

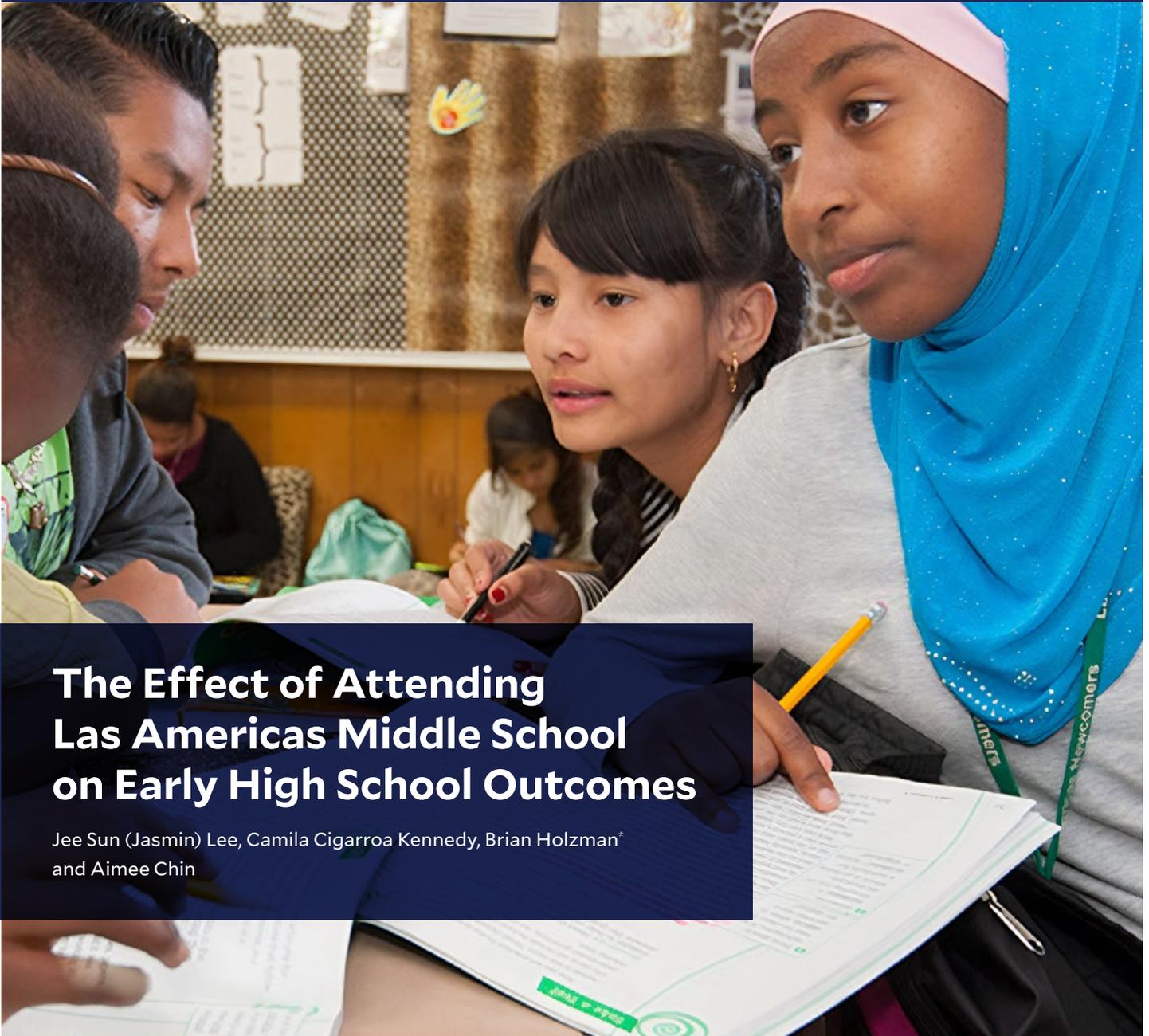


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The Effect of Attending Las Americas Middle School on Early High School Outcomes

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About HERC. Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC research is developed directly alongside district leaders with findings shared with decision-makers — culminating in long-term, equity-minded solutions, opportunities and growth for Houston and beyond.

