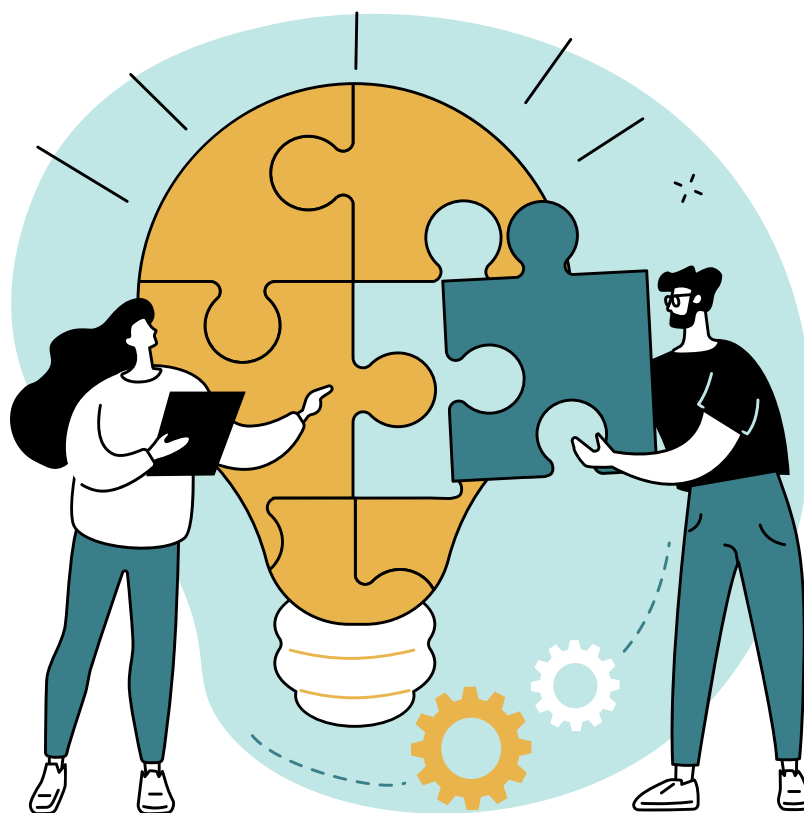
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***“We have to admit that  
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School Staff Member

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In partnership with:



# Introduction

According to Statistics Canada's 2021 Census, over 1.3 million new immigrants settled permanently in Canada between 2016 and 2021—the highest number of recent immigrants recorded since the Canadian census began in 1871 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Immigrants play a crucial role in addressing labour shortages, a need that has become increasingly urgent with Canada's rising retirement rate due to an aging population (Statistics Canada, 2022). Furthermore, with Canada's birth rate too low to sustain population growth, immigration has become the primary driver of demographic stability (Statistics Canada, 2022). While there is strong evidence of immigrants' essential contributions to Canada's economy and population growth, Bauder (2005) argues that Canada often treats immigrants as economic tools, resulting in a one-sided relationship rather than a mutually beneficial one.

This study focused specifically on newcomer youth, who comprised 17.5% of Canada's immigrant population in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021). Among the many challenges faced by immigrant youth, education is one of the most critical. For newcomer youth, adapting to an entirely new education system can be daunting, compounded by barriers such as limited English proficiency, unfamiliarity with school norms, disrupted prior education, limited parental engagement, gaps in school-based support, discrimination, and difficulty navigating peer relationships (Riley & Ungerleider, 2008; Gallucci, 2016). Without adequate support, these challenges can lead to poorer academic outcomes and reduced long-term opportunities for integration into Canadian society.

Grounded in a community-based research framework, this project was conducted in partnership with two local community organizations. Through interviews with newcomer youth and key stakeholders in junior high and high school settings, the study sought to:

- 1 Identify common educational barriers and gaps affecting newcomer youth in Calgary
- 2 Identify existing solutions and interventions that address these issues



This study uses the term **newcomer** as an umbrella term for individuals born outside of Canada, including—but not limited to—immigrants and refugees. While definitions of **youth** vary in the literature (Kaufmann, 2021), this study focuses on adolescents in junior high and high school (ages 12–18), a developmental period marked by identity formation (Li et al., 2017). Previous research shows that **newcomer youth** in this age range often balance increased academic and personal responsibilities alongside adjusting to a new environment (Rodriguez, 2023; Shakya et al., 2012). Understanding their experiences is therefore critical, as they can shape long-term educational and life trajectories.

