

FALL 2024

# DATA STORIES:

NEWCOMER STUDENTS IN MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOLS



## INTRODUCTION

For more than a year, Massachusetts headlines have repeatedly described a “migrant crisis” within the state. News stories frequently highlight the political and policy aspects of the wave of recently arrived families, from overflowing emergency shelters to conflicts between communities and the state over placements within local hotels. On the other hand, news coverage rarely delves into the humanity of the individuals involved—their stories, their fears, or their aspirations for the future.

Similarly, when schools are mentioned as part of this conversation, it’s often to bring up unanticipated costs or resource challenges associated with enrolling recently arrived migrant students. What these stories miss are the day-to-day efforts of school and district staff to orient newcomer students and their families to a novel educational system. Newcomers—a term we use to refer to students with substantially limited or interrupted formal education, as well as those at the lowest level of English proficiency—are often highly resilient and eager to learn. At the same time, newcomer students need heightened academic, language, and social supports compared to other students in order to thrive in an education system that was not designed for their success.

More than ever before, educating newcomer students requires districts all across the Commonwealth—not just the state’s traditional hubs for newly arrived immigrants—to identify and apply effective strategies for developing students’ academic, language, and social-emotional skills. Many suburban and rural communities have enrolled unprecedented numbers of migrant students in recent years. For instance, a [2023 report](#) on high school newcomers in Massachusetts indicates that the number of newcomers more than tripled in non-urban districts between 2008 and 2022.

In this Data Story, we dig into the topic from a different angle, looking at recent state funding data to examine which districts have received proportionally higher amounts of supplemental funding under the Emergency Housing Assistance program. We also highlight examples of communities that have dedicated time and resources to promoting positive experiences for newcomer students and families. Finally, we share a number of resources that can offer guidance and support to educators as they seek to better serve newcomers within their schools and classrooms.

## DATA DIVE

### Which districts are serving higher proportions of students in emergency housing?

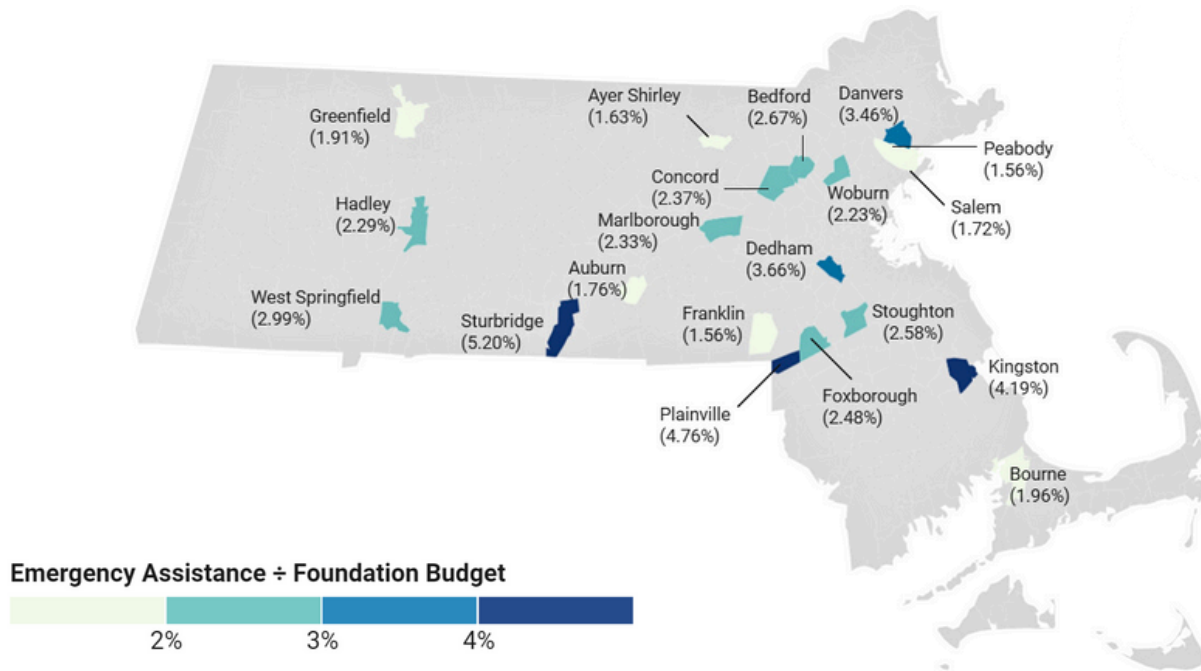
If you ask the average person to name a Massachusetts community that is hosting a disproportionately large number of recently arrived migrant families, chances are they won't come up with Sturbridge. This small town on the Connecticut border is likely better known among Bay Staters for its living history museum, Sturbridge Village, than for its status as an entry point for newcomers. Yet relative to its foundation budget, Sturbridge received the highest allocation of any district in the state to enroll students whose families sought emergency housing assistance in the 2023-24 school year.

