Supporting English Language Acquisition:

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOUNDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

A BRIEFING PAPER

from

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

and

GRANTMAKERS CONCERNED WITH IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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Preface

Immigrant and refugee children represent the fastest growing segment of the nation's child population, and they are projected to make up 30 percent of all children in the United States by 2020. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, one in five children in this country was an immigrant or had at least one foreign-born parent. Nearly 30 percent of all low-income children live in immigrant families. As a national foundation dedicated to building better futures for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, the Annie E. Casey Foundation considers immigrant children and families a critical focus of its work to improve conditions for children living in disconnected neighborhoods and to promote needed reforms in the systems that serve children and families.

While vulnerable children in immigrant and refugee families face many of the same hardships as children in low-income families, they often face the added challenge—and risk factor—of living in a household where adults have limited English skills. Nationally, close to 30 million working-age adults (ages 18–55) speak another language at home, while close to 10 million children (ages 5–17) live in households in which English is not the primary language. Nearly 30 percent of these 10 million children also live in "linguistically isolated households" in which no family member age 14 and over is able to speak English very well. As this report states, "In addition to eroding immigrant family strengths, limited English proficiency can isolate immigrant families from the larger community, preventing them from interacting with American-born neighbors, engaging in civic life, and becoming integrated into their new community."

This briefing paper highlights several promising practices in promoting language acquisition, drawing examples primarily from California, Illinois, and Texas, states with longstanding immigrant populations and historically high numbers of immigrant children and families. Together, the five models featured in this paper have been replicated in 27 states and the District of Columbia and five countries. Our hope in publishing this briefing paper, however, is to identify and compile additional best practices in the field from other states and localities and invite readers to submit examples to us via www.gcir.org.

This briefing paper also provides a timely set of recommendations for foundations interested in supporting approaches that help immigrants and refugees learn English while also strengthening family functioning and economic well-being for LEP adults and children. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is committed to promoting the goal of ensuring that all vulnerable immigrant children and families successfully learn English and have access to services in their native language so they can become fully integrated into their communities socially, politically, and economically.

This paper, published with support of the Foundation, demonstrates Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees' considerable skill in synthesizing a wide range of research and practice into a set of useful recommendations for philanthropy. I am deeply grateful for the continued leadership and vision of Daranee Petsod, who is working with local and national partners to define and invest in an agenda for integrating immigrants that encompasses direct services, immigrant rights advocacy around legal status issues, and family-strengthening approaches to learning English.

Irene Lee—Senior Associate, Annie E. Casey Foundation

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Executive Summary

Like generations of immigrants who came before them, today's newcomers play a vital role in our society, fueling our social, economic, cultural, and civic life with their strong work ethic, idealism, and resilience. And they, like the ancestors of today's native born, also face myriad challenges that prevent them from becoming full, contributing members of society.

Today, as in the past, limited English proficiency remains one of the most critical challenges facing immigrant families. It impedes immigrants' ability to improve their employment prospects and increase their earnings. It also limits their ability to help their children prepare for and succeed in school. Limited English skills can drive a wedge between the generations, as adolescent children immersed in English at school lose their first language and parents struggle to gain fluency in English. This scenario often results in a role reversal in which immigrant children are put into the awkward position of translating sensitive information—such as in a medical or legal context—for their monolingual parents.

In addition to eroding immigrant family strengths, limited English proficiency can isolate immigrant families from the larger community, preventing them from interacting with American-born neighbors, engaging in civic life, and becoming integrated into their new community.

Due to high rates of immigration, limited English proficient (LEP) individuals have become a large and growing segment of the U.S. population. According to the 2000 Census, approximately 14 million or nearly 9.5 percent of all working-age adults between the ages of 18 and 55 in the United States either did not speak English at all or spoke it less than "very well," and 89 percent of the LEP population was foreign born. Surveys and studies of this population indicate that the overwhelming majority of LEP immigrants are highly motivated to learn English, but due to limited government funding, demand far exceeds the supply of English classes. Immigrants' growing numbers and their pivotal role in the future of our country create a compelling demographic, social, and economic imperative for providing immigrants more opportunities to improve their English skills.

By investing strategically in English acquisition programs, foundations can make an important contribution to improve social and economic outcomes for working-poor immigrant families. To help funders gain a better understanding of the issues, this briefing paper provides an overview of characteristics of the LEP immigrant population in the United States and discusses the impact of limited English skills on newcomer families. It highlights proven and promising language acquisition programs and strategies that help improve immigrant families' social, educational, and economic well-being. Finally, the paper offers a set of recommendations for investing in effective language acquisition programs that can help immigrants maintain strong family relationships, improve their long-term economic security, and become full, participating members of our community.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POPULATION

Almost 14 million working-age adults in the United States, most of whom are foreign born, speak English less than "very well." The majority of limited English-speaking immigrant adults are of Mexican origin (56 percent), speak Spanish (75 percent), have nine or less years of education (50 percent), and have minor children in the home (62 percent). LEP immigrants and their offspring experience greater levels of economic distress than their English-fluent counterparts: they earn significantly lower wages, experience higher rates of unemployment, and are more likely to live in poverty. They are also nearly twice as likely to be undocumented as other immigrants.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND FAMILY ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

Programs designed to improve English language skills can help reduce the economic disparity experienced by families with limited English-speaking adults. However, the extent to which improved English skills leads to better paying jobs depends in large part on one's level of education. For immigrants with more than 12 years of education, research shows that learning to speak English fluently results in a 76 percent jump in earnings compared with only a four percent increase for workers with less than eight years of education. Ability to combine English proficiency with other skills that employers desire obviously increases the earning power of well-educated immigrants. For less-educated immigrants, who make up the majority of the limited English-speaking adult population, learning English will not necessarily increase their earnings if they still lack the basic literacy and math skills needed to succeed in the U.S. workplace.

To help relatively well-educated LEP adults learn English, funders should consider supporting vocational ESL programs that attempt to improve participants' workplace English as well as other job-related skills. While vocational ESL courses vary widely, effective programs share the following characteristics:

- Teach workplace English vocabulary, with many courses focusing on vocabulary that is used in a specific industry or occupation (e.g., construction, nursing, or childcare).
- Teach basic computer skills and soft skills that help participants find and retain jobs, including job search, resume writing and interviewing; customs and norms in the U.S. workplace; and effective communication with co-workers.
- Offer basic training to help participants obtain credentials or pass entrance tests to work in specific occupations.
- Provide job counseling and placement services to help participants find employment after completing the program.

For immigrants with low levels of education, English acquisition should be coupled with comprehensive trainings in basic literacy and math skills. One promising approach is to integrate English instruction into basic adult education courses or job training programs. The design of such programs depends on the characteristics of the targeted population, the conditions of the local employment market for lower-skill workers, and the specific program goals. Funders considering support for these programs should ask the following general questions:

- How does the proposed English acquisition program address the targeted population's educational and job skill needs?
- What are the economic and employment trends in the area, and what are opportunities for LEP job seekers in the local job market?
- In addition to English and vocational training, what other types of employment services are needed to ensure positive outcomes for the target population?
- Does providing these services require collaboration among multiple service providers and what kinds of organizations are best positioned to provide services?

Funders should also evaluate whether case management, child care, and other family-based services are needed to help participants complete the training program and find employment.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND IMMIGRANT PARENTS OF PRESCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Gaining proficiency in English has many other non-economic benefits as well. Lack of English fluency can undermine parents' ability to guide, protect, and educate their children. Well-designed and targeted multigenerational language acquisition programs can effectively counteract these risks.

Multigenerational family literacy programs can teach immigrant adults English while helping to bolster their children's early language development and school readiness. These programs can train parents to become their child's first teacher by engaging in activities to improve literacy skills. Effective programs usually have children and adults, both alone and together, participate in structured educational activities. The ones that work best provide:

- Appropriate adult education and ESL instruction to parents;
- Instructions to parents on how to support the educational growth of their children;
- Classes for young children to develop pre-literacy skills, such as vocabulary building and verbal expression; and
- Opportunities for parents and children to engage in literacy activities together.