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Research Brief

The Effect of Attending Las Americas Middle School on Early High School Outcomes

This brief evaluates the causal effect of attending Las Americas Middle School on newcomer students' early high school outcomes. Using administrative data from the Houston Independent School District (HISD) spanning the 2007–2008 through 2018–2019 school years, the study examined the academic performance, course-taking patterns, and school engagement of newcomer students who did and did not attend Las Americas. Attending Las Americas increased newcomer students' English end-of-course (EOC) exam scores and decreased students' likelihood of receiving disciplinary actions. Newcomer students who attended Las Americas fared similarly to their newcomer peers at other middle schools on all other outcomes. The brief concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the analysis, as well as potential implications for policy and practice.

Key Findings

1. Attending Las Americas had a positive effect on students' scores on the English 1 end-of-course (EOC) exam.
2. Attending Las Americas did not affect newcomer students' ninth-grade course-taking patterns or their choice of a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) endorsement.
3. Attending Las Americas impacted school engagement: it decreased a student's risk of receiving disciplinary actions, which was primarily driven by a reduction in in-school suspensions.



Background

Newcomer students are English learners (EL) who have recently immigrated to the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Because many newcomer students experience interrupted formal education,¹ limited literacy in their home language, psychological trauma from their migration journey, and unfamiliarity with the American education system, they often need support beyond what is provided in traditional English as a Second Language classrooms (Custodio, 2011; Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2020; Hos, 2020; Jaycox et al., 2002; Short & Boyson, 2004).

Designed to meet the needs of this unique population of students and ease their transition to mainstream schools, newcomer programs are instructional models that aim to promote accelerated English language acquisition, help students develop literacy in their home languages, provide content-based learning, and facilitate cultural integration (Short & Boyson, 2012).

Within HISD, Las Americas Middle School is a newcomer program serving students in grades four through eight who have been in the U.S. for less than one year. Las Americas is a non-zoned school of choice, which means that students and families must opt to attend the school. Like other newcomer programs, Las Americas offers students a content-based EL curriculum so they

can acquire English-language skills and be prepared for a successful transition to a mainstream classroom. Historically, the school has been committed to serving students with the greatest academic and socio-emotional needs through its recruitment and admissions policies and practices, as well as its connections to local nonprofits that provide students with access to social workers and mental health counselors.²

This Study

This study examined the causal effect of attending Las Americas Middle School on newcomer students’ academic performance, course-taking patterns, and school engagement early in high school. Table 1 lists the outcome measures by category. All outcomes were measured in ninth grade, except for PSAT scores, which students typically take in 10th grade.

1 Interrupted formal education is when a student has fewer years of school than their age implies (e.g., a 12-year-old who spent just three years in the classroom).

2 For a detailed description of Las Americas and the students it serves, please review a previous HERC study called *Who Goes to Newcomer Schools? Las Americas Middle School* by Holzman et al. (2023).

Table 1. Outcome measures

Academic performance	Course-taking	School engagement
Freshman on-track status ³ GPA (grade point average) EOC English 1 EOC Algebra 1 PSAT scores	Advanced courses CTE (career and technical education) courses Fine arts courses Athletics courses STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) endorsement	Attendance rate Chronic absence ⁴ Discipline (any discipline, ⁵ in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension)

Research Question

What is the causal effect of attending Las Americas on ...

- Academic performance in ninth and 10th grade?
- Course-taking in ninth grade?
- School engagement in ninth grade?

To answer this question, this study followed cohorts of newcomer students in sixth through eighth grade who arrived in HISD between the 2007-2008 and 2017-2018 school years and examined their outcomes in early high school up through the 2018-2019 school year. The analysis estimated the causal effects of attending Las Americas for newcomer students using methods that proxied for Las Americas's practice of recruiting students in nearby neighborhoods with high concentrations of foreign-born residents. Details on the data and methods, as well as full results, are available from the authors upon request.

