



Chapter 7: Education

While it is school districts, not municipalities, who are responsible for education, municipalities can benefit from a well-educated resident base. Education not only builds a skilled workforce, it also provides social, civic, and personal development. Inequitable access to high-quality education contributes to achievement gaps across racial, ethnic, and economic lines and to the decline of student achievement across the U.S., compared to other industrialized nations. While the education discussion has many facets, this chapter focuses specifically on early childhood, primary, and secondary educational institutions (pre-K, elementary, and high school).

Common Challenges

Similar to the Language Access chapter, there are many challenges facing immigrant families when it comes to participating actively in the local education system. Many immigrants come to the United States in search of a better life—including better educational opportunities for their children. However, the barriers to accomplishing this are still high due to some of the following challenges:

Many children live in “mixed-status” families with limited access to support. A “mixed-status” family means that while one parent may be a born or naturalized U.S. citizen, the other parent or siblings may be undocumented. Immigration status can affect children’s access to health, wellness, and other government-sponsored programs. This can create stress for school-aged children.

Need for youth programming. Approximately 32 percent of children in the Chicago region are children of immigrants.⁶⁵ Many communities desire increased youth programming but lack the budget to increase or maintain existing programs. This lack of resources means that programs that are available are in high demand and are often too expensive for immigrant parents to afford, leaving many immigrant children without the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular and enrichment activities.

Many immigrants have limited English skills. As the Language Access chapter describes, limited English proficiency can impact how comfortable immigrants feel when trying to engage with others. This is also a challenge for local schools who need parents to be equal partners in helping educate children. When parents have limited English skills, often it is their children who have to act as interpreters when interacting with school officials, police and fire officials, doctors, or anyone the family comes into contact with. This can complicate the adults’ understanding of what is going on and place a great deal of stress on the child.

Lower participation rates in early childhood and supplemental educational opportunities.

Children of immigrants make up one-quarter of preschool-age children who are not in school. A study of preschool attendance rates between 2009 and 2011 found that fully 63 percent of Latino children were not enrolled compared to 50 percent of non-Hispanic white children.⁶⁶ A combination of factors can lead to this phenomenon, which can have a ripple effect for immigrant children. Studies increasingly indicate the importance of early childhood education to achievement later in school and beyond.

Children of immigrants are more likely to live in low-income and less educated households.⁶⁷ When combined with limited English proficiency, this makes it particularly challenging for parents to help their children with homework and access school-based activities. As a consequence, it leaves many children of immigrants at a disadvantage.

Immigrant families’ strengths can erode over time. There are a number of factors that can disrupt immigrant family stability. A family member’s deteriorating health can have a major effect on a child’s attendance and overall participation in the education system. Whether it is a child or a parent who becomes ill, immigrant children may be expected to take on a caregiver role. Likewise, families that don’t have strong support systems can suffer when parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, aren’t nearby to help with the demands of working and raising a family.

65 Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, “U.S. and Illinois Immigrants by the Numbers.” <http://icirr.org/sites/default/files/fact%20sheet-demography%202011.pdf>.

66 The Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Kids Count: 2013 Data Book on State Trends in Child Well-Being.” <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/publications/databook/2013>.

67 Chaudry, Ajav and Fortuny, Karina, The Urban Institute, “Children of Immigrants: Economic Well-Being,” November 2010. <http://www.aecf.org/-/media/Pubs/Topics/Special%20Interest%20Areas/Immigrants%20and%20Refugees/ChildrenofImmigrantsEconomicWellBeing/412270childrenofimmigrantseconomic.pdf>.

Strategies to Support Educational Attainment

There are a variety of ways municipalities can begin to address these challenges and help to increase educational attainment. While school districts are distinct units of government, municipalities should work in concert with local school officials and elected or appointed school-boards to share information with immigrant residents who have school-aged children.

Improve access to information about early education and supplemental educational programming.

Children of parents with limited English proficiency and poor educational attainment are often less prepared to enter the school system than non-immigrant children. Municipalities can be a one-stop resource of information about the community. This could begin with a community bulletin board that contains information about early educational opportunities available in the community.

Encourage parental participation in school and after-school activities.

There is a real need to create a welcoming environment and ensure that all children have access to school and after-school activities. As stated in the public safety chapter, the Matrícula Consular is an acceptable form of identification that immigrant parents can use under state law to enter schools. Municipalities can help bridge communication gaps and ensure parents are aware of their right to be involved in their children's education.

