



The Future of Immigrant Children

Ron Haskins and Marta Tienda

Nearly a quarter of schoolchildren in the United States are immigrants or the children of immigrants. A substantial percentage of these children, especially those from Latin America, are falling behind in school. More than 5 million, for example, struggle with their academic subjects because they are still learning English. Evidence shows that three policy reforms—increased attendance in quality preschool, improved instruction in English, and increased attendance in postsecondary education—would improve their school achievement, lift their economic well-being as adults, and increase their economic and social contributions to American society.

One of the nation's top domestic problems is the poor educational achievement of immigrant youth, both those brought by their immigrant parents to the United States and those born in the United States. The educational achievement of immigrant children who trace their origins to Mexico and other parts of Latin America is especially low. This policy brief reviews the problem of low educational achievement among immigrant children and proposes a set of policy recommendations that would improve their achievement, thereby contributing to individual

economic and social mobility as well as to national economic productivity, because workers with more education are more productive (and pay more taxes).

The Problem

Major federal immigration legislation in 1965 changed the criteria for gaining admission to the United States from a quota system that favored European immigrants to one that gave priority to family reunification. Although the immigrants from a single country cannot exceed 7 percent of total immigration in a year, unmarried children, spouses, and parents of U.S. citizens are exempted from the country caps. The 1965 reforms had two unintended consequences: the volume of immigrants surged, and newcomers' countries of origin shifted from Europe to Asia and Latin America.

The result, as shown by Jeffrey Passel in the spring 2011 issue of *The Future of Children*, has been the greatest influx of immigrants to this country since the turn of the nineteenth century. The United States has legally admitted an average of about 1 million immigrants a year since 1990, and an average of

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about 500,000 each year have entered illegally or overstayed their visas. Mexicans are the largest single immigrant group, and many of them are unauthorized. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 53 percent of immigrants are from Latin America, and about 30 percent are Mexican. Currently estimated at 31 million, Mexicans (both native born and foreign born) account for about 10 percent of the U.S. population. Passel also points out another important consequence of this flow of immigrants: Today about 23 percent of all U.S. children are immigrants or the children of immigrants.

In part because the majority of immigrants from Asian nations enter under employment preferences that require market skills, Asian immigrants and their children have fared quite well in the United States. Among all ethnic and racial groups in the United States, including whites, those of Asian origin have the highest levels of education and income. By contrast, immigrants from Latin America have fared poorly both in education and in earnings. In 2010, for example, nearly half of Asians had at least a bachelor's degree, compared with less than 10 percent of Latinos. The median income of Asian households in 2009 was \$65,180, compared with \$38,000 for Latinos generally and \$36,800 for Mexicans specifically.

In their 2009 book examining Latino educational achievement, Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras labeled this problem “The Latino Education Crisis.” The list of education-related outcomes on which Latinos, but especially Mexicans, trail other ethnic groups is striking. The list includes achievement test performance at age five and earlier; performance in reading and math at grades four, eight, and twelve; high school grade point average; and rates of high school graduation, college attendance, and college degree completion.

School performance, including completed education levels, is correlated with social mobility and economic well-being. For each step up the educational ladder—from school dropout, to high school graduate, to having attended college, to two-year and four-year college degrees, to professional or graduate degrees—median household income rises. Some of the income gaps among families with varying levels of education are huge. The annual household income difference between high school dropouts and those with a four-year degree at ages thirty to thirty-nine

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was about \$59,900 (\$26,500 compared with \$86,400) in 2009.

Correlation is not causation. In the case of the link between education and family income, however, there is every indication that the relationship is causal. A seminal volume by Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz not only lays out in great detail the correlation between education and income, but also argues persuasively that inequality is increasing in the United States because growth in the fraction of Americans who graduate from high school and in the fraction who graduate from college is increasing slowly or falling. Recent trends send a powerful message: Increases in education are the surest way to income mobility; failure to raise low levels of education guarantees income stagnation. So problematic is the low level of Latino education that Gándara and Contreras conclude that “if the high dropout rates and low educational achievement of Latino youth are not turned around, we will have created a permanent underclass without hope of integrating into the mainstream.”