# Socio-Political Context

In Canada, provincial governments have exclusive jurisdiction over education at all levels (CICIC, n.d.). In Alberta, concerns about the privatization of education have grown under the continued governance of the United Conservative Party (UCP). Since taking a majority mandate in 2019, the UCP has implemented significant budget cuts to Alberta's public education system—including the Calgary Board of Education and the Calgary Catholic School District (Ferguson, 2019).

According to Statistics Canada data, Alberta's public school operational spending rank dropped from second place in 2012 to tenth (last) in 2021, despite experiencing the largest enrollment increase in that period (Zwaagstra et al., 2023). These cuts have resulted in insufficient wages, inadequate classroom resources, deteriorating learning conditions, and other negative outcomes (Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA], 2024; Ferguson, 2024). In 2024, ATA president Jason Schilling stated:

*“Despite having the richest economy in the country, Alberta has the poorest education system.”*

Alberta's education funding levels are now the lowest in Canada (Zwaagstra et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the provincial government funds private schools at 70% of their total cost—the highest rate in Canada—resulting in a per-student spending gap of \$28,000 in favour of private schools (Teachers.ab.ca, 2024). The ATA argues that this level of funding for tuition-charging schools is unnecessary and diverts resources away from public schools, exacerbating inequality.

The disparity between public and private school funding has deepened educational inequities. In 2025, in response to ongoing challenges, 94.5% of Alberta's public school teachers voted in favour of strike action (Teachers.ab.ca, 2025).



# Literature Review

Schools provide not only academic skills but also opportunities for social integration and access to settlement services (Shields & Lujan, 2019; Cohen, 2016). However, Canada's education system often reinforces exclusionary practices that affect newcomer students' social, psychological, and economic outcomes (Henry & Tator, 2010; Selimos & Daniel, 2017). The following sections highlight common barriers newcomer youth face and explore school- and community-based strategies designed to support them.

## Prevalent Barriers in the Education System

Language barriers pose significant challenges for newcomer youth. English proficiency is key for education, employment, and social participation, yet it can take three to five years to develop conversational fluency and up to seven years to master academic language (Li, 2013). Limited English skills often restrict students' ability to fully engage in school and broader society.

Discrimination also shapes newcomer youths' educational experiences. Stereotyping, exclusion, and microaggressions can come from peers and even teachers, who may hold deficit-based assumptions (Kalchos et al., 2022; DeNicolo et al., 2017). These experiences are linked to poorer mental health, disengagement from school, and higher dropout risks (Nazish & Salami, 2021; Patel et al., 2023).

Curriculum and teaching practices often fail to reflect newcomer students' cultural and linguistic diversity, contributing to feelings of alienation (Cui, 2019; Kaufmann, 2021). Teacher-student misunderstandings rooted in cultural differences can further strain relationships and negatively affect academic outcomes (Usman, 2012; Zhi-peng, 2014). Collectively, these systemic issues limit newcomer students' educational and employment opportunities.



Given these prevailing barriers that newcomer youth experience in education, the literature has identified a plethora of interventions aimed at alleviating some of these challenges.

### **School-Based Interventions**

Schools play a critical role in supporting newcomer youth's integration. Programs like English as an Additional Language (EAL) provide language instruction, academic support, and intercultural education (Volante et al., 2021). Creative approaches, including arts-based activities, mentoring, and counseling, help students express themselves, build confidence, and develop social connections (Herati & Meyer, 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2014).

While these supports are valuable, challenges remain. EAL and remedial programs can unintentionally delay graduation or reinforce segregation within schools (Li & Que, 2020; Chiu et al., 2017). Furthermore, schools often lack culturally relevant services and diverse staff, limiting their ability to meet students' needs (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; Kaufmann, 2021).

### **Community-Based Interventions**

Community-based organizations (CBOs) fill critical gaps by offering culturally responsive programs outside traditional school settings. These include advocacy, trauma-informed care, language support, and settlement services delivered in accessible spaces like community centres and cultural hubs (Lee et al., 2021; Guo & Guo, 2016).

