

ISSA helps foreign-born students to **SUCCEED**

By Michael Maynard & Haowen Ge





“English learner students at Charles F. Brush High School face language and cultural barriers that inhibit them from succeeding in the classroom, exploring career paths, applying for college and, above all, chasing their dreams,” stated Linda Reid, superintendent of the South Euclid Lyndhurst School District in Northeastern Ohio.

English learner students — those who were not raised speaking English as their primary language — are often the children of immigrants. They may be immigrants or refugees themselves. Over the past two decades, the foreign-born population of Ohio has grown by over 50% (Ohio Department of Development, n.d.), yet they often do not find the assistance that they need to learn well in their new environments, leaving them at a severe disadvantage lacking the cultural, social-emotional, and academic resources that they require.

Increase access to high-wage, high-demand careers.

International Student Services Association (ISSA) is a growing, national nonprofit organization dedicated to providing low-income, English learner students with the information, inspiration, and motivation to better themselves and the community. ISSA works with schools to provide students with the assistance needed to accomplish their goals by giving them support for life after secondary education — whether that be in college or the workforce. ISSA, based in Highland Heights, Ohio, currently assists students across 10 school districts in the greater Cleveland, Akron and Chicago areas.

The organization is led by Haowen Ge who emigrated from China when he was 12 years old and grew up in a single-parent, low-income household. Ge's experiences provide him with the ability to relate to the students with which ISSA works and to be an example of the success they can achieve.

He has developed a team of interns, volunteers and professionals and built strong connections with the local community to help hundreds of foreign-born students from more than 20 countries including China, Nepal, Pakistan, Mexico, Ukraine and more. ISSA works with the local school systems to provide two flexible, in-school programs that are customizable for each school and individual.

- The Career Readiness Program prepares students for careers through workshops and lectures that teach 21st century learning skills and the basic elements of job application. Students also benefit from paid internship and job-shadow opportunities with local and national employers like FedEx and Invacare.
- The College Readiness Program focuses on helping students find the college that is right for them. The program assists them in securing acceptance to that college as well as the financial aid necessary to attend.

Develop career readiness skills.

Students typically experience the Career Readiness Program first, as the school requires all English learner students to attend. It is run during the second quarter of the fall semester during school hours. Students learn about:

- Technical and employability skills
- What careers match their own interests and talents
- Different forms of employment, such as part-time jobs, internships and volunteer opportunities

- Various postsecondary options like college and certification programs

The students also take skill assessment exams and even use a virtual reality program to experience job simulations to better understand what's required for certain careers. The workshops use a range of teaching methods — including presentations by ISSA staff and guest speakers, one-on-one meetings, virtual reality and game-based learning platforms like Kahoot! — to engage students and encourage them to apply what they have learned. They discover how to use job application sites, what jobs will provide them with useful experience for their future careers and how to conduct interviews.

All along, the program also helps students to use the English language with more proficiency and to be more confident, even under the stress of presenting to a group of adults in a culture that is different from their own. By the end of the program, all students have learned valuable professional skills.

Plan for college and the future.

During the first half of the spring semester, students advance to the College Readiness Program. This program consists of several workshops that prepare them for college application and provide them with the necessary tools to get accepted into and afford college. The program uses many of the same techniques as the Career Readiness Program. They learn:

- How to make a list of potential schools
- Whether they will gain more from taking the SAT or ACT
- How extracurricular activities can benefit them
- How to proceed with the financial aid process, such as how to apply for the FAFSA as well as finding and applying for scholarships

ISSA understands that college is more than a rite of passage; it is an opportunity for students to prepare for their future careers and life. As such, the College Readiness Program helps to ensure that students receive vital opportunities in order to achieve their goals. Upon completion of the program, the vast majority of the seniors have secured access to their schools of choice, and most receive significant scholarship and grant awards.



Help students navigate a pathway from education to the workforce.

Since their beginning in 2019, both programs have been extremely successful with 90% of ISSA students continuing to certification programs, college and/or internships. Many of the students served are unaware of the financial, educational and cultural tools that can aid them. ISSA helps them to navigate pathways to college and the workforce.

Llse, whose family emigrated from Mexico wrote, “Being a first-generation student going to college, I was completely lost, and they helped so much. I honestly don’t know where I would be without them.” ISSA offers immense value for international and/or immigrant students. The organization’s intimate familiarity with their experiences, and with the postsecondary system and the available financial tools, is of incalculable value to these students.

“I am appreciative of all the resources and guidelines provided to me to receive the scholarship to attend Kent State University,” stated Mohammed, a Saudi-American student. “That is awesome!”

“Our immigrant students and staff have greatly benefited from working with ISSA,” commented John Hayes, a school counselor at Mayfield High School and the lead counselor at Excel TECC, a technical school in Northeast Ohio. “I give my highest recommendation for ISSA as your source for helping immigrant students.”

Look ahead.

ISSA provides invaluable support to foreign-born students like Llse and Mohammed and the academic professionals who work with them. Over the next five years, Haowen Ge hopes to transform the nonprofit into a training center for low-income immigrant students. Imagine a one-stop-shop for all of the training



resources that they need for future careers. While attending ISSA, students would be able to take part in career development and college prep programs and potentially earn an associate degree upon high school graduation. As such, ISSA students would find themselves in competition for high-wage, high-demand careers with an ever-growing list of industry partners like Google, Invacare and FedEx. ISSA would, in turn, provide these organizations with an extensive network of trained professionals from which to recruit their workforce.

We hope to inspire career and technical educators to recognize the needs of low-income immigrant students as they try to adjust and succeed in the United States. We seek to share the tools offered by ISSA and its partners — so that you, too, can help to spark student development and present opportunities for increasing access and equity in your own communities. By working together, we can help these students achieve their dreams and, in so doing, nurture the leaders that they can become. ■



Develop education & industry partnerships

Through partnership with 26 universities, ISSA provides foreign-born students many tools, including financial aid and educational resources. ISSA also benefits from the support of partner organizations.

- Thanks to partners like Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and Junior Achievement, ISSA helps students learn important life skills, such as personal finance and entrepreneurship and provides them with good mentors and role models.
- Industry and workforce development partners, such as Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Invacare, Google and FedEx, provide access to internships, job shadowing, volunteering and mentorships that will be extremely beneficial as they advance in their careers and lives.
- Another partner — ScholarMatch, a California-based nonprofit — works with students whose parents have not attended college. They are a very helpful ally as many of ISSA's students fit into this category.
- With organizations like Seek Common Ground, National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity and ACTE, ISSA also works to advocate for better education practices that will assist immigrant students.

Further, ISSA supports open system techniques, wherein parties exchange information freely and continuously (Authenticity Consulting, n.d.). ISSA and other education and immigrant-based organizations help each other through extensive networking and partnerships to make communication more effective and increase the knowledge that they can access.

Learn more at internationalstudentsvc.org/

Michael Maynard is a senior at Ave Maria University where he studies economics and history. Maynard has always had a love of education which has inspired him to work with students of all ages and backgrounds. He has worked with several organizations, including a small nonprofit in Florida where he supported the families of migrant workers and a local homeschool cooperative where he tutored in math and history.

Haowen Ge is originally from China and moved to Shaker Heights with his mother when he was 12 years old. He is the executive director of ISSA. Ge received a bachelor's in business administration from the University of Mount Union and a master's degree in business administration from Baldwin Wallace University. Currently he is also a second-year doctoral candidate in strategy and innovation at the Harbin Institute of Technology and a visiting scholar at Kent State University.

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