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Immigrant Children, Urban Schools, and the No Child Left Behind Act

By Michael Fix, Migration Policy Institute
Randy Capps, The Urban Institute

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A recent *New York Times* article reported that despite extensive new federal education requirements introduced by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), student scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress were mixed. NCLB, passed in 2002, is intended to reduce wide, persisting achievement gaps between poor, minority, and limited English proficient (LEP) students and other higher-achieving groups.

According to the *Times*, Secretary of Education Margaret Spelling said the results were "understandable in part, because the nation's schools are assimilating huge numbers of immigrants."

What challenges do schools face as they try to come to grips with a new, immigration-driven student demography? In this brief article, we first set US education policy within the context of immigrant integration policy. We then turn to trends within the growing immigrant student population, identifying seven challenges it poses for school reformers.

Education and Integration

Today, there is a fundamental mismatch in the US between immigration and immigrant integration policies. US immigration policies, which are comparatively inclusive by international standards, provide for the admission of roughly 500,000 to 600,000 immigrants a year who will eventually be eligible for citizenship. Additionally, a large number (500,000 to 650,000) of undocumented immigrants enter the country illegally or overstay valid visas each year, according to the most recent analysis by Jeffrey Passel of the Pew Hispanic Center.

At the same time, integration policies are inchoate, skeletal, and, it could be argued, under-funded. After all, the US has no national agency or department dedicated to the integration of immigrants, and few policies are framed with newcomers in mind. Indeed, even most current proposals to substantially reform — and perhaps expand — the nation's immigration system are largely silent on programs for social integration (the McCain-Kennedy bill, which requires that guest workers learn English before receiving permanent status, among other things, is a significant exception).

Recent national education reforms, however, can be viewed as departing from this largely *laissez faire* approach to integration, especially when it comes to the children who are classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) or LEP students. According to current federal law, a LEP student is defined as a person: "...ages 3 to 21, enrolled in elementary or secondary education, often born outside the United States or speaking a language other than English in their homes, and not having sufficient mastery of English to meet state standards and excel in an English-language classroom."

The most visible and controversial of recent education reforms has been the No Child Left Behind Act. The reforms not only require schools to identify and serve LEP and immigrant students but make them strictly accountable for ensuring these protected populations make progress in learning English as well as in their reading, math, and science skills.

In brief, NCLB:

- Compels schools to report scores on statewide standardized tests separately for LEP students as well as those of low-income, minority, and disabled students;

- Allows students in schools that do not meet state standards in terms of student test performance for more than two years to transfer or receive additional instructional services;
- Forces schools to close or restructure after several years of poor performance;
- Requires that every classroom — including those with LEP students — have a "highly qualified" (i.e., full certified and properly educated) teacher; and
- Requires schools to notify parents — in the languages they speak — of their children's academic performance, their schools' progress toward meeting NCLB goals, and, in the case of LEP students, the type of language instruction they are receiving.

Since 95 percent of all children of immigrants and 91 percent of students who are limited-English proficient attend urban schools, the challenge of responding to immigration-led demographic change falls primarily to increasingly diverse schools in major urban areas.

Two recent Urban Institute reports profiling the changing student population and the schools in which they are concentrated highlight several trends that will shape US urban schools' response to the accountability reforms noted above (see Capps, Fix, Murray et. al. "The New Demography of America's Schools" (2005); and Consentino, Deterding and Clewell, "Who's Left Behind" (2005).

Seven Challenges Facing Urban Schools

Taken together, the reports point out seven challenges that immigration-led change present for urban schools.

The first challenge has been a sharp rise in the number of children who have at least one parent born outside the United States; these "children of immigrants" now compose one in five children enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12). Following the recent rise in immigration — over 14 million immigrants entered the United States during the 1990s (both legally and illegally) — the share of children of immigrants among the school-age population increased rapidly, tripling from six percent in 1970 to 19 percent in 2000. By the year 2010, children of immigrants will represent 25 percent of the K-12 student population.