CBOs provide diverse opportunities for social integration and personal growth. Sports and recreation programs foster belonging and peer connection, while arts and drama initiatives help youth process trauma and build resilience (Lundkvist et al., 2020; McLeod et al., 2017). Collaborative models—such as community-school partnerships—bring schools, clinics, and CBOs together to provide integrated, student-centered supports (Herati & Meyer, 2023; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2024).

Evidence shows that programs are most effective when grounded in community knowledge, affirming students' cultural identities, and addressing structural barriers holistically (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Bryan et al., 2020). Inclusive, collaborative approaches create the strongest conditions for newcomer youths' academic success, emotional well-being, and long-term integration.



# Methodology

## Approach

This study employed a community-based research (CBR) design, which actively involves community members to produce research that benefits the community (Brown & Stalker, 2021). We partnered with two local non-profit organizations working with newcomer youth to strengthen relationships, gain nuanced insight into educational challenges, and co-create research tools.

CBR influenced several aspects of the project, including:

- Participant recruitment and site selection
- Development and refinement of interview questions
- Data analysis methods

## Method

This qualitative study explored educational challenges faced by newcomer youth and the supports available to them. We used purposive sampling to recruit participants with direct experience relevant to our research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). A total of 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Interview guides were developed from the literature and refined in collaboration with community partners. Youth were asked questions such as, *“What advice would you give teachers or principals to help students like you feel more welcome and supported?”* Service providers were asked, *“From your perspective, how effective are current educational services and programs for newcomer youth?”*

Interviews were conducted in person or virtually in English and lasted 45–90 minutes. Written consent was obtained from adult participants, while youth under 18 provided assent alongside parental or guardian consent.



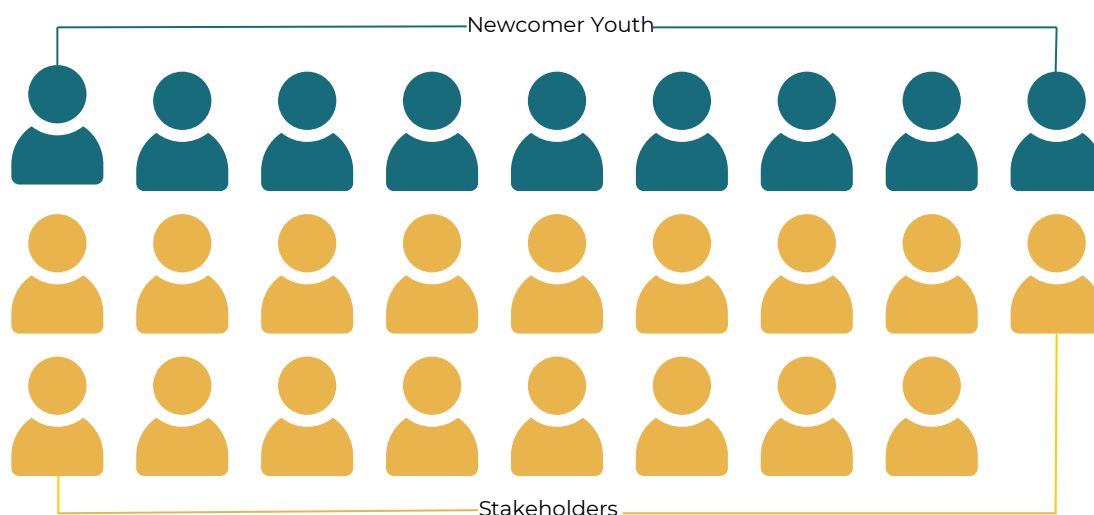
## Participants and Recruitment

Two participant groups were included:

**Newcomer youth** – 9 junior high or high school students, aged 12–18, born outside Canada (including immigrants and refugees)

**Stakeholders** – 17 individuals working directly with newcomer youth in educational or community settings.

Recruitment was conducted via posters at community-based organizations and through word-of-mouth referrals.



## Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using hybrid thematic analysis (Swain, 2008). Codes were both deductive (based on prior literature) and inductive (emerging from the data). This dual approach allowed us to capture detailed, context-specific insights into newcomer youth experiences.

A second researcher reviewed each transcript, and themes were refined through collaborative discussion to ensure consistency and reliability (Morse, 2012). This process aimed to reflect the complexity of challenges—personal, familial, institutional, and systemic—faced by newcomer youth in Canada.

