

# Four Commentaries: Looking to the Future

To provide an array of perspectives about policies needed to serve the growing number of children of immigrant families in our country, we asked experts across various organizations and backgrounds to respond to this question: “How should policymakers, advocates, stakeholders, and practitioners respond strategically and proactively to demographic change and increasing diversity in order to promote the healthy development, productivity, and well-being of our nation’s children into the future?” Their responses follow.

## COMMENTARY 1

**Mark Greenberg and Hedieh Rahmanou**

**T**he United States is in the midst of a profound demographic shift, to which our workforce and family support policies have not yet adequately responded. Almost one-fifth of the nation’s children, and one-quarter of the nation’s low-income children, are now immigrants or the children of immigrants.<sup>1</sup> One-fifth of the nation’s low-wage workforce is comprised of immigrants, and half of the nation’s job growth during the 1990s was attributable to immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Any national strategy for reducing child poverty, promoting child well-being, and helping low-wage workers advance must address the needs and circumstances of immigrants and their children.

Federal policy has largely taken the opposite approach. In 1996, Congress elected to restrict access to food assistance, health care, income support, employment services, and other benefits and services for legal immigrants. Since that time, there have been limited partial repeals of some, but not most, of the restrictions.

The result has been curtailed eligibility, a patchwork of uneven state and local responses, and sharp drops in participation among families that could benefit from services and assistance.

As the articles in this issue and other analyses make clear, children of immigrants are likely to suffer significantly greater hardships than children of U.S.-born parents, and they are less likely to be receiving public benefits that could reduce their hardships and enhance their well-being. Moreover, the nation’s workforce policies deny immigrant parents the assistance that might help them advance beyond the low-wage labor market.

This commentary summarizes some of the key data suggesting the magnitude of the problem, and proposes a set of policies that could enhance the well-being of this significant and growing share of the nation’s children.

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### Income, Poverty, and Hardship among Immigrant Families

In 2002, about 19% of the nation's children and roughly one-quarter (26%) of the nation's low-income children (with family incomes below 200% of poverty) were children of immigrants.<sup>3</sup> The poverty rate among children of immigrants was 22%, compared with 14% for children of U.S.-born parents. Most children of immigrants (51%) live in families with incomes below 200% of poverty. As detailed by Hernandez in this journal issue, on virtually every measure of hardship, children in immigrant families fare less well than children in families of U.S.-born parents. For example, children of immigrants are more than four times as likely to live in crowded housing and nearly twice as likely to be uninsured. They are more likely to have poorer health, and to live in families worried about affording food.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, low-income immigrant families are more likely to contain a worker than are low-income families with parents born in the United States. As explained by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue, the fundamental difficulty faced by low-income immigrant families is not unemployment but low wages, substantially attributable to limited language proficiency and education. In 2002, nearly half (48%) of foreign-born workers were low-wage workers.<sup>5</sup> Among these low-wage workers, most (62%) were limited English proficient, and nearly half (45%) had not completed high school. Legal status is a significant issue for some, but most low-wage foreign-born workers in the United States are here lawfully.<sup>6</sup>

Two key parts of a strategy to improve the well-being of immigrants and their children are (1) increasing participation in key public benefits for families and children; and (2) improving the workforce status and prospects of adults.

### Immigrant Families and Public Benefits

Before the federal welfare reform law was signed into law on August 22, 1996, legal immigrants were generally eligible for federal public benefits under the same terms as citizens, and states did not have discretion to develop their own rules for determining immigrants' eligibility for public assistance. But with passage of the 1996 law and implementation of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a wide range of restric-

tions on immigrant eligibility for federal public benefits was imposed.<sup>7</sup> Some of the 1996 provisions were subsequently modified, but Congress has maintained substantial restrictions affecting most legal immigrants. (See Box 1.)

The impacts of the 1996 law have been dramatic. Between 1996 and 2001, the share of adult TANF recipients who are non-citizens fell from 12.3% to 8.0%; the share of food stamp recipients who are non-citizens fell from 7.1% to 3.7%;<sup>8</sup> and the percentage of immigrant households in which any non-citizen received benefits from Medicaid or the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) fell from 12.0% to 8.7%.<sup>9</sup> By 2001, low-income non-citizen children were half as likely to participate in Medicaid or SCHIP as low-income citizen children.

The 1996 restrictions appear to have resulted in drops in program participation even among those children who remained eligible for benefits. In 2002, nearly three-quarters (72%) of all children with immigrant parents were citizens living with one or more non-citizen parents in "mixed status" families.<sup>10</sup> Although children living in such families qualify for public benefits under the same conditions as other citizen children, their rates of TANF and food stamp receipt are substantially lower.<sup>11</sup> Low-income children in mixed status families are more likely than low-income children with citizen parents to participate in Medicaid or SCHIP, but because their parents are less likely to have employer-based health coverage, children in mixed status families are much less likely to have health insurance.<sup>12</sup> In 2002, 22% of citizen children in low-income families with at least one non-citizen parent had no health insurance, compared to 12% of low-income children whose parents are citizens.<sup>13</sup>

Although some states have provided state-funded benefits in response to the federal restrictions,<sup>14</sup> the state response has not been sufficient to counteract the effect of federal restrictions. State substitute programs do not exist in some states, and some state programs are limited in scope. Among the seven states with the largest immigrant populations (California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, and Arizona), only California offers substitute programs in all three areas of health, nutrition, and cash assistance.<sup>15</sup>

## Box 1

### Restrictions on Benefits for Legal Immigrants

- ▶ **Welfare.** Most legal immigrants are ineligible for benefits under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program during their first five years in the United States. Even after the “five-year bar,” other restrictions apply. It is up to each state to decide whether to provide assistance to most legal immigrants who have lived in the United States for more than five years and whether to use state funds to provide benefits during the first five years.
- ▶ **Food stamps.** Most legal immigrant adults are ineligible for food stamps during their first five years in the United States. Under a change in law that became effective in October 2003, legal immigrant children are no longer ineligible during their first five years in the United States.
- ▶ **Supplemental Security Income (SSI).** Most legal immigrants are ineligible for SSI unless they were enrolled in SSI on August 22, 1996, or entered the United States by that date and are disabled.
- ▶ **Health benefits.** Most legal immigrants are ineligible for health benefits under Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) during their first five years in the United States.

Note: Refugees, asylees, and certain other humanitarian immigrants are not subject to any of these restrictions during their first seven years in the United States (first five years with respect to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families).

It is up to each state to decide whether to provide coverage to legal immigrants who have lived in the United States for more than five years. However, states must provide emergency Medicaid to immigrants regardless of whether they are eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP, and legal immigrants receiving SSI remain eligible for SSI-based Medicaid.

