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Patterns and Factors Shaping English Language Acquisition among Middle School Newcomer Students in Houston ISD

Jee Sun (Jasmin) Lee, Brian Holzman* and Aimee Chin

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Research Brief

* Corresponding author: bholzman@tamu.edu

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Note on the authors: Brian Holzman, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at Texas A&M University. Aimee Chin, Ph.D., is a professor at the University of Houston.

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Research Brief

Patterns and Factors Shaping English Language Acquisition among Middle School Newcomer Students in Houston ISD

Key Findings

Trajectories of English Language Acquisition among Middle School Newcomer Students

- Newcomer students who had lower levels of initial English oral proficiency, experienced interrupted formal education, and were classified as refugees or asylees achieved lower levels of English proficiency than other newcomer students by the end of their first year in HISD.

Effects of Las Americas Attendance on English Language Acquisition

- Attending Las Americas had positive effects on students' English proficiency trajectories, relative to newcomers who attended other HISD schools. Specifically, Las Americas attendance increased end-of-year English proficiency exam scores and the likelihood of reclassification.
- Attending Las Americas decreased the English as a Second Language (ESL) course load of newcomer students such that Las Americas students took a smaller proportion of ESL courses compared to newcomer peers who did not attend Las Americas.

Key Terms

EL reclassification: When a student who has previously been identified as an English learner is deemed to be English proficient.¹

ESL: English as a Second Language.

IPT: IDEA Proficiency Test. The IPT was administered to new students to gauge initial English oral proficiency and determine English learner status. The test is no longer used and has since been replaced by the LAS Links assessment.

Newcomer student: Immigrant students who are within their first three years of schooling in the U.S. and are classified as English learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In this study, newcomer students are in their *first* year of schooling in the U.S. and English learners.

SIFE: Student with Interrupted Formal Education.

TELPAS: Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System. TELPAS is the state-administered assessment used to evaluate the English language proficiency of English learners. Scores were measured on a four-point scale: 1 (beginning), 2 (intermediate), 3 (advanced), and 4 (advanced high).

1 According to Texas Administrative Code, "English learner" is interchangeable with "emergent bilingual." "English learner" is the term used at the federal level, while "emergent bilingual" is a newer term used by the Texas Education Agency (Definitions, 2003).

Background

As students who recently immigrated to the U.S., newcomer students comprise a specific subgroup of English learners (EL) and may have needs distinct from their U.S.-born peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Many of these students have limited formal education and literacy in their home language, have experienced emotional hardship during their migration journey, and have had little exposure to the U.S. schooling system (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2020; Hos, 2020; Jaycox et al., 2002; Short & Boyson, 2004). As such, newcomer students may require support beyond what is traditionally provided in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom (Custodio, 2011; Short & Boyson, 2004). One approach to serving these students is to establish newcomer programs, which are designed to meet their unique needs and ease the transition to mainstream classrooms. Newcomer programs promote accelerated English language acquisition, develop literacy in students’ home languages, provide content-based instruction, and facilitate students’ cultural adjustment (Short & Boyson, 2012).

English language acquisition is crucial for immigrant students to access educational opportunities in their new learning environments (Kao, Vaquera, & Goyette, 2013; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Although the EL designation is intended to provide additional language support to non-English speakers, students who take longer to reclassify as English proficient tend to have lower academic outcomes compared to students who reclassified earlier or were never ELs (Flores et al., 2012). Furthermore, students who are labeled as ELs for prolonged periods of time are less likely to take courses that are required for graduation as well as advanced coursework because ESL courses dominate their sched-

ules (Callahan, 2005; Cashiola et al., 2022; Umansky, 2016). This dynamic partially explains the lower rates of college enrollment and completion among ELs (Holzman et al., 2020). Therefore, promptly developing English proficiency is important for shaping newcomer students’ long-run educational opportunities.