Many family literacy programs also introduce immigrant parents to the U.S. school system and show them how to participate in school activities to support their children's education.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND IMMIGRANT PARENTS OF ADOLESCENT CHILDREN

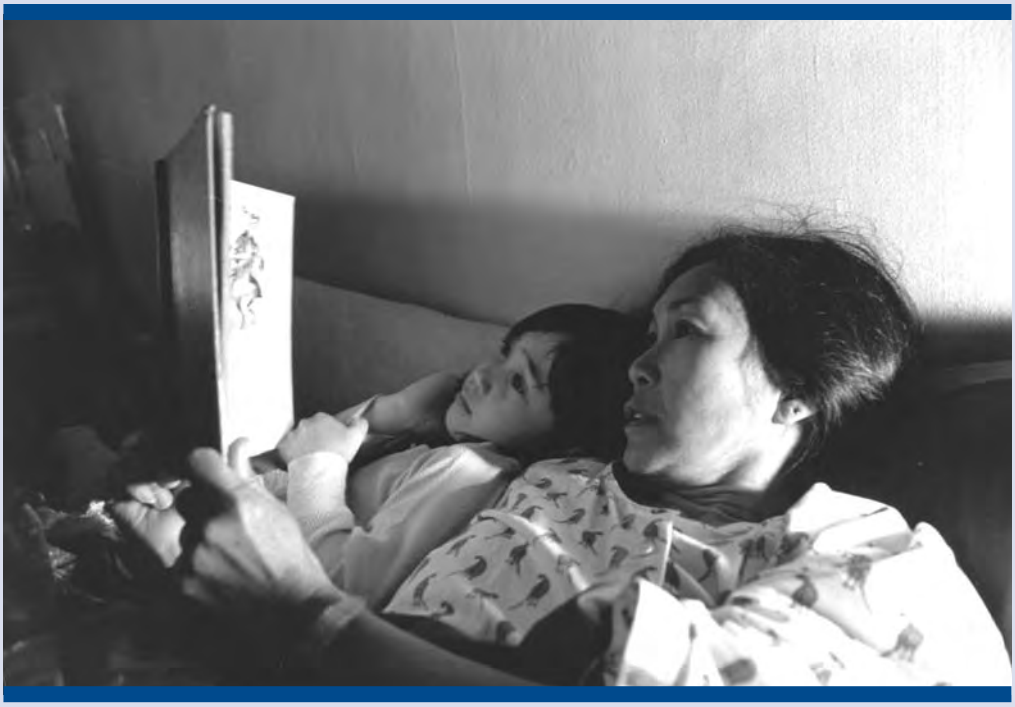
The inherent challenges of raising an adolescent are often amplified for immigrant parents who lack English skills, especially as their adolescent children begin to lose their first-language fluency. Well-designed participatory ESL and family literacy programs for immigrant parents of teenagers could potentially help bridge the gap between the first and second generations. For parents, these programs can build language skills while providing strategies to better respond to their children's adolescent development. An even more comprehensive program could be modeled after the family literacy work done with parents and preschool-age children. Parents could learn English through a curriculum that also addresses parent-adolescent issues, while their children participate in activities designed to provide psychosocial support needed to negotiate conflicts with their parents, learn more about their cultural heritage, or take classes to strengthen their native language skills.

Language acquisition programs targeting immigrant families with adolescent children are in the early stages of development and, for the most part, have yet to be replicated on any scale. Because government funding for family literacy programs is largely limited to serving families with young children, foundations can play a critical role in developing new programs that strengthen the connection between limited English-speaking parents and their adolescent children.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FOUNDATIONS

By investing strategically in programs to help LEP populations learn English, foundations can play a central role in helping immigrant families overcome one of the most critical challenges to integrating into their new communities. Improved English skills can lead to increased earnings, greater school readiness for children, improved intergenerational communication in immigrant families, and the confidence to engage in civic life.

Unfortunately, federal and state funding for English acquisition programs has not kept pace with the growth of the LEP population. Many of these programs continue to only teach immigrants very basic skills, or what some have characterized as "survival English," often with the goal of pushing participants into the workforce as quickly as possible. Although foundations alone cannot fully address the growing demand for high-quality English programs, they can help spur and support the development of innovative models that expedite the learning process and address the full array of immigrant families' needs. With recent demographic changes and the pivotal role that immigrants and their children play in the future of our country, the development of effective English acquisition programs is critical to helping newcomers strengthen their families, enhance their economic security, and achieve their full potential as contributing members of our community.



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Introduction

Most immigrants arrive in the United States with limited or moderate English proficiency, a key risk factor and characteristic that can undermine their families' social and economic well-being if they do not have opportunities to improve their English skills. Limited English skills can keep immigrant parents from finding jobs and increasing their earnings. They limit participation in civic life, isolate the family from the larger community, and prevent parents from participating in their children's education or providing assistance as their children begin to explore post-secondary schooling. Limited English skills can also drive a wedge between the generations, as adolescent children immersed in English at school lose their first language, while parents struggle to develop fluency in their second language. When immigrant families are unable to develop English skills, they face considerable challenges in integrating into their new community.

This briefing paper explores how philanthropy, through strategic investments in targeted language acquisition programs, can protect and strengthen immigrant families. It provides an overview of the characteristics of the limited English proficient (LEP) immigrant population in the United States, the impact of limited English skills on family economic well-being, and effective strategies that have been used to improve the earnings of LEP workers through English and vocational training. It also examines the ways in which parents' limited English skills affect family functioning, especially in the realms of school readiness and adolescent development. It concludes with a set of recommendations for investing in effective language acquisition programs designed to help immigrants maintain strong family relationships and improve their long-term economic security.

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A Demographic Portrait of Limited English Proficient Immigrants and Their Children

The dramatic growth in immigration to the United States highlights the importance of developing effective strategies to help newcomers acquire English skills. Between 1970 and 2003, the U.S. foreign-born population tripled to an estimated 33.5 million and accounted for almost 12 percent of the U.S. population.[1] The vast majority came from countries where the primary spoken language is not English. Fifty-three percent of these newcomers came from Mexico, Central America or Latin American, 25 percent from Asia, 14 percent from Europe, and 8 percent from other regions of the world.[2] As of 2000, more than 40 percent of immigrants had been in the country for ten or fewer years.[3] Not surprisingly, a significant portion of this population—nearly half of all foreign-born, working-age adults—is still in the process of learning English.[4]

The challenge of addressing the language acquisition needs of immigrant families is complicated by two immigration trends. The first is the rise in the population of undocumented immigrants, individuals who either entered the United States without authorization or overstayed their visas. Demographers estimate that, as of 2000, approximately 26 percent of the foreign-born population or 8.5 million individuals were undocumented.[5] Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for most federally funded training programs and must depend on a patchwork of local and state-funded adult education programs for English acquisition and vocational training. Their limited access to such programs is troubling given that undocumented adults are more likely than other immigrants to lack English proficiency and educational attainment.[6] Because many undocumented adults live in "mixed-status families," which have at least one immigrant parent and one U.S. citizen child, these restrictive eligibility requirements have broad and harmful consequences for a significant number of family members who either have legal permanent status or U.S. citizenship. Such families, for example, will be more reluctant to seek health services or report crimes, fearful of the potential impact on their undocumented members.

A recent study estimates that at least three million U.S. children live in households headed by undocumented adults,[7] often in poverty partly due to the adults' limited English skills. Foundations interested in supporting this growing segment of the immigrant population can play an important role in either supplementing existing English acquisition programs or providing support for immigrant organizations to ensure that such programs are available to undocumented immigrants at the local level.

