



PRE K- 12 EDUCATION OF IMMIGRANTS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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The Demographic Imperatives

Growth. More than one in five students in schools in the United States is the child of an immigrant . One student in ten is an English language learner (ELL). By 2030, over a quarter of all students in schools will be the children of immigrants. The immigrant student population is plainly a vulnerable one — roughly half of the children of immigrants live in low-income families, a share that has risen sharply over the past 30 years.

Predominance among Young Children. Children of immigrants are more highly concentrated among young children (those age 5 and under) versus those ages 6 to 17. Children of immigrants under age 6 are substantially less likely than children of natives to be in center-based care (including preK) than children of natives. Use is lowest among children of immigrants who have little education and are limited English proficient (LEP). Almost all young children of immigrants (93 percent) are US citizens.

Rapid Pace of Change. The challenge of educating these ELL students is deepened by the rate of change. The ELL population almost doubled over the past decade while the overall student population remained unchanged. As with the immigrant population more generally, the children of immigrants and ELL students have dispersed widely. Over the past decade, the K-12 ELL population in the “new growth” states of Nebraska and North Carolina rose by 301 and 372 percent, respectively, while the overall student population remained flat. Many of the states to which immigrants have recently migrated, especially in the Southeast, have comparatively poor records of on-time graduation rates by national standards.

Legal Status. The great majority (75 percent) of the children of immigrants are US born citizens or legal immigrants. Nonetheless roughly 2 million children in the United States are themselves unauthorized and another 2.5 million children of immigrants have one or more parents who are unauthorized. The unauthorized make up a larger share of secondary than elementary school or preschool students. The best estimate to date has been that 65,000 unauthorized students graduate each year from US high schools.

Concentration. Beyond high numbers and rapid growth, several characteristics of the LEP student population also present tough challenges for educators. One is ELLs’



extreme concentration. Like minority students generally, ELL students increasingly appear to be concentrated in schools with other, mostly minority, students who are also ELL: 70 percent of ELL elementary school students go to 10 percent of schools in the United States. It should not be surprising that these high-ELL schools are often among those found “in need of improvement” and likely to be sanctioned under federal and state accountability regimes.

Persistent ELL status. Another cause for concern and imperative for change is the persistence of ELL status. Over three-quarters of ELL elementary school students and over one-half of LEP secondary school students are members of the second generation (US born with at least one foreign-born parent) and in some cases the third generation (US born with native-born parents). Thus, children born and presumably educated in schools in the United States are not learning the English language — pointing forcefully to the need for more effective instruction and underscoring the importance of sustaining accountability regimes.

Diversity of ELLs. The diversity of the ELL population presents additional challenges. The ELL population is composed not just of recent arrivals but also “long-term ELLs.” Fifty-two percent of foreign-born children in kindergarten through 5th grade and 43 percent of foreign-born children in grades 6 through 12 entered the United States within the last three years. At the same time, three-quarters of ELL students in grades kindergarten through 5th grade and 57 percent of ELL children in grades 6 through 12 are native born. These distinct ELL populations present quite differing instructional challenges for schools. And together they make up a substantial share of disconnected youth 17 to 24 who are neither working nor in school.

Linguistic Isolation. A further challenge for educators lies in the fact that the linguistic isolation ELLs encounter in schools is mirrored in their homes. Almost all ELL students live in households that are linguistically isolated, i.e., where no one over the age of 13 speaks English well.

Performance of ELLs on NAEP. Worrisome trends in ELL student performance also reinforce the need for developing a deeper understanding and reform. Our own analysis of new data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveals that LEP students’ scores in math and reading substantially lag those of non-LEP 4th and 8th graders, and that the gap remained largely unchanged between 2000 and 2005. On a promising note, “former” ELLs performed about as well as their native peers on NAEP in math and reading.

Graduation Rates. The graduation rates of immigrant students in general and ELLs in particular are especially troubling. Nineteen percent of immigrant youth 16 to 24 who had entered the US before the age of 18 were out of school and had not received a high school degree according to the 2007 American Community Survey, double the rate of natives. Looking to one state — Virginia — ELL students had the lowest on-time graduation rates (68.5 percent) of all student subpopulations assessed with the exception of homeless students (58.7 percent).



Institutional Issues

Viewed through an institutional lens, there are many challenges to immigrant students' success. As we have documented, middle and high schools are not structured to teach both language and "content." Teachers at these higher levels are focused on teaching courses and not individual students; outside the classroom, counselors, administrators, and librarians have not been trained in ways that serve ELL students. Off-the-shelf language proficiency tests are often unaligned with state content standards. Teacher supply is a serious problem, with 60 percent of urban schools reporting shortages of English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual teachers. Maintaining teacher quality is also difficult. Credentialing standards and relevant professional development offerings vary widely, and many bilingual teachers are bilingual in name only — often having little grasp of the languages they are supposed to have mastered.

