

Issue Brief

Making their Way: Helping Kentucky's Immigrant Youth Successfully Transition into Adulthood

All youth in Kentucky need high quality educational experiences to become successful adults. Children must have access to educational opportunities at every stage of development, from early child care and preschool to post-secondary education or vocational training. Education improves each young person's ability to get a good job and become self-sustaining community members. Education also creates a strong workforce, which contributes to the overall growth and productivity of Kentucky's economy.

In Kentucky, as across the nation, children in immigrant families represent a small but growing part of the population and future workforce. Currently, children in immigrant families make up 5 percent of the total child population in Kentucky. In a highly globalized world, educated bilingual and multicultural youth in immigrant families will be an enormous future asset to businesses, service providers and government agencies.¹

Many immigrant families in Kentucky possess positive child well-being influences, including high rates of parent educational attainment, strong rates of home ownership and low rates of poverty.² On the other hand, there are also some immigrant families living in low-income households and parents who do not have a high school degree. Kentucky's older immigrant youth sometimes face additional challenges to completing high school and pursuing higher education, including English language acquisition, cultural skills and social adaptation.³ English proficiency, for example, is the greatest predictor of the success of older immigrant youth. The lack of adequate English language and education programs for older immigrant youth prevents Kentucky from taking advantage of a great resource for our future workforce.

June 2008

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Support

This report is funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of Kentucky Youth Advocates and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any funder.

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This brief presents a snapshot of older immigrant youth ages 16 to 19 and will examine how well they are being prepared to successfully transition into higher education and the workforce.⁴ To better understand how this population is faring, data on school drop out rates and on disconnected youth who are not in school and do not have a job is presented. The data compares Kentucky's immigrant youth born outside the U.S. to all youth born in the U.S. (which includes U.S.-born youth with immigrant parents).⁵

A Snapshot: Immigrant Youth in Kentucky Today

Of Kentucky's total youth ages 16 to 19, including naturalized citizens and refugee youth, less than 2 percent (or 4,136) were born outside the United States.⁶ While the immigrant youth population is small, the numbers are growing.

Fifty-nine percent of the immigrant youth population in Kentucky is male compared with an overall male youth population in the state of 52 percent. Nearly 57 percent of immigrant youth are Hispanic, 19 percent are Asian, 17 percent are White, and 7 percent are Black.⁷

Immigrant youth with limited English skills face a short time span in which to gain proficiency before facing standardized testing, college and job applications, and becoming independent adults. Nationally, one in three older immigrant youth have limited English proficiency.⁸ In Kentucky, the rate is higher – 41 percent of immigrant youth ages 16 to 19 speak English “not well” or “not at all.”

Data on students learning English as a second language demonstrates the growing need for effective English acquisition programs in Kentucky schools. The number of students learning English as a second language in Kentucky is relatively small, but increasing. Between 1990 and 2005, the number of students learning English as a second language increased from 1,300 to over 11,000. In school year 2004- 2005, 10,415 students in grades

pre-kindergarten through 12 were eligible for federal funding for Limited English Proficient (LEP) education.⁹ Approximately 4,751 students in all grades in Kentucky were immigrants themselves.

At the same time, immigrant youth and U.S.-born youth with immigrant parents often struggle with additional stressors such as interpreting for adult family members and acting as cultural brokers to help their families negotiate health care settings, financial transactions and other grown-up situations.¹⁰ Children in immigrant families are also more likely than children in U.S.-born families to have a parent or parents with no high school degree and low-wage jobs with few benefits.¹¹ About half of immigrant children who are proficient in English have a parent with limited English proficiency.¹²

