

# Final Research Report: Settlement Work in Schools during COVID-19



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - 5

## SECTION I

### **Introduction - 6**

Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies, and  
Saskatchewan SWIS Coordination - 7

Immigrants and Refugees: Demographic Trends in Saskatchewan - 8

Glossary of Terms - 9

## SECTION II

### **Methodology & Methods**

Participant Recruitment and Profiles - 10

Study Limitations - 11

Theoretical Framework: Anti-Racism - 11

Methodology and Methods - 14

Community-Based Research & Appreciative Inquiry - 14

Appreciative Inquiry Focus Groups - 14

## SECTION III

### **Findings**

Roles and Responsibilities: Shifted, Expanded, and Amplified - 16

Barriers Presented by Virtual Learning and Technology - 19

Interrupted Channels of Communication - 23

Recognition and Support for Settlement Workers in Schools - 24

## SECTION IV

### **Recommendations to Three Key Bodies:**

Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies  
(SAISIA) - 27

Ministry of Education - 28

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) - 29

## SECTION V

### **Conclusion -31**

## REFERENCES - 33

## APPENDIX

Invitation to Participate in a Research Project - 37

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**S**ettlement workers in schools (SWIS) provide a range of services that contribute to positive educational outcomes for newcomer students, yet they are an under-researched group of professionals. The need for settlement worker support increased as newcomer students navigated the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

This research report presents findings and recommendations from a qualitative study that investigated how settlement workers in Saskatchewan, Canada responded to educational inequities for newcomer youth exacerbated by COVID-19. Findings from eight focus groups conducted with 30 settlement workers are presented in four key themes.

- 1) Shifted, Expanded and Amplified Roles and Responsibilities**
- 2) Barriers Presented by Virtual Learning and Technology**
- 3) Interrupted Channels of Communication**
- 4) Recognition and Support for Settlement Workers in Schools**

The findings of this research underline multiple barriers to integration in the school system for newcomer youth, amplified by the pandemic and demonstrating a heightened need for settlement worker support as a result.

Recommendations directed at three different sectors are identified:

- 1) Saskatchewan Association of Integration and Settlement Agencies (SAISIA)**
- 2) Saskatchewan Ministry of Education**
- 3) Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)**

The report concludes that the role of settlement workers in schools is critical to mitigating the long-term effects of the pandemic, which could include increased experiences of school and social disconnection and exclusion, gaps in learning opportunities, and mental health impacts.



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# SECTION I

## Introduction

**S**tudents across the country are confronting a relentlessly shifting educational context introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like most Canadian provinces, schools in Saskatchewan closed in March 2020 until the end of the school year. Since reopening in September 2020, many school boards have shut their schools for extended periods as COVID-19 outbreaks surfaced across communities, offering online and blended options to stop the spread of the virus. At school, as in society more broadly, the impacts of the pandemic are most deeply felt within marginalized communities, including for newcomer students, whose services and supports were already limited pre-pandemic.

COVID-19 has amplified the work and importance of settlement workers in schools (SWIS). SWIS are employed by settlement agencies and supply a host of essential services linked to positive academic and social outcomes for students and their families.

SWIS play a vital role in shaping newcomer students' educational trajectories, yet remain an under-researched and under-recognized group of professionals. Knowledge is emerging about teachers' pedagogical adaptations and strategies to learning in the pandemic (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2021). However, the multifaceted role school settlement workers have played during the pandemic has yet to be highlighted in education, settlement or social work scholarship.

In spring 2020, the Saskatchewan Settlement Workers in Schools Coordinator, Maryam Karimi, and Amanda Gebhard (University of Regina), began a research partnership to study the impacts of COVID-19 on settlement work in schools. Fritz Pino (University of Regina) and Willow Samara Allen (University of Victoria) joined the research team. The group then convened an Advisory Committee of service providers and SWIS managers to inform the development of a research project driven by the following goals:

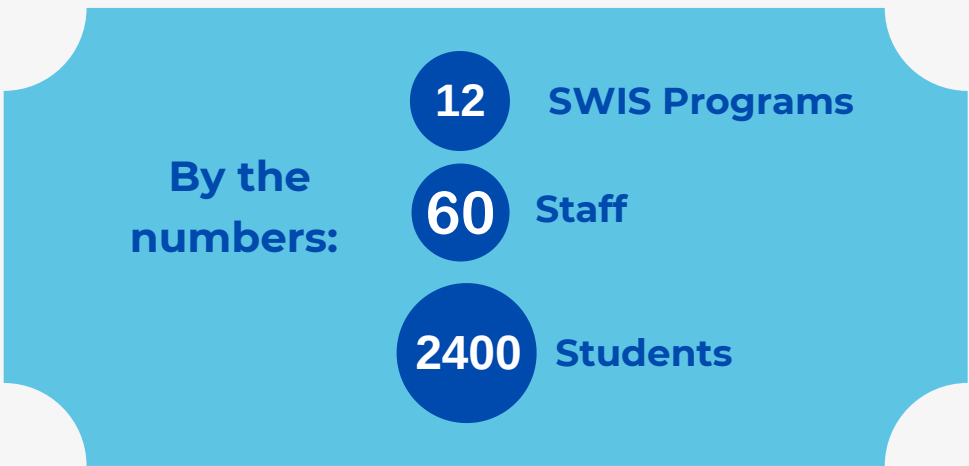
- 1) To generate in-depth knowledge of how school settlement workers across urban and rural locations in Saskatchewan were responding to educational inequities for newcomer youth exacerbated by COVID-19.
- 2) To produce a set of recommendations to guide the School Settlement Coordination program in the delivery of context-specific services to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on newcomer students' educational outcomes.
- 3) To shine a spotlight on SWIS to increase awareness, understanding, and support for their roles.

To meet these objectives, the research team held a series of eight focus groups with 30 settlement workers in schools across Saskatchewan.

This research report is divided into three main sections. The first section introduces the current context of settlement work in schools and provides background information on the Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies and Saskatchewan SWIS Coordination. The second section outlines the study methodology and provides a broad demographic profile of the participants. The third section details the study findings and recommendations as well as provides study references and appendices of study documentation.

### Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA) and Saskatchewan SWIS Coordination (SSC) Program

SAISIA is a non-profit umbrella organization for settlement and integration agencies in Saskatchewan, founded in 1987. The Saskatchewan SWIS Coordination (SSC) program is a partnership between SWIS service providers in Saskatchewan and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The SSC is a provincial support and outreach coordination program with a mandate to assist communities in urban and rural Saskatchewan in settling newcomers and their families in their schools and communities. The SSC coordinator oversees the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) Program, which is an active program in settlement agencies in small and large urban centres.



