



**MILWAUKEE  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

# MPS Quick Reference Guide to Democratic Republic of the Congo and DRC Culture for Educators and Staff

## Where Is the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), formerly known as Zaire, is not to be confused with the Republic of the Congo. It is in Central Africa and borders nine countries: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. The DRC is the second-largest country in Africa by area, after Algeria. The DRC is about 7,000 miles from Wisconsin. A direct flight from Milwaukee would take nearly 15 hours.



Goma, North Kivu, DR Congo

## Geography

The DRC is about one-third the size of the United States. The largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, the DRC has only a 25-mile coastline. Land types include a large river basin, a major valley, high plateaus, three mountain ranges, and a low coastal plain. The highest point is at 2,296 feet, and the lowest at 1,109 feet.

**Capital:** Kinshasa, population 16,316,000 (2023 est.)

**Total Population:** 111,859,928 (2023 est.)

## Climate

The climate is largely tropical but varies. Generally, the country is hot and humid in the north and west. The southern, central, and eastern areas are generally cooler and drier. The average annual temperature is about 77 °F.

## DRC Culture

**People and Languages:** More than 200 African ethnic groups, of which the majority are Bantu, live on DRC territory. The four largest groups — Mongo, Luba, Kongo (all Bantu), and the Mangbetu-Azande (Hamitic) — make up about 45% of the population.

An estimated 242 languages are spoken in the DRC. Four languages, three of them Bantu-based, have the status of national language: Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili, and Tshiluba. The official language is French, and 51% of the population can read or write in French and 74% report using French as a lingua franca.

**Religion:** Roman Catholic, Protestant, and other Christian faiths are dominant in the DRC, comprising about 93% of the population.

**Cuisine:** Some foods, such as rice, cassava, and maize, are common across the country, but most food choices vary by location. When there is no conflict, people generally eat fresh, unprocessed food. Goat, beef, chicken, and fish are common proteins. The national dish, Poulet à la Moambé, is a rich chicken stew made with palm oil, peanut butter, garlic, tomato, and spices. Fufu, a sticky dough-like dish made of cassava flour, is another staple in the DRC.



POULET À LA MOAMBÉ

**Education:** The DRC educational system consists of six years of primary education and six years of secondary education. The educational system has suffered from decades of conflict and civil war, only recently improving. Despite government initiatives, free, high-quality education is inaccessible for many. Classroom student-to-teacher ratios may range from 30 to 100 students per teacher. All children displaced by conflict are Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE). International organizations such as USAID, the UN, and UNICEF provide support for the education system.

**Clothing:** Traditional Congolese clothing is sewn from raffia, fabric made from fibers in palm leaves. Congolese women wear liputa, vibrantly colored dresses, for formal and festive occasions. Women historically never wore pants. Hats and headwraps are usually worn as sun protection and a fashion statement. Men wear dashiki-style shirts on special occasions. Wearing nice, boldly colored clothing is important in Congolese culture.

## Why Are Refugees from the DRC Coming to the U.S.?

The DRC's independence from Belgium in 1960 resulted in a series of civil wars and a long humanitarian crisis. Ongoing fighting and violence have caused more than a half-million people to become refugees and flee to neighboring countries. About 6 million people became internally displaced persons, forced from their homes but remaining in the country. The DRC also has become home to more than a half-million refugees and asylum seekers from neighboring countries, such as Rwanda and South Sudan. Many refugees from the DRC migrate to the United States through the refugee pathway and become eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship. The majority of DRC refugees coming to the U.S. are from the east of the DRC, and most speak Swahili and Kibembe.



## How Are Congolese Coming to Wisconsin?

After they gain refugee status from the United Nations or the U.S. government, Congolese people are resettled in states including Wisconsin. A refugee is defined as an individual who has been persecuted or has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Resettlement agencies, such as Lutheran Social Services, Hanan Refugees Relief Group, and the International Institute of Wisconsin, help refugee families locate housing and jobs and provide other services. In addition, Catholic Charities helps Congolese refugees with placement, employment, housing, MPS registration, social services, and immigration and citizenship services. The MPS Lau Compliance office will help families find appropriate schools near their homes.

## 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.
- ▶ Newcomer students have a variety of academic and language backgrounds, ranging from Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) to students who have strong academic skills in their home language.
- ▶ Use LanguageLine ([mpsmke.com/languageLine](https://mpsmke.com/languageLine)) via mConnect to access an interpreter over the phone.
- ▶ Use these links to request translation (for written materials) or interpretation (oral) via mConnect at [mpsmke.com/translation](https://mpsmke.com/translation) or [mpsmke.com/interpreter](https://mpsmke.com/interpreter).
- ▶ For resources to combat bullying or harassment, visit [stopbullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov) or [www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/aanhpi-massa-factsheet-201606.pdf](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/aanhpi-massa-factsheet-201606.pdf).



## 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 > Assessment**. For further information about the significance of ELP levels in learning English, contact your school's ESL teacher.



## Whom Can Educators Contact within MPS?

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

**Instructional Coach/Family Engagement (ELs)**  
**Kourosh Hassani, EdD**  
[hassanka@milwaukee.k12.wi.us](mailto:hassanka@milwaukee.k12.wi.us)

## Which Agencies Can Provide Information and Support?

<b>Cultural Orientation</b>	<p><b>Catholic Charities:</b> <a href="http://ccmke.org/RIS">ccmke.org/RIS</a>            Case manager Edumakono Zetho speaks English, Swahili, French, Kibembe, and Lingala. <a href="http://risccmke.org/en/edumakono-zetho-professional-bio/">risccmke.org/en/edumakono-zetho-professional-bio/</a> Phone: (414) 771-288 Ext. 4139. Email: <a href="mailto:ezethho@ccmke.org">ezethho@ccmke.org</a>.</p> <p><b>Wisconsin Department of Children and Families:</b> <a href="http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/refugee">dcf.wisconsin.gov/refugee</a></p> <p><b>UN Refugee Agency:</b> <a href="http://unrefugees.org/news/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-refugee-crisis-explained/">unrefugees.org/news/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-refugee-crisis-explained/</a></p>
<b>Resettlement Information</b>	<p><b>International Institute of Wisconsin:</b> <a href="http://iwwisconsin.org/">iwwisconsin.org/</a></p> <p><b>Lutheran Social Services:</b> <a href="http://lsswis.org/">lsswis.org/</a></p> <p><b>Hanan Refugees Relief Group:</b> <a href="http://hananrrg.org/">hananrrg.org/</a></p>

*This list is for information only.*

## Helpful Phrases

English	Written in Lingala	Pronunciation
Hello	mbote	m-BOH-teh
How are you?	Ndenge nini?	N-denge-nini
Goodbye	Tokomonana	To-ko-monana
Thank you	Botondi / Natondi	Bo-tonzi / Na-Tonzi

## Classroom Resources & Recommended Readings

University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (UWM ) Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS)

### International Children’s and Young Adult Literature Collection

Initiated in 2021, the collection highlights experiences from outside of the United States, both in original languages and in translation. Learn more about the ICYAL here: <https://wisconsin-uwm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/collectionDiscovery?vid=01UWI ML:MIL&collectionId=81321514550002124&sortItemsBy=title>