The State of Immigrant Students and Their Families

In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 

Plyler v. Doe

that undocumented children have the same right to free public education as all children, and just like other students, they are obligated to attend school as required by state laws. Today’s children are the most racially and ethnically diverse group in the nation’s history, and immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. They now make up a quarter of the nation’s 75 million children and by 2050 they are projected to become a third of the country’s 100 million children. Nearly three quarters of children who live with undocumented parents are citizens by birth. Because little agreement about immigration policy currently exists at the federal level, states are in an ideal position to independently take action.

This Policy Update examines some of the challenges that schools face in educating immigrant children and focuses on one important strategy for improving their educational prospects: engaging the parents of immigrant students.

Challenges Schools Face in Educating Immigrant Students

Educators have long been concerned about overall achievement gaps and dropout rates for immigrant students, but it is important to remember that these students also do worse on non-academic measures of well-being. They often live in low-income neighborhoods and attend struggling schools, conditions that counteract the impact of protective factors, such as a higher likelihood of living in a two-parent family. In addition, in some cases the process of migrating to this country, or the act of surviving here, creates health problems and results in unstable home environments.

Fifty percent of children of immigrants do not speak English fluently. Children who begin kindergarten with limited proficiency in spoken English tend to fall behind native speakers in math and reading proficiency, and these gaps continue throughout their education. Center-based care and formal preschool programs have been shown to have substantial short-term benefits, but immigrant children participate in nonparental care at lower rates than their native-born peers. This could be due in part to cultural preferences for home-based care, as well as lack of access to programs, fears among undocumented parents about becoming involved in a government program, or lack of knowledge about how to navigate the preschool system. Yet participation in a preschool program can help immigrant children with English language acquisition, which they may not otherwise receive due to native languages being spoken at home or low education attainment rates of their parents.

Parental Engagement and Immigrant Families

Numerous studies have shown that students with involved parents are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, and graduate, making such efforts a natural strategy for boosting achievement levels of immigrant students. Unfortunately, increasing parental engagement with schools has traditionally been easier said than done, and working to involve immigrant families is especially challenging. Because immigrant parents may have experiences that are vastly different from the American school system, it is especially important to help them understand how they engage appropriately with their school systems, what rights they have

Immigrant Youth: Who They Are

- 60% are second-generation legal immigrants, born in the United States to legal parents
- 24% are second-generation legal immigrants, born in the United States to unauthorized parents
- 10% are first-generation legal immigrants
- 6% are first-generation unauthorized immigrants

States with Highest Percentage of Youth (under 18) from Immigrant Families (2008 data)

29% - 49%:  AZ, CA, FL, HI, NV, NJ, NY, TX
21% - 26%:  CO, MD, MA, RI, OR
17% - 19%:  CT, DE, IL, GA, NM, UT, VA, WA

to influence their children’s schooling, and what they can expect from their school system including a respectful and welcoming environment which takes into consideration cultural differences.

Nearly three-quarters of the children who live with undocumented parents are citizens by birth, but they may not access social programs that they are entitled to because their parents:

- Are not aware of them;
- Are not savvy enough to navigate the government bureaucracy;
- Are afraid that it might lead to their deportation, and/or
- Incorrectly think that it might put their eligibility for future citizenship at risk.

Failure to make investments now in the health and education of immigrant children will result in higher spending on means-tested assistance programs in the future, coupled with lower tax revenue.

**Issues for State Boards to Consider**

Many policies and programs that could specifically benefit immigrant families would improve the educational outcomes of all students in a school community. Possible interventions include:

- Significantly expanding access to preschool, which can reduce barriers to participation and help immigrant children begin kindergarten on an equal footing with their native peers;
- Ensuring that preparation and professional development programs for K-12 teachers include training on the specific needs of immigrant families; and
- Creating state-level advisory boards to inform the development of effective family engagement policies and ultimately provide guidance to districts and schools on best practices.

**State Actions**

According to a National PTA survey of state laws on parent and family engagement, as of 2009, 21 states have laws that encourage family engagement among non-English fluent parents (AK, AZ, AR, CA, CT, FL, HI, ID, IL, IN, MA, MN, NE, NJ, NM, NY, NC, RI, UT, WA and WI). Included in this group, two states (Rhode Island and Massachusetts) require public schools to communicate with ELL families in their primary or native language.

Ohio law requires local school boards to adopt a parent and family involvement policy, and directed the Ohio State Board of Education to adopt recommendations for the development of these policies. Among the board’s recommendations are the following:

- Respect, value, and involve parents and families as partners and decisionmakers in school continuous improvement planning.
- Develop policies regarding school involvement with parents and families and distribute the policy in language they can understand.
- Create parent and family engagement activities that respect the various cultures, languages, practices and customs; and build relationships among parents, families, and schools through bridging economic and cultural barriers.

At least five states include ELL families in school policy and decisionmaking: IL, IN, MN, NJ, and WI. In Indiana, schools that operate a bilingual-bicultural program need to create an advisory committee that includes parents of students enrolled or eligible for enrollment in the program. Districts operating a bilingual-bicultural program also need to form an advisory panel, made up of one representative from each of the school-based advisory committees.

**Resources and More Information**

- *The Future of Children*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 2011). This issue is devoted to Immigrant Children, [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org).
- The Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University manages the National Network of Partnership Schools. Tools and resources are available at [www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/index.htm](http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/index.htm).
- The Urban Institute conducts research on immigrant families and their educational needs, [www.urban.org/toolkit/issues/immigration.cfm](http://www.urban.org/toolkit/issues/immigration.cfm).
- The SEDL National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools has research-based information and resources people can use to connect schools, families, and communities at [www.sedl.org/connections/](http://www.sedl.org/connections/).