Established in Saskatoon in 2007, the Settlement Workers In Schools (SWIS) program is a school-based outreach program designed to help newcomer students and families settle in their elementary and high schools of choice within their communities of residence in Saskatchewan. Currently, there are 12 SWIS programs in Saskatchewan and 60 staff serving approximately 2,400 students.\*

\*This represents an estimated number of students being served by settlement workers between March 2020 and March 2021. The number was provided by the SWIS coordinator, who asked managers of SWIS programs across Saskatchewan to provide current numbers of students served by their program.

## **Settlement Workers in Schools seek to:**

Support successful school integration by assisting in school registration, school orientation, parent/teacher interviews and meetings, home visits and follow-up meetings.

Provide information and guidance on educational issues to students and parents.

Collaborate with school counselors and the community to provide practical, culturally-informed guidance, referrals and intervention during crisis situations.

Advocate for the rights and responsibilities of all students and their families.

Assess the needs of immigrant students and families in order to assist with their settlement.

Refer students and their families to affordable programs and services in their community, programs such as: youth programs, health services, sports, summer programs, winter activities.

Encourage newcomer families to become involved in school events and community recreational activities.

Promote respect for cultural diversity by providing multicultural training to school personnel, parents, students, and the community regarding settlement challenges. (SWIS Sask, 2018).

## **Immigrants and Refugees: Demographic Trends in Saskatchewan**

Saskatchewan is a prairie province experiencing increasing international immigration. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, the number of people under the category of immigrant totals 112,495 and makes up 10.5% of the province's total population. The four top source countries for recent immigrants between 2011 and 2016 to Saskatchewan are the Philippines (34.7%), India (12.8%), Pakistan (7.2%) and China (7.0%) (Statistics Canada, 2017). While immigration to Saskatchewan during the pandemic has decreased, significant numbers of newcomers continue to settle in the province. According to the Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics (2021), net international migration added 1,679 people to Saskatchewan in the fourth quarter of 2020. This is up from 704 people in the third quarter of 2020. In the fourth quarter of 2019, net international migration was 3,781. This report is an important reminder that immigration to Canada has not halted during the pandemic. Indeed, newcomers have continued to settle in Saskatchewan during school closures and for several thousand, their experience of settlement has been entirely or almost entirely during the pandemic.



## Glossary of Terms

- ▶ **COVID-19:** Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus (WHO, 2021).
- ▶ **Newcomer:** A term sometimes used interchangeably with recent immigrants; newcomer refers to landed immigrants who came to Canada up to five years prior to a given census year (Statistics Canada, 2016).
- ▶ **Immigrant:** A person who is, or who has ever been, a landed immigrant or permanent resident. Such a person has been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities. Immigrants who have obtained Canadian citizenship by naturalization are included in this group (Statistics Canada, 2016).
- ▶ **Racialized person or group:** is preferred over “visible minority” as it recognizes the dynamic and complex process by which racial categories are socially produced by the dominant groups in ways that entrench social inequalities and marginalization (Ontario Human Rights Code, 2009).
- ▶ **Refugee:** A person “who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHRC, 1951 Refugee Convention).
- ▶ **Settler:** The term settler makes reference to “The original settlers [who] were of various European origins, and they brought with them their laws and customs, which they then applied to Indigenous peoples and later to all peoples who have come to Canada...” as well as to “people who continue to move into Canada and settle here . . . non-European peoples are folded into the settlement process when they arrive here — even as they are often denied equal social privileges [and] do not have the power to bring with them their laws and customs” (Vowel, 2015, pp. 16-17).

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# SECTION II: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

## Participant Recruitment and Profiles

**P**articipants were recruited through a study invitation circulated via email, which was facilitated by the SSC coordinator alongside management from the settlement agencies who employ SWIS (see appendices).

A total of 30 settlement workers participated in the virtual focus group discussions (FGD). They represented a rich range of regional, ethnic, racial, gender, linguistic, educational and professional backgrounds, as well as varied geographic locations, agencies, and roles within the SWIS program. Below we provide a broad overview of the participants' profile. This is done to respect the confidentiality of the participants and to align with the study's focus on identifying patterns through the focus group discussions, to meet the goal of looking for themes coming directly from SWIS experiences to inform policy changes moving forward. For these same reasons, we have not included names or pseudonyms when we present participant quotations.

- Of the 30 participants, 17 were racialized immigrant and newcomer settlers from East Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia, South America and the Middle East. 13 were white immigrant and newcomer settlers from Europe, or Canadian-born white settlers of European ancestry. There were a total of 5 male and 25 female participants. Participants' experiences varied with respect to their length of time living in Canada – from two years to since birth – and in their time employed in the SWIS program – from under one year
- to over seven years.

Participants held a multitude of professional and educational backgrounds in education, social work, social services, public administration, public health, film, and media. Over half of participants held international educational credentials and professional experience, which for some has not been recognized in Canada (part of a broader systemic barrier of credential recognition, which many people have long advocated to change (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2012; Sakamoto et al., 2010). Participants spoke multiple languages, including French, Hindi, Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish, Arabic, and more. The majority of participants were located in Saskatoon and Regina, the province's largest urban areas (n = 22). Eight of the participants served students in rural communities and smaller cities.

As a qualitative study with 30 participants, this research does not represent SWIS as a whole, and the results are not meant to be generalized to a larger population. However, the findings offer important insights into SWIS drawn from a diverse group of participants, and are intended to encourage further research as well as inform context-specific recommendations.

## Study Limitations

Despite the best efforts of the research team and advisory committee to recruit SWIS to participate in focus groups, only half of the SWIS program staff consented to participate. In the context of COVID-19, we recognized our request to participate in a study asking for two hours of participants' time was made during a period of heightened responsibilities and stress. We hope that those who had wished to participate but could not due to the pandemic will be able to participate in future studies.

We also recognize that SWIS working outside of larger urban centres, in small towns and rural locations, have distinct experiences. Rural SWIS workers and the communities they serve encounter unique challenges and obstacles, as participants from rural SWIS programs raised in the focus groups. These challenges include the need to maintain a regular caseload, difficulty in maintaining community programs, and inaccessibility of existing resources within the community.