Las Americas Middle School is a newcomer program within HISD that serves students in Grades 4 through 8 who have been in the U.S. for less than one year. As a non-zoned school of choice, Las Americas has no attendance boundary, meaning that students and families must opt to enroll in the school. During the period of study, the school recruited and admitted newcomer students with the highest levels of academic and socio-emotional needs, as determined by the principal and other school staff. In contrast to HISD schools that had pull-out services that only provided English language instruction for part of the school day, Las Americas offered a content-based EL curriculum that integrated English language instruction throughout all core academic subjects. The goal of Las Americas was to accelerate English acquisition and prepare students to transition to a mainstream school.

This Study

This study examined English language acquisition among newcomer students in HISD between the 2007-2008 and 2018-2019 school years. Table 1 lists the outcomes examined in the study, which are based on end-of-year English proficiency exam scores (TELPAS), reclassification, and course-taking data; additional details are available from the authors upon request.

TABLE 1 Outcomes examined in the study

State-Administered English Proficiency Exam		EL Status	Course-Taking
Reading Listening Speaking	Writing Composite	Reclassification	Percent ESL Coursework

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. How did the trajectories of English acquisition vary among newcomer students by ...
 - economic disadvantage,
 - initial English oral proficiency level,
 - grade level upon arrival in HISD,
 - classification as a student with interrupted formal education (SIFE), and
 - refugee or asylee status?
2. What were the effects of attending Las Americas on English language acquisition?

To address these questions, this study focused on cohorts of newcomer students in sixth through eighth grades who arrived in HISD between the 2007-2008 and 2017-2018 school years. Student outcomes were examined through the 2018-2019 school year. The analysis for Research Question 1 estimated the trajectories of English acquisition across different subgroups of newcomer students, while the analysis for Research Question 2 estimated the causal effects of attending Las Americas for newcomer students using methods that proxied for Las Americas’ practice of recruiting students in nearby neighborhoods with high concentrations of foreign-born residents. Details on the data and methods are available from the authors upon request.



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Results

Trajectories of English Language Acquisition among Middle School Newcomer Students

- 1. Newcomer students that had the lowest levels of English proficiency at the end of their first year in HISD were those that 1) first entered HISD with the lowest levels of English proficiency, 2) experienced interrupted formal education, and 3) came to HISD as refugees or asylees.**

Patterns of English language acquisition were not the same for different groups of newcomer students. Examining these trajectories revealed that after the first year in HISD:

- Compared to higher-scoring students, students who had low scores on the initial English oral proficiency exam (IPT) scored 0.50 points lower on the end-of-year English proficiency exam (TELPAS).
- SIFE students scored 0.07 points lower on the end-of-year English proficiency exam compared to non-SIFE students.
- Refugee and asylee students scored 0.19 points lower on the end-of-year English proficiency exam compared to non-refugee/asylee students.

These differences are highlighted in Figure 1, which plots end-of-year English proficiency exam (TELPAS) composite scores on the y-axis. For each subgroup, there is a gap between the red and blue lines during the first year attending HISD schools.

English proficiency growth rates did not significantly differ by initial English oral proficiency exam (IPT) score and refugee and asylee status, meaning that the disparity in English language proficiency persisted over time. As shown in Figure 1, the red and blue lines for graphs A and C do not converge, indicating that newcomer students with lower initial English oral proficiency exam scores and refugee/asylee students continue to have lower levels of English proficiency over time compared to their higher-achieving and non-refugee/asylee counterparts. When comparing SIFE and non-SIFE students, as shown in graph B, SIFE students appear to catch up to non-SIFE students during their fourth year attending HISD schools despite having lower levels of English proficiency in the earlier years.

With respect to economic status, the analyses showed that economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students achieved similar English proficiency levels in the earlier years (see Figure 2A). However, economically disadvantaged students experienced faster growth rates such that they had slightly higher end-of-year English proficiency exam scores than non-economically disadvantaged students during their third and fourth years attending HISD schools. In terms of grade level, newcomer students who entered HISD as seventh and eighth graders initially had higher end-of-year English proficiency exam scores than students who entered HISD as sixth graders (see Figure 2B). However, the pace of English proficiency growth did not differ over time by grade level. These additional results are available from the authors upon request.

FIGURE 1

Disparities in English acquisition among newcomer students persisted over time for students with low initial English oral proficiency and refugee/asylee students but not for SIFE students.

