Young Children of Immigrants and the Path to Educational Success: Key Themes from an Urban Institute Roundtable

Olivia Golden and Karina Fortuny

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About the Urban Institute Roundtable on Young Children in Immigrant Families

The goal of Young Children in Immigrant Families and the Path to Educational Success, a 2010 roundtable funded by the Foundation for Child Development and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, was to connect state and federal policy debates about early childhood education and education reform with emerging research about young children in immigrant families and what they and their families need to support their success at school. Specialists in education and early education—including researchers, key federal and state policy experts, and policymakers—came together for a day-long session with four closely related goals: to inform education and early education policymakers of the growing body of research about young children of immigrants; to educate researchers about policymakers' needs; to build relationships between the two groups; and to generate specific, useful insights about the intersection of policy and research in this field.

The authors would like to thank Serena Lei for her extraordinary writing and editorial contributions; the Roundtable participants for their commitment and the rich and honest discussion; Ajay Chaudry of the Urban Institute, and co-principal investigator of the project, for his leadership in planning the roundtable and facilitating a portion of the discussion; Irene Lee of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Ruby Takanishi of the Foundation for Child Development for their extremely useful input into all stages of the roundtable as well as their review of this report; and the Foundation for Child Development and the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their generous support of this project.

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Young Children of Immigrants and the Path to Educational Success

The population of young children of immigrants grew tremendously over the past two decades, doubling between 1990 and 2008. The growing presence of young children of immigrants is changing the demographic makeup of our classrooms, yet major debates about early education and school reform in the United States far too often do not mention them. As a result, even as high-quality education for all becomes a prominent policy and political goal, key questions remain unanswered about whether schools and early childhood programs are doing a good job teaching these young children. Do they know how to make the most of children's crucial years of language development, roughly age 3 to 8, especially for English language learners? Do schools and early childhood programs know how to engage parents and build on family strengths? Do children and their families have access to good programs that might help them succeed?

Talking about the education of children of immigrants can be difficult, sparking heated—at times, divisive—debates over immigration policy, national identity, government investment, and federal, state, and local roles in crafting early education and K–12 policies and practices. But the risk of failing to ask and answer these questions is that government policies, funding choices, and program approaches may hinder rather than support the success of this large and growing group of young students, jeopardizing their long-run success.