# Findings



## 1 Impact of Austerity Measures

Budget cuts within Alberta's public education system have produced oversized classrooms, staff shortages, and heightened teacher burnout, with particularly adverse effects on English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. Educators consistently reported that large class sizes diminish the quality of instruction and restrict the time available for individualized support. One teacher noted:

*"We don't have a lot of resource[s]. Schools are struggling especially at this time where we have a huge influx of students coming to the system."*

Limited EAL class availability has compounded the challenge, resulting in mixed-proficiency groups that hinder student progression. Teachers described feeling underpaid, overworked, and insufficiently resourced to meet EAL learners' needs:

*"Teachers are not given the tools to succeed. The classrooms are too big ... schools don't even have the ability to be effective."*

This resource scarcity has intensified teacher burnout and restricted the capacity of schools to address the unique needs of newcomer youth.

As one teacher shared:

*"We had such a huge influx and so schools are overwhelmed, teachers are overwhelmed, and that puts pressure on all the systems."*

This strain was especially acute for teachers working with EAL students, who were expected to go beyond standard instruction without receiving adequate preparation or resources. These narratives reflect the pervasive pattern of systemic underfunding that has led to resource constraints across Alberta's public education system, particularly in serving newcomer youth populations. Rather than redistributing resources to ensure inclusive and supportive environments, current policies reinforce existing inequities that fail to meet newcomer youth's needs.





## 2 Psychological and Emotional Challenges

Newcomer youth frequently carry the psychological, emotional, and social burdens of migration into their school experiences. Participants highlighted the mismatch between the high expectations placed on students and the lack of resources to address trauma, stress, and cultural dislocation. As one educator observed:

*"You can't have newcomer students who have experienced tons of trauma coming to, say, 8 hours a day to learn English."*

The absence of dedicated mental health supports often left students to internalize distress, leading to isolation, disengagement, and—in some cases—harmful coping mechanisms. One youth noted:

*"Some kids really ... it take[s] them like a long time to understand what you're actually going through ... it's stressful mostly when you don't really know who to talk to."*

Youth felt isolated when they did not feel safe or supported enough to reach out:

*"I think a lot of the time they might close themselves off, might not seek help in those cases."*

Educators noted that behavioural expressions of trauma are often misinterpreted in classrooms lacking trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices:

*"It can be so much more difficult for them to be in a classroom ... even with our groups, like we have so many kids. And if there's a lot of behaviours happening, like we may have two or three behaviours happening at a time; it's very disruptive."*

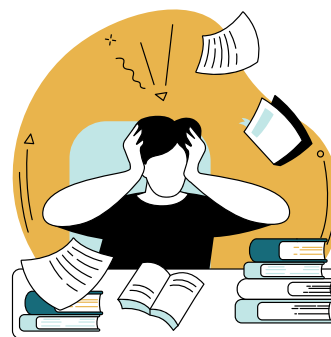
This misunderstanding exacerbates disciplinary issues and undermines student trust. Academic underperformance frequently followed, as stress impaired concentration and motivation. A participant noted:

*"This all makes stress, and that leads to like maybe academic underperformance as well."*

Experiences of bullying, racism, and abrupt assimilation pressures further deepened the sense of exclusion:

*"It was very quick and like no transition time ... I think that's all traumatic, like facing bullying at school."*

Overall, schools remain ill-equipped to respond to the intersecting mental health, socio-emotional, and behavioural needs of newcomer youth.





### 3 Cultural and Linguistic Barriers to Inclusion

A persistent cultural and linguistic divide separates newcomer students from the dominant norms of Canadian schooling. Participants described curricula steeped in Western, individualistic values that often conflict with the collectivist orientations and communication styles of many newcomer communities. Educators acknowledged that prevailing teaching methods rarely accommodate alternative learning approaches and, in some cases, actively promote assimilation:

*“We have to admit that the way we teach is culturally biased. It’s a Western point of view, right?”*

Cultural misunderstandings extended to social norms, with behaviours shaped by different cultural contexts—such as eye contact avoidance—sometimes misinterpreted as disrespect:

*“My parents were always like, ‘don’t make eye contact for longer than this,’ where like I’ve seen teachers get up in their face and it’s like, ‘why aren’t you making eye contact with me?’... and then the kid is now punished for not making eye contact.”*

Language barriers further compounded these challenges, impeding academic success and limiting opportunities for meaningful peer relationships. For students with interrupted or minimal prior education, the dual challenge of acquiring English while meeting curricular demands created particularly steep learning curves. Collectively, these barriers reinforced feelings of isolation, hindered academic achievement, and eroded cultural identity.