- 3 The freshman on-track indicator was first developed by Allensworth and Easton (2005) and is an accurate predictor of high school dropout (Bowers, Spratt, & Taff, 2013). The indicator is based on student academic performance in ninth grade. The indicator used in this study is a slight alteration of the Allensworth and Easton measure that is customized for the HISD context. To be considered "on track," students must satisfy two conditions: (1) they must have at most two semester Fs in any course and (2) they must have at most one semester F in a core subject course (English, math, science, or social studies).
- 4 This study defined chronic absence as missing 10% or more of the school days in a year.
- 5 Any disciplinary action includes in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, referrals to an alternative education program, and expulsion.



Key Findings

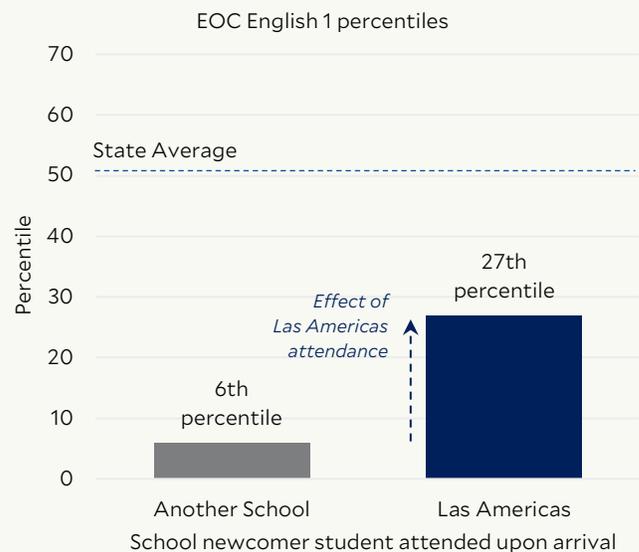
1 Attending Las Americas had a positive impact on students' EOC English 1 scores but not on other measures of academic performance.

Newcomer students who attended Las Americas had higher EOC English 1 scores than they would have had if they attended another HISD middle school. Former Las Americas students performed at the 27th percentile of EOC English 1 scores in the state, while newcomer students who had attended other schools performed at the sixth percentile. Figure 1 highlights the 21-point positive effect of Las Americas on EOC English 1 percentile scores. From a statistical perspective, this is a very large effect.⁶

A top priority of newcomer programs is to facilitate English language acquisition and set students up for academic success in mainstream schools. These results show that Las Americas is achieving that goal through its large, positive impact on English test scores early in high school.

For other measures of academic performance, including freshman on-track status, GPA, EOC Algebra 1 scores, and PSAT scores, Las Americas students fared similarly to newcomer students who attended other HISD middle schools upon arrival, after accounting for student and neighborhood background characteristics.

FIGURE 1 Attending Las Americas brought newcomer students' EOC English 1 scores closer to the state average than those who did not



⁶ This effect translates to a 0.90-standard deviation increase in EOC English 1 test scores.

2 Attending Las Americas did not impact the likelihood that a student enrolled in specific coursework during ninth grade, such as advanced, CTE, fine arts, or athletics courses, or whether they chose the STEM endorsement.

Participation rates in ninth-grade coursework for newcomers who attended Las Americas versus other middle schools were similar. Even after accounting for student- and neighborhood-level characteristics, as well as adjusting for the recruitment strategies of Las