The share of LEP school-age children has also risen rapidly over the past two decades. Between 1993 and 2003, the LEP student population rose 84 percent while the overall student population increased 12 percent. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of children K-12 who speak Spanish at home doubled from 3.5 to 7 million, while the number of children speaking Asian languages tripled from 0.5 to 1.5 million.

A second challenge for urban schools has been the dispersal of the immigrant population. Like immigrants overall, school-age children of immigrants are highly concentrated in six states (California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey) In 2000, almost half (47 percent) of all school-age children in California were children of immigrants.

But the number of children of immigrants grew most rapidly between 1990 and 2000 in Nevada (206 percent), followed by North Carolina (153 percent), Georgia (148 percent), and Nebraska (125 percent). These shifts have been profoundly felt by such new gateway cities as Las Vegas, Nevada; Charlotte, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; and Omaha, Nebraska.

Like high flows, the new diaspora coincides with NCLB implementation. Meeting NCLB's performance standards for LEP and other children of immigrants could be quite difficult for schools in the fastest growing states — especially those in smaller towns and rural areas — because they have less experience settling newcomers and less developed institutional structures than schools in major urban areas in states like California. Schools in smaller communities in fast growing immigrant states may, for example, have much more difficulty finding bilingual teachers or administrative staff who can interpret for LEP parents.

Moreover, the newcomer populations moving to the fastest growing states are more recently arrived, are more likely to be poor, have fewer English language skills, and are more likely to be undocumented than their counterparts in the traditional receiving areas and the United States as a whole. All of these factors may create challenges for designing programs that meet the needs of these children and involve their parents.

A third challenge owes to the age distribution of the newcomer children in the United States and their relatively high concentration in secondary schools. Although three-quarters of children — whether their parents are legal or unauthorized — are US-born citizens, foreign-born students make up a larger share of secondary than elementary school students.

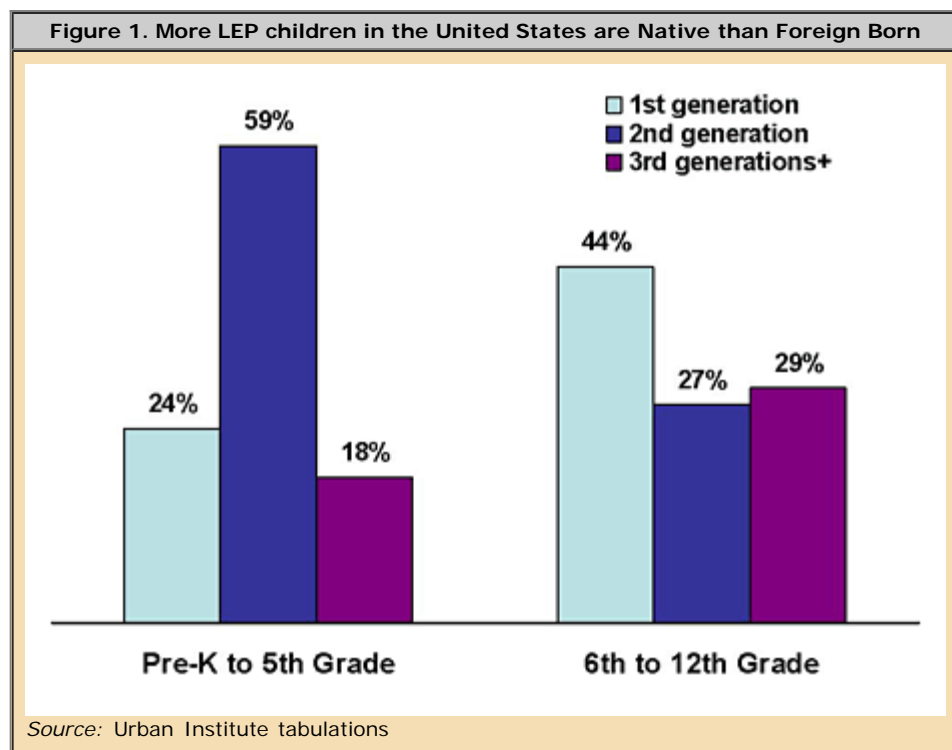
The share of children of immigrants who are foreign-born is lowest in pre-kindergarten (one in eight) and highest in grades six through 12 (one in three). The reason for this pattern is straightforward: older children have lived longer and therefore have had more time to enter the United States.