- ▶ **Sponsor deeming.** Congress imposed additional restrictions through sponsor-to-immigrant “deeming.” The income and resources of the sponsors of lawful permanent residents who enter the United States after December 1997 are deemed available to them when judging their income eligibility for the major means-tested public benefit programs, regardless of whether the sponsors provide any actual assistance to the immigrants. As a result, many legal immigrants could remain ineligible for public benefits even after they have lived in the United States for more than five years. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently clarified that federal law provides states with significant flexibility in implementing the sponsor deeming rules, but prior to receiving this guidance, many states had already adopted strict deeming requirements.

Restrictions on eligibility explain much, but not all, of the decline in program participation among immigrant families. As noted, program participation has fallen among those losing eligibility, but in addition, participation in TANF and food stamps has fallen among citizen children in mixed status households whose eligibility was not affected. Factors that may prevent parents from applying for benefits for themselves or for their children include confusion or lack of knowledge about eligibility, limited English proficiency, and parental non-citizen status.

Low-income immigrants often do not understand program eligibility rules. In a survey of immigrants in Los Angeles and New York City, 50% of low-income

respondents gave incorrect answers to at least two out of three questions about program eligibility, wrongly believing that their immigration status would be jeopardized if they or their citizen children were to receive benefits.<sup>16</sup>

Immigrant parents with limited English proficiency may also experience difficulty gaining access to public benefits for their children. The study of immigrants in Los Angeles and New York City found that respondents with limited English proficiency were more likely to experience hardship and poverty regardless of citizenship or legal status.<sup>17</sup> Language barriers can prevent families from learning that coverage is available or how to apply. An Urban Institute study of the application process

concluded that interpretation services for telephone communication and provisions of translated written material are critical to access but are often overlooked or insufficiently addressed.<sup>18</sup>

Fear of adverse immigration consequences among families with mixed citizenship status also inhibits use of benefits.<sup>19</sup> Families may be particularly fearful of application procedures that include finger imaging, home visits, and rigorous eligibility verification because they associate these procedures with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (now the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in the Department of Homeland Security).<sup>20</sup> Additionally, many immigrants are under the erroneous impression that if they apply for benefits, the Department of Homeland Security will label them a “public charge,” and will prevent them from obtaining a green card, reentering the country, or reuniting with their relatives.<sup>21</sup> In fact, those legal immigrants who are actually eligible for benefits are rarely subject to public charge test.<sup>22</sup>

### **Immigrants and Access to Workforce Development**

Low levels of educational attainment and limited English proficiency restrict employment opportunities for many immigrants. For example, 38% of immigrant adults did not finish high school, compared to 21% of U.S.-born adults.<sup>23</sup> Roughly 7.4 million adults do not speak English well or do not speak English at all, comprising 32% of all foreign-born adults.<sup>24</sup> Limited English proficiency is strongly correlated with higher rates of unemployment, low-earnings, and high poverty rates.<sup>25</sup> Access to programs that increase English proficiency, educational attainment, and job training are critical to improved labor market outcomes for these adults.

Employment services through TANF could help unemployed and low-earning immigrant parents, but such parents are often ineligible for TANF assistance due to immigrant eligibility restrictions. Moreover, for those who receive assistance, the program’s strong orientation toward immediate work placement rather than skill-building activities reduces the likelihood that they will receive services to address educational or language needs.<sup>26</sup>

Another important vehicle for providing employment services to adults is through the structure of state and local workforce boards and one-stop centers under the

Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Apart from federal funding for higher education, WIA is probably the principal federal source of training and training-related services for adults. However, there is evidence that unemployed and low-earning immigrant adults are significantly underserved by the WIA system. Roughly 12% of low-wage workers have limited English proficiency.<sup>27</sup> Yet in program year 2001 (from July 1, 2001 through June 30, 2002), only 5.8% of adults who received training services were individuals with limited English proficiency. Moreover, among those with limited English proficiency seeking WIA services, less than half (48%) received training.<sup>28</sup>

### **Policy Recommendations**

To improve the well-being of low-income immigrant families, it is important to increase access to supports that can reduce poverty and help address children’s basic needs, and to take steps to enhance the employment prospects of the parents.

First, the restrictions on access to health care, food assistance, and public benefits eligibility for legal immigrants established by the 1996 law should be repealed. The ostensible justification for such policies had been to

discourage individuals from immigrating to the United States in search of, or with the expectation of, relying on public benefits. However, the goals of immigration policy should be advanced by determining and enforcing the rules relating to immigration, not by restricting access of immigrant families and children to important public benefits. It is counter-productive to deny immigrant families access to the services that could improve parents' employment prospects and promote children's healthy development and school readiness. The restrictions on access to public benefits have resulted in significant hardships. There is no good policy justification for federal law to allow or require states to discriminate against immigrant children and families.

Second, until the federal restrictions are repealed, states should maintain existing programs that provide replacement benefits. In addition, states should provide federally funded Medicaid, SCHIP, and TANF benefits to legal immigrants who have lived in the United States for more than five years, and should consider providing state-funded replacement benefits to immigrants subject to the five-year bar. Extending TANF benefits to the immigrant parents of citizen children receiving TANF has modest marginal costs and has the added benefit of giving the parent access to welfare-to-work services.

Additionally, states need to make active efforts to improve participation in public programs among eligible immigrant families. Experiences in states point to a set of practices that can enhance participation:

- To reduce confusion about eligibility, locations that serve as “points of access” should utilize a combination of specialized caseworkers and systems that automatically determine eligibility based on prompts for required information.
- To increase access among limited English speakers, translated written notices and communications should be made available. The use of untrained interpreters such as children should be discouraged. Additionally, research shows that bilingual staff are more likely to be available in community- and health-based settings, and that immigrant families are more likely to apply for benefits at community health clinics and other non-welfare settings.<sup>29</sup> Offering simplified applications in such non-welfare settings will increase access to benefits to limited English speakers.
- To alleviate fears of threatened immigration status, applications should be modified to reduce requests for sensitive information (such as immigration status or social security numbers ) from family members not applying for benefits.

Steps should also be taken to promote better labor force outcomes for immigrant parents who are eligible to work in the United States. Federal and state policy initiatives designed to expand access to higher education and labor force advancement for low-earning workers could provide significant assistance to low-earning workers in immigrant families. In addition, eliminating restrictions on TANF eligibility could improve access to employment services for unemployed parents. Ensuring that activities to improve English language acquisition count toward program participation requirements could help ensure that such services are made available.