Key federal investments (e.g., Even Start) have been slashed. Others — such as Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provides funding for language instruction — have declined slowly in constant dollars (from \$770 million in FY 2003 to \$669 million in FY 2007) as the ELL population has risen sharply.

But perhaps the paramount challenge to effectively educating ELLs is the complexity of the task *and the limits of the knowledge base*. Tests given in English invariably mask students' content knowledge, while tests in the native language are equally problematic because they do not match the language of instruction. There is little understanding of the effectiveness of differing testing accommodations that are reliable, valid, and fair. While some progress may have been made, there is no consistent definition of ELL adopted across states or communities. Unlike other disadvantaged groups that schools are compelled to disaggregate (e.g., race, disability, poverty), group membership is temporary, leading to persisting underestimation of ELL performance.

The high leverage point here is No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) mandate that ELL students be tested alongside their non-LEP peers, their results separately reported, and schools held accountable for their progress — or lack thereof. To us, NCLB represents a revolution not just in *education* but in *integration* policy as schools must improve the performance of ELL students. Further, as we approach the law's reauthorization, these accountability and decomposition requirements appear to be here to stay, at least in some form.

Policy Directions

1. **Preserve Accountability.** Perhaps the most important policy direction that must be taken is to preserve the broad accountability mandate for educating ELLs set out in NCLB. Few data argue more persuasively for this imperative than the worrying school completion data set out above, coupled with the data on the persistence of ELL status among first- and second-generation immigrant students.



2. **Expand PreK.** Expand support for preK instruction for immigrant and other subpopulations. Studies have found that Hispanic children had the largest gains of any group in Oklahoma's universal preK program. (Oklahoma is the only state where universal preK is part of the state-funded educational system.) Recent studies have further shown that Hispanic children whose parents spoke Spanish at home and who had been born in Mexico benefitted more than Hispanics who spoke English at home or had parents who were born in the US. These results reinforce the need to target funding to ELL and other special-needs populations. The provision of instructional services will have implications not just for personnel, curricula, and the like but for space and for the construction of new facilities. In many instances, state and local school systems have plans in place for expanding preK services that have been deferred because of the economy. Therefore, stimulus funding can be put directly to work. Indeed Title III funds might be used to get more teachers ready for early childhood instruction.

3. **Bilingual Teachers.** Chronic documented shortages of bilingual and to a lesser extent ESL teachers, especially in high immigrant-growth regions in the Southeast, Rocky Mountain, and South Central states, can be met with expanded support for new teacher development and credentialing programs. Support for teacher apprenticeship programs may generate especially high returns on investment. One target population for additional bilingual ESL teachers would be late-entering secondary school students. As we state above, 43 percent of ELLs in grades 6 through 12 entered the United States in the prior three years. Support from the stimulus spending would allow places that have experienced rapid growth in their ELL populations to catch up with these demographic changes.

4. **Expanding Title III and I Spending on ELLs.** There has been a striking mismatch between the meteoric growth in the ELL population nationwide and the decline in Title III spending, as noted above. While higher, proportionate expenditures in the Title III Program make sense, spending on Title III will remain a fraction of spending on the larger Title I program. Strong federal guidance is needed to reinforce the fact that ELL students can and should be served with Title I funds. Further support could be used to expand the time of instruction that ELL students — notably those at the secondary school level — need. These expansions can occur in the school day, the school year, and even the student's school career. Where employed, supplemental education services should be aligned with the curriculum and results demonstrated on state language and curriculum assessments.

5. **The LEP Partnership.** The LEP Partnership, the Department of Education's focused, energetic, and often useful forum for states on ELL-related issues, should be revived and sustained under strong leadership, particularly as federal education policy shifts under a new administration.

6. **DREAM Act.** The significant number and strong equities of unauthorized students who have been in the United States for many years and complete high school argue for serious consideration of the DREAM Act, preceded by a thorough exploration of the documentation and other implementation issues to which the law would give rise.



7. ***Postsecondary Pathways.*** Immigrant and ELL youth can be put on a path to success by significantly expanding summer youth jobs linked with programs that provide academic and occupational pathways between high schools and community colleges. More generally, states and counties can be pushed to provide a plan for addressing at-risk youth needs and employment outcomes through stimulus support, including LEP youth, disconnected youth, and youth in transition.