High School Drop Out Rates

Kentucky ranks near the bottom (41st) in the nation in the percent of teens ages 16-19 who are high school drop outs; this is despite mirroring national trends in improving drop out rates.¹³ Status drop out rates, one measure of youth dropping out of high school, represent the number of youth who are not enrolled in school and have not attained at least a high school diploma.¹⁴ Nationally, only 68 percent of students who enter 9th grade graduate in four years, and rates in southern states are much lower. Youth in poverty and youth of color are often assigned to under-resourced neighborhood schools. Graduation rates for these populations therefore seldom exceed 50 percent.¹⁵

Secondary school-age youth account for the largest increase in the immigrant child population.^{16,17} National research shows that the vast majority attend school and that they fare as well as their peers on measures of physical and mental health and avoidance of high-risk behavior.¹⁸ Yet, immigrant youth are more likely to lag behind a grade and are more likely to not graduate from high school.¹⁹ Poverty and interrupted school attendance contribute to higher drop out rates.²⁰

Immigrant youth who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school degree fare poorly on many standard measures of well-being, including English language ability, earnings, health insurance coverage and poverty status.²¹

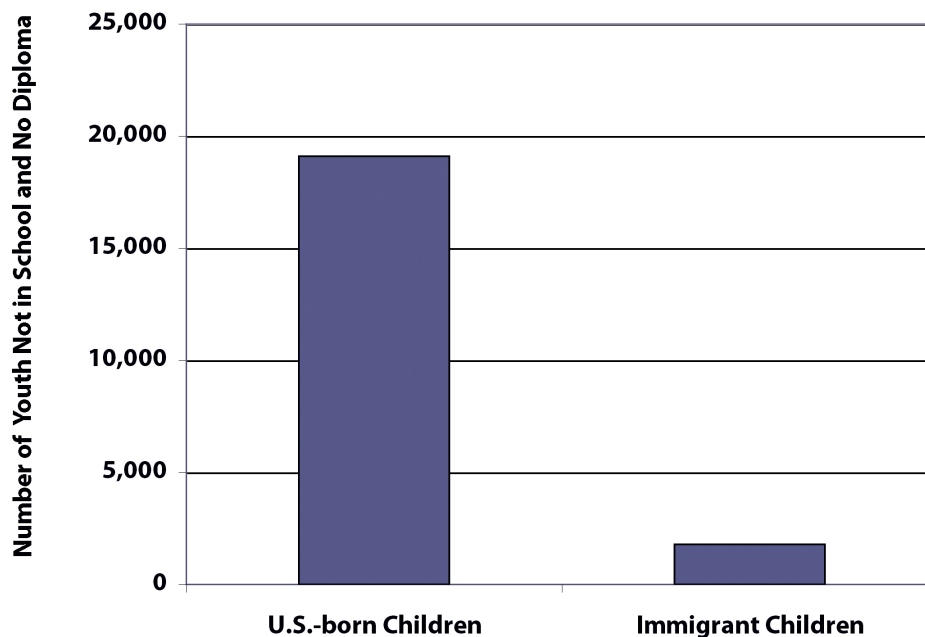
National trends also indicate children in immigrant families are more likely to be concentrated in under-resourced schools in high-poverty communities.²² These high concentrations of immigrant youth in underperforming schools raises concerns that need to be monitored and explored.²³ Kentucky focus group conversations with youth in immigrant families also echo national research that demonstrate immigrant youth face social and academic isolation in an education system that is linguistically, racially and ethnically segregated.

In Kentucky, about 9 percent of all youth ages 16 to 19 are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school degree. Nearly one in ten of these

