



Community Connectors Program



Community Refugee & Immigration Services' Community Connectors program began in July 2016 with an Ohio Department of Education grant to serve at-risk youth, fostering appropriate mentoring relationships with local community members and providing wraparound services to both the students served and their families.

The annual goal of CRIS' Community Connectors is to serve at least 75 new American students (refugee, immigrant, first generation); supporting them in three main areas: Academic/Language, Employment, and Social Engagement. Currently we have 91 mentors and 93 mentees. Mentees and mentors come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds including Central/ South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Languages spoken by mentees include Spanish, Somali, Nepali, Arabic, Swahili and Tigrinya.

Initially CRIS' Community Connectors supported students at Columbus Global Academy, the Columbus City School serving students with the most limited English proficiency. It has since expanded in the Columbus City Schools District and to Westerville City School District. Appendix A has the complete list of current partner schools. Since CRIS' Community Connectors follows students even if they change schools, we have also served students within Dublin, Hilliard, Reynoldsburg, and several charter schools. Olentangy and Southwestern School Districts have inquired about joining our program.

In the latest Ohio Department of Education report card Columbus City Schools District received an overall F including graduation rates, gap closing, prepared for success, and academic achievement. Our program is addressing each of these concerns with the students enrolled in our mentoring program. To date we have worked with more than 200 students and the graduation rates for CRIS' Community Connectors eligible seniors has been 90% compared to district wide graduation rates of 78.1% within four years or 81% within five years in 2018. An overarching objective is to pave pathways for mentees so that they graduate from high school and pursue secondary education or directly enter the workforce, avoiding reliance on public assistance and avoiding negative behaviors that lead to involvement with children's services or the court system.

The **Academic/Language** component of CRIS' Community Connectors focuses on tutoring, language comprehension, preparation for graduation and introduction to post high school education opportunities. Mentoring takes place in-home, in-school or in-community centers depending on the family's preference. Students take field-trips to learn about opportunities for secondary education. Many CRIS' Community Connectors mentors are currently attending institutes of higher education themselves. CRIS' Community Connectors strives to create a pathway to secondary education for students whose families may never have had an opportunity to attend college by providing meaningful relationships with role models.

An important aspect of the **Employment** component of CRIS' Community Connectors is exposure to career opportunities in Columbus. We invite guest speakers and take industry and STEM field trips. DHL, Ohio History Connection, MKSK Architecture Firm, COSI, the Ohio State University, and Columbus Public Libraries are a few examples.

CRIS' Community Connectors administers a student job club that meets the OhioMeansJobs Work Readiness Seal criteria. In 2019 we launched a pilot with 13 students at Columbus North International. We hope to expand the club to all participating Columbus City students beginning in fall of 2019. This seal is a special credential on a student's diploma/transcript that employers recognize as an indication that the student went above and beyond to be prepared for life post high-school. During job-club meetings students receive assistance with resume preparation, interviewing skills, professional dress, soft-skill training and research age-appropriate employment opportunities. CRIS' Community Connectors also ensures students are meeting their volunteer/internship graduation requirements which provide them real world experience and opportunities to engage with the Columbus community.

The **Social Engagement** component of CRIS' Community Connectors is an intentional effort to build a stronger and more unified community, connecting refugee and immigrant youth with supportive mentors from the broader Columbus community. Mentors run the spectrum: college students, professionals, retirees. Mentors make a commitment to spend at least one hour per week with their mentee. Social outings have included beautification projects (painting murals in various schools), Columbus Crew games, ice skating, game night at Kingmakers Columbus, and many more activities. Through these relationships students develop a sense of belonging to the Columbus community and mentors gain an appreciation of the diverse cultures within our community and the satisfaction of knowing they are making a real difference in the life of a youth. Fostering positive relationships between refugee/immigrant youth and the community is of great value to the mentee and the mentor.

An important aspect of CRIS' Community Connectors program is the hands-on oversight. The program manager meets at least twice monthly with each mentee and once per month with parents, as appropriate. Mentors submit monthly progress reports and weekly journals through which staff are able to identify any social service needs of the family. Program staff have made numerous referrals to CRIS' and other agencies' social service programs. CRIS' Community Connectors has developed a strong relationship with principals and other faculty at our partner schools. In many instances CRIS' Community Connectors staff are the first to be aware of important information regarding a student (or the student's family). This strong working relationship between CRIS' Community Connectors and the schools helps ensure a united effort to remove barriers to a mentee's success.

CRIS' Community Connectors program has received over \$300,000 in in-kind contributions. Columbus Crew SC, Ologie, Harmony Project, and Columbus Association of Performing Arts are among the generous donors. Bloomberg and Co. is facilitating the Columbus Nations Cup, a citywide soccer tournament at Easton Fields in June. The net proceeds from this event will be donated to CRIS' Community Connectors as they have since its inception. Additional grant partners are: Greenleaf JTS, Himalayan Grille, Bhutanese Community Center of Ohio (BCCO), and Mentor Center of Ohio. Each partner contributes to our program in some important way, providing background checks, mentor training, catered meals for mentors/ mentees, etc. Nationwide Children's Hospital also provides mental health and suicide prevention training to each mentor annually.

While the Ohio Department of Education provided the seed funding for CRIS' Community Connectors, we understand that we cannot rely on government funding to ensure the program continues. CRIS was recently awarded a \$10,000 matching grant from the Siemer Family Foundation, a \$10,000 from the Westerville Education Foundation and \$100,000 from the City of Columbus. CRIS is currently additional funds which will allow us to expand the program.

APPENDIX A

Beechcroft High School

Briggs High School

Columbus Global Academy

Columbus North International High School

Dominion Middle School

Downtown High School

Eakin Elementary

Fouse Elementary.

Gables Elementary

Mifflin High School,

Mifflin Middle School

Northland High School

Wedgewood Middle School

West High School

Whetstone High School

Woodward Park Middle School

Westerville North High School

Westerville Central High School