OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFUGEE TEACHERS

By Linda Rabben
INTRODUCTION

Tens of thousands of refugees, asylees, Cuban/Haitian entrants and victims of human trafficking resettle in the United States every year. In FY 2008 alone, 60,279 refugees were resettled by 10 national voluntary agencies. All make lives for themselves in cities, towns and suburbs across the country, and all strive for the same things: freedom and opportunity. Many of these newcomers bring a few reminders of home, their families if they are lucky, and their past experience. This experience is vast and varied. Now more than ever, most resettlement agencies are greeting individuals at the airport who are physicians, lawyers, teachers, professional interpreters, engineers, and so on.

In a recent survey conducted by RefugeeWorks, at least 74 percent of resettlement agencies around the country had one or more physicians in their caseload. About 25 clients per agency are seeking recertification in their previous occupation. These people represent an enormous amount of human capital. However, the issue for many of these new Americans is that they do not know how to navigate the employment and advancement systems in place in their particular profession. How does a teacher from Nepal obtain a job in education? How does a doctor from Iraq get into the medical field?

To answer these questions and many more, RefugeeWorks has created a series of in-depth guides that can be used to help newcomers regain their professional career. The first of the series focused on engineering. This guide is about teaching: the structure and future of the profession, the skills, credentials and training needed to enter this line of work—and most important, how to find employment as a teacher.

If you are someone who is working in the field of refugee resettlement, we urge you to use this research to help your clients navigate what can sometimes be a perplexing road to regaining entry into a particular profession. If you are a new American seeking to use your skills in your chosen occupation, we hope this will make your journey a little easier.

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1. A REFUGEE TEACHER IN THE UNITED STATES

Professor N. describes himself as a “normal person confronting normal challenges,” but in many ways he is extraordinary. After earning a Ph.D. at a prestigious French university, he taught social science for eight years in his home country in West Africa. Because he refused to “cooperate” with the government, he received increasingly dire threats over a seven-year period. Finally, he left home without his family and came to the United States on a visitor’s visa in late 2007. Soon after his arrival he applied for asylum, which he received less than a year later with the help of a pro-bono lawyer from a human rights organization. He does not expect ever to return home and is waiting anxiously for his family to join him in the United States. Meanwhile, he says that as an asylee, “you are free and you are guilty,” as he worries about his family’s safety at home.

Because of perceived teacher shortages, numerous school districts have hired foreign-trained teachers since the 1990s.

Professor N. was not eligible to receive assistance from the local resettlement center until he gained asylum. He felt uncomfortable accepting food stamps and other forms of government assistance but had few options. He paid nominal rent for a room at a religious house where other asylees lived. The employment specialist at the resettlement center urged him to look for a job, any job, so he found work as a baggage handler at an airport. Soon promoted to a customer service position, he works full-time and spends his free hours applying for teaching and administrative jobs and taking an advanced English course. He has applied for a number of teaching positions for which he feels qualified, but he wonders if his foreign Ph.D. and teaching experience are hindering his search. He loves teaching and would be happy to work with students at any level from middle school to graduate school.

American education is a very diverse, wide-ranging profession, with teachers giving instruction in everything from nuclear physics to basket-weaving, in a great variety of establishments and institutions, to groups of different
sizes, ages and occupations, as well as on a one-to-one basis. Public and private schools educate some 50 million children and adolescents in large and small classes during terms that generally last about four months. Most public-school pupils are required to attend school 180 days per year, and as a result their teachers do not work year round in the classroom. Teacher certification requirements vary according to state, but public-school teachers must be licensed by the state and must have completed an accredited teacher-education program, a bachelor’s degree and qualifying exams.

Colleges of education specialize in preparing K-12, public- and private-school teachers in instructional methods as well as various subjects such as history, English and mathematics. Classroom observation and student teaching are important components of these programs. Most education colleges also offer graduate programs. School districts and other institutions provide professional development courses to teachers.

2. THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Turnover is high in the profession as a whole, with 50 percent of new teachers leaving their jobs within the first five years. This means that plenty of openings may be available, but not always with optimal working conditions, salaries or possibilities for advancement. Subjects in highest demand are mathematics, science, special education and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Two major unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), have been active in recruiting members and negotiating contracts in public schools around the country. Although the AFT is organizing in some charter schools, unions are often not present in charter schools and for-profit educational establishments, such as Kaplan. In 2006, 58 percent of special education teachers but only 30 percent of teacher aides belonged to the AFT or the NEA. The American Association of University Professors represents some postsecondary teachers.

Tenure—guaranteed, secure employment starting a few years after hiring and extending until retirement—is a privilege of some public school and postsecondary teachers. In recent years, however, a decreasing proportion of postsecondary teachers has gained tenure. Part-time and fixed-term appointments have become common at universities and colleges.

