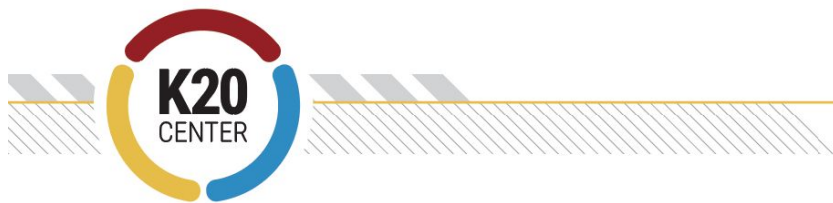


Scenario 1: “Sammy,” mother to Joseph Grey

Joseph is late to his homeroom class again. It’s his third tardy for the nine weeks and at Oakmont Middle School, a large inner-city school with over 1,500 students, that means his mom, Sammy, will be getting a phone call. Joseph knows it won’t be a “robo-call” this time. It will be from a human being in the office, probably his counselor. Joseph can hear his mom now, telling him that she is too busy trying to pay the bills and keep food on the table to have to worry about whether he is getting himself to school on time. Joseph slumps down in his seat as his teacher begins the day’s math lesson, but his stomach rumbles and his mind wanders. It wasn’t Joseph’s fault that he was late; he didn’t have an alarm. Sammy took his phone away because she caught him texting on it when he was supposed to be doing homework the day before. She forgot to give it back to him before she fell asleep on the sofa, then left before dawn for work at one of her three part-time jobs. Joseph hadn’t wanted to wake her to ask for it back. So, when he woke up this morning, he’d missed the bus and had no time to eat breakfast. He ran 12 blocks with his backpack on but missed the bell by two minutes.

Joseph’s counselor will probably want to meet with Sammy. She will have a hard time making it to Oakmont during school hours. Her schedule changes weekly, and she rarely has time off during the week. When she does, she has to run errands, pay bills, plan meals, and if possible, get some rest. But she will find a way to make it to the school. As a single mom, one of her highest priorities is making sure Joseph stays on track in school. Sammy spends a lot of time trying to find resources for her and Joseph’s well-being. She needs assistance with the utilities and with food. They keep the heat turned down in the winter. Joseph is outgrowing his clothes every six months and eating like a horse. Many nights while she is waiting tables, she counts on him to make his own meals, do his homework, and get to bed at a decent hour. Most nights, he does. But some nights, he lies awake worrying about his mom, waiting to hear the door open and know she has made it home safe. He is usually tired the next day and has trouble concentrating at school. Joseph wants to participate in more activities at school, but he has to be selective about them. Some require extra expenses for equipment or for travel to offsite competitions that he knows they can’t afford. He is always conscious of their financial situation and tries to not create any additional burdens. Sometimes he skips breakfast intentionally. That makes waiting for the bus on cold days extra hard, especially in last year’s coat that he has outgrown.

Sammy is determined for her son to have the opportunity to succeed and she lets him know that. She is strict and makes sure he follows the rules at home and at school. But sometimes things happen that are out of her control, like when her hours were cut last spring and she had to make a change their phone plan to one that was cheaper. Joseph sometimes needs to access the Internet for school, but he has to be careful about how much data he uses. He doesn’t want his mom to get charged extra. Joseph grades are good. He knows they could be better if he weren’t distracted by worrying about his mom or so tired all the time. He is hoping to take some higher-level classes to get into college prep courses in high school. But he doesn’t know if that is a good idea. It will mean a lot more work for him and if he can’t keep up, his mom will be disappointed. Maybe he will talk to her about it, he thinks. But not today.



Scenario 2: “Vivianna,” mother to Marcia Rosas

Marcia hates going to school. She loves being there with her friends and enjoys learning; she just hates going. Mostly because she isn’t sure what she’ll find when she comes home, or if she will have a home to return to. A couple of months ago she came home from school to find that her room had been packed in boxes. Her whole life was piled in the back of her dad’s pickup truck. Her mom, Vivianna, told Marcia and her three siblings they were moving that day. They didn’t have a lease and had no choice.

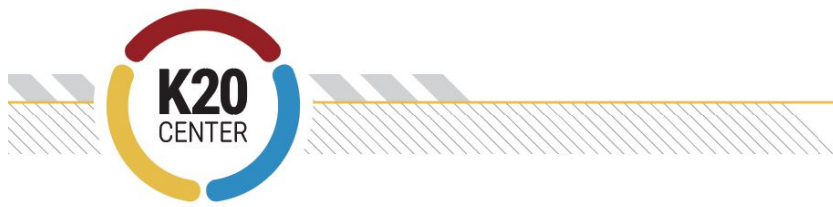
Marcia’s parents are undocumented immigrants. They have been in the United States since Marcia was six. Her family has moved three times this year, and Marcia changed schools once when they relocated across town to be closer to her dad’s jobs. Her dad works in landscaping and most of his jobs, when he can find them, are nearer to the suburbs. They found a two-bedroom apartment outside the city, but it meant starting over. With three siblings, it is crowded in their small apartment, but Marcia feels safe when she is at home with her family.