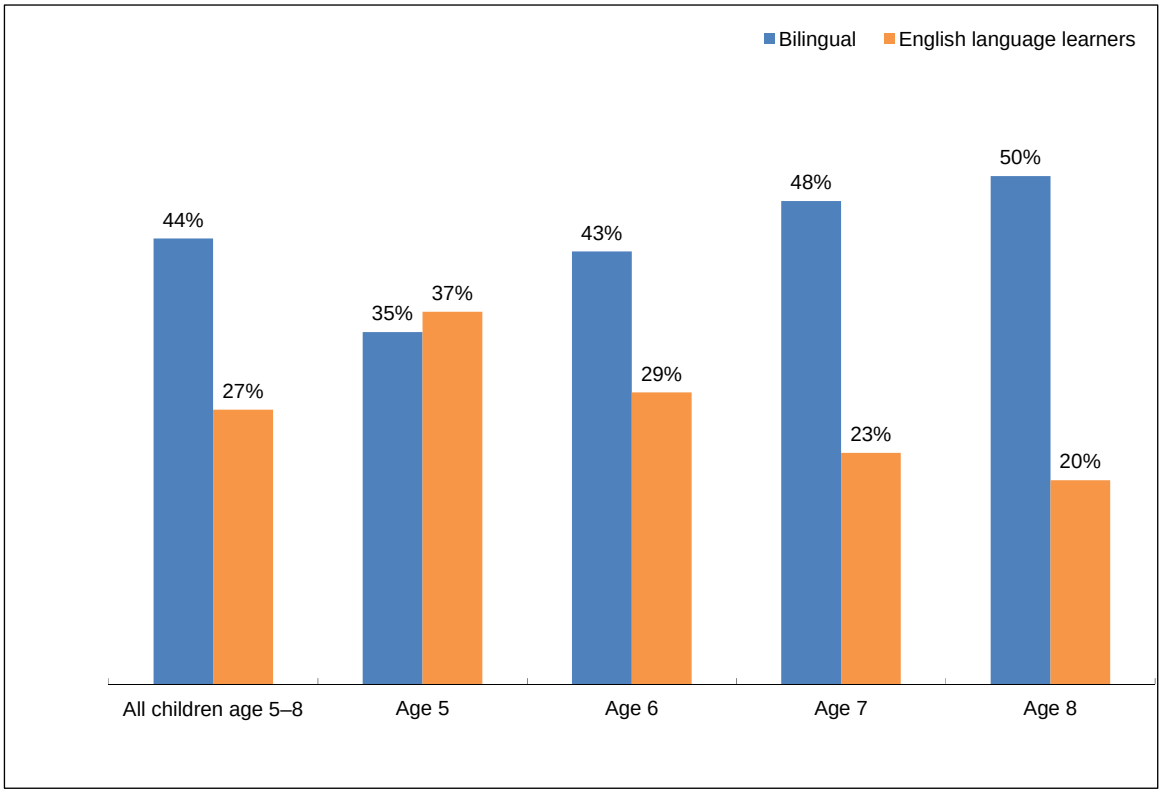
The Urban Institute's June 2010 roundtable "Young Children of Immigrants and the Path to Educational Success" sought to address these gaps by focusing attention on the specific needs of these young children and their families. The event, sponsored by the Foundation for Child Development and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, brought together a wide range of federal and state policymakers, practitioners, and experts on child development, early education, K–12 education, and immigration research. This paper summarizes their discussion.

Setting the Context

The roundtable began with an overview of immigration trends. Karina Fortuny of the Urban Institute highlighted that young children of immigrants accounted for the entire growth in the population of children age 0 to 8 in the United States between 1990 and 2008. Without them, the number of children in that age range would have declined. Currently, nearly a quarter (24 percent) of children age 0 to 8 has at least one immigrant parent. The vast majority of these children are U.S. citizens (Fortuny et al. 2010).

More than a quarter (27 percent) of children of immigrants age 5 to 8 are English language learners (ELL), meaning that they are still developing English fluency and their English abilities are only fair or poor. Forty-four percent are bilingual, meaning they are fluent in English and another language.[1] The share who continue to be considered English language learners declines with age as the share who are bilingual goes up. By age 8, half of children of immigrants are fluent in English and another language. Sixty percent of all children of immigrants have at least one parent who is not fluent in English, and a third live in homes where no one age 14 or older speaks English fluently (Fortuny et al. 2010).

Figure 1. Share of Children of Immigrants Age 5-8 That Are Bilingual and English Language Leaners, 2007–08