A set of changes to federal law could improve both access to, and the quality of, training and other workforce services for a broad range of unemployed and underemployed workers, including those with limited English proficiency.<sup>30</sup> Changes that could improve access for immigrants in particular are as follows:

- Federal performance standards governing the workforce system and any common performance standards across systems should be structured in ways that do not discourage providing services to persons with limited English proficiency.<sup>31</sup>
- Federal law should encourage the development of “integrated training programs” that combine job training and language acquisition, to help immigrants with limited English proficiency gain job training and English skills at the same time.<sup>32</sup> The development of such programs could be encouraged through a combination of research and demonstration funding, technical assistance to states and localities, data reporting, performance measurement, and state plan requirements.
- Federal law should encourage a significantly enhanced effort by one-stop centers to ensure that career counseling, vocational assessment, and other services are structured to meet the needs of job seekers and workers with limited English proficiency.<sup>33</sup>



- States should review their procedures to ensure that translated documents are made available and are consistent with federal civil rights requirements.<sup>34</sup>

Congress also needs to act to address the situation of undocumented immigrants who are residing in the United States but are not eligible to work here legally. Broader issues around immigration policy, including amnesty and guest worker proposals, are beyond the scope of this commentary. However, it seems clear that it will be impossible to fully address the needs of all children in immigrant families, or the labor force prospects of all immigrant parents, as long as substantial numbers

of immigrant parents residing in the United States are not allowed to lawfully work in this country.

Ultimately, federal policy must take a new course, one that shifts away from the goal of restricting assistance to immigrant families, and instead acknowledges the need to provide family supports and employment services to help ensure that children of immigrants thrive and that their parents can progress in the labor force.

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## ENDNOTES

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2. Capps, R., Fix, M., and Passel, J., et al. *A profile of the low-wage immigrant workforce*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, October 2003. Available online at [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310880\\_lowwage\\_immig\\_wkfc.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310880_lowwage_immig_wkfc.pdf).
3. See note 1, Capps, et al.
4. See also the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue.
5. See note 2, Capps, et al.
6. Most low-wage foreign-born workers (60%) were in the United States lawfully. See the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue.
7. It is less clear how implementation of the 1996 law affected participation in child care subsidy programs for immigrant families. Children who are legal immigrants are generally eligible for child care subsidies under the Child Care and Development Block Grant. No research was found providing information about the share of children in low-income immigrant families participating in child care subsidy programs at the time of, or subsequent to, enactment of the 1996 welfare law.
8. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means. *2003 green book: Background material and data on programs within the jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004. Appendix J: Welfare benefits for noncitizens. Appendix J available online at <http://waysandmeans.house.gov/media/pdf/greenbook2003/AppendixJ.pdf>. (Note: In 1996, data reflect participation in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program.)
9. The percentage of low-income non-citizen children participating in Medicaid or SCHIP fell (from 28.6% to 24.8%) at the same time that participation by low-income citizen children was rising (from 42.8% to 47.6%). See Ku, L., Fremstad, S., and Broaddus, M. *Noncitizens' use of public benefits has declined since 1996: Recent report paints misleading picture of impact of eligibility restrictions on immigrant families*. Washington, DC: Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, April 2003. Available online at <http://www.cbpp.org/4-14-03wcl.htm>.
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12. In 2001, 50.1% of low-income citizen children in mixed status families participated in Medicaid or SCHIP, compared to 46.2% of citizen children with citizen parents; See note 9, Ku, et al.
13. See note 10, Capps, et al.
14. Twenty-four states use their own funds to offer some form of state-funded TANF cash assistance during the federal five-year ineligibility period, and forty states offer TANF to lawful permanent residents after the five-year bar ends. See Wasem, R. *Noncitizen eligibility for major federal public assistance programs: Policies and*

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  27. Calculations based on data from note 2, Capps, et al. Immigrants comprise 20% of the low-wage workers, and 62% of low-wage immigrant workers have limited English proficiency.
  28. Calculations based on CLASP analysis of Program Year 2001 Workforce Investment Act Standardized Record Data (WIASRD).
  29. See note 18, Holcomb, et al.
  30. Patel, N., and Strawn, J. *WIA reauthorization recommendations*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, July 2003. Available online at: [http://www.clasp.org/DMS/Documents/1057258510.44/WIA\\_Recomm.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/DMS/Documents/1057258510.44/WIA_Recomm.pdf).
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## COMMENTARY 2

Harris N. Miller

E-mail. Instant messaging. File sharing. Internet games and entertainment. The reality is clear: The technological knowledge of many of America's children already surpasses that of their parents, teachers, religious and government leaders. A 15-year-old child in high school today has probably never known life and learning without computers and the Internet. Today's children are the Internet generation.

Not all children enjoy equal access to computers, however. Minority children and children of immigrants, in particular, tend to have less access to computers and the Internet, both at home and at school.<sup>1</sup> To ensure that all of our nation's children are reaping the benefits of information technology (IT), policymakers and stakeholders must take an active interest in promoting math, science, and technology education to today's youth, and they must promote ubiquitous broadband (high speed) Internet access.<sup>2</sup>

IT is important to the nation's children—and the nation—in several ways. First, it can be a catalyst for changing how American children learn. As noted in the article by García Coll and Szalacha in this journal issue, research reveals that use of computers can enhance learning by giving children opportunities to both be more self-directed and to collaborate with others.<sup>3</sup> For those who acquire skills in this area, IT offers the potential of well-paying jobs into the future. In addition, IT holds promise for facilitating the delivery of a wide range of services, including health care. Finally, IT also has the potential to extend the reach of democracy by breaking down the barriers to political participation.

### The Demographics of IT

Minority children tend to have less access to computer technology both at school and at home. This disparate

access is tied, for the most part, to disparate school and family socioeconomic status. Income, education, and ethnicity are all strong predictors of the type of access children have to IT.<sup>4</sup> Gender also can play a role, with girls traditionally tending to use computers less than boys.

There are some hopeful signs, however. Programs, such as E-rate, are helping to reduce the digital divide in public schools. Also, as technology has expanded the use of computers beyond games to include e-mail, instant messaging, and schoolwork assignments, the disparities in use between genders has diminished. In 1998, girls reported using home computers as often, and with as much confidence, as boys.<sup>5</sup> Still, more must be done to ensure that all of America's children have access to the increasingly technological world that is evolving.

### The Potential of IT

Broadband access to the Internet will bring new opportunities for e-learning, e-work, and e-government to today's children. The price for high-speed connections will continue to fall, and the Internet in classrooms and homes will become ubiquitous. For today's children, Internet anytime, anywhere can benefit their lives in many ways.

### Changing How Students Learn

Promoting math, science, and technology education among all demographic and socioeconomic groups is an important first step to improving the lives of America's children. Math and science form the foundation that children need to advance in technology fields. Unfortunately, many children—especially minority children and children of immigrants growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods—do not have equal access to technology to inspire them to pursue these fields. As of 1999, 39% of disadvantaged schools were not connected to the Internet.<sup>6</sup> But even among children who do have access, many “turn off” to these subjects as early as the third grade. Once children decide that math and science are too difficult, too boring, or too irrelevant, they begin to take themselves out of the technology pipeline.