The findings did not provide us with sufficient information to allow for a detailed comparison between challenges in smaller versus larger centres. The unique experiences of SWIS working in smaller centres is one specific area where further research is needed.

## Theoretical Framework: Anti-Racism

Anti-racism theory guides this research. Anti-racism is both a framework and a set of practices that seek to eliminate and resist racism in all of its forms (Bonnet, 2000). In Canada, racism includes all forms of discriminatory assumptions and actions that disadvantage Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) while simultaneously advantaging white people of European ancestry. Racism does not only happen at the individual or interpersonal level, but also at the institutional and systemic level, such as through policies, procedures, and approaches that privilege whiteness and marginalize BIPOC (Ocampo & Pino, 2014).

In the context of educational settings, anti-racism begins with the acknowledgement that racialized students face disadvantages that their white counterparts do not, as a result of school cultures, systems, and beliefs that reflect and (over)value white, Eurocentric ways of being and knowing. This is supported by a vast body of research demonstrating how racism and white dominance shape curriculum, teacher practices and attitudes, peer interactions and, consequently, students' educational trajectories (e.g., Chin et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2019; Leonardo, 2013; Leonardo & Grubb, 2019; Matias, 2013).

Anti-racism allows for a deeper examination of inequality in schools, and wider possibilities for attending to inequality than multicultural approaches alone (Miner, 2014).

Multiculturalism focuses by and large on the celebration of diversity and unique cultures and traditions that students bring into the classroom. Popular versions of multiculturalism in Saskatchewan include invitations to racialized groups to showcase their traditional music, art, dance, and cuisine. Practices like these can be significant acts of recognition, and can be affirming and meaningful for students. When multiculturalism is enacted as more than a surface-level add-on of cultural activities, it can be one way to bring forward and challenge harmful learned beliefs and stereotypes.

*Anti-racism asks more of school systems, leaders, educators and the student body than the development of cultural appreciation and understanding.*

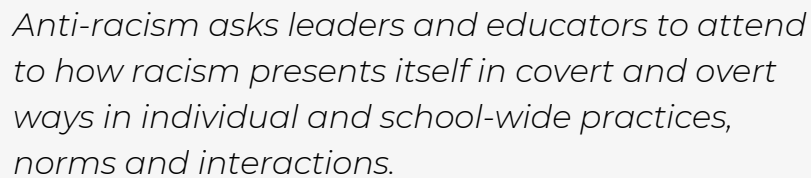
*It asks leaders and educators to attend to how racism presents itself in covert and overt ways in individual and school-wide practices, norms and interactions.*

However, multicultural practices often celebrate cultural diversity without acknowledging power relations and inequalities, including how racism is a significant barrier for students who are racialized, and how the norms of whiteness systemically advantage white students (Gebhard, 2018; Kumashiro, 2000). Multiculturalism can also serve to silence discussions about racism, because it is often used as evidence that equality and intercultural understanding has already been achieved.

Anti-racism asks more of school systems, leaders, educators and the student body than the development of cultural appreciation and understanding. It asks leaders and educators to attend to how racism presents itself in covert and overt ways in individual and school-wide practices, norms and interactions. Anti-racism acknowledges how racism is woven into institutions and shows up in subtle but powerful ways in schools. For example, research demonstrates how this takes place in the ignoring, silencing, over-disciplining, stereotyping, and devaluing of BIPOC students (e.g., Andrews et al., 2019; Gebhard, 2019; George, 2020; James, 2013; Raible & Irizarry, 2010).

There may be feelings of discomfort, apprehension or defensiveness to identify how racism is taking place systemically, especially when many people are taught that racism is enacted by individuals through intentionally harmful beliefs and actions (Allen, 2017; Oluo, 2018; Tatum, 2000). Leonardo (2013) offers the important reminder that in order to be incredibly harmful, racism in schools need not be outright and obvious acts of meanness.

That racism can be subtle and unintentional also disrupts the idea that it is a problem belonging only to a small group of “bad apples.” Colourblindness, the myth that educators can simply refuse to see colour or race and that they treat all students exactly the same, is also disputed by anti-racism theory. Colourblindness also works to conceal and erase how the racial and cultural identities and broader social locations of students shape their lived experiences, and ignores how these identities are sources of pride, strength and empowerment.



*Anti-racism asks leaders and educators to attend to how racism presents itself in covert and overt ways in individual and school-wide practices, norms and interactions.*

Anti-racism can empower educators and leaders to interrupt the status quo that sustains limited opportunities, barriers and exclusions for racialized newcomer students, Black students, Indigenous students, and students of colour. Support for anti-racism and equity can be accomplished in everyday actions and everyone in the school community can play a critical, positive, and impactful role in dismantling racial inequalities.



## Methodology and Methods

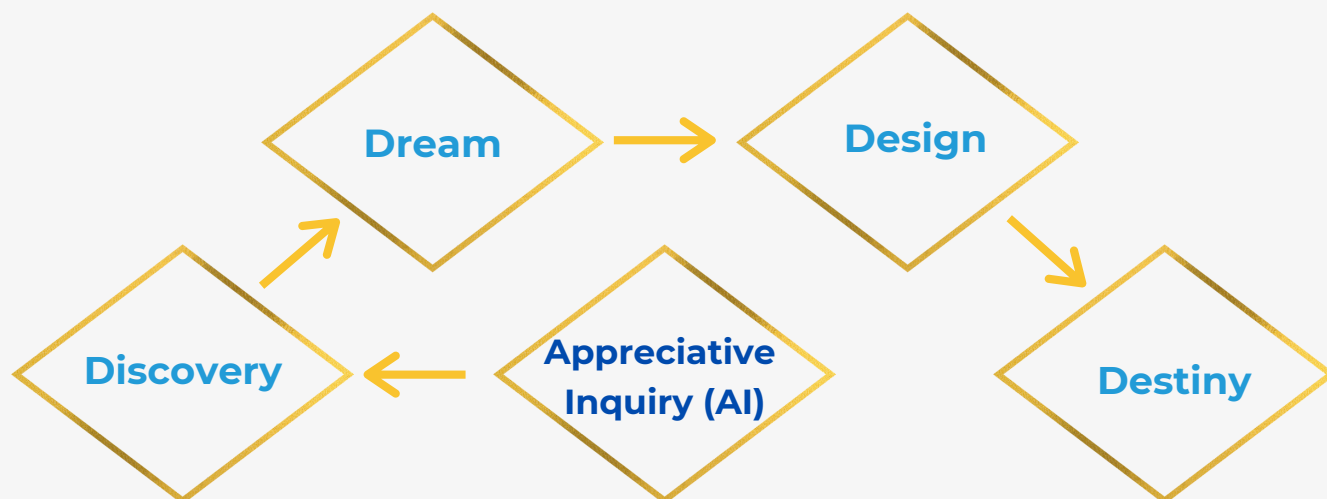
### Community-Based Research & Appreciative Inquiry

This research was guided by the tenets of anti-racism, and woven together the methodologies of community-based research (CBR) and Appreciative inquiry (Ai) to foreground the strengths of research participants and to centre the direction of SAISIA. CBR is an approach that views the community as knowledge-rich partners; responds to issues of inequity; and allows community groups, governments and academics to work together in solving complex social issues.

