

CREATED BY FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES  
ON BEHALF OF THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

# I LEARN AMERICA

Viewers' Guide



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**NYC**

Department of  
Education

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# Using This Guide

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This guide can be used with multiple audiences: educators, students, and the larger school community. It is arranged in four sections: Background, Previewing, Viewing, and Post Viewing. The Background section provides information about the film, the main characters, and the filmmakers, and it also gives suggested guidelines for discussing the film in an educational setting. Included in the Previewing section are journal or discussion prompts intended to foreshadow many of the key themes in the film. The Viewing section is divided into three subsections: Identities at School and in Society, Dilemmas at School, and Resolutions. The Viewing section also includes guided questions for a close viewing of the film. Some educators may choose to stop the film to discuss some of the questions; others may use one of the sections as a guide for a critical viewing exercise. Others may choose to hold off discussing any of the questions until the film is over. It is our belief that viewers will benefit from being in conversation with others about the film. Depending on the size of the viewing group, an educator may choose to begin with written reflection on the questions before engaging in small- or large-group discussions. The final section of the guide is the Post Viewing section. The intention of the questions in this section is to focus on the larger questions the film raises about the role of schools in welcoming newcomers into this country.

# Background

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## The Film

*One High School, One School Year, Five New Americans*

The children of immigration, here to stay, are the new Americans. How we fare in welcoming them will determine the nature of this country in the 21st century and beyond.

In *I Learn America*, five resilient immigrant teenagers come together over a year at the International High School at Lafayette and struggle to learn about and get comfortable with their new land.

The International High School at Lafayette is a New York City public school dedicated to serving recently arrived immigrant teenagers, with more than 300 students speaking 24 languages from more than 50 countries. The students strive to master English, adapt to families they haven't seen in years, confront the universal trials of adolescence, and search for a future they can claim as their own.

Through these five vibrant young people, their stories and struggles, and their willingness to open their lives and share them with us, we "learn America."

## Meet the Students



**Sing** is an 18-year-old boy from Myanmar. He is a refugee who recently relocated to Brooklyn, leaving his family behind. He is new to English and never expected to land in the United States. At school, no one else speaks his languages, and his limited English is preventing him from making friends. He is socially isolated, frustrated and angry.



**Brandon** is a 15-year-old undocumented migrant from Guatemala who crossed the border to the United States to reunite with his mother after being apart for ten years. Making the perilous journey was easy compared with getting to know his mom again. In the United States, she has remarried, leaving Brandon to face the difficult task of finding his place in his new family. He is struggling to focus on his schoolwork.



**Sandra** is 17 years old and from Poland. She is a tomboy and a class leader, and she's also undocumented. She and **Jenniffer**, a charming and animated classmate from the Dominican Republic, are inseparable best friends—"like a flower with water." Sandra has grown confident in identifying herself as a girl who dresses as a boy, but as the school prom approaches, she confronts her parents' expectations that she wear a dress. As she faces graduation, she fears that being undocumented means she will lose everything she's gained once she leaves the security of the school.



**Itrat** is 17 years old and from Pakistan. She came to the United States to join her father, whom she barely knew. At school, she's vivacious and outspoken. She is also a devout Muslim and fulfills a traditional role at home, cooking and cleaning for her father and brothers. With her feet in two worlds, she manages her way in school and in her new society.

## The School

The International High School at Lafayette, in Brooklyn, serves recently arrived immigrants from more than 50 different countries. This high school is part of a growing network of small public schools at which new immigrant students are valued and nurtured in the challenge to participate fully in the American dream. This educational model uses heterogeneous and collaborative learning to give students the rigor and support they need to achieve academically, socially, and linguistically.

## The Filmmakers

With support from the MacArthur Foundation and the Jerome Foundation, Jean-Michel Dissard and Gitte Peng directed and produced *I Learn America*.

### **Jean-Michel Dissard** (Director/Producer)

Prior to filming this documentary, Jean-Michel produced critically acclaimed films chronicling adolescent youth, including “Raising Victor Vargas” with Latino youth in New York City and the Showtime documentary “Rikers High” about incarcerated students on Rikers Island. Originally from France, Jean-Michel immigrated to America when he was a teenager. He is a dual citizen.