The higher share of foreign-born children in the upper grades highlights two policy mismatches facing urban educators. Compared to lower grades, relatively few resources for English-language acquisition flow to secondary schools given the share of foreign born and recently arrived students who are enrolled. Further, secondary schools tend to be less well equipped to provide both the language and literacy instruction that many late entering secondary school students need.

A fourth challenge to urban schools is rising poverty among the children of immigrants. The changing origins of US immigrants from Europe and Canada to Central and South America and Asia have been accompanied by a rise in poverty among children of immigrants.

In 1970, children of immigrants and immigrant children were about as likely as non-Hispanic whites to be low income, and they were much less likely than African-American youth to live in low-income families. But by 2002, rates for all children had risen, and the share of foreign-born children in grades six through 12 in low-income families (47 percent) rivaled those of African Americans (55 percent).

These trends underscore the fact that poverty is a growing challenge among children of immigrants — a development with far-reaching implications for the distribution of NCLB Title I formula grants. These grants are for instruction for the disadvantaged and are allocated to states and schools based on poverty levels. Not surprisingly, poverty rates are especially high among the children of immigrants who are LEP (60 percent).



A fifth challenge is a group of students that teachers refer to as "long-term LEPs," many of whom were born in the United States. These are children who have not learned English even after seven or more years in US schools.

The 2000 census reveals that most LEP students in both elementary *and* secondary

schools were born and raised in the United States. Over three-quarters of LEP elementary and over half of LEP secondary school children were US born, and many had US-born parents (see Figure 1). This seems to indicate that many LEP children have not been well-served by the US education system, at least in terms of learning English.

Analysis of other national data reveals another troubling language-related challenge facing urban schools: the growing segregation of LEP students. These patterns are related to ongoing residential segregation by race, ethnicity, and income.

In 1999, over half (53 percent) of LEP students attended schools where more than 30 percent of all children were LEP — a share that had risen since 1995. By contrast, 57 percent of non-LEP students went to schools where less than one percent of the students were LEP. These patterns are evident across the country, even in states with relatively small but fast growing immigrant populations. Of course, this trend indicates that LEP children in the US are not just attending schools that are economically and ethnically segregated, but also schools that are linguistically isolated.

Moreover, one pattern that has emerged at this relatively early stage in the implementing of NCLB's accountability standards is that these "high-LEP" schools are disproportionately failing to meet state standards and are being subjected to sanctions. Recent Urban Institute research has examined these high-LEP schools and found that they are more heavily urban and larger than schools with few or no LEP students, and their principals and teaching staffs are less experienced.

Finally, the seventh challenge is the linguistic isolation these children experience in their homes, since most LEP children live in households where those over age 14 are also LEP. In 2000, according to our analysis, about six in seven LEP students at the elementary level lived in linguistically isolated households.

The share of linguistically isolated children was highest in kindergarten (eight percent) and substantially lower in secondary school (four percent), following the pattern for children's English proficiency acquisition. While the prevalence of these linguistically isolated families containing LEP students reinforces the need for family learning programs, the largest such federal program (the Even Start Program) has recently been slated for steep budget cuts.

Conclusion

Like many school systems worldwide, US schools are being altered by steady high flows of newcomers as children of immigrants tripled their share of the K-12 student population between 1970 and 2000. The LEP student population rose between 1993 and 2003 by 84 percent while the overall student population rose 12 percent. These LEPs are highly concentrated in a few urban schools that are highly minority, low income, and disproportionately likely to fail federal standards.

That said, it is hard to write off these students' poor academic performance — or those of students nationwide — to simple demographic change. As we have shown, over half of LEP secondary school students were born in the United States and have grown up in US schools. Their lack of progress suggests they have not been well served by US schools and reinforces the deep logic of increased accountability in NCLB.

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MPI • 1400 16th St. NW, Suite 300 • Washington, DC 20036

ph: (001) 202-266-1940 • fax: (001) 202-266-1900

source@migrationpolicy.org