



Event Report

Afghanistan's Refugee Children in American Schools: Challenges and Policy Implications

Insights from the Afghanistan Migration & Community Dialog Series (Session II)

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Washington D.C

Event Context and Institutional Framing

This report synthesizes insights from a policy-oriented panel held on April 3, 2026, at the Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University. The discussion focused on the educational integration of refugee children from Afghanistan in the Washington, DC–Maryland–Virginia (DMV) region.

The event was convened as part of the [Afghanistan Migration & Community Dialog Series](#), a flagship initiative designed to create a sustained, policy-oriented platform for examining the evolving dynamics of migration from Afghanistan and integration processes in the United States. The series brings together scholars, practitioners, and community voices to move beyond fragmented discussions and develop a more coherent understanding of the structural challenges facing migrants. By structuring conversations across multiple sessions, the initiative generates cumulative insights that can inform both policy and practice.

This event was led by AIMED (Arise Initiative for Migration, Education, and Development) in partnership with:

- The George Washington University
 - Sigur Center for Asian Studies
 - Refugee Educational Advancement Laboratory (REAL)

This session constitutes the second installment in the series. The first session,

[“From Exile to Empowerment: Unlocking Opportunities for Afghanistan’s Diasporic Community in the United States,”](#) was held in partnership with Rumi House, The George Washington University and examined four key structural domains shaping refugee integration:

- Obstacles to social and cultural integration
- Challenges in labor market integration
- Barriers to education and professional development
- Legal and rights-related concerns

Among these, education emerged as a central yet unresolved domain. While the first session mapped the broader integration landscape, it revealed that education is not merely one sector among others, but a cross-cutting determinant shaping long-term outcomes.



Building on these insights, the second session focused exclusively on education, examining both challenges and pathways for improving the integration of refugee children from Afghanistan in U.S. schools.

This report goes beyond a descriptive account of the panel discussion. The insights presented here have been analytically synthesized and structured to inform policymakers, school administrators, service providers, and practitioners. It reflects a systematic interpretation of expert contributions and practitioner experiences rather than primary empirical data collection.

Opening Remarks and Framing of the Discussion

The event opened with remarks by Abdul Wahid Gulrani, founder of AIMED, who briefly reflected on the first session of the series and its key themes. He emphasized that education emerged as a central yet unresolved domain within the broader landscape of integration challenges, thereby underscoring the need for a more focused and in-depth examination.

Building on this framing, Gulrani positioned the second session as a deliberate shift from general diagnosis toward a targeted exploration of the challenges and solutions related to the education of migrants from Afghanistan in the United States.

Following these remarks, Bernhard Streitwieser, Associate Professor of International Education at The George Washington University, provided an overview of the work of the Refugee Educational Advancement Laboratory (REAL). He also discussed ongoing collaborative research with Gulrani, focusing on the structural challenges faced by migrant students from Afghanistan in U.S. schools, including issues related to access, adaptation, and educational outcomes.

Panel Composition

The discussion brought together a multidisciplinary group of participants representing research, education, policy, and lived experience:

1. Omar Sadr – Research Fellow, Raoul Wallenberg Institute for Human Rights
2. Daniel Altman – Co-founder, NoVA Resettling Afghan Families Together
3. Salma Naqshbandi – Student representative, Alexandria City Public Schools
4. Zahra Tawana – PhD student, University of Virginia; Moderator

This composition enabled a convergence of institutional insight, community engagement, and lived experience.



Executive Summary

Educational integration is widely framed as a language issue. This report demonstrates that it is fundamentally a problem of system design.

Since August 2021, approximately 80,000–90,000 nationals from Afghanistan have arrived in the United States, many settling in the DMV region. A significant number of children entered U.S. schools with interrupted or no formal education, limited English proficiency, exposure to trauma, and minimal familiarity with formal institutional systems.

Despite this, current educational frameworks largely categorize these students as English learners. This classification overlooks a more fundamental issue: many students face gaps in foundational literacy rather than language alone. As a result, instructional models often remain inaccessible, leading to academic disengagement and long-term marginalization.

The panel highlighted that educational integration extends beyond the classroom and is shaped by broader socio-cultural and structural dynamics. Students navigate hybrid identities under conditions of cultural tension, gender norms, and intra-community pressures. Families transitioning from informal social systems into formal institutional environments face significant barriers in understanding and engaging with schools. At the same time, trauma remains widespread but frequently unrecognized or misinterpreted within disciplinary frameworks.