Researchers using Ai recognize that community organizations “have a host of underrecognized and underappreciated resources that can be built into thriving systems for young people” and focus on building upon the strengths of the practitioners rather than researchers seeing themselves as experts (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 68).

### Appreciative Inquiry Focus Groups

This research took place at the height of COVID-19, necessitating online research methods. Between November 2020 and January 2021, eight online focus groups were conducted with three to five participants each, meeting with a total of 30 school settlement workers employed by agencies and assigned in both urban and rural schools across Saskatchewan. The focus groups and data analysis were structured around the Four Ds of Appreciative Inquiry: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny (Fifolt & Stowe, 2011).



The **Discovery** phase asks participants to share “the best of what is.” In recognition of COVID-19, we asked questions to elicit responses that would illustrate how the positive core and strengths of the organization have been destabilized. The guiding questions included: *What does a day in your life as a settlement worker look like right now, and how has COVID changed your day-to-day work? Can you tell us about any issues around racism and other forms of discrimination/marginalization, and particularly how racism in schools has been amplified since COVID-19?*

The **Dream** phase, what could be, encourages participants to imagine possibilities for responding to the current challenges and to articulate a shared vision that aligns with their strengths and aspirations. Questions posed in the dream phase included: *What would supportive, empowering services for newcomer youth look like in your dreams? How do you imagine schools should be for newcomer students? How could they be different? What needs to change?*

The **Design** phase, what should be, asks participants to share specific statements of intent that harness the strengths of the positive core of settlement work during COVID-19. Guiding questions were: *Can you tell us about what tangible resources and tools could enhance the strategies and the approaches you’ve been using during COVID? What could make the strategies and approaches you are using more effective and sustainable now beyond the pandemic? If people who read the findings from this research took away one thing, what would it be?*

The **Destiny** Phase of Ai, what will be, is putting plans into action. This phase was accomplished through the final report of findings and recommendations, and other knowledge dissemination tools stemming from the data collected in the discovery, dream and design phases. *The goal of this phase in this project is to support the implementation of expressed wishes and objectives of participants through knowledge dissemination, advocacy efforts and tailored recommendations to key organizations.*

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## SECTION III: FINDINGS

### Roles and Responsibilities: Shifted, Expanded and Amplified

It became clear from the outset of our data collection that to understand how the pandemic has impacted SWIS service provision, we needed to also understand the context of SWIS' work and professional identities pre-pandemic. To accomplish a multitude of roles in their everyday work, SWIS have always drawn on a vast and impressive repertoire of skills, expertise, and educational backgrounds and, for a large number, their lived knowledge as racialized immigrants and newcomers. Settlement workers hold multifaceted professional identities and engage in wide-ranging forms of labour to support newcomer students and their families and ensure students' needs are met in the school system.

As schools continued to flip back and forth between being open and closed, and provided online learning options, SWIS skillfully applied multiple forms of knowledge as they negotiated the moving parts of the education system during COVID-19 to continue their work of supporting students and families. For example, the multilingual skills of several SWIS were crucial for disseminating and communicating key information related to the pandemic to students and their families.

All of the participants expressed a strong sense of commitment to, and concern for, newcomer students and their success in school. SWIS remained dedicated to their students and families and to finding creative ways to stay connected with them in the pandemic.

*Sometimes, it is **difficult to have that personal touch with the client** and especially, the newcomers refugees and immigrant pupils, **they need a personal contact**. Since this pandemic, we used a master contact list and we started getting in touch with everyone, sending them emails and calling them, just **letting them know we're still around if they need some help**. We left an impression that **"we're still with you" during this pandemic**. We started doing presentations about CERB [Canada Emergency Response Benefit], who qualifies, the eligibility criteria, how to apply and all that for the parents, for the families, for their immediate family members.*

*So I feel, in a sense, that **we lost that personal touch**, but on the other hand, **we are still in touch with [students and families]**. So it's not like out of sight, out of mind. We're **still in sight, and in mind**.*

*We do work with confidential information a lot. So how do they share confidential information? It still happens. **But it adds more challenges because now it takes more skills, creativity and resourcefulness to fulfill all of those duties of ours.** I consider the SWIS team very strong and resourceful, and I would say close-knit. It helps a lot that **we are very supportive to each other** and try to **generate ideas, and to do our best** in situations.*

The regulations imposed for their entry into schools had a major impact on SWIS. SWIS abide by the regulations of their respective school boards, and participants spoke to the great variance across schools in regards to rules around their entry into schools during the pandemic. For the most part, SWIS were disallowed from entering into their schools after schools had reopened in September 2020 and during easing periods of provincial restrictions. While some SWIS were not permitted to enter the schools under any circumstances, others noted their access was limited to visiting one school per day. SWIS underlined the challenges this has posed, given relationship building is at the heart of their work.

***It really used to help to meet clients in person. But that has changed a lot.** Our problem solving has now been limited to either school allowing us to have that meeting in a school setting or over zoom or on a three-way conference on a phone call with the interpreter, and **we heavily depend on our interpreters, and availability of interpreters is a challenge** as well.*

SWIS also shared concerns about students and families settling in the province during the pandemic and not being able to meet settlement workers face-to-face. SWIS' visibility to students and parents in schools instigates the relationships and facilitates information sharing. For example, one participant described how pre-pandemic, she would stand outside of classrooms in between classes in order to connect face-to-face with newly arrived newcomer students. SWIS spoke to the challenges of now having to begin and maintain relationships online, and how they have tried to adapt as best as possible to new modes of delivery and service provision.