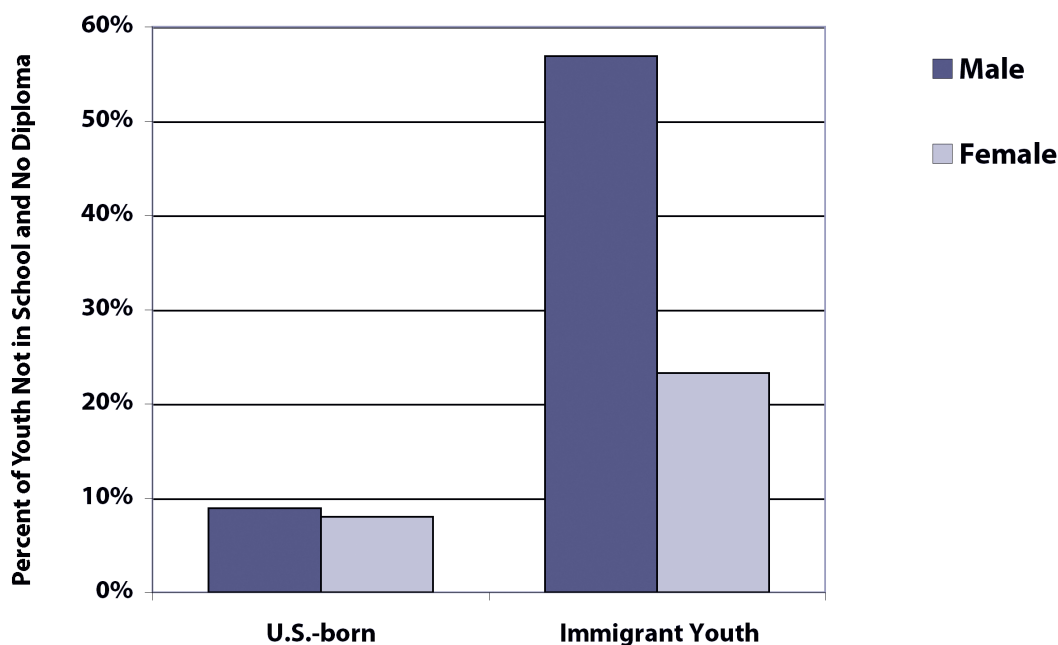
youth are immigrants (or 1,786 youth) (Figure 1). The drop out rate among immigrant youth is five times higher than the rate among U.S.-born youth (43 percent compared to 8 percent). Higher rates may accounted for, in part, by the inclusion of immigrant youth who have never enrolled in high school.²⁴ The drop out rate is especially high among male immigrant youth, with more than half of male immigrant youth not enrolled in school and not having earned a high school diploma (Figure 2).

Drop out rates among youth in immigrant families vary among racial and ethnic groups. In Kentucky, drop out rates among Asian and Black youth remain consistent regardless of immigration status. School drop out rates among White immigrant youth are three percentage points lower than the rate for U.S.-born White youth. Hispanic youth make up the largest section of the English Language Learner population struggling to integrate into American schools.

Figure 1: School Drop Out among Kentucky Youth Ages 16-19



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006, processed by Kentucky Population Research at the University of Louisville Urban Studies Institute.

Figure 2: Rates of School Drop Out among Kentucky Youth Ages 16-19

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006, processed by Kentucky Population Research at the University of Louisville Urban Studies Institute.

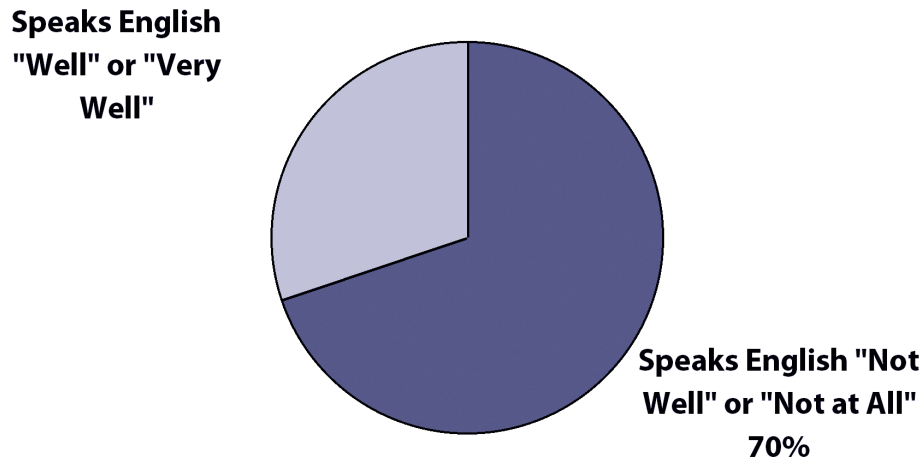
Nearly three in four Hispanic immigrant youth ages 16 to 19 were not enrolled in school and had not received a high school diploma in 2006. Part of the high rate is explained by Hispanic immigrant youth who have never enrolled in a U.S. school and have not completed a high school degree in their country of origin.²⁵ National data indicate this may account for 1 in three Hispanic immigrant youth, and that the rate of Hispanic youth who have dropped out of enrollment in a U.S. school is closer to 15 percent.

