

Children of Immigrants and New Education Policy and Practice

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The demographics of US elementary and secondary schools are changing rapidly as a result of record-high immigration, increasing diversity in terms of immigrant origin and native language, and immigrants' expanding geographic dispersal throughout the United States. Sustained high levels of immigration have also led to a rapid increase in the number of children with immigrant parents. By 2000, immigrants represented one in nine of all US residents, but their children represented one in five of all children under age 18. Many of these children do not speak English well, have low-educated parents, and live in poor families. Meeting their linguistic and academic needs presents a challenge to educators nationwide.

This paper begins with a description of the demographic challenges that US schools face when serving children of immigrants, particularly those who do not speak English very well, whom we refer to in the report as limited English proficient (LEP) students. It also provides a description of the academic achievements of children of immigrants and LEP students. To gauge academic progress of LEP students we utilize data from the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress as well as data from state tests on reading and math from 2005 State Report Cards. We use the results from assessment tests from four states – two traditional immigrant receiving states (California and Illinois) and two new immigrant destination states (North Carolina and Colorado). Finally, this paper describes five persistent policy and practice issues relating to the children of immigrants in US schools, with special attention to the federal education legislation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and other policies that may significantly impact this population.

Key Findings:

Demographic Profile

- *LEP population growth outpaces general student population.* Between 1993 and 2003, the LEP enrollment nationwide grew by 84 percent; the entire K – 12 population grew by only 11 percent.
- *LEP population growth varies dramatically by state, with “new growth” states for immigrants experiencing much higher increases in the LEP population.* LEP enrollment growth between 1993 and 2003 ranged from 35 percent in California, a state with a long history of receiving immigrants, to

500 percent in North Carolina, a state only recently experiencing sharp gains in its immigrant population.

- *Fifty-seven percent of LEP adolescents nationwide are US-born.* Up to 27 percent of all LEP adolescents are members of the second generation, and 30 percent are third generation, meaning that many students educated exclusively in US schools still cannot speak English well. The high numbers of US-born LEPs exist at the state level, even in our study states that do not have large Puerto Rican populations (a group often recognized for its third-generation LEP population).
- *Seventy percent of LEP students in grades 6 – 12 speak Spanish.* The next largest language group is Vietnamese, which accounts for only 3 percent of the total LEP student population in grades 6 – 12.

Indicators of Literacy Achievement by LEP Students

Available data on literacy achievement does not easily lend itself to measuring the progress of LEPs. While analysis in this report employs results from NAEP, which is a national test taken by students around the country, and state standardized tests (tests that are different for every state), both sources of data have one or more shortcomings with regard to the LEP population. The NAEP has a small LEP sample and the sample is not necessarily representative of the LEP population. Therefore, results are only suggestive of achievement patterns; they cannot indicate statistically significant differences. Similarly, results from state achievement tests are based on different instruments and testing procedures, as well as differing policies for identifying LEP students. While results on statewide standardized tests in reading and math allow us to compare the LEP to non-LEP populations within each state, they do limit the meaning and power of across-state comparisons.

Despite these limitations, several important findings emerge from our analysis of NAEP and state testing data:

- *National NAEP data suggest that only a small minority of LEP 8th grade students (5 percent in the non-representative NAEP sample) were proficient in reading.* At the same time, 71 percent of LEP test takers on the NAEP scored below “basic” (an even lower benchmark than proficient) on the reading test. This trend is true at the state level and at the national level for the math test, as well).
- *LEP performance on state standardized reading and math tests varies dramatically across states and foretells future challenges in meeting NCLB requirements.* The share of LEP students meeting California’s reading proficiency standards was 4 percent, while 41 percent of LEP students in North Carolina were reading proficient according to the state-set bar. Similarly in math, 11 percent of LEP students were proficient in California,

while 52 percent were proficient in North Carolina. Reading and math scores for LEPs in Illinois and Colorado fell between California and North Carolina.

These ranges do not necessarily indicate more or less stringent standards: state testing choices and policies for identifying, educating, and including LEP students in standardized tests also vary. What these generally low scores do indicate, though, is that states and districts face large challenges under NCLB, which requires that all LEP children, regardless of where they learn, be proficient in reading and math by 2014.

- *Data suggests a wide and largely uniform performance gap between LEP and non-LEP 8th grade students taking the NAEP.* Nationally, LEP students trailed non-LEPs by 41 points in reading and 37 points in math on a 500-point scale. In each of the four study states, non-LEP students on average scored above “basic,” while LEP students’ average scores did not meet even this benchmark.
- *Regardless of the definition of proficiency from state to state, wide gaps in the share of LEP and non-LEP students who are “proficient” according to statewide standardized tests exist across all study states.* Interestingly, while this gap exists in California, the scores of former LEPs in the state are roughly equal to those of non-LEPs in math and reading.

The evolution of the education of the children of immigrants

Traditionally in the United States, education has been not only a learning institution but also an agent in the integration of immigrants and a stepping stone for immigrants’ future socioeconomic mobility. In the last 100 years, the United States has absorbed two great waves of immigration: one at the turn of the 20th century, comprised mainly of Europeans, and another since 1965, comprised increasingly of Asians and Latin Americans.

There are striking similarities in the contexts in which children of today’s immigrants and children of the early 20th-century immigrants encountered the American educational system. For example, as it is now, education at the turn of the 20th century was linked to social and economic mobility; a significant portion of arriving immigrants did not speak English, which was a serious obstacle for academic achievement; and many schools, especially those in urban areas, were overcrowded and lacked resources and qualified staff.

However, there are substantial differences between the two periods that underline the critical importance of schooling for the social and economic mobility of children of contemporary immigrants.

- *Education is no longer a luxury, but a necessity*

- *The insreasing role of the federal government in the education of children of immigrants*
- *No Child Left Behind: Landmark education legislation*

Current policy and its impact on children of immigrants and LEP students

NCLB made the integration of historically marginalized groups, including the children of immigrants, a priority. However, many challenges still remain for serving the children of immigrants and LEPs, primarily in the implementation of NCLB but also in other areas of education policy and practice. In the second half of our paper we will describe five important policy issues:

- *Assessing the academic progress of LEPs*
- *Closing the linguistic gap*
- *Meaningful parental involvement*
- *Teacher quality and supply*
- *Meeting the needs of immigrant adolescents*

The section also highlights three local practices developed in response to some national policy concerns surrounding the education of children of immigrants.