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Over the past decade, U.S. public schools have seen an increase of almost 1 million immigrant students, approximately 5.5% of the public school population. Providing appropriate instruction to immigrant students who are English language learners has become an issue of particular concern to educators across the country. This concern is especially acute at the secondary level. A growing number of recent immigrant students are entering U.S. middle and high schools with little or no prior formal schooling and low literacy skills. Often referred to as "late-entrant" or "low-literacy" students, they may be 3 or more years below their age-appropriate grade level in school-related knowledge and skills. For these students to succeed in school, they must learn to read, write, understand, and speak English; develop academic literacy in English to make the transition to the labor force or into other educational programs; and become socialized into American society during adolescence, a time of major emotional, physical, and psychological change. This digest discusses essential features of effective programs for these students, drawn from a study of four successful programs designed to encourage immigrant adolescents to stay in school, complete their high school education, and pursue additional education after high school.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The following factors are essential in designing a program for immigrant adolescents with limited schooling.

"Program Location." A common strategy is to place immigrant English language learners in a specialized learning environment--an all-day or half-day newcomer school or program, a special wing of a mainstream school, a separate school, separate classes taught in the native language, or classes in which content is taught in English but is adapted and sheltered. Programs vary in the types of specialized classes offered, the ways in which students are integrated with students from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds and of other ages, and the length of time students attend special programs or classes before making the transition to mainstream classes.

Some controversy surrounds the question of where to locate these programs. Separate site programs have the advantage of consolidating staff and resources, and they can serve a large geographical area while focusing on the special needs of newcomer students. In addition, because all students in the program are immigrants, no one stands out as a foreigner.

Opponents of separate-site programs believe that they deprive immigrant students of interaction with English-speaking peers and limit access to courses and activities open to students in regular schools. Opponents also argue that the transition from a separate-site school is harder than the transition from a special program within a mainstream school. To decide which option is better, local needs and resources must be considered and prior experiences with newcomer students examined.

"Program Structure." The ultimate educational goal for all immigrant students is to perform well in regular content and elective classes. To prepare for academic success, these students need access to courses that focus on literacy and study skills, content courses that are taught through the native language, and sheltered content courses that are taught in English and adapted to make the content more accessible.

"Registration and Placement Procedures." Intake centers should be conveniently located, appropriately staffed, and provide essential services. For example, interpreters should be available to interview students and their families in their native languages if necessary. Programs that serve students from one particular language group should provide registration materials in that language. Information obtained from registration procedures should be used to make up a student profile, which will serve as an objective basis for determining the student's educational program. To identify students' needs, it is essential to assess both native language skills and English proficiency and to evaluate prior school experience. In addition, learning about the students' home environments, such as the educational levels of parents and siblings, can help determine the academic support the student has at home.

"Transitions to Other Programs." Some programs for recent immigrants have come under scrutiny because of their haphazard exit policies (Collier, 1992). For example, depending on test scores and teacher evaluations, students at newcomer schools in California may be allowed to enter mainstream classes after 8 weeks, 3 semesters, or never. Students who finally are placed in mainstream classes may not receive appropriate support or monitoring (L. Olsen, personal communication, October 1995). The majority of students move through the newcomer courses in a timely fashion, but few students complete high school in the traditional 8 semesters.

To promote successful transitions, one literacy program in Fairfax County, Virginia allows students to complete English as a second language (ESL) and sheltered courses at a transitional high school in 1 or 2 years, then proceed to a partial or full mainstream program to earn their diploma. This progression can be made within 5-6 years of initial registration. Students unable to finish high school by age 22 can fulfill state graduation requirements in adult education courses. Some students in these courses prepare for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED), but most choose to work toward their high school diploma.

"Comprehensive Services and Family Involvement." To reach out to parents, schools must find ways to establish regular channels of communication. Effective communication with parents may be hindered by language barriers, parents' lack of familiarity with American schools, and different expectations concerning the appropriate roles of parents and school personnel. To break down such barriers, a program in Spring Branch, Texas, employs bilingual caseworkers who set up meetings with parents and make home visits.