English proficiency is one of the strongest indicators of successful transition among older immigrant youth. Though English Language Learner (ELL) youth – or youth with limited English proficiency – often have similar attendance and grades as their English-speaking peers, they tend to score lower on standardized tests and are nearly twice as likely to drop out of school.^{27, 28} Nearly 70 percent of Kentucky’s immigrant youth not enrolled in school and not possessing a high school

diploma have limited English proficiency (Figure 3).

Like all Kentucky children, immigrant youth need a connection to their schools that keeps them motivated and prevents them from feeling socially and academically isolated. Studies have shown that even among immigrant youth who perform well in school, there are higher rates of low self-esteem and depression due to high pressure to achieve coupled with social and academic isolation.²⁹ Kentucky immigrant youth participating in focus groups echo research showing that English as Second Language (ESL) classes provide an important resource, but that their participation in regular classes, especially extracurricular activities such as sports, music and art, are just as important to their linguistic, academic and social integration into American schools.³⁰ English Language Learner students tend to acquire conversational English skills more quickly through daily interactions in integrated classroom settings with native-English speakers than through ESL classes alone.³¹

Figure 3: English Proficiency among Kentucky Immigrant Youth Not Enrolled in School and Not Possessing a High School Degree



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006, processed by Kentucky Population Research at the University of Louisville Urban Studies Institute.

Efforts to strengthen immigrant youth's ability to embrace their cultural heritage while acclimating to the United States, can help them achieve greater success in this country.²⁶ Research demonstrates that exposure to immigrant culture among Latino and Asian youth, for example, makes them less likely to drop out of school. Schools and agencies can support these efforts by providing multicultural programming and language accessible information for youth and parents. Schools can also foster leadership skills with programs that encourage immigrant youth to teach others about their cultural heritage or tutor youth in their language.

Schools can support English Language Learner youth through multilingual and multicultural after-school programs, tutoring, career counseling and by creating safe school environments through teaching tolerance toward immigrant students.³² In addition, programs such as the Migrant Education Program (MEP) – federally-funded supplemental programs aimed to serve out-of-school youth – show success in preparing youth with limited

English skills and frequent interruptions in their education to perform well in school.³³ Research indicates youth participating in Migrant Education Programs are motivated to learn English and achieve a GED.³⁴

However, when non-cognitive measures – including absenteeism and school drop out – are not part of the school accountability process, models such as Newcomer programs – short-term transitional programs to provide intensive English language training – isolate immigrant youth academically and disconnect youth from their resident school and from the relationships and extracurricular activities that help “hook” at-risk youth. Because school district data distinguishes Newcomer program students, their progress cannot be tracked during and after enrollment in the program. This makes comparison of Newcomer program participants and non-participants impossible.³⁵

Kentucky Solutions

Engage Parents in Schools and Adult Education Programs

Parents play an important role in youth's perceptions of school and academic achievement. Parent engagement is critical to establishing effective communication between schools, students and their families. Programs that introduce immigrant parents to the U.S. educational system, explain the roles of parents and teachers in a child's development, and help them understand how to support their child's education are most successful.³⁶ Kentucky schools can support parents by ensuring that they are language accessible for parent-teacher conferences, providing written materials to parents in their language, and giving adequate support to teachers and school staff, including family resource officers and English as a Second Language teachers. In turn, engaging immigrant parents benefits schools by building relationships with culturally and linguistically diverse partners, who can then help provide input on school policies and help expand outreach to other parents.³⁷