A second complicating immigration trend is the growing dispersal of immigrant communities to states and localities with relatively little recent history of settling newcomers. While two thirds of all immigrants still live in the traditional gateway states of California, New York, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois, the number of immigrants in these states grew by only 31 percent during the 1990s. In contrast, the number of immigrants in the ten states with the highest growth of the immigrant population increased by 61 percent during the same period.[8] Moreover, the immigrant population in these new-growth states is disproportionately made up of recent arrivals, with almost 60 percent arriving since 1990.[9] These high-growth communities have limited experience and infrastructure, such as bilingual staff and culturally competent services, for settling newcomer families. In addition, many of the institutions that can assist in the integration of immigrants, such as community-based organizations and government agencies, are still being developed to address new or growing needs.

The shortage of appropriate English acquisition programs has been particularly acute, even in states with a relatively well-established infrastructure. For example, in 2005, the Massachusetts Department of Education reported that more than 18,000 residents were on waiting lists for ESL classes; the average wait is six months to two years.[10] Shortages of English-language teachers in primary and secondary public schools have also resulted in overcrowded classrooms. In Harrisonburg, a small city in Northern Virginia, 24 ESL teachers are responsible for instructing 1,468 students who are English-language learners.[11] While foundations alone cannot address the growing demand for English programs in newer gateway states, they can provide critical leadership and support for innovative models that expedite English acquisition and make programs more accessible to newcomers.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF LEP IMMIGRANTS

Almost one in five working-age adults between the ages of 18 and 55 speak a language other than English at home.[12] Of these individuals, who total approximately 29.4 million workers, almost 14 million speak English less than "very well,"[13] and 7.4 million either do not speak English at all or speak it "not well." The vast majority (89 percent) of these LEP adults are foreign born.[14] Over half (56 percent) are from Mexico; 22 percent are from other Latin American and Caribbean countries; and 14 percent are from Asia.[15] Spanish is the native language of three-quarters of LEP adults.[16]

LEP immigrant adults tend to be relatively recent immigrants with low levels of formal education. Nearly 60 percent arrived in the United States in the last ten years.[17] Fifty percent of LEP adults report having nine or less years of education, and 64 percent have less than a high school degree.[18] Only 18 percent have any post-secondary education.[19] See Figure 1.

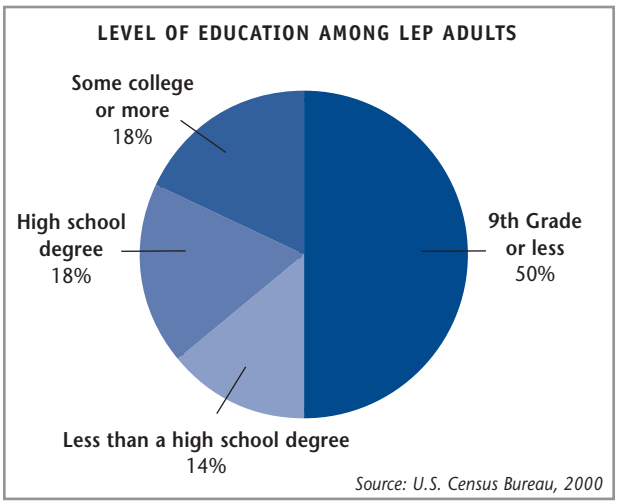

Figure 1.

LEP immigrants are more likely than the general immigrant population to have nine or less years of education (50 percent vs. 22 percent), come from Mexico (56 percent vs. 30 percent), speak Spanish (75 percent vs. 45 percent). See Figure 2. Many have arrived in the United States within the past ten years (69 percent vs. 43 percent). Research on immigrant families in Los Angeles and New York City found that LEP immigrants were nearly twice as likely as other immigrants to be undocumented.[20]

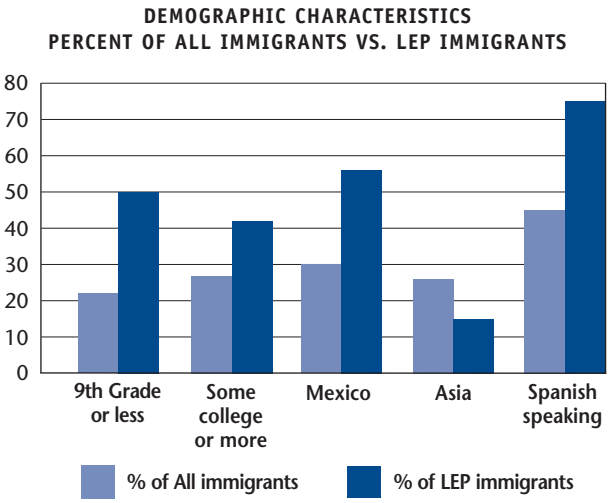

Figure 2.

In addition, 9.8 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 live in households in which English is not the primary language.[21] The vast majority of these youths (87 percent) report speaking English "well" or "very well." However, many of these children are in families where neither parent possesses significant English language skills. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that nearly one third of these children (2.7 million) live in "linguistically isolated households" in which no family member ages 14 or over speaks English very well. As illustrated in Figure 3, adults with limited English skills are more likely to have minor children in their households than English speakers. Sixty-two percent of households composed of adults who speak English poorly have children, compared to 36 percent of all U.S. households.[22]

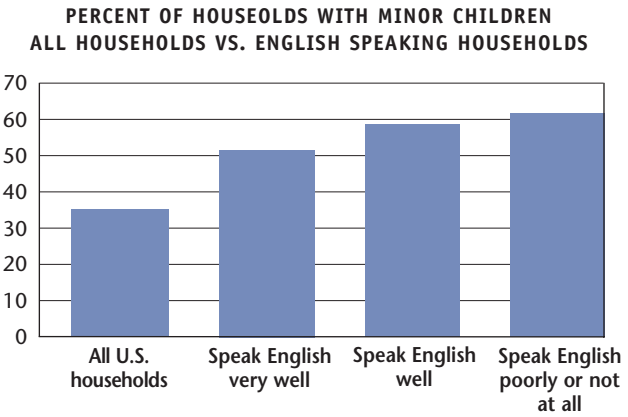

Figure 3.

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English Proficiency: Pathway to Improved Employability and Economic Success

THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ON EARNINGS AND EMPLOYMENT

LEP families experience greater levels of economic distress than their English-fluent counterparts. Figure 4, based on 2000 Census data, shows that the average hourly wage of immigrant workers who speak English "well" or "very well" is much higher than that of immigrant workers with limited English skills.[23] In fact, a fluent English-speaking immigrant earns nearly double that of a non-English speaking worker.[24] Similarly, unemployment rates are higher for immigrant LEP workers than for English-speaking immigrant workers.[25]

Higher levels of joblessness and lower wages lead to greater poverty among LEP families. A recent study of immigrants in Los Angeles and New York City found that LEP families with children were nearly three times as likely to live in poverty as similar English-proficient immigrant families.[26] Only 30 percent of LEP families in Los Angeles managed to earn an income more than two times greater than the federally defined poverty level. LEP immigrant families were also twice as likely to report experiencing food insecurity and hunger than English-proficient immigrant families. In both cities about half of all families headed by adults who spoke no English at all experienced food insecurity.[27]

While there is a strong correlation between English proficiency and economic well-being, some of the wage difference between fluent and LEP immigrants is due to other factors that affect earning potential. For instance, fluent English speakers are more likely to arrive in the United States with legal documentation and do not have to work in an underground economy that offers neither stable nor well-paying jobs.[28] Even more important, English-proficient immigrants are more likely to arrive in the United States with higher levels of education.[29] Figure 5 illustrates that immigrants who do not speak English have an average of six years of education compared to 14 years among those who speak English "very well." This analysis suggests that many monolingual immigrant adults are marginally literate in their first language and may lack other basic skills needed to find stable employment in the United States.