Schools are increasingly coordinating community services and establishing links with the business community and other educational institutions to provide students with a variety of post-secondary opportunities.

"Staff Background and Professional Development." Educators who work with immigrant adolescents must maintain academic standards and have high expectations of their students. At the same time, they must teach with sensitivity and compassion and be knowledgeable about their students' language and cultural backgrounds, their personal circumstances and strengths, and their language, literacy, and academic needs (Wink et al., 1994). It is important that both ESL and content teachers be familiar with the basic concepts and theories underlying ESL instruction. Schools should make every effort to hire teachers and classroom aides who share the language and cultural backgrounds of the students or staff with cross-cultural experience and understanding. Mentoring programs can be set up for teachers and students, and immigrant adults and students who have adjusted to life in the United States can inform teachers about the culture and language of the newcomer students.

Traditionally, professional development activities for teachers of immigrant students have been designed for teachers with ESL or bilingual certification. In recent years, however, teachers of mainstream content courses have been included as well. Often, content teachers who have received additional training to work effectively with English language learners teach sheltered content courses.

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Although little research has been done on the necessary components of secondary school programs specifically for students with limited prior schooling, two studies outline features of successful high school programs for nonnative English speakers in general. Based on a study of six high schools in California and Arizona, Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990) identified characteristics of schools that promote success among students whose first language is Spanish. These characteristics can be extended to apply to programs serving immigrant students of all backgrounds.
"Affective factors." School staff are committed to the educational success of immigrant students, have high expectations for them, and publicly recognize their achievements. Students' native languages and cultures are valued throughout the school, and some of the staff have backgrounds similar to those of the students.

* "Instruction." A wide variety of courses are offered in the students' native languages and in English. This includes advanced content courses made available through instruction in the native language or through sheltered content instruction in English. Teachers are proficient in bilingual and ESL teaching strategies for secondary school students.

* "Comprehensive services." Counselors speak the students' native languages, have

the same or similar cultural backgrounds, and are knowledgeable about post-secondary educational opportunities for immigrant students. In addition, school staff work well with parents and involve them in decisions about their children's education.

* "Professional development." School administrators provide leadership by being knowledgeable about recent research and practice in bilingual and ESL education at the secondary school level and by developing structures to strengthen curriculum and instruction. High priority is placed on professional development for all school staff, and training is designed to help teachers and counselors serve immigrant students more effectively.

Walsh (1991) suggests that a well-designed program for immigrant adolescents with limited prior schooling and low literacy includes these components: (1) an ungraded course structure that allows students to learn at their own pace and avoid the stigma of over-age grade placements; (2) small classes that allow individualized attention from teachers; (3) literacy and content courses taught in students' native languages that are thematically coordinated and encourage transfer of learning across content areas; (4) follow-up on thematic content and skill development, provided by double-period ESL classes; (5) common planning periods that give bilingual and ESL teachers an opportunity to coordinate their work; and (6) well-defined exit criteria that measure students' readiness for bilingual or mainstream classes.

In addition, Walsh makes the following recommendations:

* Individual learning plans, set jointly by teacher and student, should lead to either a regular or alternative high school diploma. Literacy and content courses should be appropriately designed and taught to enable students to earn full credit toward their diploma. Alternative means of gaining credit (e.g., independent study) and an occupational, career-awareness component that includes hands-on experience should be provided.

* Flexible scheduling should be available, as it enables students to combine academic study and work or work-related experience. Students aged 18 or older can earn a high school diploma by completing at least 2 years in a high school-based program, then transferring to a GED program.

* Access to a range of services should be offered, including regular, individual meetings with guidance and adjustment counselors who speak the students' native languages, group counseling, peer tutoring, mentoring by sympathetic adults, frequent meetings of counselors with teachers and parents, home-school liaisons, and links with community-based agencies.

CONCLUSION

Immigrant secondary school students who are learning English and have limited formal schooling need comprehensive services to accommodate a range of needs that include schooling, socialization, and language development. An effective program must incorporate instruction, parental and family involvement, support services, and professional development. Each of these components should include features targeted specifically to the needs of students with limited prior schooling.

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