Russian refugee students: Cultural background profile

Languages
The United States accepts refugees from the former Soviet states. These countries include Georgia, Ukraine, Russia, and Armenia, among many others. Their many languages include: Russian and other East Slavic languages, Baltic languages, Georgian, Estonian, Armenian, Azeri. About two-thirds of Russians speak English at varying levels.

Teaching in the Classroom
This educational profile applies to the country of Russia only; educational standards vary widely throughout other former Soviet nations. In 2015, Russian education was ranked 13th best in the world. School is free and mandatory until university. Many schools are aging facilities with inadequate resources, but students are well trained in world history, foreign languages, music, mathematics, and science. Education is extremely valued and considered vital to economic success.

Literacy rates for both men and women are nearly 100% and about half of Russian adults have graduated college, which is the highest rate in the world. Foreign languages are taught from the fourth grade through the end of high school, with English being the most popular.

Schools years are highly ritualized, with the same events and celebrations happening year after year. Students will likely be highly motivated to succeed academically, so teachers should do their best to provide challenging and appropriate curriculum to keep them stimulated. Obedience is valued over creativity so teachers may want to encourage students to engage in art and music-based activities.

Nearly all elementary school teachers are women. School culture is formal, so it might take students time to get used to colloquial conversations with their American teachers.
Students may need extra support when changing classrooms between subjects and assimilating to new groups of students frequently. Female students will likely need encouragement to pursue professions that are considered more masculine in Russian society.

**Family/School Engagement**

Teachers in Russia are valued so parents will likely be very open to communication and suggestions. Because Russia has a world-class education system and a competitive job market, many parents’ primary concern is their children’s academic success. Their wish is for their children to obtain the most desirable jobs and eventually, help support them in their later years.

Russians are not as used to the openness and instant rapport practiced by many other cultures. Many of their personal and business relationships are built up over a lifetime of association, and they prefer to get to know people slowly. When conversing, Russians value direct eye contact and firm handshakes. They may not be extremely talkative or smile excessively at first. Teachers should be friendly while avoiding topics that may be deemed too personal in the early interactions with the family. Due to experiences in their home country, many Russians may not trust authorities.

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 even if parents want to be involved.

**Culture, Gender and Family**

The concept of family is extremely important in Russia (and the former USSR) and child rearing is considered a responsibility of both the family and society. Russian homes frequently house several generations. Russians are very hospitable and prefer home-cooked food, typically eat three meals a day, and rarely go out to eat. One challenge incoming students may have is getting used to “snacking.”

Non-academic activities and expectations may be structured in terms of gender. Girls and boys are given different responsibilities. Girls are encouraged to be quiet, friendly,
and mutually supportive, while boys are expected to be noisy, boisterous, and competitive.

Orthodox Christianity is the most common religion in former Soviet nations, followed by other forms of Christianity and Islam.