Reflecting this dynamic, the increase in earnings associated with the acquisition of English fluency, defined as speaking the language "very well," differs depending on the characteristics of the immigrant learner. For immigrants with greater than 12 years of education, English fluency is associated with an astounding 76 percent jump in earnings compared with a modest four percent increase for workers with less than eight years of education.[30]

The large wage gains made by well-educated immigrants are due to their ability to combine improved English proficiency with other skills desired by employers. For instance, an LEP immigrant with a background in computer science is unlikely to find a professional job immediately upon her arrival in the United States. Her lack of English skills and the tendency of many U.S. employers to discount foreign work experience and credentials will make it difficult to find employment in her previous occupation. But as she becomes more fluent in English and familiar with the U.S. job market, her ability to find jobs that more fully use her skills—and improve her earning potential—will increase. In contrast, if a young man arrives from rural Mexico with relatively little education and gets a job on a construction crew composed primarily of other Spanish speakers, improving his English-speaking ability will be of limited utility if he does not at the same time improve math and literacy skills needed, for example, to pass an union apprenticeship test.[31] Increasing his earning potential will require more than simply improving his ability to speak English.

Other factors that affect wage gains associated with English fluency include occupation and the neighborhood concentration of minority-language speakers.[32] The economic returns of English proficiency are generally lower in occupations that already have high concentrations of LEP workers.[33] A number of reasons accounts for this effect. First, a number of occupations that employ high levels of LEP workers offer limited promotional opportunities. For example, jobs in agriculture or those involving manual labor pay low wages, even in supervisory positions. Second, when many employees in a workplace share a non-English language, English skills are less valued by employers since they are not needed for communicating with co-workers.

Similarly, on average, an immigrant who lives in an area where many others speak the same non-English language will experience a smaller wage increase after acquiring English fluency relative to an immigrant who resides in a neighborhood where the primary language is different from her own. One study suggests that an immigrant worker, living in a language-diverse area, would earn 19 percent more if he were fluent in English compared to an 11 percent gain for a comparable worker who lives in an ethnic enclave.[34]

Researchers attribute the difference in wage gains to several factors. First, wages paid in immigrant neighborhoods are relatively low, reflecting the constant stream of newcomers who are competing for entry-level or low-skill jobs. Second, English skills are in less demand by employers whose businesses either serve a non-English speaking population or are in industries that rely on low-wage labor (e.g., janitorial, food service, gardening, residential construction). Third, and perhaps most importantly, immigrants who live in ethnic neighborhoods have less information about jobs offered by mainstream employers. Like other Americans, immigrants often find employment through informal networks that are closely tied to individuals or institutions within their community. In ethnic enclaves, these networks may be of little help in finding jobs in mainstream institutions where English skills are valued. Immigrants who become more proficient in English must go beyond such neighborhood- or ethnic-based networks and find better-paying employment that uses their newly acquired skills.

In supporting English acquisition programs, foundations should be aware of occupational and neighborhood factors that can undermine wage gains. The design of English acquisition programs should address these challenges, so that newly acquired English skills can be used to help immigrant families improve their economic security.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

The recommendations below are divided between well-educated LEP adults and those with low levels of education. In reviewing the recommendations, it is important to keep in mind that it takes LEP individuals between three to five years to develop spoken fluency and even longer to master written English skills.[35] Becoming proficient in English, regardless of education level, requires a significant investment of time. Well-run vocational English acquisition programs try to expedite this learning process, so that participants rapidly develop skills that can be used to improve their job prospects. Many programs supported by federal workforce development funds experience enormous pressure to push immigrants quickly into any available jobs. Supplementary funding from foundations may allow immigrants to participate in programs that take the time needed to develop their language and job skills more fully and improve their economic security in the long-term.

English Acquisition Programs for Better-Educated Immigrants

Language acquisition programs for more educated immigrants have the potential to produce significant gains in earnings. These programs should identify and target services to immigrant adults who arrive with a solid educational background and work experience but who are forced to take low-skill jobs because of their limited English skills and unfamiliarity with the U.S. job market.

Foundations can take two approaches to improve English skills for this population. First, they can support the expansion of existing high-quality English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. In light of limited state and federal funding, the demand for such classes far outstrips the supply,[36] and foundations can play an important role in increasing the availability of these crucial programs. Second, foundations can fund programs that combine English instruction with training of other workplace skills. Such programs respond to the need for many well-educated newcomers to develop computer skills, as well as learn workplace norms and customs, how to get along with co-workers, and conflict resolution skills. In addition to improving English skills, this approach enables participants to increase their earnings.

Programs that teach both English and workplace soft skills are collectively known as Vocational English-as-a-Second-Language (VESL) courses. VESL programs vary, but components that effectively serve more educated LEP workers include:

- ***Teaching English vocabulary used in the workplace.*** Examples range from teaching general workplace vocabulary that can be used across different types of offices to English terms that are used in specific occupations. The English for International Women program (see program profile on page 18) is an example of a general VESL that provides intensive English instruction as well as training in computers, business and workplace English, and job search skills.

In recent years, a growing number of community colleges, unions, and community-based organizations have begun to offer occupation-specific VESL courses, with the goal of helping participants become better prepared to compete for certain jobs when they complete the training program. Examples include those that teach English vocabulary commonly used in construction, nursing, or childcare jobs.[37]

- ***Teaching soft skills and basic computer skills.*** Many programs teach participants about job search and interview skills, customs and norms in the U.S. workplace, and ways to communicate effectively with co-workers. These programs provide orientation and training to help participants adapt to new work environments. As computer skills become increasingly required even in entry-level positions, a number of these programs also try to help participants become familiar with basic computer software programs (see page 18).

- ***Providing basic training to help participants obtain credentials or pass tests to work in specific occupations.*** In addition to teaching vocational English, some VESL programs also provide training to help immigrants pass entrance examinations or obtain certification. Examples include courses that help LEP job seekers pass tests for construction apprenticeship programs or obtain certification for medical or nursing positions. Because vocabulary used in these courses can be relatively advanced or technical, basic English skills are often a prerequisite.

- ***Providing job counseling and placement services.*** While increasing English fluency greatly improves an immigrant's job prospects, many effective VESL programs can help find employment for participants by providing information about job openings in specific fields and helping them conduct an effective job search. In addition, effective VESL programs usually have established relationships.

The Career Advancement Program: Intensive English for Educated Immigrants

Originally started more than 25 years ago to serve international women students, the English Center for International Women in recent years has begun to provide training primarily to low-income immigrants of both genders. Based at Mills College in Oakland, California, the Center's Career Advancement Program (CAP) helps LEP immigrants prepare for employment through an integrated training program in English acquisition, computer literacy, and career readiness. The program targets immigrants 17 years of age or older who have a high-school diploma or can demonstrate academic potential (a growing number of CAP participants have not completed high school). Applicants choose between a morning schedule, exclusively for women, or an evening schedule, serving both men and women. Approximately 90 percent of the Center's students are low-income, recent immigrants.

Full-time CAP students typically take 22.5 hours of classroom instruction per week. A seven–level intensive English language curriculum provides instruction in grammar, reading/writing, speaking/listening, vocabulary development, idioms and pronunciation. In addition, students are required to take accompanying career readiness and computer education classes. The career readiness curriculum begins with the teaching of common work-place vocabulary and employer expectations, continues with resume writing and interviewing skills, and offers internships and on-the-job training opportunities. The computer education classes start with learning how to use a keyboard, followed by instructions on all Microsoft Office applications, and ends with desktop publishing, website creation applications, and/or basic accounting software. The average class size is only 12 students, which allows participants to receive greater attention from instructors and more opportunities to interact with other class members.

The program offers five eight-week sessions and one four-week session each year, providing six opportunities for students to enroll. Students are evaluated for progress and the opportunity to advance to a higher-level class at the end of each session, allowing them to progress as quickly as their English proficiency grows. The average enrollment is 32 weeks.