The high school graduating class of 2008 will be the largest in our nation's history.<sup>7</sup> While the high school population is growing, the number of colleges and universities is not. The opportunity to spend four years on a college campus is likely to become increasingly difficult.

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This fact alone is reason for stakeholders—specifically state, local, and federal government—to improve technology access to children. Broadband Internet access is an important educational tool and governments have an interest in seeing this technology integrated into the learning process.

The Web-Based Education Commission outlined the importance of broadband accessibility in its first call to action in December 2000, urging Congress and the president to “make powerful new Internet resources, especially broadband access, widely and equitably available and affordable for all learners.”<sup>8</sup> Through technology that enables broadband Internet access, stakeholders have the opportunity to extend the benefits of e-education and lifelong learning to economically disadvantaged, geographically remote, inner city, and other “offline” demographic groups.

Indeed, e-learning can benefit children in the classroom by enabling educators to utilize the Internet to aug-

ment lesson plans. It can also open doors to additional learning at home, in libraries and community centers on weekends, evenings, and summer vacations. Thanks to technology, future generations have the opportunity to experience learning on levels today’s adults never enjoyed.

### Growing the Economy

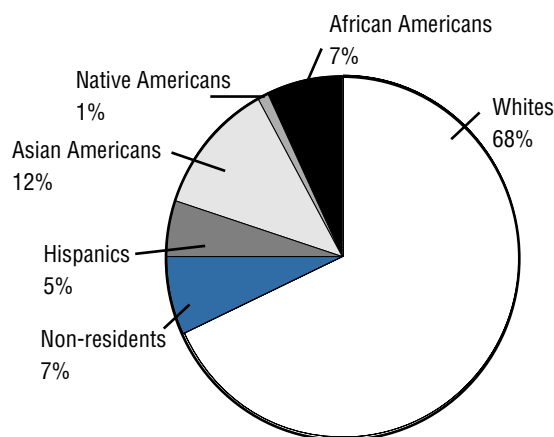
IT is important to the American economy and to future employment opportunities for America’s youth. As discussed in the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue, the demand for high-skilled workers, especially those with technological and computer skills, is increasing—and not just for jobs such as computer programmers and other technical positions. The article points out that a wide array of jobs now prefer or require some knowledge of computers, from manufacturing jobs to retail sales positions, and that this trend is likely to continue.

Moreover, the growing practice of sending technology work—specifically programming, help desk, and back office operations—to workers in low-wage countries is likely to heighten demand for an even more technologically-savvy workforce in the United States. While off-shore outsourcing has the unfortunate consequence of job dislocation in the short term, history and economics tell us that the globalization of jobs will ultimately result in new, better high-paying jobs created here at home, at the same time expanding markets for our products overseas. Technology will continue to play an integral role. By contributing to a strong knowledge base in math and science, today’s children will help ensure that the nation’s economy creates new, high-paying industries using technology for decades to come.

To realize this vision, however, U.S. children must have the foundation, tools, and inspiration to create and work in the great industries of tomorrow. Unfortunately, many youth are not preparing themselves adequately for this technological future. By the time they reach college age, relatively few minorities and women choose to enter computer science and engineering fields at the undergraduate level. In the 1999-2000 academic years, the number of white college graduates nationwide with degrees in computer science, engineering, or an engineering related field far outstripped the percentage of minorities. (See Figure 1.) Similar data show that

**Figure 1**

### Undergraduate Degrees in Computer Science, Engineering, and Engineering-Related Technologies, 1999-2000



Source: National Center for Education Statistics. *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, “Completions” Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, July 2001. Total number earning degrees in these subjects: 108,494.

women received 22% of the undergraduate degrees in the computer science and engineering related fields, compared with 78% for men.<sup>9</sup>

Although small gains have been made in the numbers of minorities and women working as IT professionals, these groups still are underrepresented in the IT workforce overall.<sup>10</sup>

For example, African Americans made up 10.9% of the U.S. workforce in 2002, but only 8.2% of the IT workforce. The underrepresentation among Hispanics and Native Americans was even greater, with Hispanics making up 12.2% of the U.S. workforce but only 6.3% of the IT workforce, and Native Americans accounting for 0.9% of the U.S. workforce, but only 0.6% of the IT workforce. Overall, women made up 46.6% of the U.S. workforce in 2002, but only 34.9% of the IT workforce.

The reasons for underrepresentation in IT and related fields are diverse. As mentioned earlier, lack of access is clearly a factor. But other factors may also contribute, including an absence of appropriate role models, an information gap at the school level, or persistence of stereotypes that may impede interest on the part of young people in studying math and science, or present roadblocks to hiring qualified minorities. Whatever the reasons, one thing is clear: Society must continue to peel away hindrances to progress on the part of underrepresented groups in IT.

### Improving Service Delivery

Broadband Internet access enables the creation of an electronic government—or “e-government”—that looks and acts far different than the government of today. Many state and federal agencies are already offering services through the Internet, allowing citizens to avoid travel time and waiting in lines. Internet sites such as [www.firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov) allow individuals access to information on vehicle registration and drivers licenses, professional licenses, vital records, social services, relocation, jobs, bills in the state legislature, news, and much more. Businesses can tap these government portals for information on procurement, taxes, licenses, regulations, road construction, complaints, building permits, labor rates, court opinions, and other critical information on state and local business requirements.

Of special importance to children, high-speed Internet technologies can also deliver improved healthcare. Rural areas, states, and communities that are traditionally underserved by the medical community are benefiting from “telemedicine”—the use of information technology to deliver medical services and information from one location to another. For example, it enables physicians to consult with patients from long distances, making preventive medicine and routine well-child visits more accessible. While technology cannot deliver a vaccination, the Internet can also be an important educational tool for parents on the importance of childhood vaccines and check-ups.

### Expanding Political Participation

Beyond bringing faster, more efficient services, the potential unlocked by Internet voting could allow today's children to be much more involved in governing when they reach adulthood compared with previous generations. For example, the Michigan Democratic Party recently announced over 42,000 voters participated in their caucus process through online voting in February 2004, about twice the number of voters who normally participate in “in person” caucuses. Through such innovative practices, the Internet has the potential to involve more citizens than ever before in the democratic process. At a time when historically low numbers of Americans even go to the polls, online voting and other Internet mobilization strategies should be explored and promoted by stakeholders.

### Conclusion

Most Americans do not question the premise that technology is making their lives better with each decade. At work, productivity increases, the American economy strengthens, and U.S. jobs provide more value because of technology. At home, technology allows parents to spend more time with family and less time on the road or waiting in lines, and both children and adults can expand their knowledge base like never before.

