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Educating the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Non-Urban Population: Three Cost-Effective Strategies

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The number of immigrants who do not speak English proficiently has grown rapidly in American schools. While the immigrant population is growing, the proportion of first and second-generation immigrants (the children of immigrants) is simultaneously multiplying. As the U.S. population grows more varied, public schools are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of an increasing population of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The researchers propose three cost-effective and closely linked strategies for principals to facilitate the education of the increasingly diverse population in non-urban schools.

Population Changes in Non-Urban Areas

The United States is currently experiencing an influx of immigrants. Citing a 1998 report on the Federal Interagency Forum on Children and Family Statistics, Shapon-Shevin (2001) noted that one in every three students enrolled in elementary or secondary school at that time had a racial or ethnic minority background. There were approximately 28.4 million foreign born residents in the U.S. in 2000

accounting for approximately 10% of the population. Of that number, 8.6 million of the foreign born residents were of school age (Rong & Brown, 2002). This number is expected to increase over the next several decades. Compounding the issue is that fact that the proportion of first- and second-generation immigrants (the children of immigrants) is simultaneously multiplying. Figure 1 demonstrates the expected changes in the school population from 1990 to the year 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

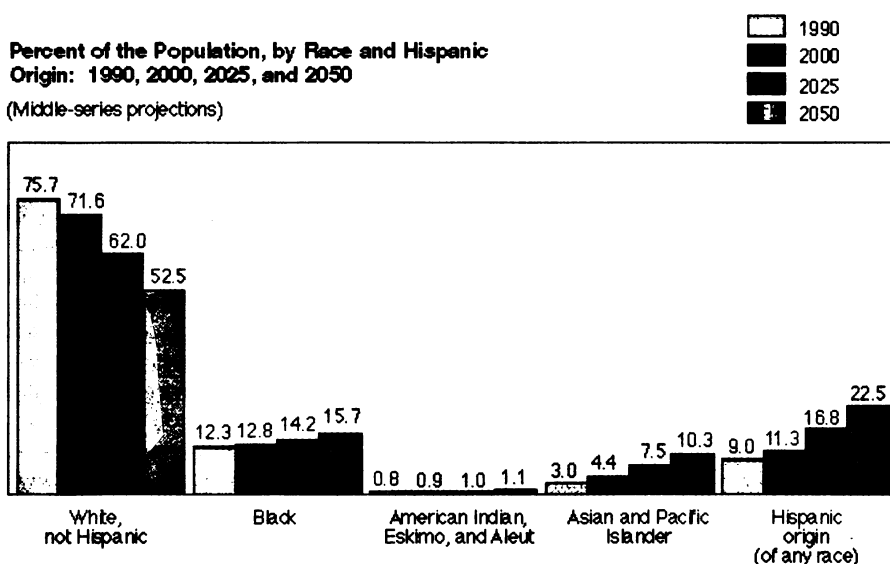


Figure 1. *Percent of the Population, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1990, 2000, 2025, and 2050.* Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division and Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division. (2007).

*Minimum State Requirements to Meet AYP

It is obvious from Figure 1 that the traditional public school population will continue to show a decline in the number of white, non-Hispanic students and will have a major increase in the Hispanic population. Accordingly, the racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity in the U.S. will continue to grow.

In its summary of the foreign born population, The U.S. Census Bureau reported that between 1990 and 2000 the number of people who spoke a language at home other than English grew from 31.8 million to 44.6 million people (Lollock, 2001) with immigrants constituting nearly half of those individuals. Of those immigrants who speak a language other than English at home, one-fifth speaks English either "not well" or "not at all" (Sahlman, 2004). This discrepancy in English proficiency poses a hardship on communities and transfers over to the public schools (Rong & Brown, 2002).

Likewise, the number of children of immigrants who do not speak English proficiently has also grown. The United States Department of Education reported that between 1990 and 2000 the number of students with limited English skills doubled to five million, which is four times the growth rate for the overall student population (Lollock, 2001). However, the number of teachers capable of instructing students with limited English proficiency has not increased at the same rate (Sahlman, 2004).

