Cuban refugee students: Cultural background profiles

**Language**
Spanish and English

**Teaching in the Classroom**
The Cuban education system is excellent, with 10% of the national budget being allocated to it. Teacher to student ratios are 12:1. Education in Cuba is mandatory through the end of secondary school (ages 15-16) and literacy rates are reported to be around 98%. Children wear uniforms through all of the years of primary school so may be surprised by the casual nature of dress in American schools.

Primary education lasts for six years and is followed by basic secondary education. There is a strong emphasis on math and science, but the curriculum also includes dance and gardening, lessons on health and hygiene, and Cuban revolutionary history. After primary education, students can choose whether they wish to begin preparing for university or vocational school. Cuban students will likely be extremely engaged and motivated in their studies, as high academic achievement is a cultural standard and necessary for professional success.

Education in Cuba is fairly formal and most classes are taught in lecture format. Relationships between teachers and students are close but formal, and group work and peer interaction is kept to a minimum. Teachers may need to facilitate group work and encourage Cuban students to be vocal in class, as this is mostly discouraged. It may take time for Cuban students to get used to the drastic increase in personal freedoms in the U.S. Teachers may need to yield questions and offer clarification on these issues.

**Family/School Engagement**
Cuban families highly value education. Cuban teachers are very active in the communities they live in and there is a high priority on building relationships with parents in order to enhance the learning process. Teachers are highly trained in Cuba, with most going to school for at least five years in order to obtain their degree. Because of this, the profession is highly regarded and Cuban families will likely be extremely
responsible and interested in developing strong relationships with their child’s teacher. Teachers should reach out to families regarding possible ESL enrollment in adult ESL courses. It is important to keep in mind that many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.

Children in families with two working parents are often taken care of by grandparents. It is likely that grandparents will have interest in attending activities and getting to know teachers.

The Cuban concept of time is event-based, which means that they do not always attend appointments until they have completed their previous engagements. This may be difficult for teachers, as they may be tardy to their children’s school events or parent-teacher meetings. Explaining the US approach to punctuality and how it may affect others is advised.

**Culture, Gender and Family**

Cubans are open, generous, and sociable. Cubans typically will have small talk before beginning to talk about business or official matters. It is actually somewhat rude not to greet males with handshakes and women with kisses on the cheek. Touching is common and not taboo. Some Cubans speak loudly when engaged in discussion; this should not be interpreted as aggression. Teachers should expect warm social contact while making sure to maintain their own personal parameters.

Cuban families, much more so than Cuban-American families, are characterized by patriarchy, strong parental control over children, and the importance of non-nuclear relationships within the family (i.e. godparents). Cuban-American women have more authority in decision-making and children have greater personal freedom. Cuban families new to the U.S. may assimilate to these new standards if they live around other Cuban emigrants.