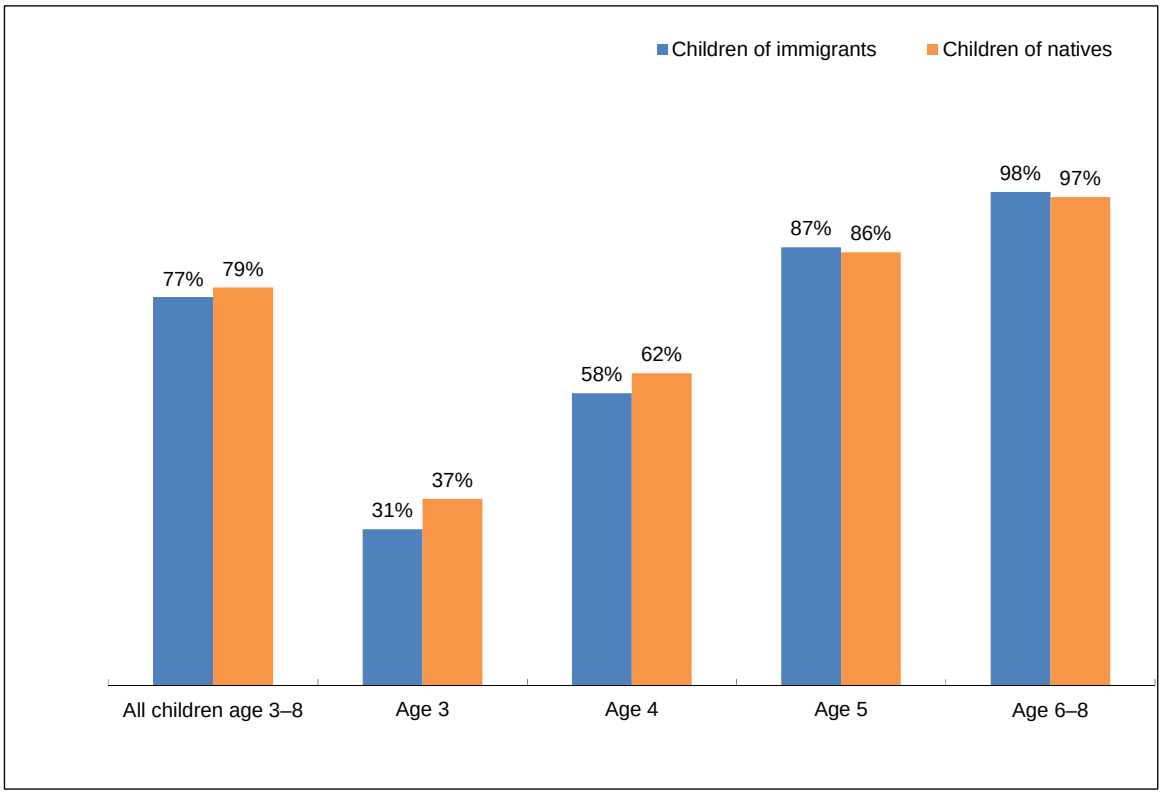


Source: Fortuny et al. (2010).

Sixty-three percent of young children of immigrants live in just six states: California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey. But immigrant families have been dispersing across the country quickly, adding to the immigrant populations in other states in recent decades. Young children of immigrants account for more than 30 percent of young children in seven states, including both traditional and new destinations (Arizona, California, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, and Texas), and 20 to 30 percent in 12 states (Fortuny et al. 2010).

Young children of immigrants are less likely to be enrolled in preschool than children of U.S.-born parents. Thirty-one percent of children of immigrants are enrolled at age 3, compared with 37 percent of children of U.S.-born parents. The gap narrows at age 4: 58 percent versus 62 percent (Fortuny et al. 2010).

Figure 2. Share of Children of Children Age 3–8 Enrolled in School by Age and Parents' Nativity, 2007–08



Source: Fortuny et al. (2010).

Young children of immigrants are also disproportionately poor, accounting for 29 percent of poor children and 30 percent of low-income children (children living in families with income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level). They are more likely than children of natives to live in two-parent families but also are more likely to live with parents who have not finished high school. While parental education varies widely by region of origin, a quarter of children of immigrants have parents with less than high school educations, compared with 8 percent of children of U.S.-born parents (Fortuny et al. 2010).

Several participants mentioned the importance of these demographic data to jumpstart the conversation about educating children of immigrants and set the context for debate. Mary Helen Berlanga from the Texas State Board of Education said she was struck by the share of young children in Texas with immigrant parents and felt that many state policymakers would find the information useful because they did not understand the true size of the population.

Participants also talked about the risks of using summary data to characterize a very diverse immigrant population that varies in individual states and school districts. Policymakers need to consider common themes across this population to help identify shared needs, while avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches, said Kris Gutiérrez of the University of Colorado. Parents' education, immigration experience, and socioeconomic status contribute to the considerable diversity among children of immigrants and affect their academic path, said Jennifer Glick of Arizona State University. Preschool-age children with immigrant parents who are highly educated or who can

afford high-quality early education are more prepared for school. Families' tenure in the United States, a child's linguistic environment, and their exposure to English also matter, Glick said.