***It's not easy for people who are new to a country . . . How do they build trust from the person who they see for the first time remotely, online, or on the conference call, or something else like that?***

*[We] are doing home visits, but with limitations where you don't have to go into the client's house, you can meet outside, keep the 6 feet distance and have your mask. **With that connection for in-person, I think it still helps.** Because you find **since COVID happened, I think we are not much in touch with most of our clients** because it's either Zoom or they're also fatigued with technology. But for sure, I think so far it's Zoom, email, text, all combined, you can mix them.*

*Settlement workers hold multifaceted professional identities and engage in wide-ranging forms of labour to support newcomer students and their families and ensure students' needs are met in the school system.*

The theme of supporting newcomer students at school who face bullying and discrimination by their peers came up across focus groups. Participants expressed concern and awareness of how the pandemic was exacerbating the discrimination and racism directed at newcomer students. For example, SWIS expressed understanding of how newcomer parents' decisions to send their children to school during the pandemic or choose home learning can be complicated by their awareness that other students, emboldened by racist discourses around COVID-19, might bully their children. Of concern in SWIS narratives were the suspicions and assumptions that SWIS encountered from community members making false links between newcomers, particularly newcomers from Asia, and the spread of COVID-19. These assertions demonstrate how anti-Asian racism and xenophobia are being given license and harmful articulation during COVID-19, which is being witnessed and reported widely in other fora (CBC News, 2021; Georges, 2021; Project 1907; Statistics Canada, 2020).



One of the Chinese kids was sitting in his classroom. **One classmate was pointing at him like, “You’re the virus.”** But he was yelling, like, “I’m no virus. I didn’t get the virus. I’m healthy.” And yes, the **teacher provided the proper education** like telling that kid, “The virus is the virus, it’s not because you’re coming from—” parents are still afraid like, **“Do I still send my kid to school? Is that safe?”**

We do hear the comments...**“oh it’s the newcomer that’s got the COVID-19 virus”**... So they’re **making that connection that it’s going to be spread by the newcomers**...we’ve heard that, and our **community was tagged with racist symbols** over the summer.

In response to the question about racism and discrimination in the focus groups, one participant responded, “Should I give examples? I have a lot.” In speaking about their own experience of trying to protect students from racism, the same participant explained their difficulty of taking on this task when they experience discriminatory treatment themselves. They underlined that “being an immigrant helping immigrants is really, really hard,” which encapsulated a range of similar responses in the focus groups. SWIS’ lived experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination also inform their work and relationships with students and their families, and provide them with insider knowledge and perspectives about the unique experience of being a newcomer navigating a new country and school system during a pandemic.

## Barriers Presented by Virtual Learning and Technology

Shifts to virtual learning have resulted in heavy reliance on technology, which has expanded the roles and responsibilities for many settlement workers into technological support workers. Newcomer families have come to rely on SWIS for support with the various technology platforms being used by schools for online learning on top of their regular job descriptions, and many SWIS are learning as they go alongside their clients. One participant stated, “we’ve become IT support.” Two other participants noted:

There’s one task actually that changed for our job. I’m not sure about other SWIS, but for me, **I’ve been IT support for almost a year.** I help people with their online learning platform set up, **all kinds of things. I need to learn from scratch, even for myself.**

And I’m **kind of exhausted** a little bit because — **I’m glad because the parents can reach out to me** and have some resources, but **[families require support with even] the small things** (and also to **teach every family how to using Google Meet, how to use Google Classroom,** how to using Seesaw, and those kind of things.

Learning new technologies and providing technological instruction and support is challenging. It takes significant amounts of time, and SWIS are limited in terms of the resources they can provide to students for their successful engagement in online communications and learning. In addition to providing IT teaching support, many SWIS have also been involved in procuring equipment for families during the pandemic through community outreach activities, without which students may not have been able to engage in learning activities.

*So we had some **businesses** that deal in computers and **they refurbished about 47 computers** and we **distributed them to those families** who didn't have computers for the children to work online.*

*One Syrian family, **they don't know computers at all and they were always frustrated. I applied for a tablet and they didn't know how to use it, so they still missed class for two weeks.** And then I made a home visit with an interpreter. And after that day, we kind of created an email for them...I'm so happy that the whole family now can count on a grade eight student who speaks very, very little English to have the kind of events on Zoom.*

Importantly, many SWIS had already been creatively using technology pre-pandemic, including social media, as a communication platform, which made it easier to connect with families during school closures. However, for SWIS assigned to multiple schools and who were used to communicating with certain groups of parents and students on designated days pre-pandemic, increasing their use of technology meant families and teachers could suddenly contact them at any time, including outside of working hours. The following excerpt illustrates some of the upsides and downsides of technology becoming the main communication platform, and highlights the exhaustion that can be brought upon by its usage.

*SWIS are limited in terms of the resources they can provide to students for their successful engagement in online communications and learning.*

*Before the COVID times, I'd already set up each group for each school to have a Wechat group for them to be chatting, exchanging information and knowing other families. Because I had the settings, when the COVID times came, it was easier to reach out to each individual family because they knew me already. **But after COVID the struggle for me was the time management** because we usually had a base school, so parents came in on different days. **But now because I don't go to school, all the parents can reach me no matter what. And also the school will reach me anytime.** So I started dealing with not one or two schools every day, **I'm starting to deal with 10 schools every day.** So my workload became higher than usual.*

The expectation that students participate in virtual learning during school closures has revealed multiple inequity issues related to technology. Newcomer students and families often do not have access to equipment, and even if they do, there are often not enough devices for children to learn simultaneously, particularly when there are multiple children in one household.

*A lot of what we're finding is that **people might not have access to electronics** or they don't have enough access to it in comparison to the size of their family... those **kids are really, really being left behind because then parents are put in a situation where they have to pick and choose which child gets to go to school** that day.*

Moreover, knowing how to use the technology and keep up with the demands of online learning is challenging due to sometimes unclear directives provided by teachers, who are also struggling to adapt and learn new technology – and who SWIS recognized were equally overwhelmed during the pandemic. Participants understood the amplifications of their work related to technology are inseparable from and indicative of the “digital divide,” a systemic barrier which has been magnified and revealed by COVID-19:

***The main challenge is the digital divide.** I would say the **lack of digital literacy** and communication, technological understanding is very hard . . . Even if they [students and families] have [equipment] or if we provide them with it, they don't know how to use it.*

Remote forms of learning have distinct impacts on newcomer students, and especially those who arrived in Canada during the pandemic. The next excerpt demonstrates SWIS' awareness of newcomers' unique situations, and their concern for how the impacts of remote learning will have future consequences for student success.