The Center also offers a vocational counseling program to complement the intensive English program. As an affiliate of Oakland's workforce development system, the Center's English Center One Stop offers vocational counseling, internship, and job placement services both to its students and the general public. It tracks CAP graduates and offers post-graduation case management and job retention services for one year. For 2002, 85 percent of graduates found jobs and six percent continued their education. Typical job placements include office work, home-health care, food services and retail sales, and program assistant positions in businesses or local service agencies. Some graduates started their own businesses in tax preparation, restaurant, and custodial industries.

Tuition for 32 weeks of instruction is $8,480. Because most of the students are low-income, CAP receives support primarily from government workforce development funds or student financial aid. For more information about this program, visit www.eciw.org.

The key question that funders should ask before investing in a VESL program for this population is how the additional training—beyond basic English instruction—will make the participants more employable. For occupation-specific VESL programs, funders should also assess whether employer demand for workers in the targeted sectors is sufficient, so that participants who complete the programs will have a good likelihood of finding jobs. An assessment of the local employment market conditions is useful in evaluating the viability of any occupation-specific VESL programs.

English Acquisition Programs for Less-Educated Immigrants

Investment in language acquisition programs for immigrant populations with low levels of education is more complex. Because this population tends to have limited job skills, funders should not expect improved English proficiency to produce large gains in earnings and employment rates without similar improvements in general literacy and math skills.

Less-educated LEP adults generally have few educational options. Even in localities with large immigrant populations, there are only small numbers of job training or GED programs available to people who cannot speak English.[38] Less-educated LEP adults must typically go through a long, sequential educational process to improve their vocational skills. They need to first enroll in ESL courses and improve their English skills sufficiently before enrolling in GED, higher education, or job training programs. Given the financial need to work, most LEP adults do not have the time to complete this lengthy process. As a result, educators and policymakers have begun to recognize that a more promising alternative is an integrated program that provides English language instruction, vocational training, basic literacy, and math skill development. A recent Center for Law and Social Policy report lists some of the key benefits of integrated courses:[39]

1. Participants gain important job skills while developing the communications skills needed to find employment;

2. The language and cultural skills needed for job search and job retention are more easily integrated into training;

3. Learning is both focused and contextualized and, therefore, more easily absorbed by participants who have little experience with formal schooling; and

4. Motivation to learn remains high as participants see a clear end goal.

Integrated language acquisition and skill development programs are also well positioned to help many less-educated LEP adults address a common challenge: limited literacy skills in their primary language.[40] An estimated 32 percent of adults enrolled in ESL programs lack literacy skills in their native language, and research suggests that these adults are slower in learning a second language than their literate counterparts.[41] While traditional language acquisition programs emphasize English immersion, emerging research suggests that helping LEP individuals develop native language literacy and other related skills may help facilitate English acquisition. As illustrated by the program profiled on page 21, one approach is to provide skills instruction in participants' primary language. Improving participants' native language literacy and other basic skills will not only make LEP individuals more employable, but it could also prepare them to learn workplace English.

Improving Job Prospects Through Intensive Vocational English Instruction

A partnership between the San Francisco Department of Human Services and City College of San Francisco has produced a highly successful VESL training program for low-income individuals with very limited English skills. The VESL Immersion Program (VIP) was started in 2001 to help LEP welfare recipients improve their English skills and access mainstream jobs. The program primarily provides instruction on speaking and language comprehension skills that are used in the workplace. In addition, the classes introduce participants to computers and teach soft skills, such as how to conduct job searches, interviews for job openings, and communicate with co-workers and supervisors. The program has been available to individuals whose English skills are relatively low. On a 1 to 8 English proficiency scale used by City College, the program offers one curriculum for those whose English skills are between 1–2 and a second for those between 3–4.

Participants can enroll in a "core" program (30 hours per week), a "modified" program (20 hours), or a "part-time" program (10 hours). Each program includes case management with a specialist who monitors participants' progress and helps them overcome challenges. During the final four to six weeks of the program, participants work closely with a case manager to determine next steps for further training and/or employment. Upon graduation, VIP participants are linked with bilingual job search, placement, and career advancement services. In 2002, 93 percent of the 165 enrollees completed the program. Seventy-eight percent of participants in the "core" or "modified" VIP program advanced at least one ESL level within 18 weeks, and over a quarter advanced two or more ESL levels. Graduates from the part-time program earned an average wage of $7.31 per hour, while the modified program and core program graduates earned an average of $10.35 per hour.

In 2005, the VIP program began to offer training to welfare recipients with higher levels of English proficiency. The new course teaches participants vocational English skills, but through collaboration with Goodwill Industries and the local Private Industry Council, it also offers part-time paid work experience at various non-profit organizations.

The program is supported by federal and state welfare-to-work and adult education funds. The cost of the class instruction and case management for an 18-week program is $3,500 per participant in the core program (this figure does not include welfare and other public benefits received by participants during the training). For more information about the program, contact the San Francisco Department of Human Services at 415-557-5000.

El Paso Community College Motivation, Education, and Training (MET) Construction Program[42]

The MET construction program educates and trains immigrant Latino farm workers for employment in the building trades. The vast majority of participants (87 percent) have limited proficiency in English and an average of three years of formal schooling. Many have never attended school at all. The construction program combines instruction in basic skills, such as literacy, math, VESL, and GED preparation, along with industry-specific skills, such as roofing, drywalling, framing, reading documents and blueprints, and exterior- and interior-painting.

The typical 28-week course includes eight weeks of Spanish-language GED and computer skills instruction, 20 weeks of VESL, and 20 weeks of job skills classes in construction. Students learn construction skills through a combination of classroom training and hands-on construction projects. Basic skills classes are taught bilingually while construction skills are taught primarily in English.

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Classes are held Monday through Friday for eight hours a day. Participants receive stipends for their participation and upon graduation are placed with a local employer who provides continuing on-the-job training for an additional 12 weeks. Additional services including emergency housing, medical care, food, and transportation are provided as needed.

Ninety-six percent of participants complete the training annually and 84 percent of those received long-term placements. Participants made significant improvements in their literacy and language proficiency, gaining four full grades on the Moreno Spanish literacy test and five point gains on CASAS, a Spanish reading comprehension assessment.

As of 2003, the El Paso MET program has trained over 585 farm workers. The total cost of training, support services, stipends, education, job placement and follow up is approximately $13,000 per participant. The program has been funded through the U.S. Department of Labor as part of the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers grants and the Workforce Investment Act. The model has been replicated at other sites in Louisiana, North Dakota, and Minnesota. For more information about the program, contact MET at 281-689-5544.

The design of an integrated English acquisition program, and the extent to which other skill trainings should be emphasized, depends on the program's goals, the characteristics of the targeted population, and the conditions of the local employment market for lower-skill workers. Funders interested in supporting vocational English acquisition programs for this population should consider the following questions before making an investment in this area:

How does the proposed English acquisition program address the targeted population's educational and job skill needs? Identifying the specific skills needed by the population to become competitive in the local job market is the most important step in designing a responsive program. Depending on the skills and interests of participants, many successful vocational English acquisition programs are available to serve this population. For participants with very low English skills, one approach has been to focus initially on improving English proficiency followed by the teaching of vocational soft skills, basic computer skills, and effective job search and interview techniques. The San Francisco VIP VESL program (see sidebar on page 20) provides intensive VESL training to improve the vocational English skills of very limited English-speaking individuals and prepare them to work in English-speaking environments.

A similar approach consists of providing vocational English instruction and hard skill training or GED preparation exclusively in English. This method is generally effective only with participants who have sufficient English proficiency to comprehend the program's vocational or GED training components.

