



**MILWAUKEE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

MPS Quick Reference Guide to Colombia and Colombian Culture for Educators and Staff

Where is Colombia?

Colombia is a country in the northern part of South America, bordered by Venezuela and Brazil to the east, Peru and Ecuador to the south, Panama to the northwest, and the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean to the north and west. Colombia is known for its beaches, mountains, rainforests, and plains. Colombia is about the size of California and Texas combined. A direct flight from Milwaukee to Colombia's capital, Bogotá, may take about 5½ hours.



Piedra del Peñol in Guatapé, Colombia

Geography

Colombia's geography features mountains, rainforests, plains, and coastlines. The Andes Mountains run through the western part of the country, dividing into three ranges and varying climates. In the east are vast lowland plains known as the Llanos, and the Amazon Rainforest covers the southern region. Colombia is unique for having coastlines on both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, providing rich marine biodiversity.

Capital: Bogotá, located in the Andes mountains

Population: 52.88 million (according to World Bank 2024). For comparison, the United States has a population of 334.9 million.

Climate

Colombia has a tropical climate that varies greatly by region due to altitude. Coastal areas and lowlands are hot and humid, while higher elevations have cooler temperatures year round. The country has rainy and dry seasons rather than four distinct seasons, with the Amazon and Pacific regions experiencing heavy rainfall much of the year.

Government

Colombia is a democratic republic with a president who serves as both head of state and government. The government is divided into three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. Citizens vote in regular elections, and the country has a constitution that protects civil rights and ensures the rule of law. The Colombian currency is the peso.

Culture

People and Languages: Colombia is home to a diverse population with a mix of Indigenous, European, and African heritage. The official language is Spanish with about 99% native speakers. More than 60 Indigenous languages such as Amerindian, Creole, and Portuguese are also spoken.



Religion: The dominant religion is Roman Catholic. Freedom of religion is protected by the constitution, and other faiths such as Protestant, Evangelical Christian, Islam, and Indigenous beliefs are also practiced.

Cuisine: Colombian cuisine varies by region but often includes rice, beans, plantains, corn, and meat. Popular dishes include arepas (corn cakes), bandeja paisa (a hearty meat and bean platter), sancocho (a traditional soup), and empanadas (cornmeal dough with various stuffings).



Education: Education in Colombia is free and mandated by the constitution for children ages 5 to 15. The system includes preschool, primary, secondary, and higher education, with a growing number of students attending universities and technical institutes.

Clothing: Traditional Colombian clothing reflects the country's cultural diversity and is often worn during festivals. Colombians typically dress in modern styles, though regional influences remain important in rural areas. Pollera colora (brightly colored skirt) and sombrero vueltiao (woven hat) are iconic clothes for special celebrations.



Why Are Colombians Coming to the U.S.?

Colombians come to the U.S. for better economic stability, safer environments, strong education or professional opportunities, and to join family. Political uncertainty and violence continue to push people northward. Colombian migrants are often well educated; around 38% of adult Colombians in the U.S. hold at least a bachelor's degree.



How can educators support students?

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 care, or immigration requirements may cause students to be absent from school from time to time.
- ▶ Newcomer students come with 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) to access an interpreter over the phone.
- ▶ Google Translate may be helpful but only in limited circumstances. Google has an app available for download.
- ▶ Use the following links to request translation (for written materials) or interpretation (oral) at mpsmke.com/translation or mpsmke.com/interpreter.
- ▶ For resources to combat bullying/harassment, visit stopbullying.gov.
- ▶ Families from Colombia have the option to enroll their students in Bilingual Dual Language programs. MPS also offers ESL services in a number of schools.

Language Considerations

Become familiar with your students' English proficiency levels. Use the Infinite Campus pathway for English language proficiency (ELP) verification: **Main Menu > Student Information > English Learners (ELs)**. For information about the significance of ELP levels in learning English, contact your school's ESL teacher.



Whom Can Educators Contact Within MPS?

Instructional Coach/Family Engagement (ELs)
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What Agencies Can Provide Information and Support?

Community Organizations	<p>Voces de la Frontera: https://vdlf.org</p> <p>Centro Hispano Milwaukee: micentro.org</p> <p>Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Wisconsin: hccw.org</p> <p>United Community Center: unitedcc.org</p> <p>Latino Entrepreneurial Network of Southeastern Wisconsin, Inc.: latinoentrepreneurialnetwork.org</p> <p>League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) of Wisconsin: lulac.org</p>
Cultural Orientation	<p>Catholic Charities: https://www.ccmke.org/RIS</p> <p>Wisconsin Department of Children and Families: https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/refugee</p>
Resettlement Information	<p>International Institute of Wisconsin: https://iivisconsin.org/</p> <p>Lutheran Social Services: https://www.lsswis.org/</p>

This list is for information only.

Helpful Phrases

English	Written in Spanish	Pronunciation
Hello	Hola	OH-la
How are you?	¿Cómo estás?	ko-mo ess-TAHS
Goodbye	Adiós	ah-dee-OHS
Thank you	Gracias	grah-see-AHS

Classroom Resources & Recommended Readings

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM): [Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies \(CLACS\)](https://uwm.edu/clacs/) found at <https://uwm.edu/clacs/>

Américas Award Collection: The Américas Award commends U.S.-published children’s and young adult books that portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinx in the United States, and provides teachers with recommendations for classroom use. Learn more about the Américas Award at <https://claspprograms.org/americas-award/>.

Pura Belpré Collection: Outstanding books for children and youth that celebrate the Latino cultural experience and are written or illustrated by book creators of Latinx heritage. Learn more about the Pura Belpré Award at <https://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpre>.