As the U.S. population grows more varied, public schools are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of an increasing population of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Schools in the U.S. are often the first point of contact for new immigrants (Rong & Brown, 2002) as they facilitate immigrants' integration and socialization into American society (Goodwin, 2002). Many immigrants hold education in high esteem as a means to achieve financial success and social advancement (Goodwin, 2002; Schoorman, 2001). For others, contact with schools may be the first experience with formal education (Kurtz-Costes & Pungello, 2000). Unfortunately, the language barrier between these immigrants and the local population hinders the educational achievement of students with limited English proficiency (Sahlman, 2004).

Schools in the United States are faced with philosophical and practical challenges due to the range of racially, ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and socio-economically diverse students, families, and communities that continue to emerge. While the immigrant population was once mostly concentrated in urban areas, a major shift has recently occurred (Jimerson, 2005; Lollock, 2001; Sahlman, 2004). Many immigrants have been migrating out of urban areas to smaller cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas.

The 2000 U.S. Census Bureau defined "urban" as all territory, population, and housing units located within an urbanized area or an urban cluster. Urbanized areas and clusters include densely settled territory, with a population of at least 1,000 people per square mile and surrounding census blocks that have an overall density of at least 500

people per square mile. In contrast, the Census Bureau's classification of "rural" consists of all territory, population and housing units located outside of urban areas or urban clusters which, in many cases, include what are commonly referred to as suburbs, towns and small cities (U.S. Census Bureau, Geography Division, 2002). For the purposes of this research, those areas that are not classified as "urban" will be referred to as "non-urban" which includes rural areas.

In 1990, immigrants were nearly equally divided between urban and non-urban areas (Sahlman, 2004). However, today, immigrants are more likely to live in non-urban areas. According to the 2000 Census data, nearly fifty percent of immigrants lived in suburban areas with five percent in rural areas and forty-five percent in urban areas (Lollock, 2001). The rapid immigrant population increases in non-urban areas have resulted in ethnic diversification. Much of this movement to non-urban areas can be accredited to new immigrants moving to find employment (Truscott & Truscott, 2005). According to Jimerson (2005), "many rural communities are witnessing large numbers of new residents, often with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. This has put new stresses on rural schools as they must accommodate both the challenges of rapid population growth and educating students with limited English proficiency for the first time" (p. 1).

Truscott and Truscott (2005) explain that "while such demographic change increases the diversity of our society and schools and offers tremendous opportunities to expand the cultural, economic, social, and political bases of our nation, it also presents serious challenges" (p. 124). Many school systems are often ill equipped for the tremendous demands this population expansion places on service and staff training (Jimerson, 2005; Rong & Preissle, 1998). Financial constraints present significant hindrances to obtaining and retaining qualified teachers, providing staff development opportunities, and acquiring resources and materials for students.

Public schools face serious fiscal challenges. Because almost half of public school funding is derived from local property taxes, schools in communities plagued by poverty receive much less funding than their wealthier counterparts (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). It is common knowledge that poverty is rampant in some urban neighborhoods. Yet deteriorating conditions and declining communities in non-urban America have also resulted in increased poverty rates (Freitas, 1992). Truscott and Truscott (2005) explained:

Ninety-eight percent of the poorest counties in the U.S. are rural. Just as many urban schools suffer from declining property values and lower tax bases as commerce and manufacturing leave city centers, so "low-population-density" (i.e., rural) communities are surrounded by agricultural land that is taxed at a reduced rate. (p.126)

In addition to the increased poverty rate, schools in non-urban areas are faced with additional financial burdens resulting from deteriorating facilities, inequitable state funding formulas and declining enrollment which reduces per-pupil funding (Jimerson, 2005). Therefore, it is imperative to identify specific cost-effective strategies that principals can implement in non-urban schools, where financial resources are hugely strained, to facilitate the English language learning of the increasing population of immigrant youth.

Strategies for Facilitating Education of a Diverse Student Population

Recognizing that diversity continues to grow while funding diminishes, the researchers propose three cost-effective and closely linked strategies for principals to facilitate the education of the increasingly diverse population in non-urban schools.

