Education: Children and Youth

CONTEXT

One of the focal points of public debate in recent California political discourse has been the issue of public education within the state, including issues of public spending, smaller classroom size, resources for school buildings, and state achievement scores. One of the most controversial elements of this discourse has been the education of immigrant children.

With the education of immigrant children as the background, California debated whether the state has the legal obligation to educate undocumented children (Prop. 187); affirmative action (Prop. 209); the use of language in the classroom (Prop 227); and most recently, school vouchers (Prop. 38).

The debate over the education of immigrant children is not only limited to California politics. As indicated by a recent Urban Institute Study, the impact of immigrant communities is no longer just being felt by the six traditional receiving states. The impacts are being felt by non-traditional receiving states with limited experience in dealing with immigrant populations and no infrastructure to deal with the issues or needs of immigrant communities and immigrant students. Nationwide, immigrant students make up 20% of the public education population. As a way of comparison, African American students make up 16% of the school age population.

The impact of changing demographics among the student population in the State of California is important because the state has been a leader in developing policies that affect immigrants nationwide. According to 1998-99 California Department of Education statistics, Latino children make up the largest segment of students currently being educated in the state public school system at 41.3%, while Asian (Asian, Pacific Islander and Filipino) students make up 11.1% of the students.

One of every four (24.7%) students in California is an English language learner. Almost 48 percent of the California student population qualify for free or reduced price meals according to federal income guidelines. CalWORKs recipients constitute 16% of the state’s student population.

Although Latino children comprised 41.3% of the student population in California in 1998-99, only 31% of the total who graduated from high school were Latino. Only 23.8% of the total student population eligible to attend the California State University System was Latino. According to a Department of Education Study released in March 2000, Latino students are twice as likely as African-American students and three times as likely as white students to drop out of high school. The state university system student population does not adequately reflect the state’s population of public education students. This issue of a student population reflecting the state’s diversity in higher education must
be addressed, if the state is to deal with issues of cultural diversity, cultural proficiency, economic inequality, equal access for all the state’s population and race relations in the future. Many studies indicate that foreign-born parents have significantly higher educational aspirations for their children than do US-born parents. However, these aspirations are not being met.

In analyzing the situation and complexity of immigrant achievement in public education it is very important to take into consideration the complexities of the immigration status of parents, length of residency of the family, the socio-economic conditions of family and resettlement issues of an immigrant family, as well as the barriers to fully understanding and participating in the schools.

Many immigrant children face linguistic isolation. They are put into courses where there are only English learners. There is no integration with native English speakers. Numerous Limited English Proficient (LEP) children face curriculum that is simplified to teach English. Immigrant children must be allowed access to the academic curriculum that will allow them to have access to the institutions of higher education. An Urban Institute Study entitled The Integration of Immigrant Families states that “schools are not only ethnically and economically segregated, but also linguistically isolated”.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“If we don’t have understanding, how can we have compassion?”
--School Administrator describing the situation of immigrant children

Finding 1: Bilingual education is preferred by immigrant parents as a way to have their children learn more easily, be able to communicate with their parents, retain their cultural identity, and be better prepared to participate in the world economy.

Immigrant parents have more children per family in the public school system in the State of California than do US-born parents. The education of these children are high for the future of our community and our economy. Immigrant parents consistently state that they prefer bilingual education as a way to have their children learn easier, be able to communicate with their parents, retain their cultural identity, and be better prepared in the world economy. Bilingual immersion programs, such as the one at River Glen Elementary School in San Jose Unified School District, have proven to be largely effective.

In the random sample survey, according to the respondents who answered the question, “Do you have children under 18 in school?” immigrant families were more likely to have children under 18 than were US-born families.
Mexican respondents who answered the question were almost three times as likely to have children under 18 in the education system compared to the US born population. The Indian, Vietnamese, and Filipino respondents were roughly two times as likely to have children under 18 in the education system.

When asked the question, “What language do you prefer that your child be taught in?” and given the following options, the responses were the following.

Noteworthy is the fact that 90% of the Chinese respondents who answered the question, 70.3% of the Mexicans who answered the question, and 67.7% of the Vietnamese who answered the question stated that they preferred that their children be educated in English.
and the native language. This compared to 69.7% of US-born respondents who answered by stating that they preferred “English only.”

In the focus groups conducted by the Summit on Immigrant Needs, the Latino youth focus group stated that there was a need for bilingual teachers at the high school level. The Salvadoran focus group identified the lack of bilingual education as one of the major barriers affecting immigrant children. As a critique of the attitudes of some administrators with regards to bilingual programs, the Mexican IBC group stated that “Students are discriminated against when they participate in bilingual programs… [they] are labeled as inferior.”