### **Gitte Peng** (Director/Producer)

Gitte is an education-reform expert who served as Senior Education Policy Advisor in Mayor Bloomberg’s administration, developing and overseeing the city’s school-reform policies and initiatives. She has also worked for the NYC Board of Education and the National Urban League and in various advocacy and public interest roles.

## About Facing History and Ourselves

Facing History and Ourselves is an international educational and professional development organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. By studying the historical development of the Holocaust and other examples of genocide, students make the essential connection between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives. For more information about Facing History and Ourselves, please visit our website at [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org).

*“We need to serve these students. Regardless of how you may feel about the immigration issue, they are children, and they did not choose to come here. But they are here. So the options are to serve them, nurture them, and educate them, or not. Then what?”*

—PRINCIPAL MICHAEL SOET  
INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL AT LAYFAYETTE

## Suggested Guidelines for Viewing the Film in a Classroom Setting

To openly discuss the issues this film raises, it is critical to create a safe classroom environment for all students and to consider the impact of the classroom climate on students' willingness to engage with the film. If necessary, you might create a classroom "contract" to underscore the importance of these conversations. You might want to adapt the following suggestions for your particular setting.

Listen with respect. Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment.

Make comments using "I" statements.

If you don't feel safe making a comment or asking a question, write the thought down.

If someone states an idea or question that helps your own learning, say "Thank you."

If someone says something that hurts or offends you, don't attack the person.

Acknowledge that the comment—not the person—hurt your feelings, and explain why.

Put-downs are never okay.

If you don't understand something, ask a question.

Think with your head and your heart.

Share talking time—provide room for others to speak.

Do not interrupt others while they are speaking.

Write down thoughts, in a journal or notebook, if you don't have time to say them during our time together.

Consider the following teaching strategies for structured conversations about the film:

- Barometer
- Fishbowl
- Ice Diagrams
- Learn to Listen / Listen to Learn
- Save the Last Word for Me
- Town Hall Circle

Two of the students in this film discuss their status as undocumented immigrants and their fears that they may be deported. See the [following guidelines](#) to inform your responsibility as an educator.

## Suggestions for Supporting English Language Learners

As you implement this guide with English Language Learners, some students might require additional support to record their responses to the questions. If so, consider grouping students in partnerships or small groups that share the same home language, enabling them to discuss their reactions to the film prior to engaging in a larger group discussion or writing their responses in their journals. Similarly, students can record their responses in their home language prior to engaging in a group discussion in English. Prior to viewing and class discussion, determine if there are new words that the students might need to discuss or write their responses to the focus questions. Refer to the [literacy research brief](#), created by the New York City Department of Education, on vocabulary for more information about focused vocabulary instruction.

# Previewing

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Throughout *I Learn America*, we will see how issues related to identity influence the choices that people make. One way to anticipate the relationship between identity, society, and the choices we make is to create an identity chart, listing words, phrases, identities, and obligations that influence how we see ourselves and how we think others see us. [Click here for an example of an identity chart.](#)

Just as individuals have identities, schools do as well, and factors such as geography, demographics, politics, economics, and historical events influence the identity of a school. Create an identity chart for your school by drawing a circle with the name of the school in the middle. Around that circle, write the words and phrases that you use to describe your school, using the following questions as catalysts to stimulate thinking.

What is the purpose of a school? What role do schools play in a community? What role do they play in a nation?

Under what conditions are differences accepted? Under what conditions are differences seen as a threat? What are schools supposed to do about the differences between students at a school? What are the qualities of a welcoming community or a welcoming school? How do those qualities impact the ways in which people feel that they belong?

What does it mean to be integrated into a school, group, community, or nation? Reflect on a time when you were integrated into a group—when you went from being an outsider to part of that group. How did it happen? What did you do? What did people in the group do? What lessons can you draw from your experience about integration?

Some of you may choose to record your thoughts in a [journal](#). The questions above will be worth revisiting after watching the film.

# Viewing

## Part I: Identities at School and in Society

Create [identity charts](#) for Sing, Brandon, Sandra, and Itrat. How do they see themselves? How do others see them? How do those perceptions affect their identities? Identity charts are fluid snapshots of a particular time and context. What words would you add to or change in each student's identity chart over the course of the film? How do the events affect the students' choices and actions throughout the film? Would students include the word *American* on their identity charts? Why or why not?