Research indicates immigrant youth benefit academically when their parents/guardians participate in English language classes, cultural integration classes, literacy, and other adult education programs.³⁸ One school-based program found that 94 percent of youth graduated from high school and 43 percent attended college when immigrant parents without a high school degree participated in a parent education program focused on English language acquisition, literacy and child development.³⁹ Yet, few programs such as this exist to address outreach to immigrant parents, and particularly parents with teens.⁴⁰ Schools need intentional strategies and community partnerships to engage immigrant parents in literacy, parenting, and English language classes. Adult English classes and literacy programs provide ideal settings to inform parents about child development, address topics in health and safety, and build families' awareness of community resources.

Measure and Evaluate the Effectiveness of Educational Programming for English Language Learner Youth

Research demonstrates that effective social and academic integration of English Language Learner (ELL) students into mainstream school life is crucial to the child's educational success.⁴¹ ELL students in middle school and high school benefit from programs that provide:

- **Intensive language development**
- **Academic and cultural orientation**
- **A five-year high school plan for immigrant students who arrive too late to complete requirements in four years or who need additional English language skills**
- **Access to extracurricular school activities**
- **After-school tutoring or mentoring programs.**

To understand what works best for immigrant youth, better monitoring is needed of all English Language Learners. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), children with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) are not tracked after they exit LEP education programming. Kentucky school districts with larger numbers of English Language Learner students should follow the model set by several school districts nationwide to measure the progress of English Language Learner students after they exit LEP programs, which includes tracking NCLB standardized testing results. This measurement is not only an indication of individual student progress, but of how successful schools have been in preparing English learners for transitioning into mainstream education.

Lost Opportunities: Youth Not in School and Not Working

The transition for youth into independent adulthood poses many challenges. School enrollment and/or steady employment are indicators of a successful transition after high school.⁴² Disconnected youth who are not enrolled in school, do not have a job or are not in the military face particular challenges to becoming self-sufficient adults.

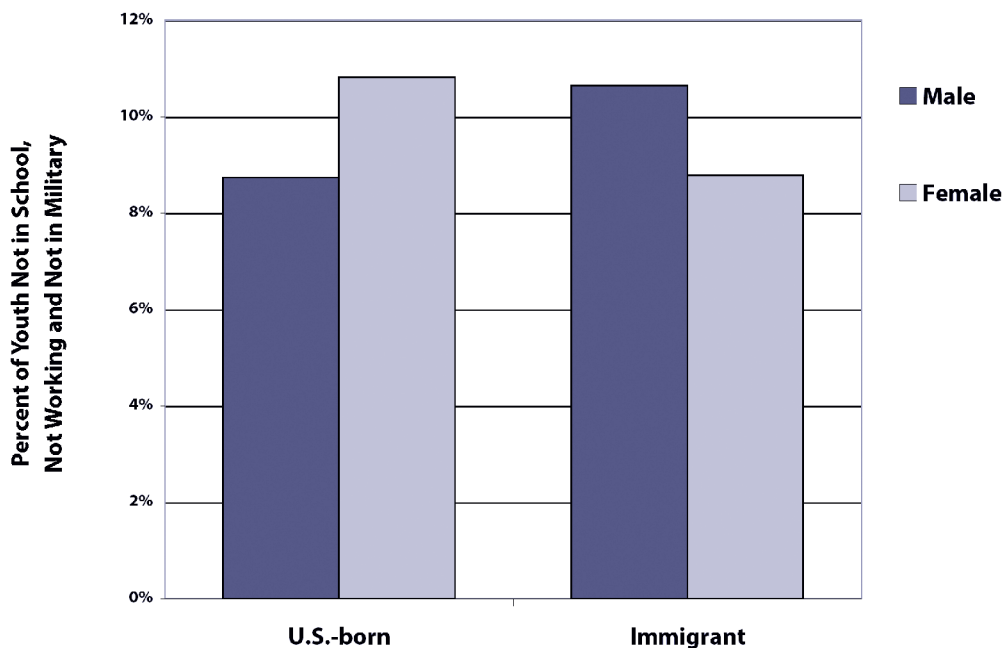
Nationally, eight percent of youth ages 16 to 19 were neither working nor enrolled in school.⁴³ Various reasons exist for youth ages 16 to 19 to be disconnected, including barriers to completing school and inability to find work. Higher levels of education are increasingly necessary to obtain reliable well-paying employment, and therefore disconnected youth face higher risks of earning lower wages and having a less-stable employment history as adults.^{44,45} Even when disconnected youth eventually do obtain jobs, they tend to