Because of perceived teacher shortages in many parts of the United States, numerous school districts have hired foreign-trained teachers since the early 1990s. For example, the Baltimore City Schools have recruited teachers from the Philippines, and the City of Chicago has hired teachers from many countries to work in its public schools. More than 35 private recruitment agencies, such as the Visiting International Faculty Program, offer credential evaluation, placement and other services to foreign teachers applying from abroad for positions in the United States.

3. TEACHING WORKFORCE COMPOSITION

The educational workforce is very large. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), around 4 million teachers work in public and private, preschool and K-12 educational establishments in the United States. Of these, 1.5 million are elementary-school teachers, 1.1 million are secondary-school teachers; 674,000 teach in middle schools; 437,000 teach in preschools; and 170,000 teach kindergarten. About 1.7 million educators are at postsecondary institutions, mainly four-year colleges, universities and two-year community colleges. More than 1 million teacher assistants (also called paraprofessionals) are employed in public and private elementary and secondary schools. Their job consists of providing instructional and clerical support to classroom teachers.

Hundreds of thousands of teachers are specializing in adult literacy, remedial education and self-enrichment education, mostly as part-timers. Thousands of counselors, administrators, librarians, social workers, coaches, psychologists, speech-language pathologists, audiologists, counselors, occupational therapists, recreational therapists and general-education teachers also work in public and private schools.

Adult literacy and self-enrichment education are areas in which certification requirements are more flexible or even nonexistent. Self-enrichment courses, often
sponsored by local recreation departments, community colleges, religious bodies and other institutions, are incredibly diverse, ranging from conversational Italian to auto repair. More than 20 percent of self-enrichment educators are self-employed and paid by the hour or the class. Some are unpaid volunteers. Their numbers should increase by 23 percent by 2016, as retirees sign up in growing numbers for such courses. Opportunities for advancement in self-enrichment education are limited, but it is sometimes possible for entrepreneurs to set up their own schools and programs.

Instructional coordinators develop curricula, select texts and other instructional materials, train teachers, assess programs and help introduce new technology in the classroom. In 2006, about 129,000 instructional coordinators worked in a variety of educational environments. Forty percent were in public or private elementary and secondary schools; 20 percent were in community colleges, colleges, universities and professional schools. Some were employed by state and local governments, services, daycare centers, research and development firms, and management, scientific and technical consulting companies.

Most teachers have at least a bachelor’s degree in education or another subject. Because of the teacher shortage, in many states those without certification or a state license may teach for a set number of years (usually two or three) while taking required courses and exams. These programs may be found on state education department Web sites or www.teachers-teachers.com. Alternative forms of certification have evolved in recent years, facilitating hiring of career-changers and others who have advanced degrees or other special qualifications. However, many states do not recognize alternative certificates. Private schools often do not require teacher certification but may not offer pay, benefits and working conditions as good as those in public schools.

4. THE FUTURE OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Because of retirements and high turnover, employment prospects for teachers are predicted to be good to excellent in the coming years. Fast-growing states in the South and West—especially Nevada, Arizona, Texas and Georgia—are expected to have the greatest increases in primary school enrollment and teaching positions. Enrollments in Midwestern states are expected to stay steady, while those in the Northeast are likely to decline. The difficult economic situation may lead many state governments to cut teaching positions and enlarge class sizes. Nonetheless, the BLS predicts that the number of teaching positions will increase by about 12 percent, or 479,000 jobs, by 2016. Prospects will be best for teachers of mathematics, science, bilingual education and ESOL, or in underserved, poor urban and rural districts. Prospects for instructional coordinators are excellent: the number of positions is expected to grow by 22 percent by 2016. Job growth will be greatest—26 percent—for preschool teachers. However, salaries for preschool teachers tend to be much lower than those for K-12 teachers.

Thousands of teachers specialize in adult literacy, remedial education and self-enrichment education, mostly as part-timers.

Prospects for special-education teachers are excellent, but they are often required to have a master’s degree as well as a special license. Alternative certification may also be available. According to the BLS, by 2016 special-education positions are expected to increase by 15 percent, and the percentage of foreign-born special-education students will increase, too.

The BLS estimates that the number of jobs for teacher assistants will grow by 10 percent—137,000 new positions—by 2016. They are likely to work with ESOL and special-education teachers and students. Those speaking foreign languages may have more opportunities. These paraprofessional positions can provide a way for foreign-trained teachers to enter the U.S. educational system. No matter what the economic situation, educationalists believe that teaching jobs will be available in underserved, poor urban and rural areas. Teacher shortages are likely to continue in secondary mathematics and science.
5. **Skills, Training, Credentials**

Every state government sets its own requirements for public-school teacher certification, usually including a bachelor’s degree, passage of qualifying exams in subject content and methodology, and practice teaching experience. The BLS notes, “A number of states require that teachers obtain a master’s degree in education within a specified period after they begin teaching.” In some places, special-education and ESOL teachers must have a master’s degree in their field. Some states have introduced a performance-based system for licensure and must require in-service continuing education afterward. Many states have reciprocity agreements for licensing, so that a teacher from one state is certified to teach in another.

