

Focus On

What Works

LEARNING WHILE HISPANIC

This was the year that Sonia Sotomayor's journey—from a public housing project in the South Bronx to the United States Supreme Court—inspired Hispanic students, immigrant and U.S. born alike. "Sonia Sotomayor gives me hope," was the sentiment most often voiced by Hispanic youth. Students identified with her and understood the enormous obstacles she and her parents had overcome for her to achieve historic heights. Like Sotomayor, the vast majority of Hispanic public school students were born in the United States. This report, however, focuses primarily on Hispanic immigrant students, who face especially daunting challenges.

Educating Immigrant Students

The children of Hispanic immigrants have special issues that U.S. educators are working hard to meet. These issues—culture, language, and economics—significantly impact student achievement and have led to questions about how best to educate immigrant children. The 1.6 million Hispanic immigrant students in today's K-12

schools are more likely to be poor than Hispanic students born in the U.S., more likely to come from homes where the adults have little formal education, less likely to live with both parents, and more likely to speak English with difficulty.

Navigating Two Cultures

For these students, adaptation—the process of learning how to navigate in an environment or social situation that is different from one's own—is crucial; and public schools have always played a central role in helping immigrants learn American cultural traits and societal norms. And of course language is key. Approximately 80 percent of all English Language Learners in the United States are Hispanic. However, nationwide only about 2.5 percent of teachers who instruct ELL students have a degree in ELL or bilingual education. Developing programs and strategies to address the language needs of both immigrant and U.S. born students is one of the biggest challenges facing our schools today.

HOT TOPIC

The Dream Act

Every year approximately 65,000 undocumented students who have lived in the U.S. for at least five years graduate from high school. Most of them cannot afford to go to college, because, as non-citizens, they can't qualify for federal aid. Their best hope: the Dream Act, a bill that would allow undocumented young people to become permanent residents if they go to college or join the U.S. military. At the end of the process, the young person would have the opportunity to become an American citizen. NEA supports this bill and has urged Congress to pass it. President Obama has promised to sign it. To learn more, visit www.dreamact.info.

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WHAT'S WORKING

1 Newcomer programs help students adapt socially and academically. School districts across the country are implementing Newcomer Programs for students and families. Student programs provide individual academic attention; help children become familiar with the school system; and offer counseling and health care services, while family programs reach out to family members in their own language and refer them to needed community services. Districts with newcomer programs include California's Hayward, Long Beach Unified, and Paramount Unified school districts and Maryland's Prince George's County school district.

2 Reaching out to families improves student performance. In Putnam City West High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, the fastest growing segment of the student population is Hispanics. Two years ago, the NEA's Public Engagement Project and the Oklahoma Education Association initiated a series of community conversations focusing on closing achievement gaps and meeting the needs of Hispanic parents and students. Called "Compadres in Education," the conversations addressed topics such as the importance of higher education, required course work for entering college, and the economic value of higher education. In addition, hands-on help was provided for completing financial aid forms. The pass rate for Hispanic students on the end-of-instruction test in English II, a graduation requirement, rose from 55 percent in 2007 to 77 percent in 2008.

And Hispanic students' Academic Performance Index—a measure of both reading and math scores—rose from 839 to 1065 on a scale of 1500. Student attendance has also improved dramatically since Compadres was launched.

3 Targeted instruction and interventions lead to student gains. Of the 23,993 students attending the Las Cruces, New Mexico, public schools, 71 percent are Hispanic, and 59 percent are enrolled in free/reduced meal programs. (There are also immigrant students, primarily from Mexico, but students are not asked whether they are immigrants or U.S. born.) The number of Las Cruces students (grades 3-10) meeting math and reading growth targets increased by 10 percent over 2007-2008, a major achievement for the district. Dr. Steven Sanchez, Associate Superintendent of Teaching, Learning, and Research attributes these academic gains to a number of factors, including improved professional development for teachers. More time has been allotted to teachers for planning and consultation, and teachers are now provided differentiated professional development opportunities so that each teacher can improve in the area he or she thinks needs improvement, including teaching students who are struggling with English. Las Cruces has also implemented a Measuring Academic Performance system that enables teachers to look at students' individual instruction data and intervene to assist students academically throughout the school year.

WHAT STUDENTS SAY

“I had a 4.0 average throughout high school and was valedictorian in my senior year. But I heard a teacher say that if I had been at a White school, I wouldn't even have been in the top 500.”

—High School Student
San Diego, California

“At school there's always a racist comment about Hispanics. I remember one time someone asked me if I had a green card. It made me feel awful.”

—Middle School Student
Denver, Colorado

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