High-Quality Early Childhood and Elementary Education

The roundtable participants discussed young children of immigrants' access to high-quality early care and education during the crucial years from age 3 to 8. Participants then turned to what is known and what isn't known about what high-quality settings look like and how to create them. A number of themes, such as the importance of professional development for teachers, crossed the early childhood and early elementary years, while other points, such as large gaps in access to early childhood programs, applied to one setting but not the other.

Access to Early Childhood Education

Emerging research finds that early childhood education can help children of immigrants and English language learners close the achievement gap, said Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, director of the Office of Head Start, but this population is less likely than children of U.S.-born parents to participate in preschool or early childhood programs (Fortuny et al. 2010). Just providing subsidized child care isn't enough, said Danielle Ewen of the Center for Law and Social Policy, because access is more complex than cost or availability: it's also about communication and partnerships and making sure the program is accepted by the immigrant community.

Participants discussed a wide variety of access challenges, including language barriers, cost, the lack of available programs or slots, lack of trust in providers, and parental work schedules. Immigrant parents may be unaware of early education opportunities and child care subsidies or assume they do not qualify. Other participants said that families must feel that the program is safe and welcoming to immigrants before enrolling their children. Participants pointed out that Head Start, the federally funded preschool program for low-income children, has no immigrant restrictions. However, waiting lists are long, and expanding the program sufficiently to meet them is, participants thought, a political nonstarter at this time.

Availability of subsidies further complicates access. Also, the administrative process that a state or county uses can influence what type of care a family can access. When the subsidy authorization is tied very tightly to parents' work schedules, the children's educational needs may get lost, especially for those who work unusual schedules that don't match up with preschool hours. Shannon Rudisill from the Administration of Children and Families said ACF's Office of Child Care is encouraging states to consider both the parents' work and the child's development and education when designing subsidy policies and practices.

While these issues are important for all children, they may particularly affect immigrant families with long hours of work and nontraditional work schedules. Gina Adams of the Urban Institute studied preschool access in Illinois among non-Latino immigrant families and found that access barriers to the subsidy system (e.g., challenging enrollment process, employer and income verification, and eligibility restrictions) were the primary obstacles to accessing pre-K for working families. Even though pre-K programs were separately funded and free, many working families could not take advantage of them unless they also had subsidized care for the rest of the workday.

Several participants emphasized the many dimensions involved in how parents choose child care and early education and the need to pay attention to those preferences when structuring programs. One participant said policymakers should think strategically about how parents choose schools, suggesting that children of immigrants tend to enroll more in preschools connected to public schools. Parents may be aware of a preschool option if an older sibling attends the elementary school, and they may want to maintain continuity between their child's preschool and elementary school.

To increase access to high-quality early education programs, Hannah Matthews and Danielle Ewen of the Center for Law and Social Policy recommended ways for state and federal policymakers to increase outreach and accessibility to early education opportunities and improve the responsiveness of programs to the needs of immigrant families (Matthews and Ewen 2010). The Child Care and Development Block Grant reauthorization, best practices in Head Start, and partnerships with Even Start can help address the development of children, Ewen said.

Quality in Early Childhood Education

Early education may have some lessons for K–12 when it comes to teaching children of immigrants, participants said. Head Start performance standards require programs to support children's cultural backgrounds and to hire bilingual staff when a majority of children speaks a second language. Head Start multicultural principles guide the creation of culturally relevant programs that help children learn English language skills while continuing to develop their home languages. These principles could serve as a model for other early childhood programs, as well as for K–12 education. One participant said that Head Start is also a particularly good model for how to work with families where they are and how to encourage family engagement.

However, participants also identified obstacles early childhood programs face in providing high-quality settings for children of immigrants. Turnover, low salaries, and low educational levels among staff were high on the list, as they are in any discussion of quality in early childhood programs.