Many states require candidates for teaching certification to pass the nationwide Praxis exams. According to the Educational Testing Service, which administers them, “Praxis I tests measure basic academic skills, and the Praxis II tests measure general and subject-specific knowledge and teaching skills.”

Community colleges require full-time teachers to have a master’s degree in the subject area but often hire adjuncts without any teaching preparation. Universities require a Ph.D. and highly developed oral and written communication skills in English, as well as a record of research and peer-reviewed publications. Universities also hire part-time and adjunct faculty, usually on a per-course basis at a much lower rate of pay than full-time teachers receive.

States have set up programs to encourage college students, graduates and career-changers to become public-school teachers. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Education has detailed descriptions of the Teacher Intern Certification Program, the Temporary Teaching Permit and the Vocational Intern Certificate on its Web site. Brief descriptions of these programs follow.

1. Teacher interns must have a bachelor’s degree or equivalent related to their content area and a 3.0 GPA. They must have passed the Praxis I exam and a specialty area test administered by the state. The intern certificate, issued after passage of Praxis, is good for one three-year period. Foreign nationals may obtain the intern certificate if they “demonstrate their intention to become citizens or have applied for citizenship in the United States or possess appropriate permits which allow them to work.”

2. The Temporary Teaching Permit is available for one calendar year to teachers who passed the American Board for Certification of Teaching Excellence (ABCTE) exams and have that organization’s “Passport to Teaching” credential. The ABCTE is a nonprofit organization that provides alternative certification through six-week intensive courses in teacher training and qualifying exams. (See below for more information on alternative certification.)

3. The Vocational Intern Certificate allows the holder to teach courses in dozens of skilled trades and occupations, including electrical technology, law enforcement and carpentry, in public vocational schools for a maximum of three years. The intern must pass the Praxis I exam in reading and writing and an occupational competency exam or evaluation. Eligibility is based more on technical experience than on the usual teacher training.

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Community colleges and universities have established pilot programs to retrain foreign-trained teachers and help them gain certification and employment.

Alternative certification is a burgeoning industry that has emerged in response to structural weaknesses in the teaching profession, including high turnover and perceived shortages of teachers, especially in mathematics and science and underserved urban and rural areas. The Pennsylvania programs described above and the ABCTE program are among many examples of alternative certification initiatives. The National Association for Alternative Certification, a professional association, “advocates standards-driven programs for alternative routes
to certification/licensure.” But many states do not recognize these programs.

Several community colleges and universities have established pilot programs to retrain foreign-trained teachers and help them gain certification and employment. From 2002 to 2007, the Refugee Teacher Training and Mentoring Program at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee trained 86 high school graduates from 11 countries to be preschool teachers. The Milwaukee Area Technical College, Cardinal Stritch University, the Milwaukee Public Schools and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction collaborated in the program. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, it helped refugees improve their English-language proficiency, learn teaching methods and prepare for Praxis exams. Participants received tuition scholarships and stipends. Sixteen program graduates are now working in schools, and several others went on to study education at universities. This may be the only training program in the United States aimed specifically at refugee teachers since a Massachusetts program trained Southeast Asian refugees in the 1980s.

The University of Southern Maine started the Newcomers-Extended Teacher Education Program (ETEP) in 1999 for “recent immigrants and refugees who have completed a bachelor’s degree in their home nation or the United States to become certified teachers through a rigorous, graduate-level teacher certification program spread out over two years.” The program was funded by the U.S. Department of Education. After attending ESOL and content area courses in the Newcomers Program, ETEP participants take methods courses, practice-teach under the supervision of mentor teachers and prepare for the Praxis I exam. Over 10 years, the program has attracted some 30 candidates, of whom 14 were admitted to the graduate program. Eleven have graduated with full teacher certification. Five are full-time teachers in the public schools, and another four are working as teacher assistants.

Programs to retrain refugee teachers also exist in other countries, where centralized educational systems may make it easier for them to obtain certification. For example, Birkbeck College of the University of London operates the Passport to Teaching Plus Program for refugees. For three years, the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit of London Metropolitan University ran a six-month certificate course for refugees seeking support positions in schools. According to the 2006 “Report of the Refugee Teachers Task Force,” published by the Employability Forum of London, 10 nonprofit organizations in the UK operate programs that help refugee teachers find jobs. The Employability Forum also publishes a newsletter, “Opening Doors for Refugee Teachers.” Some of these British initiatives could be replicated in the United States.