It is important to clarify that Sturbridge did not receive the highest *total* amount of supplemental school district funding, intended to help districts address the costs of enrolling students under the state's Emergency Housing Assistance (EA) program. In absolute terms, Worcester received the largest allocation (just over \$2.2 million), followed by Marlborough (\$2.0 million), West Springfield (\$1.9 million), and Boston (\$1.8 million).

Moreover, not all newcomer students qualify for EA services (or supplemental district funding)—in particular, Massachusetts' urban districts continue to serve large numbers of recently arrived immigrant students whose families do not participate in the EA program. Meanwhile, the state's emergency shelters do not serve only recently arrived migrants, but rather a range of families in need of a place to stay. Therefore, examining the amount of EA funds received does not directly represent the number of newcomer students who entered districts in the last school year. It does, however, indicate which districts received an infusion of state funds as they sought to serve a growing population of new families, many of them recently arrived migrants.

From that perspective, it is interesting to take another look at the data to better understand which districts received large amounts of EA funding relative to their budgets. For the purposes of this calculation, we examine the ratio of the supplemental district funding received in FY24 to each district's foundation budget for that year. By that calculation, Sturbridge comes out on top—EA funding amounted to more than 5% of the district's total foundation budget. Furthermore, only two Gateway Cities (Salem and Peabody) appear among the top 20 districts. Instead of larger cities like Boston (0.16%), Lowell (0.24%), and Worcester (0.47%), top districts on the list largely include suburban communities like Dedham (3.66%), Danvers (3.46%), Bedford (2.67%), Stoughton (2.58%), and Foxborough (2.48%). (See the map below for more information on the top 20 districts.)

## Top 20 Districts: FY24 Emergency Assistance, as a Percentage of Foundation Budget



The **map** above shows the 20 districts with the highest ratio between the supplemental district funds received under the state's Emergency Housing Assistance program in FY24 and the district's foundation budget for that year. These districts are spread across the state and represent a wide range of communities, from urban to suburban to rural.

*Note:* This map lists depicts only the 20 districts that received the highest proportion of supplemental school district funding relative to budget. A total of 78 districts received some supplemental school district funding under the EA program in FY24, ranging from a high of 5.20% of foundation budget to a low of 0.01%.

*Sources:* [Report on the Emergency Housing Assistance Program from August 26, 2024](#) and [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education \(DESE\) Chapter 70 District Profiles](#)

Within these communities, educating the large proportion of newly arrived students—many of whom have experienced significant trauma in their journey to this country—requires novel approaches for learning and student support. Undoubtedly, responding to this need has taxed many districts' budgets and capacity. News of newcomers' arrival and subsequent enrollment in local public schools has, in some towns, been met with intense pushback, with regard to both housing and educating migrant families.

Yet even amid the political and organizational challenges, there are numerous stories of towns and communities working to welcome new students and their families. Many school and district leaders have made new investments in areas such as language development, family and community outreach, and trauma-responsive practice, undertaking collaborative efforts to promote a smoother transition for families whose lives have been upended by migration and resettlement. The box below highlights a few examples of positive news stories, spotlighting communities that have sought to create a welcoming environment for newly arrived students and families.