Quality in Elementary Education

Most children of immigrants speak a language other than English at home. While schools conduct assessment tests to determine the English fluency of these students and classify them as either English language learners or English fluent, the true picture is more fluid, with children in both groups at varying degrees of proficiency. Many students classified as fluent in English may still need similar supports to those needed by students classified as ELLs. As the discussion suggested, this is in part because fluency in daily conversation is different from academic proficiency.

For more than 30 years, English language learners have consistently lagged academically behind their English-proficient peers, with a roughly 30 percent achievement gap on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (Leos and Saavedra 2010). ELLs must learn the same academic content as their peers while simultaneously learning English. Finding what works best for these students is a challenge no school can ignore: by 2020, the number of English language learners and children of immigrants in the school-age population will grow to 17.3 million, or 1 in 4 students, according to the Pew Hispanic Center as cited by Leos (Leos and Saavedra 2010). Policymakers disagree on the best way to teach English language learners. Approaches range from immersion or English-only schooling—where academic lessons are taught only in English—to bilingual

instruction to various strategies in between. Some schools have semistructured immersion or transitional bilingual programs where classes are taught primarily in English and foreign languages are spoken only as needed.

The discussion explored the research evidence on this question, as framed for the group by Eugene García of Arizona State University, then considered a number of links among research, policy, politics, and day-to-day practice in schools. García indicated that research is starting to show that a bilingual approach has more academic benefits than an English-only approach (García 2010), but the practice is not always adopted. Diane August of the Center for Applied Linguistics said programs that use some of the child's first language are more effective at developing literacy. Schools that don't have the capacity for a true bilingual program can still leverage a child's first language to help them learn a second language, August said.

Critics of bilingual education argue that students need to acquire English early to succeed in school—and do so best by being immersed in English-only instruction. A few states and many districts require overwhelmingly English-only instruction, including California, where half of all young kids are children of immigrants. In Arizona, schools pull English language learners out of class for four hours a day to work on their English skills. García called this separation of language from academics a "fatal flaw," as it takes English learners away from their peers and sets them behind academically. His recommendations include integrating language and content, increasing professional development and coaching time, expanding opportunities for ELLs to learn through afterschool classes or summer school, and involving immigrant families (García 2010). These interventions can work in restrictive policy environments, but can also be implemented in other policy contexts, García said.

Margie McHugh of The Migration Policy Institute noted that teachers are shouldering the burden for these tailored approaches and need guidance and professional development to help English language learners. García cautioned against regulating the specifics of what professional development should look like—better to provide schools with the necessary resources and time to train teachers in a way that best fits their needs and their students' needs.

School Reform

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), also known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, has been up for reauthorization since 2007. Participants saw important opportunities in the reauthorization to strengthen supports for young children of immigrants but disagreed on the best approaches.

Under NCLB, schools are required to test English language learners and be held accountable for their performance. The law has directed needed attention to ELLs but could be strengthened, roundtable participants thought. Some participants had contributed to the Working Group on ELL Policy, which has developed recommendations for reauthorization that include better identification and classification of ELL students, a stronger accountability system, appropriate assessments, access to high-quality teachers, and greater supports to ensure schools meet the language and academic needs of ELLs (Working Group on ELL Policy 2010). Other participants worried that too much focus on the supports needed could dilute the accountability effects and give schools excuses for inadequate performance.

Several participants stressed the need for better classification and tracking of ELL students—the Working Group's first recommendation. By definition, English language learners are not proficient in English. Proficient students leave the group as they improve and new low-proficiency ELLs join. Identifying and tracking stable cohorts of ELL students allows schools to measure the progress of one consistent group instead of testing a revolving group of low-proficiency students.

