



MPS Quick Reference Guide to Burma and Burmese Culture for Educators and Staff

Where Is Burma (also known as Myanmar)?

Burma is a Southeast Asian nation bordering India, Bangladesh, China, Laos, and Thailand. It is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia. The distance from Burma to Wisconsin is about 8,000 miles (12,800 km). A direct flight from Milwaukee to Burma's capital, Rangoon (Yangon), may take about 17 hours.



Burma or Myanmar?

The military authorities in Burma have promoted the name Myanmar as a conventional name for their state; the U.S. government has not officially adopted the name. Henceforth, in this document, we will refer to the country as Burma.



Geography

Burma is similar in size to Texas. Burma is the northernmost country of Southeast Asia; it is shaped like a kite with a long tail that runs south along the Malay Peninsula. Burma slopes from north to south with the highest elevation, Mount Hkakabo (19,296 feet), to the sea level of the Irrawaddy and Sittang river deltas.

Capital and Large Cities: Rangoon (Yangon) – capital, Nay Pyi Taw – administrative capital, Mandalay – large city

Population: 54,701,435 (estimated 2023). For comparison, the United States has a population of 331.5 million.

Climate

The climate is generally tropical, with a rainy season from mid-May to October, a cool and dry season from November to mid-February, and a hot pre-monsoon season from mid-February to mid-May.

Burmese Culture

People and Languages: The Burmese government officially recognizes 135 indigenous ethnicities grouped into eight national races. The largest ethnic group is the Burman (or Bamar), followed by the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan. The official language is Burmese. Other ethnic groups use their own languages. Due to displacement and resettlement routes, some Karen students who lived in Thailand may speak Thai while some Burmese and Rohingya students who lived in Malaysia may speak Malay.

Religion: Major religions: Buddhist 87.9%, Christian 6.2%, Muslim 4.3%, and other 1.6%.

Cuisine: Rice is a staple food in Burma. A typical meal includes steamed rice with fish, chicken, pork, or vegetables. Many families enjoy a fish soup called mohinga for breakfast.



Mohinga

Students who practice the religion of Islam do not consume pork or any pork products such as gelatin. Families usually select vegetarian options from the school cafeteria menu.

Education: Children enter primary school at the age of six. Primary school is made up of grades 1–5. Primary school education is compulsory for all children in Burma. Middle school is composed of grades 6–9, while grades 10–12 are considered secondary school.



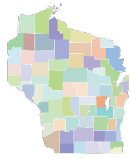
Clothing: Clothing in Burma varies depending on the ethnicity, religion, geography, climate, and cultural traditions. The most widely recognized national clothing item is the longyi, which is worn by all. Female Muslim students from Burma may wear a hijab.



Why Are Refugees from Burma Coming to the U.S.?

In 1824, the British colonized Burma and incorporated it as a province of India. Burma gained independence in 1948. Throughout its history, Burma has gone through successive governments, with the Burmese military overthrowing the elected governments. As far back as the 1950s, many ethnic minorities in Burma have suffered systematic violence, persecution, and human rights violations. Burma has also been vulnerable to a wide range of natural disasters. These factors forced Karen, Karenni, Chin, Burman, Rohingya, and other ethnic minority groups to flee the country. Today the United Nations describes the displacement of the Rohingya as a refugee crisis and calls this ethnic group “the most persecuted minority in the world.” So far, the refugees have been fleeing mainly to Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia.

How Are Burmese People Coming to Wisconsin?



After they gain refugee status from the United Nations or the U.S. government, various ethnic groups from Burma are resettled across various states including Wisconsin. A refugee is defined as an individual who has experienced persecution or has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Resettlement agencies are organizations that help locate housing and jobs and provide other services.

How Should Educators Prepare?

- MPS educators should use their training and skills in welcoming newcomers.
- Approach students with a lens of empathy and trauma-informed care.
- Create a core group of support involving school psychologists, social workers, nurses, and counselors.
- Be attentive to students’ clothing needs for Wisconsin weather.
- Learn how to say a few phrases in your students’ language.
- Be aware that students are in a major transition. Issues such as housing, clothing, medical resources, or immigration requirements may cause students to be absent from school from time to time.
- Be mindful of religious practices such as food restrictions and prayer requirements. Ask your students or a family member if you have questions.
- Many newcomers are students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE).
- Use **LanguageLine** (www.mpsmke.com/language) to access an interpreter over the phone.
- Google Translate may be helpful but only in limited circumstances. Be aware that Rohingya is not a written language. Some students may be multilingual (Burmese/Rohingya/Malay/Karen/Chin, etc.).
- Contact the MPS Department of Communications and Marketing to request translation (for written materials) or interpretation (oral) at www.mpsmke.com/translation or www.mpsmke.com/interpreter.
- For resources to combat bullying/harassment, visit www.stopbullying.gov/.

Important Practices and Customs to Observe

Burma is a multiethnic and multilingual country. Some ethnicities represented by MPS students include Burmese, Chin, Karen, and Rohingya. It is important for educators to learn their students’ specific ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. For example, you may see your students using thanakha. It is a paste made from ground bark. It is a distinctive feature of the culture of Burma, seen commonly applied to the face and sometimes the arms of women and girls, and it is used to a lesser extent also by men and boys.



Language Considerations

- Become familiar with your students’ English proficiency levels. Use the Infinite Campus pathway for English language proficiency (ELP) verification: **Index > Student Information > English Learner > EL tabs**. For further information about the significance of ELP levels in learning English, contact your school’s ESL teacher.



Who Can Educators Contact within MPS?

For assistance, contact your school social worker, school nurse, school psychologist, or school counselor depending upon needs.

Instructional Coach/Family Engagement (ELs)

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What Agencies Can Provide Information and Support?

General Information	Rohingya American Society	www.masjidmubarak.online
	Burmese Rohingya Community of Wisconsin	www.burma-care.com
Cultural Orientation	Catholic Charities	www.ccmke.org/RIS
	Wisconsin Department of Children & Families	www.dcf.wisconsin.gov/refugee
	UN Refugee Agency	www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained
Resettlement Information	International Institute of Wisconsin	www.iwisconsin.org
	Lutheran Social Services:	www.lsswis.org
	Hanan Refugees Relief Group:	www.hananrrg.org

Helpful Phrases

English	Language	Written	Pronunciation
Hello	Burmese	မင်္ဂလာပါ	<i>Min ga la ba</i>
	Karen	ဟဲလိန်	<i>Heh loh</i>
	Malay	Hello	<i>Helo</i>
Goodbye	Burmese	သွားတော့မယ်	<i>Swar-rto-tmaal</i>
	Karen	ဂီလအဂု	<i>Hgaw ler ah gay</i>
	Malay	Selamat tinggal	<i>Sel-a-mat ting-gal</i>
Thank you	Burmese	ကျေးဇူးတင်ပါသည်	<i>Je-zu-tin ba-deh</i>
	Karen	တင်ကျူး	<i>Ta-blu</i>
	Malay	Terima kasih	<i>Te-ri-ma ka-sih</i>
Are you well? (How are you?)	Burmese	ခင်္ဤးဝဲနေကာဌးလား	<i>K'amyā ne kaun la?</i>
	Karen	နအိန်ဆုန်ခါ.	<i>Na oh hsoo ahh?</i>
	Malay	Adakah anda baik	<i>A-da-kah an-da baik?</i>