To realize the promise that technology holds of raising the standard of living for today's children, however, stakeholders must take action. They must strengthen math and science public education for all students—both boys and girls of all races and socioeconomic groups. And they must endorse broadband applications such as e-learning, e-work, e-health, and e-government that

promote children's strong development, productivity, and well-being. With access to quality instruction and compelling content, children will grow and expand their horizons in directions never before considered or even dreamed of. Just as the IT industry of today could not have been imagined 25 years ago, children of today will generate ideas and found companies—maybe even entire industries—25 years from now with business proposi-

tions that are not even imaginable today. But one thing that is imaginable today is that technology will likely be the foundation of many of the future endeavors of our nation's children. Ensuring all the nation's children acquire skills in technology not only promotes their individual success, doing so also helps ensure continued American global competitiveness and innovation into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## COMMENTARY 3

Karen M. Kaufmann and J. Celeste Lay

Political organizing on behalf of children and the poor is a persistent uphill battle. Since the War on Poverty in the 1960s, federal commitments to programs that enhance youth educational opportunities and health care access have declined or stagnated as a proportion of the federal budget. While the American public voices generic support for vulnerable children, widely held negative stereotypes about poor adults and individualistic explanations for poverty stymie political efforts to create family-friendly initiatives.

Recent and projected levels of foreign immigration indicate that racial and ethnic minorities will comprise an ever-growing proportion of the nation's children and the poor. To the extent that public ambivalence toward funding poverty-related policy is tied to negative racial and ethnic stereotypes, growing numbers of poor immigrant children will probably reinforce, if not exacerbate, this non-Hispanic white reticence. Communities of color, however, cannot sustain a social movement on behalf of children by themselves. Any successful effort on behalf of vulnerable children will have to mobilize new immigrant groups, while at the same time attracting poor and middle-class African American and Anglo voters. Indeed, the political challenges to such an effort are substantial.

This commentary offers a two-pronged political strategy intended to build policy support, as well as a sense of urgency, on behalf of the nation's at-risk children. First, to attract diverse backing from non-Latino white, African American, and naturalized immigrant voters, political actors need to acknowledge the important role that issue

framing plays in terms of mass receptivity to political messages, and to more clearly specify and communicate their goals so that moderately engaged voters (who make up the vast majority in any given electorate) can easily identify "pro-child" candidates. Secondly, greater emphasis is needed on enhancing political participation among racial minorities and new immigrants. Surveys suggest that racial minorities and immigrants are more sanguine in their support of child and family public policies than are their non-Latino white counterparts, but that numerous hurdles are associated with mobilizing these groups—especially recent immigrants who often have little knowledge of the U.S. political system. The strategies that appear to be most effective at engaging minorities and immigrant groups in the political process are group-specific mobilizing efforts.

Thus, although universal themes and messages are essential to building a broad consensus, group-specific strategies are superior to more general strategies when the aim is minority or immigrant mobilization. Both types of efforts will be needed to build a strong constituency on behalf of vulnerable children in the years ahead.

### Framing Issues on Behalf of Children

With the exception of *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* and the random curmudgeon, most Americans support the abstract notion of helping children. Unlike politically contentious groups such as "welfare recipients" and "the undeserving poor," children are accorded little responsibility for their personal circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Thus, from a political perspective, children represent a valence issue—that is, an issue that elicits a one-sided emotional response from the public.<sup>2</sup> When candidates claim to be pro-child or pro-family, they are staking out safe territory. No sensible contender for office would ever claim to be otherwise. One of the challenges in building constituencies that support children and family issues, however, is that when too broadly defined, children and family issues lose meaning.

An enormous body of political science and social psychological research indicates that the way an issue is framed directly affects levels of public support. Framing effects operate by priming group-based concerns in the attitude formation process.<sup>3</sup> Any social movement that is to succeed must transform the frame in which

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the public views the issues of concern.<sup>4</sup> To build a successful constituency on behalf of children, clear and simple goals of a pro-child agenda need to be identified. In addition, the emphasis needs to be on vulnerable children rather than on combating poverty, to avoid eliciting negative associations with stereotypes of poor, undeserving adults.

### **Identify Clear and Simple Goals**

In a political environment where no consensual criteria define what it means to be pro-child, a whole host of policies and political candidates can claim to be pro-child and will likely seem credible in their claims. For example, according to some, recent legislation authored by the Bush Administration, referred to as “The Leave No Child Behind Act,” provides proof that President Bush is pro-child, whereas others argue that the bill did not go far enough.

Children’s advocates lack a small set of clearly staked positions that both engender organizational activity and provide clear cues to voters. People need to know what constitutes a pro-child candidate without having to exert much effort—a litmus test of pro-child policy positions that enables voters to make easy judgments. Successful collective action hinges, in part, on such simplicity.

At the same time, support for broad policy areas does not necessarily translate into backing for specific programs.<sup>5</sup> For example, recent data from the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS) suggest that Americans of all stripes support increased spending on health care and education: Three out of four Americans say that the government is, in fact, spending too little in these areas. Yet despite the apparent overwhelming public support, there has not been much progress in either of these policy areas. In part, this is due to the fact that there is relatively little agreement on how existing challenges should be addressed. Some favor proposals that guarantee unpaid leave for parents to take care of sick children and mandate class size reduction, whereas others support proposals that increase technology investment in schools and expand early childhood education projects like Head Start. Regarding health care, the public is especially divided between government-administered solutions such as a Medicare-like system to cover children or a government voucher plan, and private sector solutions such as family tax credits to

pay for insurance or tax subsidies that act as incentives for insurance companies to provide low-cost coverage for children.<sup>6</sup>

The lack of consensus on desired solutions is a serious obstacle to the goal of constituency building. Arguably all solutions are not equal, and programs that advocate more comprehensive or aggressive assistance to children in need must become rhetorically linked with support for children and families. The general cause of children would be well-served if it could be identified with two or three simple, but program-specific advocacy positions.

### **Emphasize Vulnerable Children, Not Poverty**

Although it may be obvious to anyone who advocates for children that poverty policy and children’s policy are often one and the same, it is essential that children’s advocates use issue frames that emphasize vulnerable children, as opposed to the poor more generally, because American attitudes toward poverty programs typically evoke a strong cultural norm of individualism and/or powerful negative stereotypes about groups that are disproportionately poor.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, negative attitudes toward African Americans—that they are lazy and violate cultural values of hard work and consensual moral standards—are primary explanations for why non-Latino white Americans oppose means-tested social welfare programs.<sup>8</sup>

As a result, advocates that work on behalf of children and families need to be sensitive to the nature of their appeals and de-emphasize their use of strictly poverty-related language. Instead, they should situate child welfare appeals within the larger cultural value system of preparing children for work and family responsibility. Frames such as these openly combat negative cultural stereotypes about the poor while drawing cognitive links between children and diffusely accepted social norms. Public information campaigns that dispel common misperceptions about children and poverty will be invaluable to gaining long-term policy support for programs that benefit poor families.

