

# National African Immigrant Heritage

A framework for history, belonging  
and academic connection



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## History

National African Immigrant Heritage Month is observed every September to recognize and celebrate the vast cultural, economic, and civic contributions of Americans who have migrated from the African continent. The roots of this national observance began in 2015 when the U.S. House of Representatives first introduced and passed a resolution (H.Res. 371) to formally dedicate September to this community. Congressional leaders and advocacy groups, such as African Communities Together (ACT), championed this initiative to capture the modern realities of the African diaspora.

A central driving force behind the creation of the month was the recognition that the demographic needs, linguistic variance, and historical paths of modern African immigrants are distinct from Black/African Americans whose ancestors were involuntarily brought to the U.S. through the transatlantic slave trade. By highlighting these differences, lawmakers aimed to combat resource disparities and ensure equitable representation for newly arriving families in areas like healthcare, public policy, and education. Today, the month is marked by state and local proclamations across the country, celebrating the diverse waves of migration that bring hundreds of thousands of voluntary immigrants and refugees to the United States annually.

### Key Concepts & Demographics

- The African **Diaspora**: A broad term referring to the global collection of communities descended from native Africans. Modern African immigrant heritage is a crucial component of this diaspora, connecting recent arrivals with established generations.
- A Non-Homogeneous Population: African immigrants represent a highly diverse group spanning more than 50 sovereign nations, four dozen distinct ethnicities, and over 500 linguistic dialects. There is no single “African immigrant experience.”
- Key Visual Symbols: Because the month celebrates an entire continent of nations rather than one specific culture, celebrations are visually characterized by a vibrant tapestry of traditional textiles. These include West African Kente cloth (woven silk and cotton geometric designs symbolizing status and spiritual values) and East African Kanga or Kitenge fabrics (printed cotton fabrics that frequently incorporate written proverbs, expressions, and regional histories).

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## Barriers To Belonging

### Invisible Barriers

- **Linguistic Isolation via Monolithic Grouping:** School administrative systems often assume that if a family arrives from an African country, their primary language is either English, French, or Arabic. This overlooks thousands of indigenous or regional languages (such as Yoruba, Amharic, Wolof, Tigrinya, or Somali), leaving families without proper interpretation or translated school resources.
- **Intra-Racial Erasure:** African immigrant students frequently navigate an invisible boundary between their specific home cultures and the broader American racial narrative. In classrooms, their unique cultural traditions, histories, and systemic needs as first- or second-generation immigrants can be inadvertently erased when they are generalized into a singular "Black" student identity.
- **Complex Religious and Dietary Demands:** The African immigrant community includes vast religious diversity, including Christian, Muslim, and traditional African faiths. School systems often fail to accommodate varying dietary restrictions (like Halal options) or seasonal religious practices (like fasting during Ramadan), isolating these students during school hours.

### Common Misconceptions

- ***"Africa is a single, uniform culture"*:** This is the most prevalent misconception in K-12 spaces. Referring to "African food," "African music," or "African traditions" as a monolith erases the vast national and cultural boundaries that span the continent.
- ***"All African immigrants arrive as refugees"*:** While thousands of African families have sought vital refuge in the U.S. from political crises or conflicts, statistics show that African immigrants also represent some of the highest percentages of highly educated, skilled professional voluntary migrants entering the U.S. workforce.
- ***"Linguistic competence equals academic capability"*:** Bilingual or multilingual African students who speak English with a pronounced accent, or who are still building Academic English, are sometimes miscategorized as lacking cognitive depth, ignoring the reality that many already speak multiple regional languages fluently.

### Common Microaggressions

- **"Your English is so good, where did you learn it?":** This assumes that the African continent lacks high-level educational institutions, structured European-language governance histories, or modern globalization.
- **"Do you live in a hut / see wild animals?":** Relying on outdated, colonial media depictions reduces modern African cities, technology hubs, and diverse topographies to inaccurate, primitive stereotypes.
- **Mispronouncing names or altering them for convenience:** Shortening or anglicizing complex African names without a student's explicit permission strips away family legacy, cultural lineage, and personal autonomy.

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## How to Connect with Families and Communities

### Building Authentic Partnerships with Families

#### Start with Cultural Humility

- Recognize that Africa is made up of 54 countries, hundreds of ethnic groups, and thousands of languages and traditions.
- Avoid treating African immigrant families as one cultural group.
- Ask families how they prefer to communicate, celebrate, and engage with the school community

#### Primary (K–5)

##### Focus Areas

##### Cultural Variety, Geography, & Shared Storytelling

##### Family Connection Strategies

- Invite families to share stories, songs, proverbs, or traditions from their home countries during literacy or cultural learning activities.
- Create “Family Heritage Maps” where students and caregivers can identify countries, languages, and important cultural traditions.
- Host multicultural read-aloud nights featuring African children’s literature and storytelling traditions.
- Encourage students to interview family members about childhood experiences, celebrations, foods, or favorite folktales.