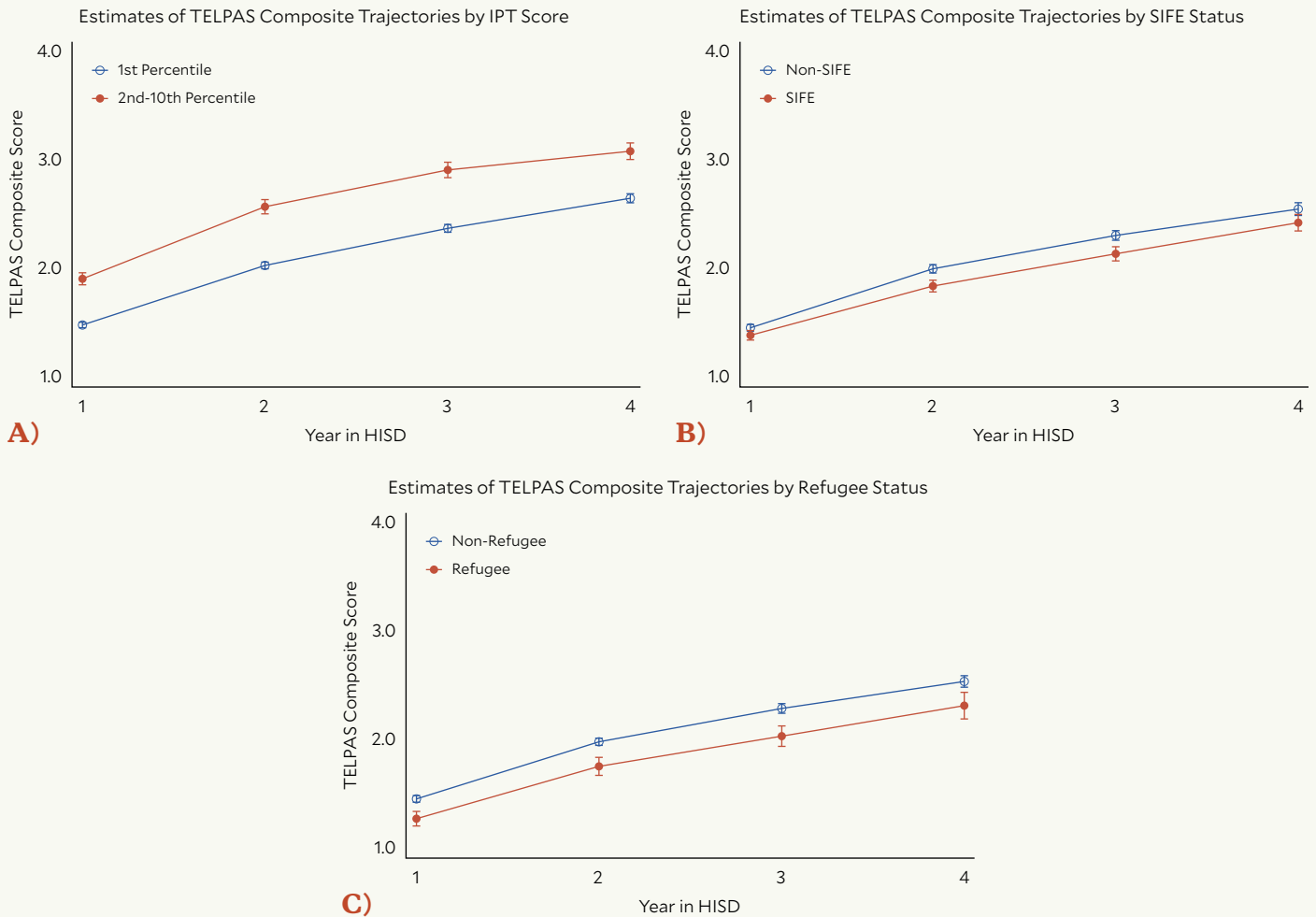


FIGURE 2

Economically disadvantaged students experienced faster growth rates in English acquisition than non-economically disadvantaged students. English acquisition growth rates did not vary by grade level.