At the institutional level, fragmentation remains a core constraint. Schools, community organizations, and resettlement agencies often operate in parallel, leading to duplication of efforts and gaps in support. However, coordinated models—such as those observed in Alexandria—demonstrate that structured data-sharing and institutional collaboration can significantly improve outcomes.

These findings suggest that the primary barrier to effective integration is not a lack of resources, but a failure of system design.

Core Findings and Analysis

The analysis reveals a set of interrelated structural failures that collectively shape educational outcomes:

- Misclassification of educational need
- Neglect of socio-cultural dynamics
- Fragmentation and lack of institutional coordination

Without structural recalibration, these gaps risk producing long-term disengagement, educational exclusion, and entrenched inequality.

1. Misdiagnosis: Literacy vs. Language

The dominant integration model treats newly arrived students as English learners. However, many students are not simply acquiring a new language—they lack foundational literacy in any language. Placement in ESL programs designed for literate learners produces predictable outcomes: inaccessible instruction, rapid academic decline, and eventual disengagement. This reflects a failure of problem definition rather than a lack of resources.



2. Identity, Culture, and the Limits of Participation

Access to schooling does not ensure participation. Students navigate hybrid identities shaped by cultural expectations, gender norms, and intra-community pressures. These dynamics often remain invisible to institutions but significantly influence behavior, participation, and long-term engagement.

3. From Informal to Formal Systems: A Structural Shock

Families transitioning from informal, relationship-based social systems into highly formalized institutional environments face a structural disconnect. This gap undermines trust, reduces engagement, and limits families' capacity to support their children's education.

4. Fragmentation and Institutional Silos

Support systems frequently operate in parallel rather than in coordination. This leads to duplication of services, gaps in support, and inefficiencies.

The Alexandria Model demonstrates that coordination is achievable. Structured data-sharing between schools and community organizations enables real-time tracking, early intervention, and targeted support. The challenge, therefore, is not resource scarcity but system design.

5. Mobility and Disrupted Educational Trajectories

Ongoing mobility among families disrupts educational continuity. Systems built on assumptions of stability fail to account for these realities, leading to administrative barriers and fragmented learning trajectories.

6. Trauma and Systemic Misinterpretation

Trauma is widespread but often misinterpreted. Behavioral responses are frequently addressed through disciplinary mechanisms rather than therapeutic support, exacerbating exclusion and disengagement.

7. Informal Success vs. Structural Absence

Many positive outcomes depend on informal efforts by individual educators and community actors. These successes persist in spite of the system—not because of it—highlighting the absence of institutionalized pathways for replication and scale.

8. Structural Barriers and Conditions for Success

Key barriers include:

- Language limitations
- Lack of foundational literacy
- Cultural identity tensions
- Difficulty navigating school systems
- Trauma and mental health challenges

At the same time, outcomes improve significantly in environments that combine:



- Literacy-integrated instructional models
- Culturally responsive teaching practices
- Access to counselors and social workers
- Peer mentoring structures
- Strong school-family communication

Key Insights

- Access without alignment leads to exclusion
- Literacy gaps are misdiagnosed as language barriers
- Integration is shaped as much by social pressures as by institutional design
- Coordination, not resources, is the primary constraint

Policy Implications

These findings challenge prevailing policy assumptions. Educational integration is not a classroom-level issue—it is a system-level process requiring structural alignment.

Policy Pathways

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from programmatic interventions to system-level redesign:

- Establish dedicated foundational literacy tracks
- Institutionalize culturally fluent liaison roles
- Develop integrated data-sharing systems
- Implement trauma-informed educational frameworks
- Design mobility-responsive education systems
- Scale effective informal practices into formal policy

Conclusion

The integration of refugee children from Afghanistan into U.S. schools is not fundamentally a question of access, but of alignment. Current systems are built on assumptions that do not reflect the lived realities of newly arrived students.

Where coordination exists, outcomes improve measurably and consistently. This makes the central problem unmistakable: the barrier is not a lack of resources, but a failure of system design. This requires moving beyond incremental adjustments toward structural redesign.

The question is no longer whether systems can adapt. It is whether they are willing to redesign themselves to reflect lived realities.