Some participants believed that a larger role for early education in NCLB could benefit young children of immigrants. Under NCLB, testing begins at 4th grade, leaving out students in pre-K through 3rd grade. High-quality education is defined in generic terms for early learners, one participant noted. More detailed standards—not just academic standards, but social and emotional development benchmarks as well—can support healthy child development at early ages, one participant said. Some participants agreed that these earlier years should become part of the K–12 accountability system, believing that accountability could drive resources to early education and potentially lead school districts to better allocate their Title 1 funds to strengthen early education. However, others were concerned about putting strict requirements on early education providers without giving them the resources they need to succeed.

In K–12 education, participants disagreed about whether gaps in resources hinder services to these young children. Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, argued that while early education providers don't have enough resources, K–12 educators typically do—they just don't use those funds effectively. Other participants disagreed, saying that real turnaround requires real investment and that it is not clear where schools would take the money from to serve these children better.

Under NCLB, states are free to set their own standards and assessments, so grade-level expectations can vary considerably from state to state. However, states are required to develop a system of standards and assessments for ELLs that include English language proficiency standards aligned to the state's academic content standards. Tied into the upcoming NCLB reauthorization debate is the question about states adopting national academic standards. About 40 states have already adopted common core standards for math and language arts, developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, under the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Some participants thought that common English language proficiency standards aligned with content standards would benefit ELLs and immigrant students, though they are not currently a part of the common core benchmarks (Leos and Saavedra 2010).

The common core standards do include ELL guidance for teachers, advising them that students can achieve reading and writing standards without demonstrating "native-like control" of vocabulary. The guidelines also remind teachers that ELLs are a diverse group at varying levels of proficiency. Several participants also raised this point, arguing that children learn English on a continuum, so while it is important to have standards, teachers need to work with ELLs where they are and understand that they progress at different rates. August, an advisor to the common core standards initiative, said policymakers need to lay out what ELLs can and cannot do at different levels of English proficiency and determine the specific supports they need to meet grade-level standards.

Rolf Grafwallner from the Maryland State Department of Education stressed that teachers need professional development alongside common core standards so they know how to work with

English language learners entering school at any grade level. He also suggested that school districts train K–12 teachers and early education providers jointly to ease the transition from preschool to elementary education.

Parent-Focused Strategies

Robert Crosnoe of the University of Texas at Austin presented the research about specific two-generational strategies to boost children's educational achievement. These parent-focused strategies aim to help children by changing parental behavior directly or by targeting the barriers to participation. Direct strategies include services and classes that help parents become teachers at home, Crosnoe said, or help demystify how American schools work so immigrant parents become more comfortable with school personnel. Evaluations suggest some benefit in changing parents' attitudes more than their behaviors.

Indirect strategies aim to improve parents' literacy, English language skills, and education in conjunction with child education programs, such as Head Start or some state pre-K programs. Even Start offers grants to support projects linking early childhood education with adult education. Crosnoe cautioned in his framing paper (Crosnoe 2010) that evaluations of these programs are inconclusive, partly because families in the control groups sometimes gain access to services similar to those being tested. One participant said that working with families this comprehensively means adapting and personalizing the program to fit each family, making evaluations difficult.

All families want to be involved, said David Johns, senior education policy advisor to Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA); the trick is finding the time and space for them to participate and encouraging parents and educators to interact. Schools also need to be aware of language barriers and other obstacles that can stand in the way of parents' ability to contribute.

When interviewing immigrant parents, Crosnoe said, he found that as a group they strongly believed in being involved in their children's education, but they had different conceptions for what that entailed. The role they play may not be as visible to school administrators or may follow a different script, making them seem uninvolved on survey measures. Other participants echoed this observation and said that immigrant parents may not know how to help their children with school—yet others thought the larger problem was with schools and their lack of capacity to include parents.

Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University said it was incumbent on schools to reach out and build partnerships with all parents to best serve the students. She described her work with the National Network of Partnership Schools,[2] which helps districts and schools implement partnership programs and uses their experience to inform further research. Roughly 1,200 schools in 150 districts—most with multicultural populations, including immigrant families—have adopted partnership programs, Epstein said, adding that doing so is not expensive. Crosnoe, in his research, found that administrators and teachers were more receptive to the idea of helping parents by connecting them to family service providers, for example, than by incorporating them into the management of schools.