Vivianna has similar feelings about school. Making sure her kids get a good education is important, but she is also wary of all the unknowns at school. What if something happened to Marcia? What if someone said something to hurt her? The news is full of threatening headlines and she knows some people don’t think her children have a right to be educated in public schools. She also worries about how moving and changing schools affects her kids’ grades and relationships. She is concerned that other kids, parents, or even teachers might not treat her children fairly when she isn’t there to watch out for them. But she also doesn’t want to call attention to herself or her husband. For this reason, she is soft-spoken and reluctant to get too involved with other parents and administrators. She is careful about when she chooses to interact and with whom.

Marcia has one older sister and two younger brothers. They all pitch in to help out with chores, though Vivianna insists that they do their homework first. She and her siblings look out for each other at home. But as a seventh-grader, Marcia is the only one in middle school. Her younger brothers are in elementary and her older sister is at high school. So, at school she feels alone. She is cautious about opening up too much to teachers or even friends, much like her mom, who has taught her in subtle ways that she can’t be too trusting of others.

Marcia is happy, makes friends easily, and does well academically. Vivianna tries to assist Marcia with homework but English is not her first language, so isn’t always able to help with grammar and writing projects. Mostly, she wants Marcia to be successful and have a great life. She knows education is the key to a bright future, but she worries about Marcia when she is at school.

Marcia worries too. She dreads leaving her home, her parents, and her siblings every day. Once she is there, she usually has fun. She hopes that when she comes home, everything is just the same as when she left.



Scenario 3: “Kaine,” father to Curtis Copper

Most other kids think Curtis is pretty lucky. He lives in a nice house and got the latest iPhone for his fourteenth birthday. The problem is, Curtis doesn’t have anyone to message on it. He has always had trouble making friends. Curtis is shy, but many of the other kids at school perceive him as being aloof. Or they think he wouldn’t want to hang out with them because they aren’t in his economic class. Lots of kids in middle school feels awkward. But Curtis suffers from social anxiety and it affects his ability to meet other people and join groups.

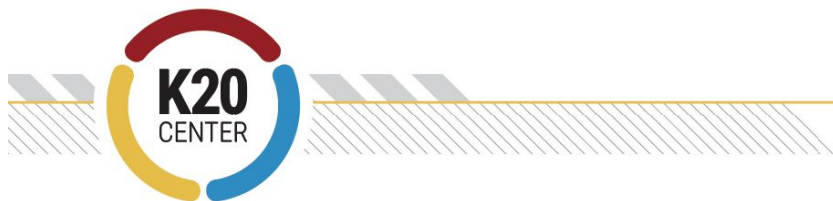
Part of the problem is Curtis’ dad, Kaine. Everyone knows Kaine is a successful realtor. His signs and picture are all over town. Kaine’s job often requires him to work nights and weekends, when customers are available to tour the homes he is selling. He commits to school events but often has to “take a pass” or “bow out” when something comes up with work. Curtis is accustomed to living in his dad’s long shadow. It has made him reluctant to call attention to himself, to reach out to others for help or friendship. Curtis fears disappointment.

Kaine is a social butterfly, making sure he doesn’t miss any events around town where he can court potential clients. Oftentimes he gets news about Curtis’ school events from other parents. For example, Kaine found out on Tuesday that the school is hosting a career fair on Friday evening. But he can’t make it because he has an open house scheduled. Curtis thought about going by himself but has decided not to. He is too embarrassed to tell people his dad can’t make it.

Curtis’ grandparents are nearby, and they want to fill in when Kaine isn’t available. But this only makes Curtis feel more awkward. Curtis’ dad and grandparents sometimes goad him into being more outgoing, but this doesn’t help either. Curtis wants to join an extracurricular coding club that meets after school and on weekends, but he recently found out that parents are required to volunteer to help out once a month. He doesn’t want to make others in the group upset if one of his dad’s “unexpected” absences negatively affects their meeting.

Curtis is a good student; he’ll go to college for sure. But he worries about his ability to make friends there also. He finds group work at school difficult, especially when paired with others who have more outgoing or overbearing personalities. Curtis is reluctant to ask his teachers for help and doesn’t speak up when he has trouble understanding a concept. He hopes that he can find a group that he feels comfortable with and wishes someone at school understood him. But he doesn’t know where to look. He tends to coast academically instead of pushing himself to achieve more.

Curtis knows that in many respects, he is privileged. He doesn’t want to complain about his circumstances when he has so many positives in his life. So, he becomes even more introverted and more reluctant to open up to others. He doesn’t want to complain, but he sure doesn’t feel “lucky.”