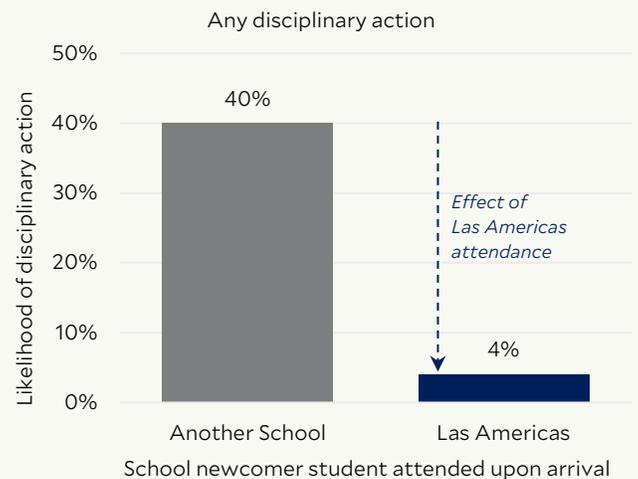
Americas, there were no significant differences between groups in rates of taking advanced, CTE, fine arts, or athletics courses. Both groups also chose the STEM endorsement at similar rates.

3 Attending Las Americas decreased the likelihood of adverse school engagement in ninth grade, as measured by discipline.

Attending Las Americas decreased a student's risk of receiving any disciplinary action in ninth grade (see Figure 2). When newcomer students reached ninth grade, those who attended Las Americas for middle school had a 4% chance of being disciplined. Additional analyses showed that this result was due to a reduction in in-school suspension rates; these results are available upon request. This suggests that Las Americas's focus on socio-emotional support through social workers and mental health counselors, as well as a lack of exclusionary discipline, might have had a prolonged impact on students' school engagement when they started high school.

FIGURE 2

Attending Las Americas reduced the likelihood of receiving any disciplinary action by 36 percentage points



Conclusion

Summary and Discussion

Newcomer students who attend Las Americas are some of the district's most disadvantaged students. The school's admissions policy selects students with the lowest levels of English proficiency, intending that the program will offer them the opportunity to accelerate their language skills and academic performance. The eventual goal is for newcomer students to successfully transition into mainstream high schools. Indeed, the results from this study suggest that the school is achieving its primary goal by increasing English language acquisition, as measured by EOC English 1 scores. For other measures of academic performance and course-taking, Las Americas students performed on par with their newcomer peers from other HISD middle schools. Beyond language acquisition, newcomer programs aim to help students with socio-emotional and cultural adjustment to the U.S. school system. Based on the lower discipline rates among students who attended Las Americas, it appears that the school successfully supported its students in a way that led to improved school engagement. Overall, these findings suggest Las Americas attendance had a lasting impact beyond middle school.

One limitation of this study is that it could only measure outcomes using the data available to the research team. Las Americas may influence newcomer students' experiences in ways not captured by the metrics used in this study. For example, the presence of on-campus social workers may also benefit students' socio-emotional well-being, feelings of belonging, and identity development. In addition, wraparound services and dedicated staff support may connect students to resources for food, clothing, and other necessities that can improve their quality of life. It is important to remember Las Americas provides newcomer students and families

an option designed to meet their unique needs, irrespective of whether every high school outcome yields measurable benefits.

Recommendations

With its strong effects on EOC English 1 scores and disciplinary actions, the newcomer program at Las Americas is a promising model for serving newly arrived immigrants. Based on these findings, the research team offers the following recommendations:

- **Learn from Las Americas:** Attending Las Americas had a demonstrably positive effect on the outcomes of newcomer students. As a valuable in-district resource, HISD could expand opportunities for other schools serving large newcomer populations to learn from the practices implemented at Las Americas.
- **Expand capacity and reach:** HISD could allocate more resources to expand the capacity of Las Americas or create more newcomer programs or services within the district to broaden the reach of these targeted supports.
- **Explore future research opportunities:** The outcomes observed in this study provide insight into how Las Americas affects the academic performance and school engagement of newcomer students in HISD. Nonetheless, there are lingering questions about the experiences of students in the program and how attending the school may affect outcomes not readily available in administrative data. For example, this study could not address how Las Americas influenced feelings of belonging, mental health, and acclimation to the U.S. schooling system. Future research using qualitative or survey research methods may be able to address these questions.

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Mission

The Kinder Institute for Urban Research builds better cities and improves lives through data, research, engagement and action.

About

The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.



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