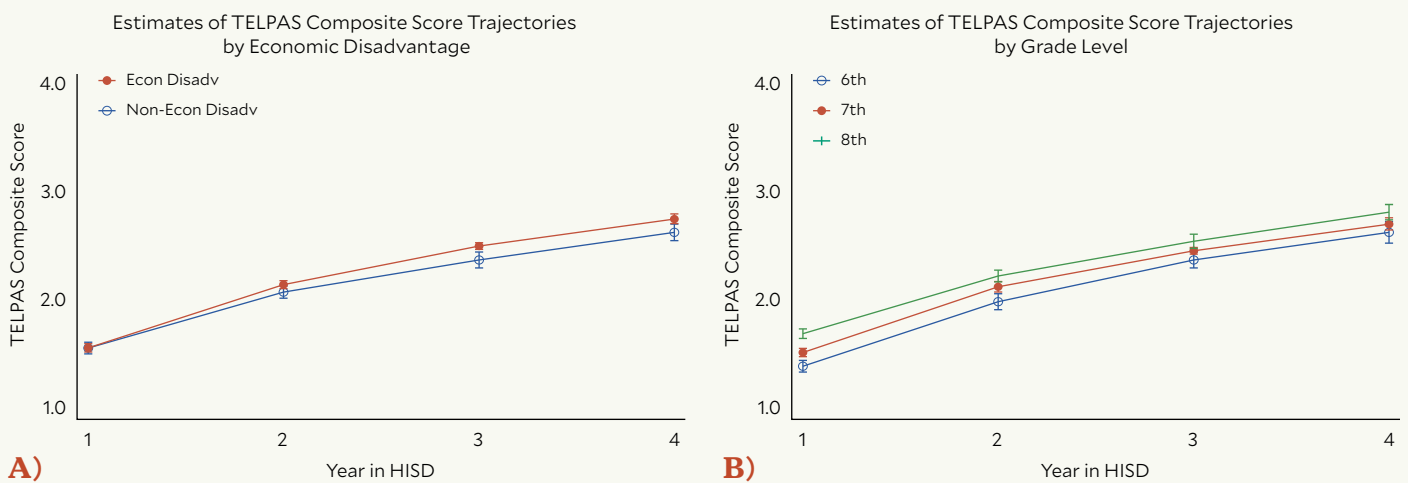
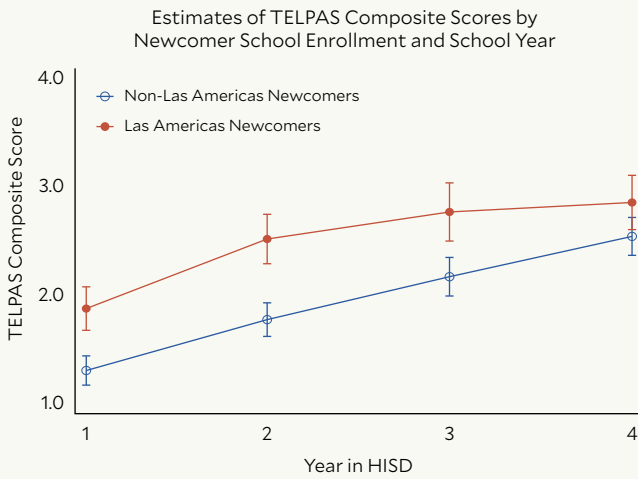


FIGURE 3

Attending Las Americas had a positive effect on newcomer students' end-of-year English proficiency exam (TELPAS) scores, especially in earlier years.