In the analysis of best practices, conducted through secondary research and focus groups, it was found that well-funded bilingual programs with well-trained truly bilingual staff have proven to be more effective than English-only programs in transitioning immigrant children to English.

**Recommendations for Finding 1:**

- Support the conditions to re-establish bilingual education in the State of California. Encourage bilingual education where it is still legally possible, e.g. in San Jose Unified.
- In the short run, support bilingual immersion programs and increase the number of double immersion schools in the county.
- Develop paraprofessional training programs for bilingual aides and incorporate bilingual aides in mainstream classrooms for LEPs to facilitate learning.
- Improve multi-cultural teacher training and increase the number of BCLAD credential teachers.
- Institute bilingual after school tutoring programs for all K-12 grade levels.
- Pay bilingual teachers a differential.
- Oppose the use of English only achievement tests for immigrant students.

**Finding 2: Immigrant parents are not sufficiently involved in their children’s schools.**

Because of a variety of factors, Immigrant parents are not sufficiently involved in the education of their children. Schools must make a special effort to understand and address the needs of immigrant parents in their efforts to become involved in the education of their children.

The Latina focus group identified the education of immigrant children as a concern and stated that they were concerned about the access that immigrant children have to existing programs. The Laotian focus group identified the following issues: the lack of youth services that are culturally appropriate, the lack of a support systems for immigrant parents, and the fact that many parents face language, cultural, and generational barriers with their children. The Mexican IBC group also stated that many Spanish speaking parents are often sent home information in English which neither they nor their child can
understand. They also stated that Spanish speaking parents want to be active in their children’s school. However, they are often unable to communicate with their child’s teacher, and do not know what resources are available to them.

In the analysis of best practices, it was found that programs that target the needs of immigrant parents have a lasting effect. One such program is a Program in the Franklin McKinley School District, the Families & Schools Together Program (FAST Program/Fast Works). The program is an eight week program involving parents and children. It looks at needs and resources, finds peer tutors, and parents choose what they want to talk about. That allows parents to ask questions. A similar program exists in the San Jose Unified School District and in other limited school districts.

Another best practice is “Cafecitos” (coffee breaks), monthly meetings where parents can ask questions with regards to school issues. Several school in the Franklin McKinley school district have instituted these interactions. In the teacher/administrator focus groups, Family Learning Centers were identified as an important best practice. In these centers parent and child needs are met simultaneously. Some elements of these centers are English classes, computers classes, parenting classes, and homework centers, with transportation and childcare provided.

**Recommendations for Finding 2:**

- Institute culturally appropriate outreach methods for immigrant parents.
- Conduct home visits by teachers, aids, and other school personnel.
- Conduct special orientations in the parents’ own language regardless of a child’s grade level.
- Address immigrant parents’ needs by offering services or referrals in collaboration with agencies and government programs.
- Hire bilingual and bicultural staff at all levels, and designate an immigrant parents’ liaison for this purpose.
- Teach immigrant parents concrete skills to help their children academically.
- Collaborate with ethnic media to inform parents regarding school issues.
- Educate parents about the institution and their rights.
- Educate parents with regards to the educational options available for their children.
- Develop “link crews”, mentors, peer counselors, and support groups for immigrant parents.
- Educate parents with regards to the process and their student’s rights if there is disciplinary action.
- Hire school staff so that it reflects the community it serves.
- Provide school signage in the languages of the community being served.
- Translate all school correspondence and documents into appropriate languages.
- Place pictures and artwork that reflect the community being served on school walls.
**Finding 3: Immigrants lack sufficient access to higher education.**

Immigrant youth are not gaining sufficient access to higher education. Special efforts must be made for outreach, retention and access to higher education for immigrant students.

Many focus groups identified the education of immigrant children as one of the top five concerns affecting their community. These included the Cambodian, Ethiopian, Central American, Iranian, Lao, and Mexican focus groups. It also included the focus groups for Latina immigrant women, Latinas on Calworks, and Latino immigrant youth.

---

**WHAT IMMIGRANTS SAY ABOUT ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

In the Mexican focus group, Luna stated, “Many Mexican children drop out of high school because they know that there is no future especially if they are undocumented. After high school, there is no where to go… It’s just like when I was a child in Mexico, there was no where to go because there were no schools after high school. Here there are schools, but because a child does not have a social security number when he finishes high school there is no where else to go”.

Melissa, a Mexican mother of four added: “As a community we are being separated from technology. We are not being allowed to become professionals in the industries that give people a decent wage.”