6. HOW TO FIND A TEACHING JOB

- Networking. In such a diverse profession, employers may be either inaccessible or very approachable. As a result, networking is essential for successful job hunting in the educational field. Job seekers must “sell” their qualifications, experience and talents, not only to human resource personnel but also to intermediaries and mentors who can advise and inform them about job opportunities. Initiative, persistence and skillful self-presentation are important qualities for job seekers in all professions.

- Self-Presentation. American cultural norms for self-presentation may be very different from those in the refugee’s home country. Mock interviews and exercises in meeting and greeting should be helpful to the refugee job seeker. Mentors can also give good counsel and feedback.

- Résumés/CVs. Résumés should be tailored to demonstrate specific accomplishments in the field as well as certificates and degrees. The job seeker should be prepared to present a résumé at job fairs and networking events and to consult it during telephone screening interviews.

- Training. Obtaining teacher certification can be time-consuming, complicated and expensive. In the meantime, refugee teachers may want to take courses in a new area, such as special education, or enroll in a teacher-education program at a community college or university. No matter what
experience a teacher may already have, professional education is a good long-term investment and provides an opportunity to update knowledge and improve vocational-language skills.

- **University Employment.** An administrative or support position at a university may include free courses, since many offer tuition benefits to employees. University employment also provides opportunities to interact with potential colleagues, mentors and employers. Teachers who come to the United States with an advanced degree may want to investigate pre- or post-doctoral fellowships at universities and research institutes. These positions are temporary and pay less than work for a private employer, but they do provide a living wage, opportunities to do advanced research and relevant professional experience. Demand for postsecondary instructors of Arabic is especially strong at present. Teaching positions in other languages are also available at universities and community colleges.

Volunteering could give access to professional colleagues who might help a refugee teacher look for a paid position. Networking is very important.

- **Growth Areas.** Certain teaching specialties are experiencing shortages in the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, mathematics, science, ESOL and special education are the specialties in highest demand. Teachers with expertise in related subjects should consider taking graduate education courses that would help qualify them for primary- and secondary-school positions in these areas.

Refugee teachers wishing to teach in public schools must find a way to obtain certification from the state. Some states have special programs like those in Pennsylvania, where teachers may take interim appointments, internships, substitute teaching jobs or paraprofessional positions while preparing for qualifying examinations and fulfilling other requirements. Such programs may be listed on state education department Web sites. Community colleges and universities offer teacher-training programs that lead to conventional or alternative certification.

Positions in private schools, postsecondary institutions, test preparation or tutoring centers, daycare centers, religious institutions and nontraditional venues usually do not require certification. Listings of such jobs may be found on Web sites and in educational publications. Both public and private schools sponsor employment fairs where job seekers have opportunities to speak directly with potential employers. Recruitment or “headhunter” organizations help private schools find teachers and administrators.

Volunteering in a school could give access to professional colleagues who might help a refugee teacher look for a paid position. As in all job searches, networking is very important for aspiring teachers. Professional society meetings, public lectures, conferences and other events can provide opportunities for refugee teachers to meet and interact with potential colleagues, mentors and employers.

A position as a teacher aide can be a good entry point into the profession. Schools in districts with large immigrant populations may also hire bilingual refugees as community liaisons, interpreters and ESOL tutors. Some states have hired refugee educators as teacher aides under the Refugee School Impact Program, funded by the Division of Refugee Assistance of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Postsecondary teachers should take every opportunity to display their scholarly skills by participating in panels, roundtables, symposia and conferences; colleges and universities often interview job candidates at such events. If possible, refugee scholars should join and participate in professional societies.

Many Web sites provide useful information for job-seeking teachers. The nonprofit Recruiting New Teachers site, www.teachers-teachers.com, posts the “How to Become a Teacher Job Search Handbook,” employment opportunities around the country and every state’s certification requirements. With the rise of online job applications, on Web sites often managed by private subcontractors,
Refugee professionals sometimes find themselves at a disadvantage because their qualifications and experience do not fit the automated template. As a result, their applications may be rejected without being considered by the potential employer. Job developers might find it effective to contact the school principal, human resources office or diversity office directly, on behalf of refugee applicants. Refugee teachers could also try to arrange informational interviews with principals and other school administrators.

7. NOTES

4. See www.employabilityforum.co.uk.

8. SOURCES


9. LINKS

Employability Forum. Opening Doors for Refugee Teachers Newsletter. www.employabilityforum.co.uk

10. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank Judy Corello, David Edwards, Shannon Lederer, Kalyani Rai, Flynn Ross, Winsome Waite, two refugee teachers and the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, as well as RefugeeWorks colleagues Jonathan Lucas and Daniel Sturm, for their comments, advice and help. Any errors are her own.
This guide is published pursuant to cooperative agreement number 90RB0024 from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The views expressed are those of RefugeeWorks and may not reflect the views of ORR.