Low educational achievement among Latinos is one of the most important problems that limits the futures of immigrant children. Latin American immigrants arrive in the United States with a strong work ethic and strong family values. But by the second generation, their work rates decline, their wage progress appears to slow, and both their nonmarital birth rates and their divorce rates rise. These social and economic trends bode ill for immigrant parents, their children, and the nation. Finding ways to boost achievement and help more Latinos complete high school and attend and complete college or other postsecondary training should be high on the nation's policy agenda.

Policies to Address the Problem

Three policy changes hold promise for boosting education among immigrant children and could, over a generation or two, increase both family income and family stability. Specifically, the nation should provide preschool education to all low-income immigrant children, improve language instruction for school-age children, and pass a revised version of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act that would allow undocumented adolescents brought as children to the United States by their parents to attend postsecondary institutions or join the military services and subsequently become citizens. Combined, these three policies would bolster the human capital of young immigrants—the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population—and could produce a demographic dividend for our aging population in the form of a larger and higher-earning workforce that contributes more to the Social Security and Medicare trust funds. Other policy analysts have proposed to address low educational achievement among immigrants by making fundamental changes in immigration policy, such as reducing the number of immigrants admitted because of family relationships in favor of admitting immigrants with more education or skills. Such changes in immigration policy may be desirable but are beyond the scope of this brief.

Expanding Preschool Programs

Immigrant children face a serious educational challenge even before they enter the public schools. A disproportionate number of them have mothers with little education and limited English fluency, both of which are associated with poor school readiness among their children and with subsequent academic problems. Several national studies show that an achievement gap between immigrant children and native children (those born in the United States to U.S. parents) opens during the preschool years and does not close during the primary or middle school years. One intervention that demonstrably promotes early development and can help prevent the preschool gap from opening is high-quality preschool programs.

In the new spring 2011 volume of *The Future of Children*, Lynn Karoly and Gabriella Gonzalez examine research on early education programs for immigrant children and explain why expanded preschool programs should be part of a national strategy to prevent the achievement gap. First, they point out that many

quality preschool programs now help children from poor families and immigrant families improve their language and math readiness for the public schools, with benefits continuing during the school years and beyond. A program for four-year-olds in Oklahoma, for example, substantially increased the school readiness of Latino children as measured by standardized tests. Second, the authors note that immigrant children are less likely to participate in out-of-home care than are nonimmigrant children. Only about 45 percent of immigrant three-year-olds and 65 percent of four-year-olds are in center-based facilities, and many of these facilities provide mediocre care that will not give the needed boost to the children's development.

Third, although immigrant children's low rate of preschool enrollment is attributable not to their immigrant status per se but rather to family characteristics such as high poverty rates, low maternal education, and the daily presence at home of one parent in a two-parent family, extending preschool programs to more immigrant children makes sense because they are likely to be raised in low-income homes where parents speak limited English. Fourth, making preschool programs available to more immigrant children and directing outreach to their parents could help break down barriers to preschool enrollment, such as the reluctance of undocumented parents to have contact with public officials, the inability of low-income parents to pay for high-quality care, and the difficulties for parents with limited English skills of completing complex paperwork to enroll their children in preschool and apply for subsidies.

Compelling evidence, then, shows that increasing the number of immigrant children in high-quality preschool programs will boost their school achievement. But what of the increasing pressure on federal spending? One possible strategy would be to allow states that are willing to expand their prekindergarten programs for low-income children, including immigrant children, to take control of Head Start funding in their state. A high-quality national evaluation shows that the federal Head Start program is not adequately preparing preschoolers for the public schools. By contrast, many evaluations seem to show that state pre-K programs promote school readiness for four-year-olds more effectively than Head Start does. States, then, might be able to produce greater benefits for all poor children, including immigrant children, than does the current Head Start program.

At the very least, Congress should give the Department of Health and Human Services the authority to experiment by allowing a few states, notably those with large immigrant populations, to control Head Start funding in exchange for admitting more low-income and immigrant children to high-quality programs and agreeing to have their programs rigorously evaluated.

Programs for English Language Learners

Another article in the spring 2011 volume of *The Future of Children*, by Margarita Calderón, Robert Slavin, and Marta Sánchez, points out that during the 2007–08 school year 5.3 million students (10.6 percent of all students) were English language learners (ELLs). About 80 percent of these students were Spanish speaking. Although the Supreme Court in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) ruled that schools are responsible for providing special assistance to non-English-speaking students, a national survey showed that in 2000, 41 percent of all U.S. teachers instructed English learners, but only 13 percent of teachers had received any specialized training in effective methods for teaching students who are not proficient in English. Given the universal finding from research that English learners fall behind other students in academic achievement, as well as the evidence that achievement gaps are relatively stable after third grade, it follows that helping English learners master English by second grade is an essential policy target to boost academic achievement of immigrant children.