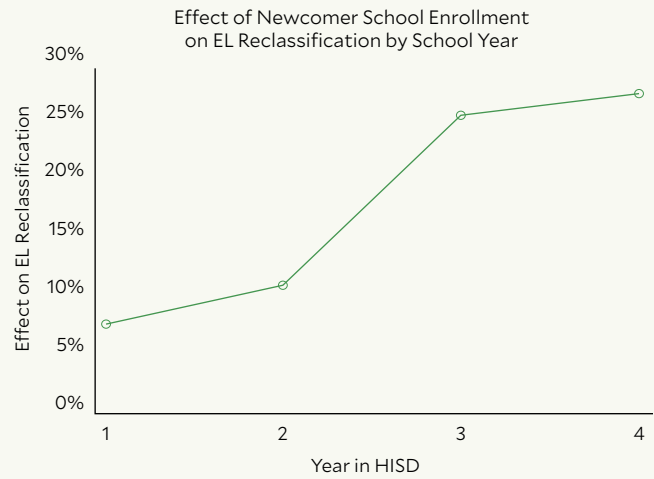
Effects of Las Americas Attendance on English Language Acquisition

2. Attending Las Americas had a positive effect on newcomer students' end-of-year English proficiency exam scores and increased their probability of being reclassified as English proficient.

Attending Las Americas improved newcomer students' English proficiency both in the form of end-of-year English proficiency exam (TELPAS) scores and their likelihood of being reclassified as English proficient. As shown in Figure 3, Las Americas students (represented by the red line) experienced a boost in end-of-year English proficiency exam scores, on average, compared to newcomer students who did not attend Las Americas (represented by the blue line). The magnitude of this effect was especially pronounced in the early years when Las Americas attendance resulted in a 0.61-point and a 0.79-point increase in end-of-year English proficiency exam scores during the first two years in HISD, respectively. In practical terms, at the end of their second

FIGURE 4

Attending Las Americas increased the likelihood of being reclassified as English proficient, and the size of this effect grew over time.

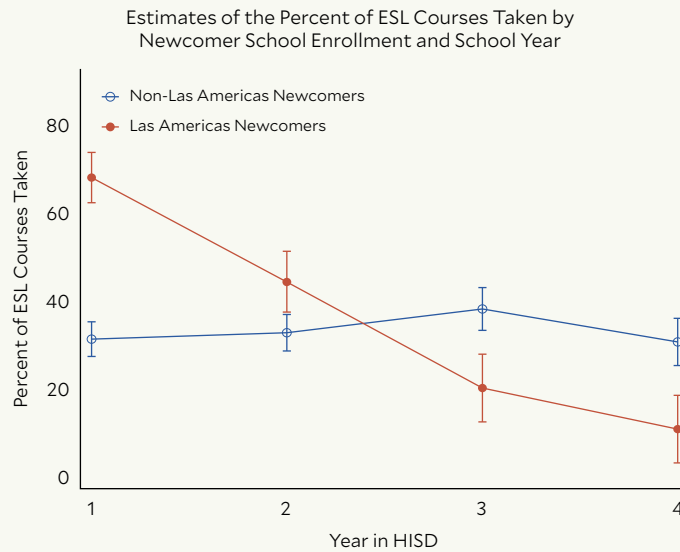


year in HISD, the average Las Americas student had “intermediate” English proficiency, as outlined by the end-of-year English proficiency exam, while the average newcomer who attended another HISD school still had “beginning” English proficiency.

In addition to increasing newcomer students' end-of-year English proficiency exam scores, Las Americas attendance significantly impacted newcomer students' probability of being reclassified as English proficient during their first four years attending HISD schools. Figure 4 plots the effect of attending Las Americas on EL reclassification: the percentage-point difference in EL reclassification rates between newcomer students who attended Las Americas Middle School and newcomer students who attended other schools in HISD. Compared to newcomer students who attended other HISD schools, the impact of Las Americas attendance on EL reclassification increased over time, from a 7-percentage-point greater likelihood of reclassification during the first year attending HISD schools to a 29-percentage-point greater likelihood of reclassification during the fourth year.

FIGURE 5

Attending Las Americas resulted in a much steeper decline in the proportion of ESL courses taken by newcomer students over time, with Las Americas students taking a smaller share of ESL courses the longer they were enrolled in HISD.



3. Over time, newcomer students who attended Las Americas took a significantly smaller share of ESL courses compared to newcomer students who did not attend Las Americas.