Other programs place less emphasis on English acquisition and provide native-language training in literacy, math, and job skills along with vocational English instruction. The El Paso construction program (see sidebar on page 21) is an example of this bilingual approach, where vocational skill development and English acquisition are twin goals. Bilingual programs are more widely used in localities which have a primary non-English language shared by immigrants, and many employers can communicate with workers in this language. Contrary to popular perceptions, increasing the literacy skills in an LEP adult's native language through bilingual programs may have positive effects on English acquisition.[43]

What are the economic and employment trends in the locality, and what are opportunities for LEP job seekers? Any effective workforce development strategy needs to include an analysis of the types of jobs potentially available in the local economy for LEP workers, job sectors that are expected to have future growth, and entry-level jobs that have the potential for a career path. As discussed above, LEP workers are often concentrated in occupations or industries that offer low-paying work and where acquiring English skills does not necessarily result in higher wages. An analysis of the local employment trends may help identify alternative occupations that have better earning prospects.

Such an analysis may reveal industries or occupations that have labor shortages, where employers are willing to hire LEP adults while they are still learning English. For instance, recognizing the high demand for entry-level workers in the local manufacturing sector, the Milwaukee Spanish Tech Track program successfully trained and placed Spanish-speaking workers into computer-controlled machining and industrial maintenance mechanic positions, paying between $10–12 per hour while the workers were still learning English.[44]

Similarly, there also may be businesses in areas with large immigrant populations that need staff who are bilingual or, at minimum, can speak their customers' native language. In the San Francisco Bay Area, one large home healthcare firm regularly hired LEP workers who could communicate with their Cantonese-speaking clientele if they agreed to continue improving their English.[45] The availability of local employers willing to hire LEP adults may argue for developing programs that emphasize skills training in a native language, so that participants become employed while they continue learning English. On the other hand, in areas where there are few jobs available to LEP adults, the programs need to emphasize English acquisition since the development of other skills, by themselves, are unlikely to improve job prospects.

In addition to English and vocational training, what types of other services are needed to ensure positive outcomes? Ancillary services, such as job counseling and placement by organizations with connections to employers, play an important role in improving the job prospects for LEP adults. Since many immigrants find employment through neighborhood- or ethnic-based networks, expanding their access to jobs that place a higher value on English skills is an important element to increasing participants' earnings. Depending on the target population's characteristics, funders should also evaluate whether case management, childcare, and other family-based services are needed to help participants complete the training program and find better employment.

Are the proposed service provider capable of providing the range of services needed to help LEP adults improve their employment prospects? Programs designed to improve participants' English skills and job prospects need to provide a wide range of services. The program provider must be prepared to offer competent training to improve both English and vocational skills; have a good understanding of the participants' cultural, language, and family background; be able to communicate in the participants' native language when providing case management or job counseling services; and help individuals who have completed the training find better employment. Few institutions have the ability to provide all of these services by themselves. Increasingly, successful vocational English acquisition programs are operated by two or more organizations, usually with one partner providing the in-class training and the other organization(s) providing support services to help participants through the training and find and retain jobs upon completion. In evaluating grant requests, funders need to make sure that the applicant organization, either on their own or in partnership with other service providers, have the skills and capacity to deliver all of the service needed to help LEP adults succeed in these programs.

While integrated language acquisition and skill development programs can expedite the process of helping an LEP adult become more work ready, experts warn that learning basic English and workplace skills still take, at a minimum, nine to 18 months for those who speak little English.[46] In short, there are no "magic bullets" for helping less educated LEP adults become better prepared for the U.S. workplace. However, examples of successful integrated English acquisition programs suggest that this approach holds great promise in helping the targeted population improve their economic conditions.

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English Proficiency: Strategies for Strengthening Immigrant Families

THE NON-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF ENGLISH ACQUISITION ON IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

The benefits of English acquisition go beyond increased earnings or better job opportunities. Indeed, non-economic gains such as the potential for higher levels of parental participation in children's education, improved parent-teen relationships, and increased civic involvement are also important to the well-being of immigrant families.

Unlike increased earnings, these non-economic benefits may not be immediately apparent to immigrant parents when they are deciding how to balance their desire for improved English skills against other family needs. For instance, an immigrant father with young children may not face some of the more serious consequences of having limited English skills until his children are in their teens. Faced with immediate economic and family pressures, he may decide that his time is better spent working a second job or spending time with his children rather than attending English classes. However, over time, his poor English skills will limit his ability to communicate with and support his children. In the education context, he will have difficulties communicating with teachers and helping his children with schoolwork. As his children's English abilities improve, he is likely to become increasingly dependent on them to interact with English-speaking institutions, such as hospitals or government agencies, thus changing the power dynamics within the family and potentially undermining his parental authority. Typically, immigrant children's fluency in their first language fades the longer they have been in the United States. Unless the father improves his English, he will likely face challenges in communicating with and guiding his children as they get older. A parent's English acquisition and fluency, therefore, play an important role in maintaining the strengths of immigrant families.

Similarly, although most funders are familiar with the economic benefits of improved English skills, there is less understanding of how non-vocational language acquisition programs can help strengthen immigrant families. This section describes how language acquisition can support the existing strengths of immigrant families and help them overcome the educational and economic challenges faced by low-income families, as well as the cultural and generational differences between immigrant parents and their children. The focus is on families headed by immigrant adults with low levels of education (nine or less years).

The dynamics of international migration in part explain why immigrant families arrive with qualities that help them succeed in a new environment.[47] It takes capital to finance the initial trip and, on an individual level, immigrating abroad takes health, ambition, a willingness to take risks, and a strong desire to build a better life.

Further contributing to immigrant parents' drive to succeed is their unique perspective. Immigrant parents view their living conditions and opportunities through a dual frame of reference, judging conditions not simply according to U.S. standards but in reference to conditions in their home countries. This dual frame of reference provides many immigrants with a strong sense of optimism, even if their living conditions are considered substandard in this country. For instance, longitudinal research on low-income immigrant parents in Miami and San Diego confirms that these individuals have consistently high levels of satisfaction with their lives in the United States and high expectations for their offspring.[48]

One challenge for low-income immigrant parents is to successfully transmit this optimism and achievement drive to their children who are born in this country or immigrated at a young age. This is a particularly important task for less-educated immigrant parents, many of whom assumed the enormous risks of international migration to improve their children's lives.[49] For these parents, protecting their children from adverse neighborhood effects and poverty is a challenging task.

For example, research shows that second-generation immigrants, particularly those who live in low-income households, face many risks when compared to newer immigrants. Holding other factors constant, longer residence in the United States is correlated with declining academic motivation and achievement among the children of immigrants.[50] In addition, as second-generation youths in poor neighborhoods become increasingly assimilated into U.S. norms, unhealthy behaviors—such as smoking, drinking, and drug use—become more likely. Over time the dire socioeconomic conditions and poor public school systems in low-income neighborhoods can erode the strengths of immigrant families. Their children may gradually stop seeing the world through their parents' dual frame of reference; instead they begin judging their situation according to U.S. standards and lose the optimism and drive that brought their parents to the United States.[51]

These corrosive effects are heightened by the inability of LEP parents to access outside resources to help their children. When combined with low levels of parental education and limited knowledge of U.S. culture, lack of English skills can seriously hinder a parent's ability to help their children's education, a key factor for their future success. Monolingual parents may miss out on important early education opportunities and resources, such as Head Start and other pre-school programs. Important information about early child development may never reach them either because it is not translated or is only available in written form, making it inaccessible to those not literate in their first language. Monolingual parents will also have greater difficulty helping their children with homework and advocating at school to address their children's needs at school.