*Now since last March, **I don't even know who the newcomers are who are coming in.** And most of the newcomers, those who are entering the school, **they don't know how the school looks,** because they are opting for e-learning. And **they don't know who the teacher is.** They don't know who their friends are. **So they're in like, a dark cave and they're just moving on. And so it creates a lot of frustration.** And I believe this will **decline the grades of the students.***



*Participants understood the amplifications of their work related to technology are inseparable from and indicative of the “digital divide,” a systemic barrier which has been magnified and revealed by COVID-19.*

Contrasting cultural assumptions and worldviews about technology and its value also came into focus during the pandemic. SWIS discussed the high value placed on technology and online communications in Canadian society. Some participants compared this to some of their clients' other cultural contexts in which more value is placed on face-to-face interactions, and where there is less expectation to be constantly connected to online communications. The participants stated that the expectations of schools that families own and be proficient with technology had multiple impacts, including limited access to learning materials and supports, complicated communication and relationship-building with school staff and peers, and mental health and integration.

*SWIS emphasized the high value placed on technology and online communications in Canadian society. Some participants compared this to some of their clients' other cultural contexts in which more value is placed on face-to-face interactions, and there is less expectation to be constantly connected to online communications.*

*Even before COVID-19, a big issue that all families encounter when they come to Canada, is the **value that. . . Canadian culture places on technology** versus the value that [is placed on it] in other countries. **In less developed countries we place more value in face to face interactions.** So . . . there's a **lack of empathy from the Canadian culture regarding [this].***

Settlement workers expressed concern around how newcomer students would develop friendships and feel a sense of belonging in an online environment. Participants noted that for many students, developing friendships and being accepted by their peer community was a challenge pre-pandemic, and expressed concern about how an online environment was exacerbating these barriers.

*I think the students, what they are missing right now, **the most important thing that they are missing** is not that they are not learning the language, it's that **they are not creating relationships.** And that, I think, is the key. **You don't feel at home until you have your first friends** and that's super important.*

## Interrupted Channels of Communication

The theme of communication —its importance and the challenges it brings —ran through all of our focus groups in a multitude of forms. Participants underlined what is reflected in the literature that communication has serious implications for equity — including who is offered opportunities and assistance, the distribution of materials, and building and maintaining relationships (Pollock, 2017). SWIS noted the difficulties of communicating with families, students, teachers, and schools as a result of the pandemic. As with other challenges noted thus far, SWIS were already navigating communication obstacles in their schools, and the pandemic has in many ways made impossible the traditional modes of face-to-face communication relied upon by SWIS to indicate their presence to students, parents, and the wider school community.

Prior to the pandemic, some schools had already been reluctant to acknowledge settlement workers, which participants understood not as the issue of individual teachers, but as a systemic issue. There appeared to be widespread agreement that school communities are largely uninformed about the SWIS program, which posed challenges for communication and the development of meaningful partnerships with teachers and administrators. For example, one participant was told by a teacher that entering classrooms would disrupt other students, and another described the difficulty of trying to schedule a “three-minute meeting” with staff members. One participant pointed to their



experience with a school principal who seemed to frame the work of a settlement worker in school as unnecessary to immigrant families, which was also interpreted as a lack of understanding about the role of SWIS:

***The first school visit, I just sat in the library the whole morning, no one paid any attention to me. Then the second time when I was there, I told myself, I cannot just sit there doing nothing. And then I approached the principal [and asked for a list of students and parents]. And I waited in the library for almost one hour . . .***

Many SWIS also noted a decrease, and in some cases a total absence, of communication from the schools since March 2020. Many participants noted that they are most often contacted by schools only when, or not until, a serious problem arises. This was of great concern for SWIS, who explained how earlier communication about issues is preventative as opposed to reactive. While they were cognizant about teachers' increased workloads, their ability to provide support to newcomer students was dependent upon their communication with teachers.

## Recognition and Support for SWIS by Educators and Schools

SWIS reported experiences with schools and teachers that ranged from very positive to very challenging. It became clear that recognition, validation, and understanding from the wider school community are crucial for SWIS to effectively support newcomer students to their full potential. This is inextricably related to the impacts of COVID-19, because precarious and inconsistent forms of support from schools set the stage for many of the challenges encountered by SWIS during COVID-19.

Participants described their work as inconsistently recognized and valued by school staff and administrators, and many expressed the importance of increasing understanding about the purpose of their positions. Variations of the statement, "I'd like to see us work together and for administrators to see us as a service, a quality service that will help in schools" came forward across all of the focus groups.

Many participants underscored that they work with teachers and administrators committed to newcomer student success and that positive difference this makes. Still, a pattern of barriers was identified including a lack of recognition and understanding by some school staff and the wider school community, coming up against unwelcoming and discriminatory attitudes, and heavy caseloads. The below excerpt is one version of a common response to our question of what participants hoped would come out from the research.

*What I would want the larger group to understand, is just what our role is. The fact that we're not there just to serve the school, we're not there just to serve the family. **We're there to support everyone and we're going to work together** with both the family and the school.*

Participants also spoke to the importance of an education for the wider school community about newcomer students and their families. SWIS' past witnessing the school community's misunderstandings of newcomers' cultural and social norms related to student social engagement, food and eating, parenting practices, and more, in many ways drove their concerns about how the pandemic was exacerbating barriers to social integration and discrimination. The extensive experience of SWIS working alongside students and their families and observing teachers and school cultures, coupled with their own lived experiences as immigrants, allow many SWIS to see the discrepancies between how schools perceive themselves and how immigrants and refugees are treated. The following excerpt is an example of the harmful comments SWIS are regularly privy to, revealing the importance of anti-racist training for school communities, who often see themselves as welcoming and inclusive but do not realize the negative assumptions and differential treatment bestowed upon newcomer students and families.