### **Mobilizing Communities of Color**

Generally speaking, African Americans and Latinos represent strong potential constituencies for youth and family issues. In contrast to non-Hispanic whites, Latinos and blacks are more supportive of social welfare



programs and more supportive of enhanced federal and state spending on education and health care. Although little public opinion research exists regarding Asian Americans and their dispositions toward child-friendly public policy, the population of Asian American children is growing rapidly and is projected to equal the percentage of African American children by the end of this century.<sup>9</sup> The political challenge—especially within immigrant communities—is not to build support for children (which already exists), but to enhance rates of political participation.

### **Blacks and Latinos Respond to Community-Based Efforts**

Participation research conducted for blacks and Latinos points to a similar conclusion: Community-based, ethnically or racially organized mobilization campaigns appear to be the most effective means of enhancing minority participation.<sup>10</sup>

For example, Southern Echo, a community-based group in Jackson, Mississippi, successfully organized African Americans in Tallahatchie County around issues of redistricting after the 1990 Census, pressuring the county board of supervisors to negotiate with a black organization for the first time.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the board agreed to create three “electable” black districts for the five-member board.<sup>12</sup> Many African American parishes are also effective political agents. The black church has a long tradition of effectively mobilizing members to political causes.<sup>13</sup> Partisan grass-roots political efforts—especially when conducted in tandem with local black organizations—also tend to generate above-normal rates of black turnout.

Similarly, research conducted on Latino turnout emphasizes the importance of local Latino-based mobilizing groups in bringing above-average rates of Latinos to the polls. According to one recent study, Latinos contacted by Latino organizations were eleven percentage points more likely to vote than Latinos who were not contacted.<sup>14</sup> Equally interesting, they found that political party contacts (in the absence of a co-ethnic tie-in) generated no incremental gains in turnout. Findings from this research strongly suggest that children’s advocacy resources would be well spent on developing Latino-oriented/Latino-run organizations that can make local, pan-ethnic appeals.

At the same time, research indicates that registration drives—in the absence of ethnically-based mobilization efforts—are a less efficient expenditure of scarce resources. Although registration drives may pay dividends by increasing the pool of total voters in the long run, in the short term, mobilization drives reap larger rewards, particularly when these mobilization efforts utilize ethnic or racially-specific community groups to make their requests.

Community organizations that combine political activism with social welfare support, such as La Alianza Hispana in the Roxbury/Dorchester community in South Boston, are especially successful. As discussed in several articles throughout this journal issue, many Latinos—particularly new immigrants—face serious life challenges, including lack of English language skills, poverty, joblessness, homelessness, and insufficient access to medical care and child care. La Alianza Hispana helps Latinos in their community with basic needs, while at the same time promoting civic involvement.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, one of the most effective ways of mobilizing black and Latino constituencies is to have one of their own on the ballot. Minority political candidates can have a significant influence on levels of minority turnout. For example, studies show that having black candidates on the ballot typically yields higher levels of black voter participation, all else being equal.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Latino candidates—especially those at the top of the ticket—also stimulate above-normal levels of voter participation among Latino voters.<sup>17</sup> Non-Latino white candidates, even those that run with racial group endorsements or on race-specific platforms, may generate appreciable percentages of electoral support from minority voters, but even ideologically attractive white candidates typically do not enhance minority turnout.<sup>18</sup> In practical terms, this means that advocacy groups (and political parties, for that matter) that want to build reliable electoral constituencies for children’s issues need to work with community-based organizations to groom and sponsor minority candidates who can carry the children’s advocacy banner into the electoral arena.

### **Asian Americans: Long-Term Prospects and Short-Term Challenges**

Political organizing within the Asian community—with its enormous diversity across national origins, languages,

religions, and more—is a particularly daunting endeavor, and considerably more difficult than mobilizing within the African American and Latino communities that have established traditions of politics as a means for community advancement. As a result, to the extent that Asian Americans represent a pool of potential constituents for political action, they are truly untapped. Even controlling for differences in education, income, length of residence, and citizenship, Asian Americans participate less than do other racial and immigrant groups.<sup>19</sup>

Yet Asian Americans are a potentially important constituency that could be mobilized to represent the interests of vulnerable children in this country. For example, as is the case in many urban areas throughout the country,<sup>20</sup> in New York City, Asian Americans are the most rapidly expanding percentage of the population, with much of this growth attributed to immigration. Moreover, over half of all Asian American babies in New York City are born into poor or near-poor families.<sup>21</sup>

Although Asian Americans represent a small proportion of the whole, they are growing at a rapid rate, and opportunities for constituency building in select localities should be pursued. The two main political parties have paid scant attention to Asian American populations and, as such, the main sources of political socialization for Asian Americans has come from labor organizations, religious institutions, community non-profits, and ethnic voluntary organizations.<sup>22</sup> From a strategic standpoint—similar to our recommendations regarding blacks and Latinos—inroads to the Asian American voter base show the most promise if pursued locally, and through ethnic or pan-ethnic appeals.

## Conclusion

Public opinion generally, and policy preferences among minority voters particularly, support children- and youth-focused agendas, yet the political realization of government policies on behalf of children is far from certain. In the abstract, there is considerable support for increased government spending in areas such as education and health care. At the same time, being pro-child can be so diffuse it becomes meaningless. To advance a children's agenda, particular attention must be paid to how issues are framed and how minority and immigrant groups are mobilized.

To begin, it is imperative that advocates on behalf of children provide the public with cognitive shortcuts that simplify the political landscape into pro-child and not. In particular, it seems essential to link children's advocacy with several policy positions that can be used to rally public sentiment, enhance organizational integration, and facilitate voter decision-making. Additional research on the preferences and priorities of the public toward the children's agenda may be necessary to accomplish this task.

Importantly, however, it is also essential that children's advocates rhetorically separate questions of children's welfare from adult welfare. A majority of Americans are wary of "big government programs," particularly poverty programs. Questions of poverty, and beliefs about the root cause of poverty, have become deeply entangled with the politics of race and racial privilege in the United States. To the extent that child advocacy hinges on the success of poverty policy as it is currently framed, the long-term prospects appear rather bleak. In order to build support for children, issue framers must steer clear of old rhetoric that evokes notions of the undeserving poor, and instead, use frames that link children's advocacy with diffusely accepted values such as family and work.

Finally, though there is likely to be substantial support from minority communities with regard to children's issues generally, political participation within minority communities must be augmented for the full force of these values to be felt. However, numerous hurdles are associated with mobilizing these groups—especially more recent immigrants who often have little hands-on knowledge about the U.S. political system. To overcome these challenges, the scholarly understanding of minority mobilizing points to the efficacy of local groups in the role of grass-roots organizers. Investing in the development of strong community-based organizations that can rally voters on Election Day appears to be a particularly promising use of advocacy resources.

