

# Supporting Unaccompanied Children from Central America in Arlington County Schools

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Over 20,000 unaccompanied minors (UAC) – many from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – have moved to the Washington, D.C. region. The Arlington County School Board can support the migrant youth who call our region home by increasing language support, hiring more Spanish-speaking staff and social workers, expanding programs that address economic anxiety and food insecurity for all students, and provide trauma-informed training to all staff.

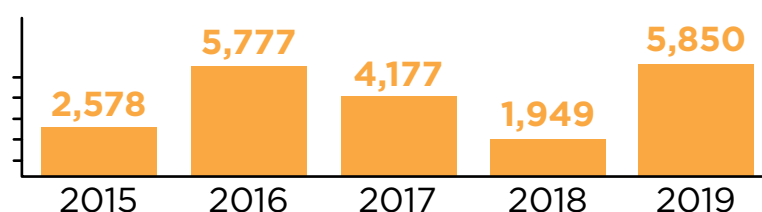
## WHAT SETS THESE STUDENTS APART FROM OTHER ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

Every interviewee brought their own sets of stories. Many bring trauma from experiencing or witnessing violence, from the notoriously dangerous journey north, or detention by Customs and Border Protection. Others are leaving family members and entering unfamiliar households with family members they have not seen in years. They also bring dreams and ambition, a desire to learn English, make friends, and follow a career they are interested in.

## WHAT INTERVENTIONS EFFICIENTLY ADDRESS MIGRANT STUDENTS' BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION?

Our study participants reported that struggling with English-language instruction hampered their performance and happiness in school. Simultaneously, by making friends and speaking in Spanish with other Latinx students, they could feel more at home and part of their community. Arlington Public Schools can hire more bilingual staff and provide more and more extensive bilingual/immersion programs, expand the Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) offerings, and emulate counties in the region that have programs designed explicitly for immigrant youth and parents reuniting after years apart.

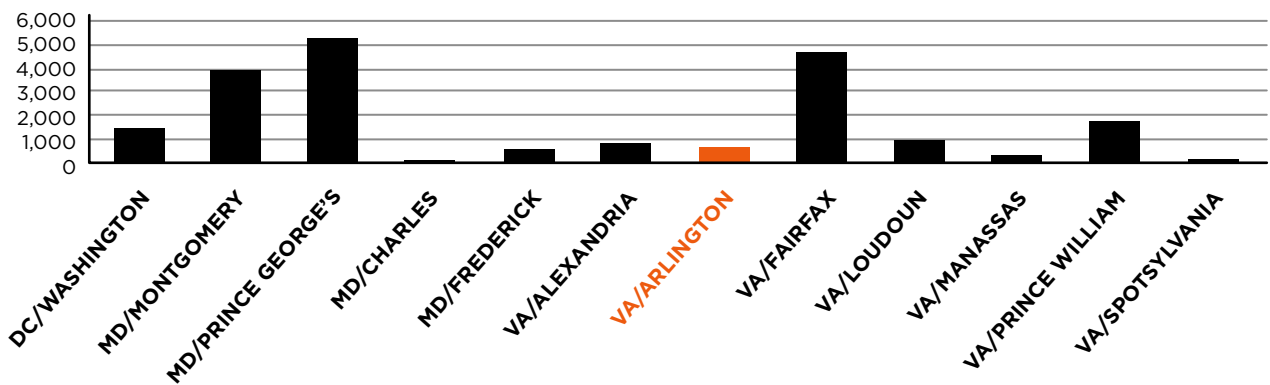
## NUMBER OF UACS RELEASED TO SPONSORS IN THE DC METROPOLITAN AREA BY YEAR



**Economic anxiety** and **food insecurity** – exacerbated by the pandemic – have meant that food pantries, school-based meal programs, and school-based counseling and family services have been lifesaving. There needs to be more contact with parents to ensure that they know what federal services are available to them. **Public youth programming** can make an effort to enroll more immigrant youth whose parents do not speak English well, to better engage families in community activities.

Arlington County should ensure that explicit training is provided to all school officials to work with Central American immigrants and those with a history of traumatic experiences. The County could consider funding its own programming or create grant programs for community organizations to scale up their school and family support programs so that youths and their families can process their pasts and futures together, and so that these populations can more consistently achieve health and happiness. Arlington County's unaccompanied youth population is smaller than in other parts of the DMV, **so a few targeted programs could have an enormous impact** and not be prohibitive in terms of resources required.

**TOTAL UACS PLACED WITH SPONSORS, 2015-2019**



**WHAT INSIGHTS DO WE HAVE INTO THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANT YOUTH WHO ATTEND ARLINGTON COUNTY SCHOOLS?**

Our research with the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University includes interviews with 58 recently resettled youth; 41 sponsors; and 23 social service providers and school staff in the DC metropolitan area.

“Here . . . I’ll be going to university. I want to study. And where I used to live was very dangerous, and there are no opportunities to pursue higher education.”  
**—DIANA, 16, EL SALVADOR**

“[The gang] wanted to force me to join the Maras. And that is why you can’t study, because I was scared to leave the house, to go to school, and then to come back home.”  
**—CARLOS, 15, EL SALVADOR**