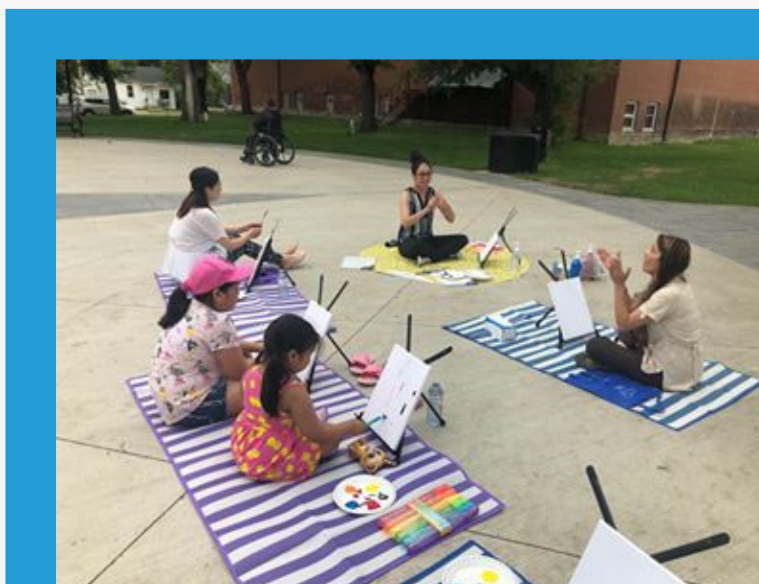
*I have this admin assistant who would say, **"Those folks, will they ever learn to speak English?"** And she tells it to me in a playful way. But she really means it. Like, "These folks, when are they going to learn to speak English?" But she doesn't see the way she says **it comes out very — it's discriminatory...So it's those little things.***

*Recognition, validation, and understanding from the wider school community are crucial for SWIS to effectively support newcomer students to their full potential.*

Some SWIS expressed concern over whether they were doing enough to protect newcomer students from the impacts of racism. The weight of perceiving this protection from racism as their responsibility was expressed by one participant who stated, “I feel a little embarrassed, because I’ve seen a lot of racism and discrimination but I haven’t really done a lot.” SWIS were cognizant that they alone cannot change attitudes or be the sole providers of an education to the school community about newcomer and immigrant realities, and wish to share this task with educators. Importantly, participants also noted that intervening in and speaking up against racism is complicated as they wish to keep their relationships with teachers intact. This speaks to the power differentials SWIS navigate in their work, and thereby the crucial importance of institutional support and validation for building anti-racist school communities. The next excerpt, a response to our question of what the participants wished for their students, demonstrates participants’ awareness of the limitations of multiculturalism for promoting newcomer student belonging:

*I think by the **community being open to new ideas and to being more welcoming to newcomers.** I see some of the schools are really good at that. They do **cultural days**, they invite the families to come and to share food, to talk about their culture, to sing, to dance, bring their clothes and things like that. **It’s a good first step.***

Participants expressed dreams about a school community where they could trust that their students and families are not stereotyped or excluded, where all students are free to express their unique identities, and where newcomer students’ entitlement to the resource of a high-quality education is taken for granted.



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# SECTION IV: RECOMMENDATIONS

## Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA)

- 1.** Support SWIS in their pursuit for meaningful and quality service provision by preventing SWIS work overload due to resource constraints. Revisit SWIS workload during the pandemic to ensure balanced client/SWIS ratios, and similar balances across agencies where possible.
- 2.** Develop a permanent multi-sectoral task force geared towards addressing the unique needs of newcomer immigrant and refugee students. This multi-sectoral task force will address the need for an interprofessional collaborative approach to settlement work. This task force may consist of representatives from the Ministries of Education, IRCC, Health, Social Services, and Parks and Culture.
- 3.** Enhance existing mechanisms that bolster communication and connections amongst SWIS and their settlement agencies to facilitate exchange of knowledge, best practices, and resources on doing settlement work during the pandemic. This could include a directory of resources of translators and interpreters who can be immediately contacted.
- 4.** Facilitate interprofessional and inter-agency collaboration to create a holistic approach to newcomer students' and families' integration. Interprofessional collaboration refers to an interventionist model that allows professionals from different fields to work collaboratively to provide a holistic intervention of client issues and needs. Professionals include but are not limited to: teachers and principals, social workers, psychologists, counsellors, physicians and other healthcare workers, child protection workers, religious/spiritual/community leaders, family members, and police officers.
- 5.** Allocate more resources to support SWIS with technology training and education. An IT Coordinator and a technology hub are recommended to support SWIS in their outreach and service delivery to students and families.
- 6.** Institute mechanisms and structures where SWIS can safely report incidents of discrimination and racism that they experience and/or witness. Implement transparent accountability and follow up measures that are clear and easy to track.

- 7.** Enhance professional development training on anti-racism education to increase knowledge and skills on addressing racism and other forms of discrimination that SWIS encounter in their work. This training will also assist settlement agencies to emphasize anti-racism into their mission, vision, and mandate.
- 8.** Develop strategies and programs that will aid in strengthening the mental, physical, and emotional wellness of SWIS during the pandemic and beyond. This can be in the form of instituting mechanisms and policies around opportunities for self-care, either individual or collective, grief and bereavement support, or as a worker benefit program.
- 9.** Channel resources to enhance the research and evaluation strategy of SAISIA by hiring a consultant to assist in identifying gaps in service delivery during the pandemic. This includes strategic delineation between which services can be delivered online and face-to-face in response to changing public health guidelines.
- 10.** Develop a quarterly or annual province-wide data collection protocol for all SWIS programs to track numbers of newcomer students and families and the number of SWIS staff, in order to bolster evidence-based advocacy and funding support.

## Ministry of Education

- 1.** Allow settlement workers the same rights as teachers for entering schools during pandemic restrictions.
- 2.** Create open and transparent communication, consultation, and dialogue with Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) that focuses on recognizing the significant role of SWIS in the educational success of newcomer immigrant and refugee students. This will also include developing strategies for the Ministry of Education to adopt in order to enhance resources for settlement work in schools.
- 3.** Promote the significance of SWIS by implementing educational programming that highlights the valuable contributions of SWIS to enhancing educational success of newcomer immigrant and refugee students.
- 4.** Offer ongoing anti-racist education professional development to all school staff to challenge harmful beliefs and mitigate impacts of racism for newcomer students and families.



- 5.** Promote a collaborative approach with SWIS and settlement agencies when it comes to ensuring a balanced and equitable workload for SWIS. School administrators, staff, and teachers should ensure sharing of responsibilities in addressing the needs and challenges of newcomer immigrant and refugee students, rather than becoming the responsibility of SWIS because of their racial and ethnic identifications.
- 6.** Support SWIS by providing resources to programs and activities that promote and enhance relationships among newcomer immigrant, refugee, and Canadian-born settler students. For example, programs such as School Buddy.
- 7.** Develop strategies and programs with faculties of education for pre-service teachers that emphasize the work of settlement workers in school. This can be included in pre-service curriculum, training, and evaluation of student teachers.
- 8.** Recognize and actively support SWIS in their continued connection with EAL programs as their usual point of contact to outreach with newcomer immigrants and refugee students and their families.
- 9.** Dismantle “one-size fits all” models of intervention that undermine a holistic and culturally relevant perspective when it comes to addressing settlement needs and understanding the issues of newcomer immigrant and refugee students.
- 10.** Critically examine ongoing issues of pathologization and criminalization of immigrant and refugee “problems.” This also includes introducing training programs such as culturally-safe and trauma-informed care that do not only consider the biomedical and psychological perspective, but also the cultural, spiritual, political and historical dimensions of settlement and integration.