To the extent that communities of color rally around their racial and ethnic brethren—and to the extent that the future of our children and their welfare may rest in their collective voice at the ballot box—recruiting, training, and promoting African American and immigrant political candidates seems a necessary and

most promising strategy. In the short term, immigrant mobilization efforts pay substantial dividends by linking various communities with political agencies, local organizers, and like-minded candidates. In the long term, the potential payoff from these mobilization campaigns is even greater, as these novices in the political arena

become the next generation of habitual voters—voters to whom politicians must pay attention.

The task may seem daunting. But only through more strategic issue framing and mobilization efforts can efforts to build policy support and a sense of urgency on behalf of the nation's at-risk children be realized.

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## COMMENTARY 4

**William D. Novelli and Amy Goyer**

**T**he American melting pot has become the American mosaic. As the articles in this journal issue have presented, the demographics of children are changing. The demographics of older adults are changing as well. In 2000, minority populations made up 16.4% of the older adult population, and there were 3.1 million foreign-born persons age 65 or older. These older foreign-born adults are more likely to live in poverty and to live in family households than are elders born in the United States. By 2030, minority populations are projected to comprise 25.4% of the nation's elderly. During that time period, the older minority population is expected to increase by 219% as compared to Caucasian older adults increasing by 81%.<sup>1</sup>

While society is becoming more diverse across all population age segments, it is also aging. Increased longevity is one of the great success stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- ▀ Since 1900, the number of people age 65 or over in the United States has increased 11 times (from 3.1 million to 34.4 million).
- ▀ A child born in 2000 could expect to live 77 years—nearly 30 years longer than a child born in 1900 when life expectancy was just over 47.
- ▀ By 2030, the population age 65 or over will double again to well over 70 million people.<sup>2</sup>

Combined, the two trends of increased diversity and increased aging have tremendous implications for policy-makers, advocates, stakeholders, and practitioners (and for society in general) in promoting the welfare of our nation's children into the future. On the surface, some tend to view these trends as a precursor to intergenerational and intercultural conflict, with different population segments challenging each other for resources and attention. This view is not only misguided, it ignores the family bonds that tie generations together and discounts the capacity of society both to invest in children and to support the needs of older persons. It ignores the fact

that the quality of life people experience in their later years is reflective of their healthy development and well-being in their formative years. The actions people take (or are taken for them) early in life can have tremendous effects on them later in life. This view also ignores the fact that the enhanced productivity of the workforce helps to ensure the affordability and long-term viability of entitlement programs that support the elderly, the poor, and those with disabilities (that is, programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid). Thus, investment in the positive development, education, and well-being of today's children is an investment in the productivity and success of tomorrow's workforce, and the future of these important programs.

Increased longevity happened primarily for three reasons: (1) investments in the priority to reduce death rates for children and young adults; (2) creation of a system for providing adequate medical care to older persons through Medicare and to the poor and disadvantaged through Medicaid; and (3) improvements in public health (such as sanitation, hygiene, living conditions, and clean drinking water). These were strategic societal changes, and the results have been extraordinary. A strategic societal effort targeted to young persons could have similar results. Strategic initiatives, both public and private, can greatly improve the well-being of all the nation's children, and help ensure the well-being of all Americans into the future.

### **An Intergenerational Paradigm**

Society must respond to demographic change using a different paradigm, one based not on conflict, but on lifespan continuity. People are connected through necessary interdependence, and every life stage is equally important. The population of older adults includes parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other family members who care about children. They play a critical role in caring for, mentoring, and advocating for children. Moreover, many issues are shared among children and older adults. A more integrated approach

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to addressing these issues can be an effective way to build bridges and take advantage of the resources of both young and old, and to facilitate the provision of needed supports and services.

### **The Role of Older Adults**

The urgent need to improve the lives and care of our nation's children must be addressed on many fronts. Violence, drug abuse, child abuse and neglect, unequal access to quality education, and lack of affordable, quality health care all threaten our nation's children, and therefore the future of all generations.<sup>3</sup> Children clearly need caring adults and advocates on their side. When the strengths of one generation are drawn upon to help or complement those of another generation, all of society benefits. Much more could and should be done to support and encourage older adults in their roles as caregivers, mentors, and advocates for the young.

#### *As Child Care Providers*

Grandparents play an important role in the lives of children, and most are in close contact with their grandchildren.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, grandparents are the largest providers of child care for pre-schoolers whose mothers are working, caring for 21% of these children.<sup>5</sup> In addition, 4.5 million at-risk children are living in grandparent-headed households in the United States (a 30% increase in the decade from 1990 to 2000).<sup>6</sup>

Research has shown Hispanic children are the fastest growing segment of minority children being raised by grandparents. Also, minority grandparent caregivers (particularly Spanish language-preferred Hispanic and Native American grandparents) are highly misinformed and uninformed about services and benefits that are currently available for them and their grandchildren.<sup>7</sup> In order to meet the current and growing future needs of grandparent caregivers and the children they care for, major outreach efforts are needed to provide education in culturally sensitive ways about available resources regarding legal, financial, health care, education, housing, transportation and social support.

Those for whom English is not their first language are often isolated and unable to communicate adequately to assist their grandchildren with culture assimilation or in accessing needed developmental education, benefits or services. These grandparents are providing an important service to their families and to society, and steps must

be taken to ensure that they have the resources they need to do this important job.

#### *As Mentors and Tutors*

Research has shown that the presence of caring adults in children's lives can have a major positive impact for children. This is an area where older adults are an extremely valuable, but often under-recognized resource.<sup>8</sup> The Big Brothers/Big Sisters program initiative to recruit and train older adults as mentors is an excellent example of garnering the resource of our nation's older adults. The Experience Corps, a program that engages older adults (age 55 plus) in community service as tutors and mentors for children in urban schools, has also demonstrated the positive outcomes of connecting the generations. Evaluations of this program have shown progress in students' academic and social skills, as well as positive gains in the health and well-being of the older adults serving as tutors and mentors.<sup>9</sup>

#### *As Advocates and Volunteers*

Older adults are also an important resource for active advocacy on behalf of children. Many serve as individual advocates for abused and neglected children through the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. Others engage in larger organized advocacy efforts. As the baby boomer population ages, our nation has the opportunity to draw upon their wisdom and experience to enable them to play an increasingly important role in advocating for younger generations.

Research shows that adults age 45 and older are most likely to volunteer their time to help two population segments: elderly people and children/teens. It is also interesting to note that Hispanic Americans volunteer more hours per month than other racial/ethnic groups, and they are most likely to provide help to other immigrants in the United States.<sup>10</sup> This represents a resource of millions of older adults ready and willing to volunteer to address the needs of the growing diverse generations of children in America—mentoring, tutoring and advocating for children. They are just waiting to be asked. Moreover, intergenerational exchange is thought to be an important aspect of productive aging,<sup>11</sup> and community service has proven to be an effective forum for this exchange while addressing essential community needs and enhancing cultural continuity.<sup>12</sup> (See Box 1.)