Information sharing between the municipality and the school district is another way local government can help immigrant families. For instance, many municipalities have monthly or quarterly newsletters that contain wealth of information about the community and upcoming events and activities. Check with the local schools to see if they have information they can share about programming and after-school activities and vice-versa; school districts also have a broad reach into the community and may provide a similar newsletter to students and parents. If there is pertinent information that the municipality would like to get out to immigrant residents, the school newsletter may be a good way to get this information out.

SPOTLIGHT

Abriendo Puertas ("Opening Doors")

Abriendo Puertas ("Opening Doors") is the nation's first evidence-based parent leadership program designed primarily for Spanish-speaking parents of newborns and children up to five years old. The interactive curriculum focuses on cultural values, key strengths, and experiences of Latino families. The "for-Latinos-by-Latinos" curriculum was developed in partnership with Latino parents, researchers, and program specialists and is managed and administered by Families in Schools, a California-based nonprofit.

Since 2010, the Latino Policy Forum has shared the Abriendo Puertas program with more than 25 Chicago-area Latino-serving organizations, equipping more than 1,000 Latino parents with knowledge and tools to support their children. Thanks to generous support from the Pritzker Children's Initiative, the Forum expanded Abriendo Puertas throughout Illinois in 2013.

Niles Township Schools' ELL Parent Center

The Niles Township Schools' ELL Parent Center serves as a resource for immigrant parents to support them in advocating for their children's academic achievement. The center offers English classes, access to community services, and tailored workshops to help parents gain the skills and tools to understand and navigate the U.S. educational system.

SPOTLIGHT

Bensenville's Padres Unidos

Bensenville's Fenton Community High School sponsors Padres Unidos, or Parents United, a parent group for Latino families. The group meets on a monthly basis to discuss challenges and social pressures facing children and to develop strategies that alleviate these pressures and encourage positive behavior. Spanish-speaking professionals are brought in to help facilitate discussion as well as teach effective parenting methods. The meetings are an opportunity for parents to learn from experts and each other, as well as an opportunity to network. The meetings also help build ties between parents and the school and help maintain parental involvement.

Aurora's El Día De Los Niños

Since 2001, in recognition of the cultural importance of children and families, the Aurora Hispanic Heritage Advisory Board has hosted an annual event known as El Día de los Niños, or Day of the Children. El Día de los Niños is a holiday celebrated throughout Latin America in which families, schools, and communities come together to value and uplift children in the community. This event includes ethnic food, educational activities, booths sponsored by community businesses and vendors, and entertainment for the entire family.

Use municipal buildings as a resource for after-school activities and/or educational classes.

Municipalities may not have funding for after-school programs, but that doesn't mean that they don't possess valuable resources. Sometimes finding adequate space to host activities like ESL classes or programs for children is expensive for service providers. Municipalities could work with local service providers to host events that bring immigrant families into municipal buildings, making them more familiar to families when they eventually need assistance from the local government or have questions for municipal staff (water bills, permits, etc.).

Elected leaders should engage with local schools. Local elected officials can make a big difference in the lives of young people by showing their commitment to the community. Work with a local government or civics teacher and meet with local students to hear their ideas about the community. Institute an annual field trip where students can come to village hall and learn about what it's like to be the mayor, trustee, building inspector, or community development director for a day. Activities like these can inspire young people to get more involved in the civic life of their community. Another idea would be to coordinate a community clean-up day where elected officials, municipal staff, and students work side-by-side on a project that directly benefits the community.

Partner with local youth service providers on programs and activities. Municipalities should look to local youth organizations, like the Boys and Girls Club, United Way, or perhaps the local park district or community center, to see what programs they presently have that support the young people in the community. See if there are opportunities to partner or share information through these programs. Bring this information on youth programming back to the community by sharing it in the community newsletter or link to it online.



Engaging with local schools.
Source: Addison Police Department

SPOTLIGHT

Strengthening Families Program for Youth Engagement

Griselda Hernandez, a social worker with the Carpentersville Police Department, runs Strengthening Families, a youth program from Iowa State University, which the Village offers several times a year in both English and Spanish. The program was initially funded by the State and then by the Village. When the Village was no longer able to support it, Ms. Hernandez partnered with the Boys and Girls Club of Dundee Township on a United Way grant to fund the program. Often, grant-makers are interested in funding projects that have strong partnerships. By seeking funding jointly, Carpentersville showed that they could bring important staff resources and expertise to bear, while the Boys and Girls Club had access to youth—a successful recipe for any grant proposal.