The field of ELL instruction has long been divided between those who believe that English learners should have bilingual instruction and those who believe all instruction should be in English. But, say Calderón and her co-authors, a review of the relevant research shows that the conflict between the competing views obscures the real issue—namely, that the quality of the instruction is more important than whether it is bilingual or English immersion. And they find that effective programs feature frequent data collection on student learning, professional development that helps teachers learn to use curriculums and offers them coaching or other ways to practice classroom skills, and effective classroom and school management in which information about students is widely shared and all staff are held accountable for student learning. A small number of curriculums, including the Success for All whole-school reform

model, have been shown by rigorous evaluations to improve both the English skills and the achievement of English learners. What is more, all students benefit academically when schools implement instructional programs proven successful with English language learners.

The Obama administration has launched several initiatives that allocate funding to states and other entities to implement programs that have been shown by rigorous evaluation to produce good outcomes—the idea being that federal dollars should support programs based on solid evidence of effectiveness. The review by Calderón and her colleagues identifies several evidence-based programs that improve both English learning and academic performance; one, the Success for All program, is already being expanded using federal funds. If the evaluations from the expansion continue to be positive for immigrant children, Congress and the administration should continue to expand the program to other schools.

Pass the DREAM Act

In today's global economy most young people in the United States, native or immigrant, will need some postsecondary education to earn enough to support a family. Latinos, not surprisingly, are far less likely to enroll in any form of postsecondary education than are either natives or other immigrant groups. Policies that raise postsecondary enrollment and completion rates can help not only Latinos but all immigrants achieve financial stability while boosting the economy by providing a skilled workforce for American employers. To the extent that immigrants and children of immigrants can get a postsecondary education, they will help themselves, their families, and the American economy.

One way to increase immigrant postsecondary education would be to focus on undocumented immigrant youth who were brought to the United States as children by their parents. Under current law, these young adults are subject to deportation, cannot receive benefits designed to defray college costs for students from poor families, and cannot work. Yet many have excelled in high school and are well qualified for college. Moreover, if immigrant families knew that their children could attend college and achieve citizenship, the children might work harder in school to prepare for college and their parents too might put a greater emphasis on their schoolwork.

The DREAM Act, first introduced in Congress in 2001, would give certain undocumented students the opportunity both to attend college and to become citizens by following a two-step process. The first step gives undocumented youth a conditional legal status that allows them to work or attend school without fear of deportation. To qualify, youth must be enrolled in a two-year or four-year college or in trade school, have a high school diploma or General Educational Development credential, have been in the United States continuously for at least five years, have good moral character, and meet a few other requirements. Then, in the second step, youth would have up to six years to apply to upgrade their status to legal per-

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manent resident (LPR), which in turn would allow them to apply for citizenship. To upgrade their status to LPR and eventually citizenship, immigrant youth would be required, among other things, to maintain good moral character and complete at least two years of college, trade school, or military service. During the second step, the youth would be eligible for federal student loans and some other benefits, but not Pell grants (the major source of federal grant funds for low-income college students) or welfare benefits.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that the DREAM Act would increase both spending and revenues, but on net would reduce the deficit by \$1.4 billion over the first ten years relative to current law primarily because more authorized workers would pay social insurance taxes and individual income taxes. Because of increased spending on the federal health insurance exchanges, Medicaid, and nutrition programs, CBO also estimates that the legislation would increase the deficit by a few hundred million dollars a year after the first ten years of implementation.

In 2010, the DREAM Act's most recent congressional run, it passed the House but was defeated in the Senate, when supporters could not muster the sixty votes needed to end a filibuster. The major arguments against the act are that it would reward illegal behavior (unauthorized entry to the United States) by granting what opponents call "amnesty," allow "criminal aliens" to become citizens, cost taxpayers money by allowing some federal and state funds to be spent on undocumented immigrants and thereby deprive some citizens of educational benefits, and allow aliens granted LPR status the right to bring their relatives to the United States. Opponents also argue that by rewarding unauthorized entry, the act would encourage future illegal entry to the United States.