## Box 1

### An Intergenerational Approach: AARP Initiatives

AARP,<sup>a</sup> the world's largest organization representing the needs and interests of the 50-plus population, recognizes that aging is a continuum that begins at birth and continues until death, and therefore strives to serve people as they age, not just when they are old. Examples of AARP intergenerational initiatives that have targeted benefits to children include the following:

- A teacher-mentoring program conducted by the National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA), a division of AARP, to help address the problem of high turnover among new teachers.<sup>b</sup> Under the program, retired teachers are paired with new teachers so that they can share the benefits of their experience and knowledge, and give the new teachers support. In addition to helping new teachers, thousands of retired educators also have volunteered

over 45 million service-hours directly with children and youth to provide meaningful educational and life-skills support.

- AARP state offices that are recruiting AARP members to serve as mentors in school-based and community settings working with a number of partners including Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Experience Corps, and Everybody Wins.
- AARP volunteers in Texas working side-by-side with Children's Defense Fund volunteers to enroll hundreds of Hispanic children in the State Children's Health Insurance Program.
- AARP volunteers in many states, mobilizing to help pass laws and conduct education and outreach assisting children being raised by grandparents and other relatives.

<sup>a</sup>Formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons.

<sup>b</sup>A high turnover level among new teachers

for example, Chicago Association of Community Organizations in Reform Now. *Where have all the teachers gone? The costs of teacher turnover in ACORN neighborhood schools in Chicago*. Chicago: ACORN, June 2003, p. 4.

### Shared Concerns among Young and Old

An intergenerational paradigm makes sense because there are many overlaps among the needs and the resources of the various generations. For example:

- **Poverty.** Over half of the poor people in this country are either under 18 or over 65.<sup>13</sup> More than 2.4 million grandparents are responsible for the basic needs of grandchildren living with them, though almost 20% of these grandparents live in poverty.<sup>14</sup>
- **Health.** Good health is a reflection of genetics and health care, as well as lifelong behavior. Too many children do not receive proper health care and their behaviors are leading them to poor health as they age. Obesity<sup>15</sup> and osteoporosis<sup>16</sup> are just two illustrations of adult diseases that have their roots in childhood.
- **Health care.** Medicaid is now a significant source of health care for children in working families, as well as for low-income older adults.<sup>17</sup>
- **Education and training.** Education, skills develop-

ment and training are lifelong issues. The children of today must be prepared to enter a future workforce. Likewise, the parents and grandparents who are raising children must have access to affordable education and training opportunities so they can work and provide care for their families.

- **Language skills.** English language acquisition is a key aspect of education for both young and old. Work opportunities and use of public benefits and services are limited for those who do not possess adequate English skills.

### Systems, Resources, and Services Integration

A new generation of Americans is growing—a “sandwich” generation—of people typically between the ages of 45 and 55 who are struggling to care for their children and their parents. (Many of these caregivers are actually part of what is being termed a “club sandwich” generation: caring for their grandchildren in addition to their parents and children.) The way members of the sandwich generation cope is dependent upon their

race and ethnic background, and cultural differences must be accounted for when developing programs, policies, and resources to support families.<sup>18</sup> Across all races/ethnicities, however, the evidence suggests that an integrated, intergenerational life-cycle approach to development and implementation of services can be an effective way to successfully meet the needs of the upcoming diverse generations of children, as well as their parents and grandparents.<sup>19</sup>

For example, a family-centered approach to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) training, as described in the article by Takanishi in this journal issue, can help parents to access benefits and services and improve their workforce prospects at the same time it is helping children. By also including the older generation—the grandparents—who are often involved in care for the grandchildren, it would fulfill an unmet need for them to take advantage of solid English skills that are often required to access resources that will help them as they age. One program that illustrates this approach is Project SHINE at the Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning in Philadelphia. The program recruits and trains college students to tutor older immigrants in English and to assist them in learning about American history and culture.<sup>20</sup> Another example is Bridges, a program provided by Interages, the Intergenerational Resource Center in Wheaton, Maryland. In this program, older adults mentor and/or tutor foreign-born elementary and middle school students who have multiple risk factors.<sup>21</sup> These programs are excellent models for effectively providing much needed ESL services while engaging young and old in cultural and generational exchange.

Shared site programs are another way to facilitate the provision of services and/or programs to multiple generations and to promote intergenerational interactions through planned and/or informal activities.<sup>22</sup> In fact, community-based, mutually beneficial shared site programs are a growing trend. They hold vast potential for improving the quality of life for both children and older adults in times of scarce resources. Facilities, staff and resources can be shared among schools, child care centers, after-school programs, senior centers, adult day health centers, nursing homes or community centers. Practitioners report this approach to be a cost-resource-effective way to work together to meet the needs of all

generations in the community.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, integrating systems can make it easier for family members to navigate the various systems. Indeed, when systems do not interface, many give up before they are able to find the office or program that can help. As the needs of a diverse population of children and older adults grow, systems are likely to become even more complicated unless steps are taken toward more effective integration.

The provision of cross-training to social service and health care workers about the needs, services, and benefits available to all generations is an important step toward creating better-integrated systems and networks. For example, aging practitioners may be more likely to interact with grandparents who are raising grandchildren. If trained adequately, these practitioners can effectively refer grandparents to services/benefits available for children. The same would be true for training those who primarily serve children about how to refer their parents/grandparents. In light of the growing cultural diversity in the United States, cross-training should include specific cultural sensitivity training and instruction about how to target and reach minority and immigrant populations.

## Conclusion

America faces a tremendous challenge in meeting the needs of its generationally and culturally diverse society. The nation must approach this challenge from a perspective of continuity, not conflict, as every life stage is equally important. Both the eldest and the youngest members of society require support, regardless of their economic or cultural background. The children of today are the workforce and the caregivers of tomorrow. The parents today are the elders of tomorrow. The elders of today are often also caregivers, and many comprise a significant segment of our economic base. Society must promote both interpersonal and policy-driven interdependence among the generations through the intergenerational and intercultural cycle of support, service, and caregiving.

Policymakers and advocates have a choice. They can create generational competition and conflict by setting up a divisive “either/or” scenario about meeting the growing needs of a rapidly changing, diverse nation. Or they can acknowledge the commonalities and address a continuum of services, resources, and care over the

lifetime. It is the ultimate false choice to pit one deserving cause against another. Instead, the nation must take an intergenerational approach to advocating for all generations concerning health care, financial assistance, education, work, housing and social supports.

The advocacy, policy, and programmatic services and

resources mentioned in this commentary all require a creative, integrated life-cycle approach. Policymakers, advocates, and practitioners at the federal, state, and local levels must work together collaboratively to evaluate and implement these intergenerational approaches. If they do so, all generations, regardless of cultural background, will benefit as the future unfolds.

## ENDNOTES

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