



AP PHOTO/BEN MARGOT

The Case for a Two-Generation Approach for Educating English Language Learners

By Tracey Ross

May 2015

Introduction and summary

“By focusing on the civic, economic, and linguistic integration of new Americans, we can help immigrants and refugees in the United States contribute fully to our economy and their communities.”¹

– President Barack Obama, November 2014

Over the past two decades, the United States has undergone a number of demographic shifts. Between 2000 and 2013, the Latino population grew by 43 percent, far outpacing the growth of non-Hispanic whites, whose population grew by 5.7 percent during the same time period.² The number of Asians in the United States is increasing as well; Asians recently surpassed Latinos as the nation’s fastest-growing group of new immigrants. This population grew by 46 percent between 2000 and 2010.³

In November, President Barack Obama announced steps to allow nearly 5 million undocumented immigrants to remain temporarily in the country, the majority being the parents of U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, or DREAMers—undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children.⁴ This action will keep families in tact as the federal government uses its limited immigration enforcement resources to address more-pressing cases—for example, focusing on serious criminals and recent arrivals.⁵ In addition, the president established the White House Task Force on New Americans to develop a coordinated federal strategy to better integrate new Americans into communities and support state and local efforts to do the same.⁶ Together, these steps signify a greater understanding of how immigrants are already contributing to this nation, as well as a growing recognition that more must be done to ensure that they can reach their full potential as active participants in their communities.

For instance, when these roughly 5 million individuals are able to work legally, they will have greater opportunities to find jobs that match their skillsets and as a result be more economically productive.⁷ In addition, immigrants buy goods and services from U.S. businesses, helping increase demand and create new jobs.⁸

As the leadership of Welcoming America, an organization that works to promote mutual respect and cooperation between foreign-born and U.S.-born Americans, stated, “How cities respond during this welcoming moment will reflect our commitment to the values that define us as Americans.”⁹

One of the most significant ways that communities can respond to potential changes in the immigration system, as well as ongoing shifts in the nation’s demographics, is by ensuring greater access to English language instruction, as a lack of English proficiency is a significant barrier to full participation in society. English language learner, or ELL, students must acquire language skills while studying the same core content areas as their English-speaking peers, essentially requiring that they do double the work. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that ELL students are more likely than non-ELL students to attend high-poverty schools where resources are limited.¹⁰ Furthermore, regardless of their own level of English proficiency, children are greatly affected by their parents’ English skills. English proficiency among parents is critical when it comes to accessing the knowledge and resources necessary to help children navigate classrooms, health facilities, and even the juvenile justice system.¹¹

Moreover, parents with limited English skills tend to have higher rates of unemployment and lower wages even when doing the same job as a person proficient in English.¹² Numerous studies have shown that immigrants who are proficient in English earn more than those who lack proficiency.¹³ Depending on where they live, workers proficient in English earn anywhere from 17 percent to 135 percent more than ELL workers.¹⁴ In essence, the language barrier can create a poverty trap for families and a loss of human capital for communities. Given the fact that the majority of labor-force growth in the United States over the next four decades is projected to come from immigrants and their children,¹⁵ investing in these two populations is critical to the success of not only these families but also the U.S. economy. It is not surprising, then, that higher proficiency in English among immigrant parents is associated with greater academic and economic success of their children.¹⁶

As the number of ELLs will increase in the United States, historic and emerging so-called gateway communities—communities with established immigrant populations¹⁷—must engage ELL parents and students simultaneously, as the outcomes for both groups are closely linked. Such a two-generation approach has proven effective with English-proficient, high-poverty communities¹⁸ and could be a successful strategy for the ELL population as well. This report proposes a number of recommendations for ways that communities can implement a two-generation approach to close the language gap and expand opportunities for English learners, including:

- Adopting the community school model to provide critical wraparound services for students and families
- Implementing extended learning time to ensure that students have additional instruction critical to help them learn English while learning their curricula
- Prioritizing family engagement at school to help parents become better advocates for their children
- Creating workforce-development programs with English as a second language, or ESL, classes and wraparound services
- Prioritizing ELL training for teachers

This report provides an overview of the ELL population in the United States; explains why a two-generation approach is a valuable strategy to improve English proficiency and the economic well-being of families and communities; and presents case studies of promising approaches for educating ELL students and parents while providing critical wraparound services to enhance the learning process.

ELL: A definition

An ELL student is a student whose native language is not English, or who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant.¹⁹ In education, a number of terms are often used when referring to this population, including English language learners, or ELLs; English learners, or ELs; limited English proficient, or LEP; dual language learners; and non-native English speakers, among others. While these terms are often used interchangeably, school districts may define each term differently to distinguish between the levels of language skills that students possess. However, the federal government and many state governments use both ELL and LEP to mean the same thing.²⁰

Furthermore, LEP is most often used to describe working-age adults who have limited English language skills, as well as in the context of immigrants applying for citizenship, as proficiency in English is a requirement to pass the citizenship exam.²¹

For the purposes of this report, ELL will be used to discuss broadly the non-native English speaking population, particularly students. LEP will be used when specifically discussing working-age adults.²²

Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