Attending Las Americas allowed newcomer students to take more non-ESL courses over time. This is important because taking fewer ESL courses may allow recently arrived immigrant students to free up their course schedules to take other subject-area courses that are required for high school graduation and college enrollment (Callahan, 2005; Cashiola et al., 2022; Holzman et al., 2020).

During their first year in HISD, newcomer students who attended Las Americas Middle School took more ESL coursework than newcomer students who attended other HISD schools: 68% ESL coursework among Las Americas students vs. 31% ESL coursework among other newcomers (Figure 5). During their second year in HISD, Las Americas students (44% ESL coursework) still took more ESL coursework than newcomers at other schools (33% ESL coursework). However, during

their third and fourth years in HISD, students who attended Las Americas took *fewer* ESL courses than newcomers who attended other HISD schools. For example, during their fourth year in HISD, 11% of the courses Las Americas students took were ESL courses, while 31% of the courses other newcomers took were ESL.

The timing of the decline in the percentage of ESL courses taken also corresponds to when Las Americas students are likely exiting Las Americas and beginning to attend a non-newcomer school. This suggests that Las Americas has a positive effect on facilitating the transition out of the ESL track, which may play a role in the school's strong effects on reclassification.

Summary and Discussion

English language acquisition is one of the most important factors shaping how immigrant students transition into the U.S. educational system (Kao, Vaquera, & Goyette, 2013; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). The results from this study showed that the English proficiency trajectories of newcomer students varied among subgroups. Specifically, newcomer students who had the lowest initial English oral proficiency exam scores, were SIFE, and were refugees or asylees achieved lower levels of English proficiency during their first year in HISD. While SIFE students were able to catch up to their non-SIFE counterparts over time, disparities in English proficiency persisted by initial English oral proficiency exam score and refugee/asylee status.

As a newcomer school, Las Americas Middle School serves recently arrived immigrant, English learner students who have faced pressing challenges and arrive with very low levels of English proficiency. This study found that attending Las Americas had strong, positive effects on English language acquisition and reclassification. Further study in different schools, districts, and states is, of course, warranted, but the newcomer program implemented at Las Americas appears to be a promising strategy to address HISD immigrant students' education, particularly their English language acquisition. Additional research may be able to determine the specific aspects that made Las Americas so effective (e.g., intense language instruction, wraparound services, and mental health counseling).

Recommendations

Given the findings from this study of newcomer students' English language acquisition, the research team offers the following recommendations:

- **Provide targeted support to different groups of newcomer students, namely students with lower baseline English proficiency scores and refugee/asylee students:** The results showed that the lowest-achieving newcomer students and refugees/asylees had similar rates of growth compared to higher-achieving newcomer students and non-refugees/asylees. Thus, one way that school districts may continue to provide support to newcomer students is to dedicate targeted attention to specific groups of them, especially those who demonstrate low levels of baseline English proficiency and are classified as refugees or asylees.
- **Continue to support the instructional model at Las Americas:** Newcomer students who attended Las Americas achieved higher end-of-year English proficiency exam scores, had a greater probability of being reclassified as English proficient within the first three years of arrival, and took a smaller share of ESL coursework compared to newcomer students who did not attend Las Americas. This indicates that Las Americas is effective in helping newcomer students gain English language



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proficiency. While identifying the specific aspects of Las Americas' instructional model that facilitate English acquisition is beyond the scope of this study, it is possible that several practices implemented by the school act in concert with one another to bring about positive change for newcomer students. To that end, HISD should continue to support the instructional model that Las Americas has used to serve recently arrived immigrant, English learner students.

- **Look to Las Americas as a bright spot and opportunity for learning:** Despite the evidence suggesting that Las Americas is achieving its goal of expediting English language acquisition for newcomer students, it is worth acknowledging that establishing more newcomer schools like Las Americas may not be feasible due to constraints in cost and staffing. An alternative that may be more adaptable to the HISD context is to draw upon Las Americas as an important in-house resource and example for other schools serving large newcomer populations and to learn best practices that can better address their unique needs.

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RICE UNIVERSITY

Kinder Institute for Urban Research

6100 Main Street MS-208 • Houston, TX 77005
713-348-4132 • kinder@rice.edu
kinder.rice.edu