Policy Opportunities

What are the implications of these research questions and findings for policy? And what do legislators need from researchers to better craft policies supporting young children of immigrants? At the roundtable, a panel of federal officials weighed in on these questions.

Jacqueline Jones, senior advisor to the secretary for early learning at the U.S. Department of Education, said that the agency was taking a careful look at early learning. The goal, Jones said, is to look at the whole child—not just the child's academic achievement, but also his or her health, social, emotional, and cognitive development from birth through 3rd grade—especially for English language learners and other children who might need extra support. Jones said the department is open to hearing from researchers and practitioners about what regulatory issues stand in the way of better serving these children.

Mark Greenberg of the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) said that the Obama administration has a tremendous interest in place-based strategies like Promise Neighborhoods and Choice Neighborhoods. ACF is seeking opportunities for cross-program strategies that address families' economic security and safety within the context of early childhood programs. The administration is looking particularly for opportunities across Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund to foster school readiness.

As noted earlier, some participants said that the No Child Left Behind reauthorization opens the door to policy opportunities. José A. Rico, deputy director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans said the Education Department was soliciting advice from researchers, looking for regulatory changes they can make—such as content standards or teacher training requirements—to better integrate immigrants into mainstream education. Johns, Sen. Harkin's education policy advisor, said legislators are grappling with the question of what the federal role in NCLB should be in terms of encouraging investment in early education. He also stressed the importance of research that shows the benefits of investment in early education.

Next Steps in Research

A clear theme that emerged from the roundtable was the need for specific kinds of information. Researchers don't know enough about what effective programs look like, don't agree on best practices, and have little information about real-life implementation, many participants said. What research is available often is not broken out by immigrant status. English language learners may be included, and lost, under the broader category of "at-risk" students. And while studies about minorities or low-income students can give researchers clues about educating young children of immigrants, we need a better research base, participants agreed.

Participants highlighted several priorities. First, they asked for more research on language development that focuses specifically on young children. A comprehensive review by the National Literacy Panel on language minority children and youth found few studies that concentrated on young children in particular, said August, a coeditor of the report. Participants said more research is needed specifically on how dual language learners develop—what early literacy skills in one language transfer to learning another, and under what conditions? How does learning two languages at once affect children's early cognitive development? Many participants also expressed a need for better

tools to assess the development of English language learners, including measures of social and emotional development.

Second, participants wanted to know more about implementation—what these children are experiencing in school right now and what teaching approaches are being used and adopted in early childhood programs and schools. Participants' curiosity about how pre-K and school programs are teaching children in their classrooms today tied together many different questions related to promising practices raised during the session: What are teachers getting in professional development, and what do they need? How are states, cities, and specific early childhood programs and schools making decisions about funding priorities? How do NCLB and other accountability frameworks affect school choices and responses to these young children? How is immigration enforcement affecting children's education, and how are schools responding? What is happening in multilingual classrooms, where no single language dominates? Potentially, analytic case studies could explore practices in communities with more experience serving immigrant families and children or in communities seen as leaders in the field, yielding lessons about successes and obstacles that could move policy discussions forward.

Third, several participants emphasized the value of basic demographic data taken to the local level. Some thought this information could not only inform the debate, but also reframe the conversation. As several participants pointed out, simply talking about the educational needs of children of immigrants can be a nonstarter among some legislators, since immigration is so highly politicized. But, one participant said, having the data about who children in the classroom actually are makes the point about real-life needs without a political discussion.

Finally, participants talked about broader issues that affect whether any research at all, however high quality, can be useful in the policy debate. Ruby Takanishi, president of the Foundation for Child Development, suggested the roundtable consider ways to reframe the discussion, recognizing the political reality that educating children of immigrants can be a controversial topic. She suggested aiming for shared, broader goals, such as increasing literacy for all children or building on the benefits of being multilingual. Other participants suggested reframing the conversation around the need for a better educated workforce or focusing on the advantages of teaching all children a second language, reinforcing the idea that a second language is an asset, not a deficit.

