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Mexican Immigrants in High Schools: Meeting Their Needs. ERIC Digest.

THIS DIGEST CONSIDERS the needs of Mexican immigrant students of high school age, needs that often escape the attention of educators. Whether their status is undocumented or documented, however, U.S. law provides for these students to be educated at public expense.

The discussion briefly reviews some of the salient characteristics of this population, including its historical roots and educational needs. It then examines features of schooling thought to be productive for Mexican immigrant students, including frequently used program models. It also summarizes the characteristics associated with effective programs that respond to the needs of adolescent immigrants. The Digest concludes with a discussion of the transition from high school to work, an issue of major importance to this population throughout the high school years.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Although the circumstances of immigration from Mexico have changed over time, movement back and forth across the joint border with Mexico has a long history. During the nineteenth century, and into the early decades of this century, authorities took surprisingly little notice of this movement. Mexicans became an integral part of the population of the U.S. Southwest before official policies, in fact, gave them the label "immigrant." More recently, increasing numbers of students--with or without their families--have entered the United States in search of the advantages associated with life and work in this country.

In the Southwest and Midwest, Mexican laborers have traditionally supplied the bulk of unskilled labor. Exploitation and discrimination have been common (Acuna, 1981). Mexican immigrants are more likely to live in urban areas than in rural areas, the average size of their households is larger than that of non-Hispanic households, and their families are younger than the non-Hispanic population (Garcia & Montgomery, 1991). Naturalization rates for this group are low, but its youth and its geographic concentration mean that Mexican immigrant students are certain to attend American schools in significant numbers for the foreseeable future.

High dropout rates, students overage for their grade levels, low scores on achievement tests, poor attendance records, and low rates of participation in postsecondary education are common among these students. Cultural and language differences, mobility, and priority given to work over education make it difficult for U.S. schools to meet the needs of many Mexican immigrant students.

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Immigrant students--especially those who arrive as adolescents and those whose families migrate as seasonal agricultural workers--have special needs as they adjust to

their lives in the United States. Their educational backgrounds vary considerably. Some adolescents will have attended Secundaria in Mexico (approximately 7th-9th grade in the U.S.), a comparatively strong educational background. Many others, however, will have attended only a few years of Primaria (grades 1-6); still others may have never enrolled in school in Mexico. Such adolescents will have few literacy skills. Varying educational backgrounds is one source that structures the needs of this population. The need to learn English, however, characterizes most new Mexican immigrants; it is an accommodation most seek willingly. Not only is learning English an economic asset, but research has consistently demonstrated that being bilingual is an intellectual asset (Hakuta 1986).

Whatever students' intents, and whatever the intellectual advantages of bilingualism, Mexican immigrant students are often viewed as lacking intellectual ability instead of lacking English proficiency. Complicating the issue, immigrants from rural areas in Mexico may have had numerous absences and transfers because of their families' migration patterns. High mobility in the U.S. compounds this original difficulty.

PROGRAM TYPES

These influences--lack of literacy skills in Spanish, limited English language abilities, and high rates of mobility--present difficult instructional problems for schools. Secondary schools have responded primarily by establishing three sorts of programs:

* intensive English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) classes,

* bilingual programs that teach subject courses in the students' native language as they learn English, and

* newcomers' schools, which try to address the cultural and academic adjustments of immigrant students.

Quality of instruction is hampered in each of these programs by the students' varying levels of academic skills and English proficiency and a curriculum that usually does not parallel that provided to English-speaking students. Each program approach, however, has strengths and weaknesses, as considered next.

ESOL classes are typically found in schools that enroll students whose native

languages vary widely. ESOL tends to focus on goals that are immediately useful to, and appreciated by, students; this feature constitutes both a strength and a shortcoming. First, immigrant students and their parents have the strong desire to learn English for its economic utility--opening up more and better job opportunities in the United States (Romo, 1985). Immigrants are, therefore, eager to participate in ESOL classes. Second, the disadvantage of ESOL programs is that they tend to emphasize oral language and do not cultivate students' reading and writing skills, more specific academic needs (i.e., specialized high school courses), or critical thinking.

Bilingual programs teach academic concepts in a student's strongest language, while simultaneously teaching English language skills. The catch for adolescent immigrants is that bilingual programming is more comprehensive in elementary schools (San Miguel, 1987). As a result, most secondary bilingual programs are limited to the core subjects of reading, writing, and basic math. The shortage of certified bilingual faculty to teach specialized subjects at the high school level means that, no matter how great the need, providing expansive course offering in the bilingual track is very difficult.

Newcomers' programs provide a series of transition courses, allowing recent immigrants to learn about American culture and to receive counseling on adjustment problems. They teach English language skills that will help students make the transition into the regular school program. The programs facilitate adjustment, but being grouped with other newcomers cannot by itself give immigrant students access to mainstream activities and social groups.

A common feature of each of these programs is that they tend to segregate immigrant students from their English-speaking peers and track them away from academic or college-prep courses. This tendency is particularly objectionable in the case of gifted immigrant high school students. Such students, most particularly among all students, need a broad-based program of intellectual challenge and cultural enrichment. Special attention should be provided in areas that will help these students graduate from high school, attain high scores in examinations, enroll in four-year colleges and universities, and attain advanced college degrees.

These goals, of course, are also important for many other immigrant high school students. Programs such as the International High School, a collaborative curriculum project developed by New York colleges and public schools, and special summer programs such as Upward Bound, that bring immigrant high school students to college campuses for tutoring and college orientation, help bridge the gap between high school graduation requirements and college entry expectations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PRACTICE

The work of researchers Carter and Chatfield (1986); Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990); and Olsen and Dowell (1989) reports the positive characteristics of schools that effectively meet the needs of Mexican immigrant students. Such characteristics include many that describe good schools in general (e.g., high expectations for academic achievement for all students, high levels of parental involvement, and strong instructional and organizational leadership). Other characteristics effective with this population include: (1) valuing of students' home languages and cultures, (2) school leadership that makes immigrant students a priority, (3) outreach and communication in the parents' home language, (4) staff development to help teachers and other staff serve immigrant students more effectively, (5) scheduling that includes immigrant students in classes with English-speaking students, (6) placement decisions made with adequate assessment and consultation, and (7) programs that address multicultural concerns (both social and academic).

TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK

Although most jobs that offer the prospect of upward mobility require graduation from high school, the "transition" from school to work precedes high school graduation for many Mexican immigrant students. This pattern is unfortunate.
Flexible instructional programming and support services are needed to help immigrant students throughout every transition from school to work. Provisions that have helped keep immigrant students in school include coordinated social services, counseling, tutoring, enrichment activities, health service referrals, and job training and placement. Initiatives that lead to associate degrees (or other certification from community or technical colleges) are important options for many immigrant students.

Imel (1989) notes that many issues--such as knowledge of career options, access to programs, program quality, support services, interagency coordination, and family influence--must be considered as educators help immigrant students plan vocational training. Effective high school programs and multiple or "second-chance" opportunities for education and training--such as self-paced curriculum, workplace English and literacy instruction, and evening school classes--help ensure that Mexican immigrant students get the chance to learn skills needed for decent employment (Neubert and Leak, 1990).

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