We watch Ms. Christina conduct an interview with Sing. She explains that this is something the school does with all the students to get to know them. What do we learn about Sing from the interview? What does she learn that will help her as his teacher?

Unlike the other students depicted in the film, Sing is a refugee. What is a refugee? How is a refugee experience similar to or different from other immigrant experiences?

Brandon lived apart from his mother for many years. What might that have meant for him when he was apart from her? What are the implications as he adjusts to his new family and to his new land? How do you think it effects his relationships with his new family as it evolves during the course of the film?

Consider how animated Brandon is as he describes his experience coming to the United States. What does the story tell you about him as a person and as a student? Based on what you heard, what would you want his teachers and classmates to know about him? What do you know about your own classmates' history and experiences?

We get to know Sandra as she presents her "struggle memoir"—a class assignment—to her peers. What do you think is the purpose of that assignment? Sandra titles her struggle memoir "Being Different Being Me." What does she want her classmates to know about her identity? How do her classmates and friends perceive Sandra's differences?

Early in the film, Sandra says, "My family status in here, there is a lot going on, and there are many things happening. We're just here on a visa, and I have nothing. So it's kind of like on all of us, a pressure. But right now I'm a child, like I'm still a teenager and like for me now everything is like in my head and it's worrying." Would you describe Sandra as a "typical" teenager? How does her immigrant status impact her life as a teenager?

Reflect on the conversation between Itrat and her classmates about her headscarf. What do you notice? What is the tone of the conversation? Itrat tells her classmates, "I [didn't] take a scarf like this in my country. When I was here, I choose it by myself." What does that tell you about her values? Her identity? Immigration scholar Carola Suárez-Orozco's afterword to the Facing History and Ourselves publication [Stories of Identity: Religion, Migration, and Belonging in a Changing World](#) explores similar dilemmas of identity.

Itrat says, "I love America and I love Pakistan. The heart is over there and the body is over here." Throughout the film, how does she balance her identities? For more on the idea of transcultural identities, see "[Transcultural Identities](#)" for a reflection on identity by author and immigrant Jhumpa Lahiri.

## Part II: Dilemmas at School

As you watch the film, consider the ways in which the characters in the film are similar to you, your friends, and your colleagues. What differences do you notice? When and where might those differences seem important? When might those differences not matter that much?

What does it mean to "learn America"? Over the course of the film, how does each student "learn America"? What does it mean to be or become American? How do people become American?

### Brandon

Brandon is struggling academically but devotes a lot of time to soccer. How do the teachers respond? How might his life experiences and his undocumented status impact life at school?

After continued academic struggles, Brandon's parents decide that, due to his poor grades, he will have to go to work and not return to school for his senior year. What do you think of that decision? If you were Brandon's parents, what could you do to motivate him? If you were his teacher, what might you do?

### Sandra

What dilemma does the prom raise for Sandra? How does Jenniffer support her friend? How do Sandra's classmates respond? How do students support each other at International High School at Lafayette? How do they support each other in your school?

What do you think about the decision of several of Sandra's friends to wear tuxedos to the prom? How do they explain their decision to the man at the tuxedo store? How does he respond? From the evidence in the film, how do you think the responses made Sandra feel?

### Sing

Watch the scenes about Sing. Ms. Christina says, "I think that the most difficult thing for Sing is that absolutely nobody else on the team or in any of his classes speaks his language." What challenges is he having at school? How do the adults at school respond? Based on their words and actions, what do you think they are trying to teach him?

Café night is a big night at International High School at Lafayette. What do you think is the purpose of the event? How does Ms. Christina try to prepare Sing to present his story to the community? How does she encourage him?

Sing calls his story "I Am Tired of Learning New Languages." He explains, "I learned how to speak in Chin, Burma, Malaysian, Chinese, Indonesian, and now English. And I can say 'always have hope' in all of them." What do we learn about Sing from his presentation that we didn't know before? How do his classmates and his teachers respond to his presentation? How do you think their responses made him feel?

## Itrat

The children of immigrants may come to the United States as a result of their parents' choice rather than their own. Itrat says, "It was not a choice; well, it was not for the children who come here, it is something the parents choose." What dilemmas does Itrat face as she tries to balance her ambition with her love for her family and her Pakistani heritage?