*“Sometimes it’s hard to explain what you’re feeling or what you’re going through... If you can’t relate to them, it’s really hard to connect to people... English is a big barrier still for some kids.”*





## 4 Role of Community-Based Programming and Services

Community-based programs emerged as critical supports for newcomer youth, particularly in bridging gaps left by formal education systems. Such programs provided not only academic assistance but also essential services including housing access, food security, trauma support, and opportunities for social connection. Participants framed these initiatives as “a bridge” between immigrant communities and schools, facilitating both integration and belonging. While recalling a program, a student described:

*“It foster[ed] that sense of community within immigrants and schools.”*

While collaboration between schools and community organizations remains inconsistent, the presence of these programs was widely valued. A service provider reflected on a collaboration between four immigrant-serving non-profit organizations in Calgary, stating it was created because:

*“They noticed a lot of youth... were falling through the cracks... specifically in regards to mental health barriers and making that connection between school services.”*

Programs aimed at high school retention were also highlighted as vital. A service provider shared their involvement in supporting youth whose ability to finish school was hindered by both social and settlement barriers:

*“I’m helping high school students, immigrant youth overcome barriers... involving their social needs and their settlement needs.”*

Participants emphasized the indispensable role of community-based organizations in supporting newcomer youth, highlighting how these initiatives often address needs that formal education systems overlook. Rather than functioning as optional add-ons, these programs and services were described as integral spaces where youth could access mental health supports, navigate cultural transitions, and secure material resources. While collaboration between schools and community organizations was noted to vary in consistency and effectiveness, participants consistently underscored that such programs form a foundational network of care necessary for the success and well-being of newcomer youth.



# Recommendations

The findings point to the urgent need for systemic reform across service provision and educational policy domains. Key recommendations include:

- 1 Redistributive Justice at the Policy Level**  
Allocate consistent, long-term funding to the education system, ensuring adequate staffing and resources, and implementing policies that directly address structural inequities.
- 2 Enhanced Teacher Education on Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism**  
Strengthen educators' capacity to navigate cultural differences and foster equity in diverse classrooms.
- 3 Curricular Reform for Representation and Belonging**  
Co-create curricula with newcomer youth and communities to ensure cultural relevance, disrupt assimilationist approaches, and position students as active cultural contributors.
- 4 Integration of Cultural Humility and Trauma-Informed Practices**  
Equip educators with training to address the mental health and socio-emotional needs of newcomer students, particularly in contexts shaped by migration-related trauma.
- 5 Holistic Education Models**  
Educational stakeholders should adopt a wraparound, holistic model of education that integrates academic learning with supports addressing socio-economic, political, and health-related determinants shaping students' lives.
- 6 Consistent and Ongoing Multi-Sector Collaboration**  
Strengthening collaborations between families, schools, and community-based organizations can create more equitable learning environments where all students are better positioned to thrive.



# Moving Forward

The growing population of newcomer youth in Canada demands immediate and sustained attention from educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Without intentional efforts to dismantle systemic inequities, these students will continue to face barriers that undermine their educational success, well-being, and sense of belonging. The challenges they experience are not the result of individual shortcomings but of structural gaps within schools, funding models, and policy frameworks that fail to adequately meet their diverse needs.

Addressing these inequities requires moving beyond fragmented, short-term solutions toward coordinated, multi-level action that centers the voices and experiences of newcomer youth themselves. Educational systems must meaningfully engage with families, schools, community-based organizations, and policymakers to create a shared vision of belonging—one where newcomer youth are not just integrated but empowered as cultural contributors and leaders in their own right.

The urgency is clear: building inclusive, responsive, and well-resourced educational systems is not optional but essential. Every delay risks deepening disparities and perpetuating cycles of marginalization. By investing in equity-driven policies, culturally relevant curricula, and trauma-informed supports, Canada has the opportunity to transform its education system into one where all students are positioned to thrive—today and for generations to come.



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