However, some low-income immigrant families are able to effectively overcome the challenges of living in neighborhoods where youths face considerable risks. As a result, their children remain both healthy and highly motivated. What makes these families unique? Language skills, on the part of both children and parents, appear to play a central role. A longitudinal study of immigrant children found that families who were able to overcome the risks of living in poor neighborhoods and had the greatest upward mobility were those in which the parent and child shared fluency in a common language. In contrast, children who had the least success in school and encountered other related problems were in families in which young people reported losing some of their proficiency in their first language while parents remained unable to speak English.[52] In effect, discordant language skills within a family limit the ability of parents to guide and protect their children. In these families, parental authority wanes while peer influence rises.

Research also shows that children who learn English while remaining fluent in their first language are best situated to benefit fully from their families' strengths and assets.[53] Predictably, immigrant families with the best outcomes were those in which both child and parent are fluent in English and their native language. However, families in which both the child and parent are fluent in their first language had better outcomes than those who were both fluent in English.

Families fluent in their native language reported higher educational and occupational aspirations, higher self-esteem, lower depression, and higher reading and math test scores. Youths in these families were less likely to be embarrassed by parents or report frequent clashes.

The study's authors hypothesized that shared first-language fluency promotes what they term "selective acculturation" in which children can draw upon resources and assets from their native and U.S. cultures to help them succeed. Preserving first-language fluency ties young people closer to the norms of their parents' community and allows them to learn valuable lessons from their elders to counter the impact of poverty and other challenges in their daily life. They are able to take pride in their culture, which makes it easier to absorb their parents' optimism and ambition and accept their support and protection. Because many of these youths become proficient in English through U.S. schooling, they can also access opportunities that are only available to English speakers.[54] In short, their bilingualism allows them to take advantage of resources from both their native and English-speaking communities.

Several important implications flow from the research on language acquisition in the family context. First, the findings suggest that English acquisition by immigrant parents is an important element to strengthening their families and improving intergenerational communications, particularly as their children's first-language fluency fades. However, strengthening these children's bilingual abilities while helping their parents acquire new English skills is the preferred approach. Second, parents' language acquisition should not be limited to learning English but include gaining literacy and numeracy skills in their first language. One context for teaching parents these skills is in programs to improve their job prospects. But as described below, another context is in family literacy programs that help LEP adults both improve their English skills and learn how to participate more fully in their children's education. These programs can provide LEP parents with parenting and educational skills that will help support the success of their children from early childhood through adolescence.

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LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN, AGES 0 TO 5

Decades of research have documented the importance of rich parent-child language interactions during early childhood. A preschooler's language experiences at home lay the groundwork for developing more sophisticated literacy skills during elementary school. The quality and quantity of parent-child language interactions between the ages of 0 and 5 predict the child's literacy skills in fourth grade.[55] Even when such early interactions are in a non-English language, the skills developed by a child can be transferred to learning how to read and write in English. The activities that account for the largest part of literacy achievement include parent-child engagement during storybook reading, extended conversations during mealtime and playtime that include new vocabulary and explanations, and opportunities to discuss things that are not in the child's immediate environment.

Parents with limited literacy skills in their first language find it particularly challenging to support their child's early language development and school readiness. Research demonstrates that, while healthy and well loved, the children of immigrants are significantly less likely than other poor children to be exposed to reading and writing materials and activities in any language during their first five years of life.[56] Figure 6 shows that although between 80 and 87 percent of native-born parents with low education levels report reading to their preschooler within the past week, only about 50 percent of comparable foreign-born parents report doing so. Limited availability of children's literature in non-English languages—as well as parents' limited literacy in their first language—means that many preschool-age children of immigrants do not regularly encounter printed words before beginning public school. Furthermore, preschool-age children of immigrants with low levels of education are less likely than other comparable children to attend preschool or Head Start programs that can compensate for disadvantaged home learning environments. Not surprisingly, once they start kindergarten, children of immigrants are less likely than the children of natives to be assessed as "school ready."

Recommendations for Funders: Family Literacy Programs, Children 0 to 5

Intergenerational language acquisition programs can address multiple needs of this population and improve the language development of both immigrant parents and their pre-school children. Known as family literacy programs, they try to improve the parents' English and parenting skills in a manner that could lead to increased school achievement for their children. Successful family literacy programs targeting LEP immigrants typically have four key components:

- **ESL and adult education as needed.** Like the vocational language acquisition courses discussed earlier, family literacy programs can also provide basic English and other adult education instruction to participants.[57] Successful programs generally use participatory or learner-centered classes designed to help parents develop English and other skills. Learner-centered materials draw on parents' own experiences and interests in developing curriculum and classroom activities. The ESL module often addresses the challenges LEP parents face in raising children.[58] However, too frequently, family literacy programs focus primarily on the child, and the adult ESL component is an afterthought, developed without access to good materials, appropriate curriculum, or well-trained teachers. Just as in the VESL context, having state-of-the-art adult ESL materials and well trained teachers for adult learners is critical to the overall success of intergenerational English acquisition programs.

- **Training to help parents support the educational growth of their children.** This component introduces parents to the main principles of early childhood development and helps them develop skills to increase language-related activities with their children. The curriculum usually includes topics such as parenting practices, nutrition, the importance of literacy learning for their children, and information about school and community resources. As illustrated by the examples in the sidebars on pages 29 and 31, effective programs teach parents how to engage pre-school children in reading and other literacy activities although the parents may have limited English or first-language literacy skills. In addition, many programs introduce parents to the U.S. school system, provide strategies for increasing parental participation in their children's education, and show parents how to advocate effectively within public schools if their children's educational needs are not met.

- **Early childhood education for children.** While the parents are learning English and other skills, effective family literacy programs also provide early childhood education to their children to bolster skills needed to succeed in school. The primary focus is on developing pre-literacy skills, such as vocabulary building and verbal expression.

- **Joint activities to allow parents and children to practice shared language learning.** The adults and children are brought together to participate in shared literacy activities, with the goal of increasing such activities at home. This component teaches parents how to best fulfill their role as their child's most important teacher and provide them with feedback on how to improve these skills.

© Raising a Reader

Raising A Reader

Raising A Reader is a program designed to encourage low-income parents with limited literacy and English skills to read to their young children by establishing a reading routine that enhances their children's vocabulary, pre-literacy skills, and family bonding time.

The program began in 1999 when the Peninsula Community Foundation provided seed funding to San Mateo County library system to design a book bag program in collaboration with childcare providers, Head Start, and kindergarten teachers. With recent immigration, San Mateo County had become increasingly diverse. In response to an increase in the immigrant population, the Foundation funded the collaborative to increase parent-child book reading in low-literate homes, including those where parents might not read or speak English.

The program rotates the distribution of bright red book bags filled with high-quality children's books in Spanish and English to families. The book bags are distributed by childcare providers trained in appropriate read-aloud strategies. Each participating family also receives a video that provides an overview of how to read with their children. The training video includes strategies that allow poor readers and parents with limited English to engage with their children around a book. At the end of each week the parent and child return their book bag to their childcare provider in exchange for a new bag of books. At the end of the four-month program, children are given a permanent "library bag" that they can use for future trips to the library, school, or bookstore. Ongoing reading is encouraged through weekly visits to the library.

Evaluations showed that the number of Spanish-speaking participants who reported reading frequently to their preschool-age child increased by nearly 60 percent. Monthly parent-child library visits among Spanish speakers increased an astounding 337 percent. Children who participated in the program scored 66 percent higher than children in the comparison group in pre-reading skills, 22 percent higher in comprehension, and 43 percent higher on the early overall literacy assessment.

Raising A Reader has grown from 12 pilot sites in 1999 to 72 affiliates in 24 states and four countries in 2005, reaching over 100,000 children. Each community raises funds to support its local program, and most programs are collaborations among childcare organizations, school districts, and libraries. Raising A Reader headquarters offers training packages of three to four days in length and a 360-page manual that explains everything from job descriptions to fundraising tips. Delivering the program costs approximately $35 per child over the life of the program. An investment of $2,300 would launch a Raising A Reader program in most large Head Start classrooms. Once a program has begun and preschool teachers are trained to integrate the program into their overall work, the ongoing costs are minimal, primarily consisting of replacing lost or damaged items each year.