---

**Recommendations for Finding 3:**

- Eliminate “out of state fees” for undocumented California resident students so that they may continue studying and contribute more to the economy and society.
- Work so that the ethnic and racial make-up of professors and students in higher education reflects the population of the state.
- Promote special outreach and recruitment efforts by colleges and universities to immigrant communities.
- Pay special attention to the retention of immigrant students.
- Develop scholarships for immigrant students.
Finding 4: Immigrants who complete more years of formal education have better incomes and better opportunities to meet their individual and family needs.

There is a direct correlation between educational attainment and level of earnings. As was stated by a Latino youth focus participant, education is directly connected to income and earning power.

As demonstrated in the graph below, there is a clear pattern of higher hourly earnings as educational levels increase. There is a significant difference between immigrants with a low level of education and immigrants with a high level of education. An interesting observation is that fact that no US-born respondents had less than a 10th grade education while for the immigrant group there were responses of very low levels of education. Immigrants are also represented in the very high end of the educational attainment spectrum. The level of 17 to over 18 years of education mostly includes Indian and Chinese respondents who received high levels of education in their native countries.

Recommendations for Finding 4:

- Develop “link crews”, mentors, peer counselors, and other support groups for immigrants students to allow them to succeed.
- Develop special outreach programs targeting immigrant students.
- Develop a system of early evaluations of immigrant student’s academic, social and economic needs.
- Provide after-school English, science, and math programs.
- Create homework centers that address the needs of immigrant students.
Finding 5: Student-centered learning for success among immigrant children requires a public policy shift, ethnic-appropriate teaching and learning methodologies, and inclusive curriculum.

Public education institutions, politicians, educational administrators and teachers must take into account the needs and assets of language minority students and their families. These needs and assets must be taken into account in order to develop programs, improve teaching and learning methods, and curriculum, as a way to promote the success of immigrant students.

The Vietnamese IBC group identified the lack of after school activities and poor communication between school staff and parents due to language barriers as two key problem areas. The Cambodian focus group identified the lack of adequate school services as one of the top five issues affecting the Cambodian community. Participants in the Cambodian focus group worried about gang, drug, and truancy issues.

What immigrants say about the education of their children

“There are gang activities, drug activities and truancy problems in our neighborhoods and we worry that our children will get involved in these activities and get in trouble with the police.” Cambodian focus group

“When my child decides to call 911 because I will not order pizza for dinner, and when the police come I don’t have the ability to communicate with them. The child then ends...
up interpreting for me and I feel totally helpless. The easiest way to deal with him now is to let his mother be responsible for his upbringing.” *Somali father*

“Education is the key. It's what opens the way to move up, to become independent.” *Latino male youth*

“The immigrant population is the most affected by the lack of quality education. Children receive no support. Children are not given positive self-esteem. They see the immigrant child as just one of the bunch.” *Luna, Mexican mother of three teenagers*

“Lately they have focused on education for children. But what happened to all the years in the past where they were not educating the children? All of a sudden they want the children to catch up in one year when they have been behind for many years. But it is impossible. Why don’t they accept the fact that the system is to blame, not the child.” *Atziri, Mexican mother of two*

The following focus groups further identified that the lack of youth activities for immigrant children was a concern: Cambodian, Korean, Lao, Latina immigrant women, and Latino immigrant youth.

The Somali focus group identified families and youth as the second priority issue that needs to be addressed. They identified cultural clashes with their children as an issue, and loss of culture as an important factor. They also expressed a fear that their children would be stuck in limbo, not being completely accepted in US society and not completely belonging in the refugee community.

The Education of Children and Youth Work Group conducted four special focus groups for a) teachers and administrators, b) immigrant parents, c) Latino parents, and d) Mexican parents. These focus groups concluded that homework centers are positive but need to be smaller and must have more teacher support in order to be effective.

Another best practice identified in the teacher/administrator focus group and the immigrant youth focus group was the buddy support system, whereby older students help younger students. The “buddy support system” was found to be an important element in integrating immigrant students into the school environment.

**Recommendations for Finding 5:**

- Institute regular cultural programs and events to recognize various nationalities.
- Promote bilingual education policies that address the needs of immigrant students.
- Develop culturally competent tutoring programs for immigrant students.
- Track all cases of discipline by ethnicity, nationality, race and language.
- Develop youth services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.
• Promote programs that integrate immigrant students with the general student population.
• Educate students with regards to the process and their rights if there is disciplinary action.
• Advocate for culturally competent teacher training.
• Incorporate the issues of the immigrant students in a more profound way into university teacher training curriculum.
• Train teacher aids on how to better serve immigrant students and their parents.
• Develop more communication among teachers in order to create standards that address immigrant student needs.
• Provide special after-school programs for immigrant students