Although the opposing sides in the immigration debate appear to be mired in cement, it nonetheless seems worthwhile to consider in a reasoned and measured way the possibility that the DREAM Act would help immigrant children and, for that matter, the nation. Reliable information, some of it from social science research, bears on most points of contention. Take the cost of the bill. As noted, CBO says the bill would reduce the deficit by \$1.4 billion over its first ten years and cost a few hundred million dollars a year thereafter. Proponents of the bill argue that the CBO estimate does not take into account the financial and nonfinancial effects of improving the education of the approximately 1.1 million youth expected to take advantage of the legislation. Opponents argue that the bill would result in a big influx of new immigrants, many of whom would consume federal and state resources, because youth who have reached age twenty-one and upgraded to LPR status could sponsor their immediate relatives for entry to the United States.

The concern that large numbers of family members would be sponsored for entry could be easily allayed by enforcing the sponsorship obligations already in place and raising the income threshold for sponsorship from 125 percent of poverty to 200 percent or higher. The charge that the bill would grant amnesty is correct. But the amnesty would go only to a select group of youth—those who have either served in the military or completed at least two years of postsecondary education—and would thus fulfill a key purpose of immigration policy, which has always been to admit people who could help build the nation. Moreover, being brought to the United States illegally by

their parents as children hardly seems to qualify as an illegal act by the youth. In fact, the DREAM Act is in accord with an important principle of U.S. law, which is that children are not fully responsible for their actions.

Perhaps the two strongest arguments in favor of the DREAM Act are that giving people a chance based on academic achievement and good behavior is the American way and that the act will help immigrant youth by boosting their education and will help the nation by allowing it to recoup the investments it has made in their K–12 education. A careful study by Neeraj Kaushal of Columbia University found that allowing Mexican youth to pay in-state tuition for postsecondary education would increase their high school graduation rate by 14 percent, their college enrollment by 31 percent, and the number with a college degree by 33 percent—precisely the types of outcomes the nation needs to close education gaps between immigrant and native youth. If the incentive

provided by offering young immigrants in-state tuition generates benefits of this magnitude, the joint impact of offering both in-state tuition (which would be encouraged by the DREAM Act) and the promise of a pathway to American citizenship should provide even greater motivation for undocumented immigrant youth to raise their academic achievement. Few policies are as likely to boost postsecondary education among immigrant youth as the DREAM Act.

Taken together, these three policies would increase the school readiness of immigrant children, increase the odds that young immigrant children speak English well enough not to fall behind in their subject matter achievement, and increase the rates of postsecondary education among immigrant youth. The short- and long-term effects on immigrant children, their families, and society would be positive; achieving these changes could guide future immigration reform in ways that would better align democratic principles and economic goals.

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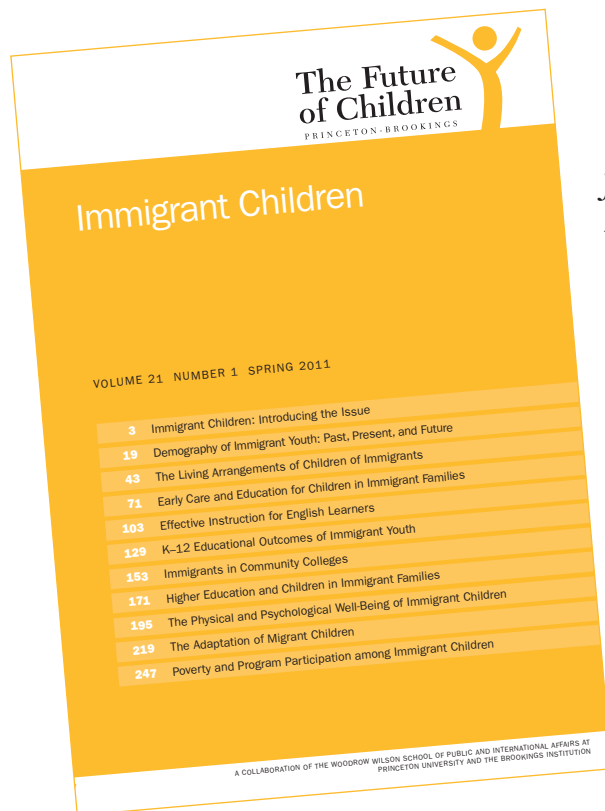


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