earn less money and have less socio-economic mobility.⁴⁶

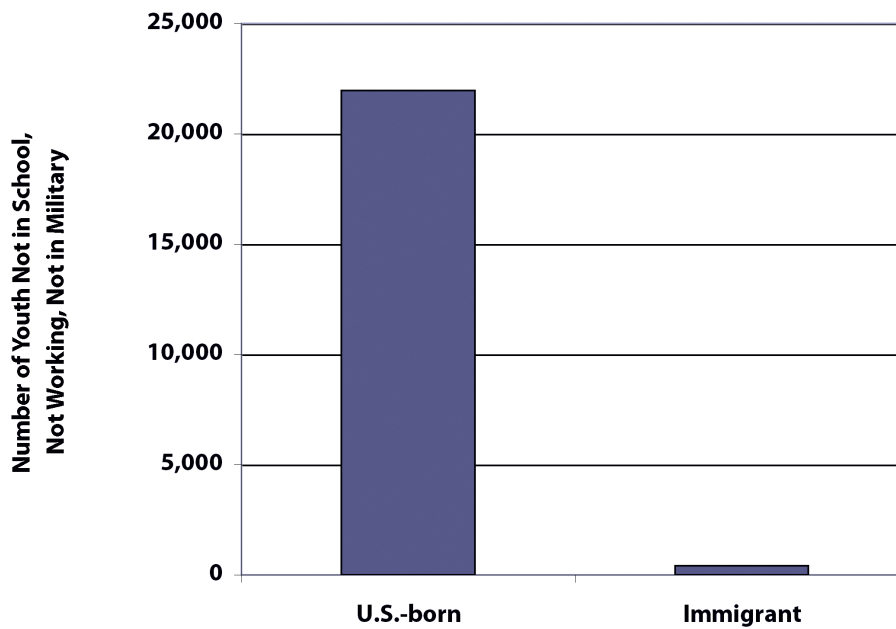
Immigrant youth who have obtained citizenship were least likely to be disconnected, while non-U.S. citizen immigrant youth were most likely to be disconnected. In 2005, of youth ages 16 to 19, 5 percent of naturalized citizen and 13 percent of non-citizen immigrant youth, were not in school, not working or not in the military, as compared to 8 percent of U.S.-born citizen youth.⁴⁷

At 43rd, Kentucky is among the states ranking worst in the nation in the percentage of disconnected youth not attending school and not working.⁴⁸ Ten percent of all Kentucky youth ages 16 to 19 fall into this category.⁴⁹ This rate is consistent among both immigrant and U.S.-born youth overall, but varies by gender (Figure 4). The vast majority (82 percent) of Kentucky's disconnected youth are U.S.-born (Figure 5) and are White.

Figure 4: Rates of Disconnected Youth in Kentucky by Gender and Immigrant Status



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006, processed by Kentucky Population Research at the University of Louisville Urban Studies Institute.