1. Educate Staff about the Diverse Composition of the Student Body

Principals need to be aware of the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in their schools (Garrett & Morgan, 2002). As school leaders, principals must play an active role in and serve as a model to facilitate academic and cultural education for a diverse student body (Garrett & Morgan, 2002). A student's age at migration, pre-migration experiences, reasons for migration, facility with the primary language, living arrangements, previous schooling experiences and disparity between the society of origin and U.S. society can greatly impact acculturation and learning for immigrant students (Kurtz-Costes & Pungello, 2000). Research has shown that an important element that contributes to the success of English language learners is to have teachers who are prepared and who have a broad cultural knowledge to help these students succeed in their classrooms (Reigle, 2007).

Thus, it is necessary that principals not only be aware of the diversity in their schools, but must also facilitate the education and preparation of staff members to combat pre-existing biases about the immigrant populations. Culture education empowers school employees to accommodate and utilize the cultural and linguistic diversity of the school population to enhance their teaching. English language learning works best when teachers and principals cooperatively create a school climate that incorporates multiculturalism into every aspect of a student's life (Kurtz-Costes & Pungello, 2000).

Providing professional development opportunities regarding the cultural makeup of the school need not be expensive. Public libraries and the Internet offer expansive information about various cultures. The Internet can be used to meet some of the language issues faced by principals, teachers and students and is a promising source for meeting some of the educational needs of these groups (Garrett &

Morgan, 2002). Another source of support is tapping into the existing immigrant community, seeking out its leaders who can serve as an asset to accommodating English language learning in non-urban schools. Leaders in the immigrant community are usually aware of the needs of their people and are valuable resources when it comes to political, social and educational issues (Reigle, 2007). By nurturing these relationships, the immigrant community leaders can serve as educators, translators, advocates and liaisons for the school community. The cultivation of knowledge about the community's varied cultures and relationships with the immigrant population leaders in non-urban communities enhances the school's ability to effectively teach students and makes the school more welcoming to parental involvement (Peterson & Heywood, 2007).

2. Involve Immigrant Parents

Although some families migrate to the U.S. voluntarily and others are forced to flee their native country, immigrant groups tend to share the desire to further their children's education and improve their standard of life (Kurtz-Costes & Pungello, 2000). Yet, because of cultural differences and financial challenges, many immigrant parents do not readily provide the support expected by U.S. schools. It is not unusual for immigrant parents, even though they may be well educated, to be working two or more jobs to meet the financial needs of the family while simultaneously trying to meet the other needs of their family (Peterson & Heywood, 2007). Immigrant parents' lack of participation should not be likened to a lack of interest or support of their children's progress or the school's success (Peterson's & Heywood, 2007). Principals must gain an understanding of the diverse cultural backgrounds in order to reach out to immigrant parents. Goodwin (2002) explains the necessity for principals to focus on developing worthwhile relationships with immigrant parents:

Schools need to work closely with immigrant families. Knowledge about the histories, cultures and life stories of immigrant families will be critical if they (schools) are to respond in culturally relevant and sensitive ways to immigrant children. The sacrifices the families have undergone in their moves from one part of the world to another, the many daily challenges they face as they learn how to live in a new society, the demands and restrictions of their traditions and religions, their conceptions of schools and their expectations of teachers, and their communication and parenting styles all represent critical knowledge for principals and teachers. (p.169)

While it is always important to develop authentic, respectful, and cooperative relationships with families, it is

particularly significant when working with immigrants. Family connections are central to one's sense of identity and responsibility (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Schools and parents alike rely on the children to serve as "language brokers" for their immigrant parents and act as the "go-between" for the home and school (Nieto, 2000). A veteran bilingual education teacher in New York explained, "In Latin America, parents leave the job to the school to do it all, but in America, parents are expected to be more active. It is intimidating if you're not fluent in the language to go into a school and ask questions" (Costalas, 2006, p. B5). Similarly, due to a shortage of bilingual teachers and administrators in non-urban areas, schools must rely on immigrant families and communities for language support (Zehr, 2001). Principals who reach out to immigrant families for support can be more successful in facilitating English language learning for limited English proficient students (Peterson & Heywood, 2007).

