

Hispanics

WELCOMING IMMIGRANT FAMILIES AND STUDENTS

Dramatic Demographic Changes

The number of immigrant students in public schools has more than doubled since 1990. They now number 3.8 million—and Hispanic students comprise almost 60 percent of the immigrant students in our schools. This, of course, is all part of a larger demographic shift in the U.S. that will lead to there being no ethnic majority in the United States by 2050. The Hispanic population is expected to triple by 2050.

With Change Comes Friction

Throughout U.S. history, great social change has caused great social friction, and now history is repeating itself.

The wave upon wave of immigrants in the 19th Century spawned virulent anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism in the United States as well as anti-immigrant political movements such as the Know Nothings and the Native American Party. In the 20th Century, when the Great Depression hit, some Americans blamed Mexican immigrants for their economic woes. The Congress passed and President Herbert Hoover signed the infamous Deportation Act. This law empowered counties, working with the U.S. Immigration Service, to arrest Mexicans, put them on “deportation trains” and send them to Mexico. This was the largest forced migration in U.S. history, with half a million to a million Mexicans and Mexican Americans deported.

After the recession hit in 2008, we saw a spike in anti-immigrant legislation in a number of states. Most of these proposed laws increased local and state police powers to demand proof of citizenship or legal immigration status from any person the police deemed “suspicious.” In 2010, Arizona enacted such a measure over the protests of the NEA, NAACP, MALDEF, NCLR and other civil rights groups who pointed out that the law encourages racial/ethnic profiling.

And this year, Alabama enacted the harshest anti-immigrant law (H.B. 56) yet. It requires school personnel to verify that newly enrolling students are in the country legally. If parents are unable to provide proof of U.S. citizenship, then the student will be designated as undocumented in annual reports school districts provide the state. The

impact of H.B. 56 has been immediate—children have literally vanished from Alabama classrooms. NEA, the Alabama Education Association, and the National School Boards Association have filed two joint amicus briefs challenging H.B. 56.

Immigrants, especially Hispanic immigrants, are being scapegoated for the recession. Look at the rationale given in H.B. 56 for targeting undocumented immigrants: “The State of Alabama finds that illegal immigration is causing economic hardship and lawlessness in this state ...” This assertion is not backed up by a single fact—and given that only 3 percent of Alabama’s population is foreign born (documented and undocumented), we are confident no supporting evidence will be forthcoming. As our joint amicus brief states: “The purpose and effect of H.B. 56 is to use fear and intimidation to drive undocumented immigrants and their children out of the state of Alabama.”

NEA has a long and proud history of fighting for students who are being denied their right to an education. When Asian immigrant children, Hispanic children, and Black children were denied access to an equal opportunity to an education, we fought for them—and we will continue to fight for them. We believe every student has a fundamental right to quality public education.

Dispelling Some Misconceptions about Hispanic Immigrants and Schools

Hispanic immigrants are flooding America—“They’re taking over.”

Americans consistently **overstate** the population that is foreign born—believing, according to one study, that 39 percent of our population was born elsewhere. In fact, immigrants constitute only 14 percent of our population today, compared with 40 percent in 1900.

Immigrants, especially Hispanics, are not involved in their children’s education, and it is impossible to get them to come to school events such as parent-teacher conferences.

If schools reach out to immigrant parents in new and creative ways (see below), they will become involved because they care passionately about their children’s education. Surveys done of Hispanics show that they see education as the key to a better life for their children.

If Hispanic students are not legal residents of the U.S., school districts are not obligated to enroll them.

Yes, they are. In 1982, the Supreme Court held in *Plyler v. Doe* that Texas violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution by denying undocumented school-age children a free public education. Reasoning that such children are in this country through no fault of their own, the Court concluded that they are entitled to the same K-12 education that the state provides to children who are citizens or legal residents.

Most Hispanic limited-English-proficient (LEP) students are born outside the United States.

Wrong. Most LEP students were born here; only 20 percent of LEP students are immigrants. Most LEP students born in the U.S. are being raised in homes in which English is spoken little or not at all.

An Alternative to Scapegoating: Welcoming Immigrants into Our Communities and Schools

With the rising backlash against immigrants, there is now a budding movement among communities across the country to proactively bridge the gap between natives and newcomers.

“Our vision for America is one in which mutual respect and cooperation prevails between foreign-born and native-born residents, and where immigrants feel welcome and are fully integrated into the fabric of their adopted hometowns,” says David Lubell, Executive Director, Welcoming America (www.welcomingamerica.org/rci).

Churches, local government agencies and charities can do much to welcome immigrants into their “receiving communities.” And of course, we know that schools can also play a vital role. NEA’s new report, *Family-School-Community Partnerships 2.0*, documents 16 successful efforts of educators across the country to reach out and engage families, native-born and immigrant. These projects range from the Parent-Teacher Home Visit Project in Sacramento, CA to Compadres in Education at Putnam City West High School in Oklahoma City, OK.

The Compadres Project especially impacts immigrants. Supported by NEA and the Oklahoma Education Association, trained local community members to record community conversations with Hispanic families. These conversations, in turn, led school employees to hold meetings with Hispanic families through a series of events called Noche de Padres Hispánicos or Hispanic Family

Night. These meetings, which include Mexican food, have addressed topics such as the legal rights of immigrants, the challenges of raising teens in American culture, and tips for success in high school and college.

In addition, the school has taken several actions in response to the concerns raised in the community conversations. It has added bilingual staff, offered professional development to improve the teaching of English Language Learners, provided course descriptions in Spanish as well as English, and expanded opportunities for students to engage in service-learning—community service activities aligned with the curriculum.

Since the Compadres in Education began in 2007, the graduation rate among Hispanic students has increased 70 percent and attendance at Noche de Padres Hispánicos has increased from 50 to more than 250 attendees.

NEA member and 2002 Teacher of the Year Chauncey Veatch said of teaching Hispanic immigrant students at Coachella Valley High School in Thermal, CA: “I see the face of hope daily, and if I listen carefully to my students and their families, they give me all the clues I need to teach.”

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