Scenario 4: “Westie,” father to London Greene

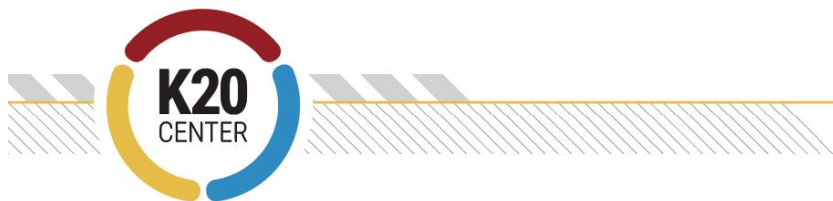
London’s life is hectic. As a middle child with two older siblings and two younger ones, her family is always busy, attending sporting events, musical recitals, and academic honors. It seems like there is something going on every night during the school year. All of her siblings are very competitive and high-achievers. London can hold her own academically and is a member of the cross-country team, but she isn’t a standout. Much of the time, the eight-grader feels lost in the shuffle and forgotten.

London’s dad, Westie, considers himself a very good parent. He encourages his kids to pursue their dreams and never says no when they ask to try something new, which is often. He tries to be equitable when it comes to the five kids. He never misses any of their extracurricular events. He promised to always be there for them, and he is. But he also has a busy work schedule and is often on his phone checking emails and texts or stepping into the hallway or away from the crowd to answer an important call. He is self-conscious about his workload and wants to make sure all of the parents and teachers know he’s present.

London appreciates her dad’s efforts, but she feels pressure to achieve on the same level as her siblings in order to get more of her dad’s attention. Her older brother’s team won the state championship in soccer last year and her little sister made it to the final three in the district spelling bee. Their house was filled with medals and trophies, a shrine to the kids’ accomplishments. Some were London’s, for sure, but she never felt like there were enough. Westie only wants the best for his kids. He was a standout athlete and scholar, but an only child. He always wished he had brothers and sisters. He also missed his days on the playing field. He was proud he had given his children the chance to have siblings that they could compete with and loved reliving his own accomplishments through them.

London ran for student council president this year but didn’t win. She couldn’t stop thinking about what she should have done differently that might have changed the outcome. Maybe she should have run for treasurer or a lesser role instead, but that wasn’t how her family did things. Her older siblings were always the most popular and successful in school. Every teacher London had remembered them and made compared her to them.

This year, London wanted to try out for the school play. She knew her dad would tell her to go for it. He always did. Her older sister had the lead in “Oklahoma” last year, and she was worried that if she didn’t get a big role it would just be a waste of time. She’d hate to look out in the crowd from the chorus and find Westie staring down at his phone. Lately, she just didn’t see the point in trying. She just wasn’t as good as her brothers and sisters. She felt like she never would be.



Scenario 5: “Raffaello,” grandfather to Jamaal Bleux

Jamaal’s hero is his grandfather, Raffaello. The patriarch was the first in their family to graduate from college and eventually got a doctorate degree and became a minister. He has spent his entire life serving the people where Jamaal grew up. Raffaello has been a city councilman, serves on numerous non-profit boards, and counsels the people in their tightly-woven community during times of need. Jamaal is his only grandchild and he takes a special interest in him, making sure that all of his needs are met and that he has the support he needs to succeed. Likewise, because Raffaello is so well respected, the entire community has always looked after Jamaal.

Jamaal, now in ninth grade, follows in his grandfather’s footsteps by volunteering frequently, participating in both school and civic events, and trying to uphold his grandfather’s legacy. He does a good job of balancing academics, extracurricular activities, and civic activism. But he often wonders if he is doing enough. He plans to apply to several elite colleges in few years and worries that he might not have the right mix of activities to garner admission to a top school.

Raffaello is trying to steer Jamaal in the right direction during these crucial middle school years, but many of the people in the community also ask him for counsel and assistance. Many of them think of Raffaello as a father figure and he considers them family as well. He feels obligated to everyone as much as he can. But now he wonders as well, with his cherished grandson about to embark on high school, has he been done all he can to support Jamaal’s future?

Raffaello is concerned that Jamaal might not gain the social skills he needs to be successful in college. He might not be able to succeed without the vast support network he had always enjoyed in their community. Raffaello is concerned that he has spread himself too thin and wishes he had spent more time life-coaching Jamaal, instead of mentoring everyone else in the community.

Jamaal is concerned about leaving the nest as well. On the one hand, he wants to get away to college, enjoy the freedom, and find new experiences. However, he fears starting over and wonders if he will be able to assimilate into a new environment. Many of the best schools are halfway across the country. It will be a cultural shift for him, and he will probably only be able to come home a couple of times during the school year. He has considered going to a state school instead, just an hour’s drive away, but knows it wouldn’t be the best academic or career choice.

Raffaello always reminds Jamaal to “be the best he can be.” That’s what Jamaal wants too, not only for himself, but to honor his grandfather who has worked so hard to give him that opportunity. He would hate to disappoint him and fears it will also reflect poorly on Raffaello within their community if he didn’t go to a top college. Jamaal has some big shoes to fill and is under a lot of pressure. Raffaello wants to find a way before Jamaal graduates to let him know that reaching your full potential means achieving inner satisfaction and isn’t based on comparisons to other people, either peers or family. He hopes that Jamaal will realize this and trust his own ability to make good decisions.