Figure 5: Number of Disconnected Youth in Kentucky

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006, processed by Kentucky Population Research at the University of Louisville Urban Studies Institute.

However, Hispanic immigrant youth in Kentucky face higher rates of limited English proficiency and are less likely to hold a high school diploma, which impacts a youth's ability to gain employment. Thus, the rate of disconnected youth is highest among Hispanic immigrant youth (17 percent).

Among Kentucky's 400 disconnected immigrant youth, the majority (64 percent) are male. Male youth who are neither enrolled in school nor working face especially high risk for engaging in delinquent activities.⁵⁰ For young adults in the juvenile justice, foster care or the special education systems, dropping out of school and not working can leave them ineligible for services that could increase the likelihood of a successful transition to adulthood.

Kentucky Solutions

Increase Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Programming for Older Youth with Targeted Outreach to Immigrant Youth

Effective alternative education and vocational training programs need to be designed to meet the development needs of youth, especially for youth ages 16 and 17 at-risk of dropping out of school. These youth, for example, may not qualify for existing GED or adult education programs, which often have grade competency and minimum age requirements. Community programs can also greatly increase success by communicating with schools in a comprehensive effort to address the developmental needs of youth ages 16 - 19.

At the same time, programs need to be culturally and linguistically appropriate for serving diverse immigrant youth. Strong partnerships between immigrant organizations, schools, and youth programs are especially important to engaging older immigrant youth and meeting their language and culture needs. Whether programs are specific to an immigrant population or multicultural, incorporating diverse staff ensures language accessible services to parents and youth. At the same time, programs can encourage immigrant youth cultures and promote leadership skill development by engaging youth in community advocacy projects and to develop tolerance trainings.⁵¹ Immigrant youth connected to both the culture of their country of origin and American culture demonstrate resiliency skills that protect them from becoming disconnected from school and work.

Increase Awareness of Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education Policy

All youth need the opportunity to pursue higher education and job training to meet employer market demands. The Kentucky Council on Post Secondary Education's (CPE) goal is to improve the system of higher education and increase the number of college graduates in the state. Therefore, CPE has enacted proactive policies that can keep immigrant youth engaged in high school with future options for higher education and career training. Unlike many other states, Kentucky's CPE policies ensure that all Kentuckians can pursue higher education, including eligibility to enroll in public postsecondary institutions and eligibility for in-state tuition for all graduates from Kentucky high schools.⁵² Yet significant gaps exist in institutions' understandings of these policies and in their outreach and recruitment practices. Kentucky colleges and universities can encourage immigrant youth to complete school with increased outreach efforts to immigrant students through stronger community partnerships and by designating a resource officer specifically to immigrant and

English Language Learner students. Expanding scholarships for all minority students, including immigrant students, is also needed to meet Kentucky's increasingly diverse student population.

Increase Youth Input in Making Policy

All youth need opportunities to inform public policies that affect them and their peers. Kentucky's next steps for addressing disconnected youth must include conversations with Kentucky's immigrant youth in order to discern community needs and achieve greater results in improving the state's rate of disconnected youth. There is limited qualitative data on youth perceptions, especially views on strengths and barriers for keeping at-risk immigrant youth engaged in school. Qualitative research is needed to identify cultural assets, describe asset variation between populations and communities, and develop effective strategies for fostering immigrant youth resiliency and keeping older youth connected to school and employment.

Endnotes

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- 4 For the purposes of this report, the term "immigrant youth" represents all youth in Kentucky ages 16-19 who were born outside the United States. This population of immigrant youth includes naturalized citizen and refugee youth.
- 5 Youth living independently in their own homes or apartments and youth living in group quarters or foster care are also included in this data set.
- 6 Unless otherwise noted, all Kentucky data reported in this issue brief are based on U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey data, from 2006, as processed by the Kentucky State Data Center at the University of Louisville Urban Studies Institute.
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