#### Recommended Resources

- *Sulwe* by Lupita Nyong’o
- *The Water Princess* by Georgie Badiel
- Picture books that show both modern African cities and traditional communities

#### Classroom & School Inclusion Tips

- Display visuals of contemporary African life, including universities, businesses, families, architecture, and technology.
- Avoid only showing images connected to poverty, illness, or wildlife stereotypes.
- Learn and correctly pronounce family and student names.
- Provide translated communication whenever possible and ask families which language they prefer.

## **Family Event Ideas**

- International Family Storytelling Night
- African Heritage Literacy Celebration
- Family Map & Culture Showcase
- Community Potluck Featuring Regional Foods

## **Secondary (6–12)**

### **Focus Areas**

### **Geopolitical Literacy, Diaspora Advocacy, & Post-Colonial History**

### **Family Connection Strategies**

- Invite parents, caregivers, or community leaders to share immigration stories, professional experiences, or cultural traditions.
- Partner with African immigrant organizations and faith communities to support student leadership and mentoring opportunities.
- Create opportunities for students to explore identity, migration, and belonging through writing, oral history, or digital storytelling projects.
- Encourage family participation in college and career conversations, especially for multilingual learners and first-generation students.

## **Recommended Resources**

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk: The Danger of a Single Story
- African Studies Association historical resources
- African Communities Together (ACT) policy and advocacy resources
- African Communities Together (ACT): [africans.us](https://africans.us)
- The Center for African Immigrants (CAI): [tcaius.org](https://tcaius.org)

## **Classroom & School Inclusion Tips**

- Ensure interpretation and translation services reflect specific regional languages rather than assuming English, French, or Arabic proficiency.
- Avoid making assumptions about immigration status, educational background, or economic circumstances.
- Honor multilingualism as an academic asset.
- Include African diaspora perspectives in history, literature, civics, and social studies instruction year-round.

## **Family Event Ideas**

- African Diaspora Heritage Panel
- Student Oral History Showcase
- Multilingual Family College & Career Night
- Community Cultural Celebration Night

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## Best Practices for Schools

### Communication

- Use multiple forms of communication: phone calls, translated documents, text messaging apps, and in-person relationship building.
- Partner with trusted community leaders or cultural liaisons when engaging families.

### Representation Matters

- Ensure curriculum reflects modern African innovation, leadership, literature, science, and art.
- Celebrate African cultures beyond holidays or heritage months.

### Relationship Building

- Take time to build trust before expecting family participation.
- Understand that some families may come from educational systems where questioning teachers or school leadership is discouraged.

### Equity & Belonging

- Create welcoming environments where students and families feel seen, respected, and valued.
- Address stereotypes, accent bias, and microaggressions immediately and consistently.

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## Education Connections

### Alignment with FCPS Portrait of a Graduate

- **Critical Thinker:** Investigating the colonial borders drawn at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 empowers students to analyze how artificial political boundaries created historical conflicts, and how those actions ripple forward into modern global migration patterns.
- **Effective Communicator:** Exploring the oral histories, proverbs, and complex linguistic landscapes of various African cultures teaches students how nuanced storytelling can preserve heritage and pass down legal and ethical values without written text.
- **Empowered Learner:** Encouraging first- and second-generation African immigrant students to connect their lived cultural practices—such as the complex polyrhythms in music or the botanical science of indigenous agriculture—validates their home knowledge as an academic asset.
- **Creative Problem Solver:** Studying modern humanitarian, civic, or health initiatives led by African immigrant figures—such as the philanthropic foundations of figures like Dikembe Mutombo—models how diaspora communities create sustainable, global solutions.
- **Collaborative Team Member:** Creating structured learning environments where students from varied global backgrounds co-design projects builds deep cross-cultural competency, dismantling regional biases and building global team skills.

### KY Standards Alignment

#### Universal Social Studies Inquiry Standards

- **Using Evidence:** Gathering relevant evidence from credible sources; in Grades 6-12, determining accuracy, context, bias, and intended use.
- **Communicating Conclusions:** Constructing explanations and/or arguments using reasoning and information; in Grades 6-12, using claims and evidence from multiple sources while acknowledging counterclaims, strengths, and limitations of the arguments.
- **2.H.CH.1:** Identify and compare the diverse North American cultural groups of the past and today.
- **3.G.HI.1:** Explain how the cultural aspects of a region spread beyond its borders.
- **5.C.CV.1; 8.C.CV.1:** Describe the democratic principles of equality before the law, inalienable rights, and consent of the governed...
- **HS.C.CP.3:** Evaluate the civil responsibilities of individuals within a society
- **HS.C.CV.3:** Analyze the impact of the efforts of individuals and reform movements on the expansion of civil rights and liberties locally, nationally and internationally.
- **HS.C.PR.2:** Explain how active citizens can affect the lawmaking process locally, nationally and internationally.