In one scene, Itrat and her teacher talk about balancing Itrat's own desire for an education with her parents' expectations for her. How do they talk about the dilemma Itrat is facing? Was the teacher respectful of Itrat's values and her understanding of her culture? How would you evaluate the teacher's strategy for motivating Itrat?

What questions does Itrat have for her teacher about the prom? What do you think is behind her questions? How does Itrat navigate the dilemmas the prom raises for her?

## The School

Watch the scene in which Mr. Michael, the principal, and Mr. Jon, the assistant principal, talk with their students about their experiences as gay men. What do they say? What questions do the students have?

Speaking with the students, Mr. Jon explains, "Part of having a school is a place to ask questions, a place to learn new ideas. It's a place where if you have these ideas from before or things you don't understand or things you want to hear about, if you have preconceptions, it's a chance to . . . explore those questions and those challenges." What do you think of his idea of a school? Is your school like the school Mr. Jon describes? Why or why not? How would you define the purpose of a school?

What do you notice about the way that educators and students respond to the differences in language, nationality, ethnicity, and sexual identity between the students and the staff? How do people at your school talk about differences? Are differences ignored or discussed?

What do you notice about the relationship between administrators, teachers, and students at International High School at Lafayette? How do the teachers and students create a welcoming school? What role do the students play? What role do the teachers play?

## Part III: Resolutions

What does it say about the culture of the school and the community at International High School that Itrat announces Sandra as the prom queen, considering both of their concerns before the event?

How do you explain why Sing continued to commute to International High School at Lafayette despite the two-hour commute? Many new immigrants express frustration at having to start over at a new school when they are just getting acclimated. Why might that be? What does it say about the challenges that Sing and other newcomers face at school?

In the credits, we learn that Brandon's parents have given him a chance to return to school. In the meantime, he had been working despite his undocumented status. Why do you think he wants to go back to school?

How has Itrat's experience at school changed the way she sees herself?

# POST VIEWING

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How did the students at International High make the school theirs? What impact do you think the students' embracing of the school has on the way they see themselves as newcomers to the United States? How do you think their attitude impacts their chances of success in this country?

One way in which schools build a community is through common school events, such as café night, the prom, and graduation. What rituals did you notice in the film? How does the prom build a positive school culture? What are some of the challenges to building a community through a prom? What about events like café night? How do such events help create a positive culture?

Consider revisiting the themes introduced in the Previewing section. How has the film impacted the way you think about the impact of integration on newcomers, the purpose of school, and the conditions under which differences are either accepted or seen as a threat?

What could your school learn from the teachers and students at International High School at Lafayette? What could the teachers and students at International High School at Lafayette learn from your school?

## Extensions

Based on a five-year study on immigration and its impact on social cohesion, Professor of Sociology Robert Putnam suggests that,

The challenge for a successful immigrant society is to, over time, over a decade or two, make people become more comfortable with diversity by creating a new sense of identity that cuts across these lines, a sense of shared identity—as Red Sox baseball fans, or as people who play soccer together, or as people who go to mass together—people who share something in common that overrides and that for a while trumps this sense of their ethnic diversity.

What do you think Putnam means? How do you create a shared identity? Why do you think he believes that there is a need to share something that may trump this “sense of their ethnic diversity”?

*Everyone Has a Story* tells the experiences of Arn Chorn Pond, a Cambodian immigrant to the United States. As a young man, he survived the Cambodian genocide and was later adopted by an American father. Not only was Arn among the first Cambodian refugees to come to the United States, but he and his brothers were the only nonwhite children at White Mountain Regional High School. What responsibilities do teachers, students, and the community have to newcomers like Arn? How might Arn's experience be different at a traditional public school compared with a school like International High School at Lafayette, whose mission focuses on teaching and supporting newcomers to the United States?

Encourage your students to share their own stories about immigration. Some students will share their own personal stories of immigration, while others may choose to either discuss their family history or reflect on how immigration has impacted their community.

Drawing inspiration from the stories in the film, the *I Learn America* project also teams up with schools and organizations to harness the immigrant experiences in their communities. Through screenings and workshops, the *I Learn America* project taps into the powerful stories of migrating youth and provides a safe platform to craft unique and personal narratives that can be shared with the world. Go to [www.ilearnamerica.com](http://www.ilearnamerica.com) to share your stories, host a screening, organize a workshop and turn your school into a welcoming community through engaging “homegrown” community conversations.

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