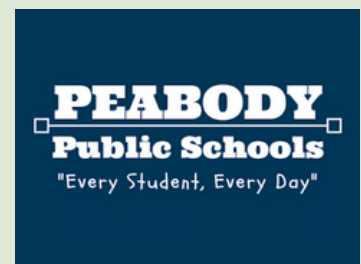
### News Highlights

In **Bedford Public Schools**, preparing to start the 2023-24 school year with 17 newcomer students was an “all-hands-on-deck effort,” according to Superintendent Cliff Chuang. The district worked closely with other town agencies, particularly the health department, to provide necessary services. Superintendent Chuang also gathered with families over a shared meal to orient them to the local school system and introduce their students’ classroom and language instructors.



Educators and district leaders in **Foxborough Public Schools** have sought to ease the transition into a new environment for 48 recently arrived students, most of whom hail from Chile and Haiti. Educators have helped address students’ anxiety by walking them through their schedules and introducing them to school norms and practices. Foxborough teachers also recognize the tremendous assets that these students bring (from skills in their native languages to positive attitudes and a dedication to learning), seeing them as vital new members of the community.

**Peabody Public Schools** welcomed forty newcomer students during the last school year—enough for the district to open a new kindergarten classroom mid-year. Along with a classroom teacher, the district also brought on additional staff to support the new students, including an English language teacher, paraprofessional, and school counselor. But, as Superintendent Josh Vadala noted, efforts to integrate the new families were not confined to schools—various organizations helped coordinate a community-wide response that included enriching (and fun) out-of-school programming. Peabody also hired a resident of a local emergency shelter who speaks multiple languages to serve as a liaison, allowing for better communication between schools and families.



## RESOURCES

### How can schools and districts support newcomer students?

Even in communities that have sought to welcome newcomer students (and their families), providing the range of academic, language, and social-emotional supports they require can be a challenge. In the following sections, we outline a variety of tools and resources from the Rennie Center and other sources that can help support the holistic development of newcomer students. We hope these recommendations can serve as a useful starting point for planning and adopting new approaches to academic and social-emotional development for recently arrived students.

- **Academic and Language Development**

Because so many newly arrived migrant students speak a language (or multiple languages) other than English, strategies for promoting their academic development often align with more general strategies for working with English learners (ELs). For ELs, as for all students, high-quality instructional materials are critical to fostering academic success. It is especially important for schools to identify core instructional materials (as opposed to supplemental programs) that enable effective instruction for ELs, so that EL students are gaining access to the same grade-level content as their peers.

**Curriculum Ratings by Teachers** (CURATE)—which the Rennie Center leads in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)—is a great starting point for schools and districts seeking to identify high-quality instructional materials that meet the needs of all students, including newcomers and other ELs. Through CURATE, the Rennie Center convenes teachers from across the Commonwealth to examine curricular materials and determine whether those materials meet, partially meet, or do not meet expectations for quality. The final **report** on each curriculum calls out its particular strengths and challenges, including how well the materials help educators work with ELs and how well they integrate culturally responsive texts and assignments.

School and district leaders may also want to examine resources from DESE's **Next Generation ESL Project**, which includes a rubric to evaluate the quality of ESL curriculum and a suite of planning tools to help educators develop thoughtful, well-designed instructional units and lessons. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education's **Newcomer Tool Kit** contains a great deal of useful information on offering high-quality instruction for newcomer students, while also sharing recommendations on how to support students' social-emotional development and establish effective partnerships with families.

- **Family and Community Engagement**

To consistently and effectively engage families who are new to the country, and who often have little or no familiarity with the American educational system, schools must think about proactive ways to build trust and promote two-way communication. Schools can also play an important role in connecting newcomer students experiencing homelessness—like those residing in the state’s emergency shelter network—with critical community resources.