In order to develop relationships with immigrant families and to address the abundance of cultural differences, principals must rethink traditional notions of parent-school relationships (Nieto, 2000). Principals need to make accommodations for multi-language communication between staff and parents. Letters to parents in their native languages and interpreters at school programs and conferences have proven to be effective and relatively cost-effective strategies to promote immigrant parent participation (Iowa State University, 2001). Principals can offer workshops to introduce immigrant parents to the school and to provide information about the school and teachers' expectations to help parents support their children's academic success (Reigle, 2007; Goodwin, 2002; Peterson & Heywood, 2007).

Fostering strong relationships with immigrant parents facilitates their participation in the school and support of their children's academic success, and also enriches student learning. Since English literacy is enhanced by continued exposure to one's native language, immigrant parents can provide a valuable resource in their English language learning (Hayes, et. al., (Cite all authors with the first citation) 1991; McCarty, 1993). Teachers can involve immigrant students and their parents in creating dual language books which honor the native language and culture and encourage literacy at home (Peterson & Heywood, 2007).

Cultivating the parent-school relationship augments immigrant children's learning potential. Inviting immigrant parents into the school for workshops and providing tours make parents feel welcome in the school and assist them in adjusting to cultural differences between their native home and their new community. Principals can implement a variety of cost-effective approaches to develop strong relationships among the school and immigrant families and communities to promote a celebration of diversity as well as English language learning in their schools (Garrett & Morgan, 2002; Peterson & Heywood, 2007).

3. Build upon Students' Existing Knowledge and Experiences

It is important for schools to adopt an approach to teaching that educates students about their culturally and linguistically diverse composition. "Schools and educators can serve as cultural bridges to help immigrant children establish links between their social-institutional knowledge of their new world and the world they left behind. Utilization of these resources may empower immigrant children and help teachers and administrators transform themselves and their schools" (Rong & Brown, 2002, p. 130). Similarly, teaching strategies need to be based on children's knowledge and experiences (Carter, 2007; Goodwin, 2002; Kurtz-Costes & Pungello, 2000; Peterson & Heywood, 2007; Rong & Brown, 2002).

There is evidence that supporting the immigrant student's first language and appreciating his/her culture enhances English language learning (Fitzgerald, 1995; Hayes, et. al., 1991; McCarty, 1993). Effectively building upon immigrant children's prior knowledge and affirming their personal and cultural identities can lead to academic success. Students' self-esteem and their desire to achieve both increase when teachers appreciate the diversity of languages and cultures in the classroom (Peterson & Heywood, 2007).

Developing a multicultural environment has positive influences beyond academic success. Kurtz-Costes and Pungello (2000) noted that fostering multiculturalism by integrating cultural differences into the curriculum enhances the cultural flexibility of both immigrant and nonimmigrant children. Similarly, in their study of schools identified as exemplary in supporting new immigrant parents and children, Peterson and Heywood (2007) found that celebrating cultural diversity not only resulted in improved academic achievement, but that "high levels of interest in the students' cultures, languages, customs and values made a number of schools welcoming to parental participation and involvement" (p. 528). Carter (2007) similarly found that integrating multicultural education with content areas "addresses stereotypes; promotes understanding and respect of different historical narratives; espouses humanitarian and democratic values; develops a culture of dialogue within the school; and creates a common meeting point for individuals, communities, and the society" (p. 83). Although building upon students' existing knowledge and experiences requires a school's commitment to fostering multiculturalism, it entails little to no added financial commitment of the non-urban school.

Research Needs and Considerations

With the rapid growth of immigrant populations in non-urban areas (Lollock, 2001), rather than ignore the vast knowledge and experiences that immigrant learners bring to schools, principals can lead schools to access their diverse

cultures, languages, customs and values as tools to reach limited English proficient students and to enhance education for all. Non-urban principals (and urban principals) can facilitate the education of the increasingly diverse population by employing these three cost-effective and closely interconnected strategies. By (1) educating themselves and staff about the diverse cultures that make up the student body, (2) fostering involvement from immigrant families and community members, and (3) building upon students' diverse knowledge and experiences by integrating cultures and languages into the curriculum, non-urban schools can cost-effectively meet the educational needs of a culturally and ethnically diverse population.

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