## **Immigration, Refugee, & Citizenship Canada (IRCC)**

- 1.** Increase funding support for SAISIA to expand SWIS programs. SAISIA’s SWIS program is an effective model that can be enhanced with more resources to facilitate the recommendations in this report.
- 2.** Offer permanent positions for settlement workers in schools.

- 3.** Increase funding of rural settlement agencies in Saskatchewan. Our study has revealed the particular need for rural regions to be channeled with relevant resources, including expanded settlement services, and sport and leisure programs for young people.
- 4.** Recognize digital literacy training as a core settlement component for newcomers. Boost the technology resources of settlement agencies by providing them with computers and other equipment that they can lend to newcomer families during the pandemic, and support digital literacy programs.
- 5.** Support SWIS who wish to further their knowledge and education of settlement and immigration, and related areas, through university courses, etc., by allocating SWIS funds for accredited professional development on a yearly basis.
- 6.** Our study revealed that most SWIS are internationally-educated professionals who have been trained in other disciplines and professions outside Canada. IRCC can be true to its work of genuinely supporting the integration and settlement of immigrants and refugees by offering opportunities for immigrant SWIS to engage in professional development that would expand their options and economic mobility.
- 7.** Offer more funding opportunities for settlement agencies to utilize the talents, knowledge, and skills of settlement staff and community members. Many SWIS have suggested innovative programs that can be developed within their respective settlement agencies; for example, those directed towards family reunification. Increasing the number of grants and funding programs available to settlement agencies in Saskatchewan will boost the quality of settlement services available to the increasing demographics of immigrants and newcomers in the province.
- 8.** In the first point of contact for newcomers (e.g. at the Canadian border), share information about SWIS services as part of standardized initial intake immigration process.
- 9.** Provide up-to-date feedback to SAISIA and/or settlement agencies in terms of the number of newcomers and refugee intake.

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## SECTION V: CONCLUSION

**S**ettlement work in schools is a unique form of settlement work. SWIS engage with young people and their families within the framework of one specific crucial institution, education, and within the limited time period of young people's school-aged years. Schools are spaces where students form identities that they carry into adulthood, and the support SWIS provide to newcomers during their elementary and secondary years has future implications and impacts.

Positive schooling experiences are correlated with improved educational outcomes, higher rates of post-secondary attainment, positive mental and physical health and wellbeing, decreased rates of involvement in criminal activity, increased political and community involvement, and better employment and job opportunities. The impacts of investing in newcomers to Canada during their most formative years extend far beyond school walls.

SWIS are protective forces for newcomer students, pre-COVID-19 and even more so during COVID-19. The report findings demonstrate settlement workers assist newcomer students in traversing barriers to integration heightened by the pandemic – but importantly, many of these barriers were already present pre-pandemic. Issues were described as systemic, as opposed to belonging to individual teachers or schools.

SWIS intervene in critical moments of life at school for newcomer students, and therefore have an important influence on newcomer youth's educational trajectories. Settlement workers' interventions reposition newcomer students – whose histories of marginalization continue in schools today – as rightfully belonging and entitled to the resource of a high quality education that will allow them to thrive. The findings bolster the importance of settlement workers being designated as essential and allowed the same rights as teachers for entry in schools during pandemic restrictions.

The majority of participants expressed participating in the study was a valuable experience, demonstrating their keenness to have the opportunity to effect change. We conclude with a sample of quotations below which suggest that for SWIS, the opportunity to have their voices heard was validating, which is a research finding in itself. This points to the importance of including SWIS in future research, as well as the inclusion of SWIS in discussions about the implementation of recommendations moving forward.

*Thanks for making me feel like there's **someone who is trying to find out the problems and wanting to solve them**. Thanks for being someone to hear. Thank you so much for inviting me.*



*I believe that the feedback from a grassroots level, like us, like **working directly with the children and with the teachers** will ultimately **improve the education** of newcomer students in the province.*

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## **Invitation to Participate in a Research Project**

Dear Settlement Workers,

You are invited to take part in a study entitled: Existing and Exacerbated Educational Inequities for Newcomer Students in COVID-19: School Settlement Workers Respond.

In partnership with Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA), our research team is conducting a research study on the experiences and approaches of settlement workers in schools during COVID-19.

The research team is made up of Dr. Amanda Gebhard (principal investigator) and Dr. Fritz Pino (co-investigator), faculty members at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina, and Dr. Willow Samara Allen (co-investigator), adjunct faculty member in the Faculty of Education, University of Victoria.

You are being asked to participate in this research because you are a school settlement worker and your perspectives are valued in understanding the conditions and impacts of COVID-19 on your work and the youth and families you serve. Your participation in this project is voluntary and there will be no negative consequences if you wish to decline participation. Should you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an approximately 2-hour focus group (conducted online using Zoom conferencing) with approximately 4-6 other participants. We will be conducting our next focus group on Thursday, January 14, and on Fridays thereafter.

In the context of COVID-19, we recognize that this can be a particularly stressful time. Your ability to participate is important to us, therefore should you require flexibility around the amount of time you can participate in a focus group, or the time and date, we are happy to schedule focus groups to accommodate your needs.

You will be asked to give electronic consent to our use of the video-recorded focus group session, and your participation in the research process will be confidential. By participating in this study, you will contribute to research data that will be used to generate a research report with specific recommendations, public presentations and written publications, aimed at supporting and highlighting the critical role of settlement workers in Saskatchewan.

To qualify for this study, you must be employed as a school settlement worker in the province of Saskatchewan.

To volunteer as a participant for this study and to receive a detailed consent form containing more information, please click on the following link: [Consent form](#) where you will be taken to a secure website that will ask you to enter your name and e-mail address. Our research team will follow up with you by e-mail.

We hope you consider participating in this important work. Should you have further questions, please feel free to contact us using the contact information below:

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**This study has been reviewed and received approval through the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina.**