The Rennie Center's **Back-to-School Blueprint** series was designed to help educators reconnect with students and families following the COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures, but it includes a great deal of content that is equally pertinent today. In particular, our guides on **Rebuilding Community** and **Accessing Essential Services** contain many tools to help make school environments more welcoming.

Rennie’s **A Year in the Life** project, which documents the experience of Somerville Public Schools during the first year of the pandemic, is similarly useful for schools seeking to engage newcomer students and families. One dispatch in the series takes an in-depth look at **communications** and **community services**, examining how the Somerville Family Learning Collaborative aimed to support the city’s diverse population and facilitate connections with both learning opportunities and essential goods. See the sidebar for a selection of recommendations drawn from our reporting on Somerville.

### **Promoting Community Engagement in a Time of Crisis**

In the Rennie Center’s **A Year in the Life** project, we highlighted a number of recommendations drawn from our in-depth examination of Somerville’s response to the pandemic. Many of these are relevant to communities seeking to support newcomer students and families, such as the strategies listed below.

- Identify and catalog community partners and seek to leverage each one’s individual strengths for supporting basic needs.
- Use school facilities in new ways to integrate existing services such as a clothing closet or food pantry within the school building.
- Convene student support teams to review individual students in order to identify key needs and opportunities for enrichment, then follow up on this review by linking students and their families with community resources.
- Provide spaces for parents and family members to come together and build community in order to promote healing and wellbeing for themselves and their students. These spaces can vary in focus, from general conversation and mental health support to advocacy and organizing.

More recently, the Rennie Center has put out several reports on how schools and districts can develop school-community partnerships to support homeless youth and their families. [Supporting Unhoused Students: A Blueprint for Massachusetts Schools](#) offers a step-by-step process for building collaborative programs that promote housing stability and academic success for students experiencing homelessness. Our [practice](#) and [policy](#) guides for school homeless liaisons, meanwhile, are designed to connect liaisons with information and resources they can use in their day-to-day work with students and families.

- **Trauma-Responsive Practices**

Quite often, newcomer students have experienced trauma, violence, and chronic stress in the process of migration and resettlement. As schools seek to integrate these students into the community and build their academic skills, it is critical to recognize the impact of trauma on their daily lives and respond in thoughtful and compassionate ways. Especially when thinking about students in need of higher-level trauma-sensitive interventions, it can be easy to focus on the symptoms of trauma, see misbehavior as a choice, and adopt negative mindsets about students' interests and motivations. Instead, the resources below aim to help shift educator mindsets from “what is wrong with you” to “what happened to you” to “what can I do to help you.”

The Rennie Center’s Back-to-School Blueprint series, described above, includes a guide on [Helping Students Heal from Trauma](#). It looks at the causes of trauma, the effects of trauma on child development, the impact of secondary trauma on educators, and the symptoms of trauma that educators may see in the classroom.

Through its Thriving Minds initiative, which aims to help schools build comprehensive mental health systems, Rennie also developed a toolkit on [Trauma-Informed, Healing-Centered School Practices](#). This resource—published in partnership with the Center on Child Wellbeing and Trauma—contains a number of practical resources and tools for embedding trauma-responsive supports within schools and classrooms. For instance, the section on Tier 1 interventions (i.e., classroom and universal practices) includes a Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms Strategy Guide with concrete suggestions such as “Establish a quiet, safe, comfortable place in the classroom for students to go when they are feeling overwhelmed,” and “Ease transitions by giving time warnings ahead of changes in activity.”

As the data shows, districts all across Massachusetts have been impacted by recent migration to the state and high utilization of the state’s Emergency Housing Assistance program, requiring new strategies for supporting newcomer students and their families. High-quality instructional materials, effective approaches to family engagement, and trauma-responsive school and classroom supports are critical elements for districts seeking to serve their newcomer population. As the new school year kicks off, we hope that the resources listed above can offer useful guidance to educators on how to address the academic, language, and social-emotional needs of newcomer students—and to fully welcome them into a new community.



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