Looking back at the questions that framed the roundtable, the concluding discussion suggested the importance of drawing together research, policy, and practice to focus on young children in immigrant families. If we do not effectively use what we know now about how children learn, about the importance of early investment, about promising approaches throughout the early years, and about the strengths and needs of these young children and their families, we will risk the nation's ability to ensure high educational achievement for a whole cohort of children. At the same time, we must also learn more, choosing clear priority targets for the information that is most urgently needed to get a clearer and more certain picture of what works best for educating and supporting young children of immigrants.

Notes

[1] The ELL estimates in Fortuny et al. (2010) are based on U.S. census data and could differ from school reports. School districts use language assessment tests to determine English fluency, while English fluency is self-reported in the census data. English language learners as defined in Fortuny et al. (2010) report that they speak a language other than English at home and speak English well, not well, or not at all. English-fluent persons speak English exclusively or very well. Those who speak another language at home and speak English very well are classified as bilingual and English fluent. English fluency is not recorded for children under age 5 in the census data.

[2] For more information on the National Network of Partnership Schools, see http://www.partnershipschools.org.

Roundtable Participants

Gina Adams, Senior Fellow, Urban Institute

Diane August, Senior Research Scientist, Center for Applied Linguistics

Janine Bacquie, Director, Early Childhood Division, Montgomery County Public Schools

Mary Helen Berlanga, Senior Member, State Board of Education, Texas

Helen Blank, Director of Leadership and Public Policy, National Women's Law Center

Wendy Cervantes, Senior Director, Child and Family Immigrant Policy, First Focus

Ajay Chaudry, Senior Fellow, Urban Institute

Dylan Conger, Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration, George Washington University

Clemencia Cosentino de Cohen, Director, Program for Evaluation and Equity Research, Urban Institute

Robert Crosnoe, Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin

Timothy D'Emilio, Senior Research Specialist, Office of English Language Acquisition, U.S. Department of Education

Joyce L. Epstein, Director, Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, Johns Hopkins University

Linda Espinosa, Professor of Early Childhood Education, University of Missouri–Columbia

Danielle Ewen, Director of Child Care and Early Education, CLASP

Karina Fortuny, Research Associate, Urban Institute

Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, Director, Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Vivian Gadsden, William T. Carter Professor of Child Development and Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

Eugene E. García, Professor of Education and Vice President, Education Partnership, Arizona State University

Jennifer Glick, Associate Professor, School of Social Family Dynamics, Arizona State University

Olivia Golden, Institute Fellow, Urban Institute

Naomi Goldstein, Director, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Rolf Grafwallner, Assistant State Superintendent for Early Childhood Development, Maryland State Department of Education

Mark Greenberg, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Lisa Guernsey, Director, Early Education Initiative, New America Foundation

Kris Gutiérrez, Professor and Provost's Chair, School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder

Kati Haycock, President, The Education Trust

Donald J. Hernandez, Professor, Department of Sociology, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York

David Johns, Senior Education Policy Advisor, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, U.S. Senate, Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)

Jacqueline Jones, Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Early Learning, U.S. Department of Education

Christina Lagdameo, Deputy Director, White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, U.S. Department of Education

Irene Lee, Director, Successful Working Families, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Kathleen Leos, CEO, The Global Institute for Language and Literacy Development

Evelyn J. Lynn, Senator, Florida Senate, District 7

Margie McHugh, Codirector, National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, Migration Policy Institute

Delia Pompa, Vice President, Education, National Council of La Raza

José A. Rico, Senior Advisor and Deputy Director, White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education

Shannon Rudisill, Associate Director of the Child Care Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Thomas Schultz, Program Director for Early Childhood Initiatives, Council of Chief State School Officers

Ruby Takanishi, President, Foundation for Child Development

Marci Young, Project Director, Pre-K Now, Pew Center on the States

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