The award-winning "Read Aloud: Share A Book With Me" video allows parents and children to learn together about the importance of reading, using a medium and language with which they are comfortable. The video shows parents how to enjoy a picture book with a child, even when they face significant language barriers or cannot read at all. In addition to the closed-caption version, the video is currently available in 11 languages: English, Spanish, Bengali, Cambodian, Cantonese, Hmong, Korean, Mandarin, Russian, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.

Grantmakers interested in beginning a Raising A Reader program in their community should contact 650-854-5566 or visit www.raisingareader.org.

For immigrant parents with very low levels of education or English proficiency, family literacy programs may need to teach some of its content in an immigrant's native language. Otherwise, LEP adults will have difficulty understanding or participating in parenting education activities. Depending on the goals, a program may also want to help participants improve their native-language literacy skills in conjunction with ESL activities. Immigrant adults with very limited English or first-language literacy skills may only be capable of engaging in parent/child reading activities in their first language. Because vocabulary is the best single predictor of a child's reading outcomes, activities that enrich the parents' knowledge and use of vocabulary at home, in their native language and in English, should be encouraged.[59] Comprehensive programs, such as those highlighted in this briefing paper, can effectively train parents to teach their children and help them support future literacy achievement.

Family literacy programs can also introduce immigrant parents to the U.S. school system and help them develop skills to interact with teachers and school administrators. (See sidebar on Project FLAME, page 31.) Many immigrants come from countries where either compulsory schooling ends between sixth and ninth grade or where competitive testing can end a student's formal education. Through their dual frame of reference, 12 years of free public school education is nothing less than a "highly valued gift."[60] However, immigrant parents' appreciation of this country's educational resources may blind them to the ways in which public schools may not effectively meet the needs of their children. In addition, many come from cultures where it would be highly unusual—and even disrespectful—to challenge or question a teacher.[61] In the U.S. context, challenging school officials to address the needs of one's child is often needed to ensure a good education. Effective family literacy programs can help immigrant parents overcome their initial reluctance to be an advocate for their child and to develop skills to participate more effectively in the public education setting.

Immigrant parents recognize the important role language acquisition plays in ensuring that their children receive a good education. Isabel Martinez, a researcher studying Mexican immigrant parents in New York City, quotes a participant named Felipe, who described his desire to improve his English so that his children would have better educational opportunities:

We come hungry, Isabel. Although I only went to the sixth grade, and my wife to the seventh, we know that that's not good enough for our children; we know they must do better. We have tried to come here and improve our English because we have our sons. When we go to schools we need to converse with their teachers, to be informed, to see what to do about whatever issue arises in their education. We want to arrive and feel like we can speak to whichever person, not have to rely on another person to explain to us, or who can translate.[62]

Felipe's words embody the hopes of hundreds of thousands of immigrant parents. By supporting effective family literacy programs, philanthropy can play a crucial role in fulfilling these hopes and ensuring that both children and parents become "school ready" by the time kindergarten begins.

© FLAME

Family Literacy Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando/ Family Literacy: Learning, Improving, Educating (FLAME)

FLAME is a family literacy program started originally in Chicago, Illinois to help LEP parents enhance the home literacy environments of their young children. This multigenerational program is designed to encourage parents to be literacy models for their children through increasing reading and writing opportunities at home, improving home-school relationships, and taking full advantage of community resources. FLAME activities are conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the level of English-language proficiency of participants. All activities are supplemented by participatory ESL courses. Parents are encouraged to use the language that they know best when working with their children. The program has three basic modules: 1) Parents as Teachers, 2) Parents as Learners, and 3) Parents as Leaders.

The first module, Parents as Teachers, consists of 14 bimonthly classes attended by both parents and children. The classes teach parents how to create a home environment that is supportive of their child's literacy development. Parents and children learn about book sharing, book selection, libraries, the alphabet, songs and games, math, home literacy centers, and community literacy. In addition to hands-on activities, parents also learn how they can use the culture of the family to support their child's education. They learn how to provide homework help, visit their child's classroom, interact with teachers, and speak with administrators to ensure their child's needs are addressed.

In the Parents as Learners module, parents develop their own literacy so that they can serve as models for their children. They attend biweekly ESL classes in which the curriculum and activities are focused on English literacy activities. The classes emphasize a participatory approach, and each ESL instructor is encouraged to develop class materials and activities that reflect the students' interests, such as writing stories or developing books for their children. Parents can also attend basic skills or GED classes. When parents attend classes, former FLAME participants provide free childcare. They are paid by the hour and are an integral part of Project FLAME.

The Parents as Leaders module occurs at the conclusion of the Parent as Teacher component and involves parents attending a three-day summer leadership institute. The institute is designed to make parents aware of existing community services and to empower them to advocate for their children in school settings. The curriculum includes how to recognize effective school programs, the importance of parent-teacher relationships, the power of community advocacy, bilingual education, immigration law, and parents' rights.

Children of participating families showed significant gains in cognitive development, pre-literacy and literacy skills, and vocabulary development in both Spanish and English. In addition, parents became more comfortable teaching their children at home and also became more proficient in English as shown by significant gains in the Language Assessment Scales (LAS).

At a typical site, approximately 60 parents participate in the two-year program. Of all parents who begin the program, approximately two-thirds complete the first year and return for the second. The cost for providing the program is approximately $500 per family per year. FLAME has been successfully adopted by 29 organizations that serve 54 sites in California, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Texas and in British Columbia, Canada. Individuals or groups interested in replicating Project FLAME in their communities, should contact Project FLAME at 312-996-3013.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE ADOLESCENT CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

If parents do not learn English, they will find themselves increasingly forced to rely on interpreters or English-speaking family members to communicate with individuals or institutions outside of their community. Given the paucity of bilingual staff at schools, hospitals and government agencies, the responsibility for interpretation often falls upon children.[63] Children in these families are called upon to fill out government forms, translate during parent-teacher conferences, report crimes to law enforcement, and communicate with healthcare providers, among many other adult-level responsibilities.

Numerous reports have documented the harmful effects of having children serve as interpreters.[64] In many situations, children do not have the needed vocabulary or maturity to accurately interpret for parents. As Queena Lu's experience illustrates (see the "Children: Voices for Their Parents" sidebar), many youths have difficulty interpreting in situations where they either do not understand technical terms or are not sufficiently fluent in their first language to provide family members with accurate information. Equally harmful is the stress that children experience when they are put in the position of having to play a caretaker role for their family at a young age. Many pre-teen children in LEP families describe how they must assume adult responsibilities, such as reviewing applications for food stamps, interpreting for parents in court proceedings, or responding to questions by police officers regarding their parent's behavior.[65]

Beyond the stress that these responsibilities place on the children of immigrants, the interpreter role can also change the dynamics within a family so that the roles of parent and child are reversed. The child is saddled with authority and responsibility beyond her years while the parent is reduced to a dependent. The detrimental side effects of this role

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reversal can be particularly harmful when immigrant children reach adolescence and must establish a stable and separate identity from that of their parents.[66] This movement towards self-reliance involves abrupt swings between dependence and independence, and between rebelling against parental values and internalizing them. As adolescent children of immigrants move from a parent-child relationship to a parent-adult relationship, they need the firm guidance of their parents. To provide this guidance, immigrant parents must remain authoritative figures in their teenagers' lives.

Yet, if a child has spent years serving as the parents' bridge to the world outside of the immigrant community, the parent's ability to guide that child will be limited. As parental authority erodes, the role reversal increases. When children no longer believe that their parents are in control or when the knowledge of elders is not viewed as useful, adults lose their authority over children and their ability to guide and protect them. This situation gives adolescent children the ability to use their English skills and knowledge of U.S. norms and institutions to resist parents' legitimate attempts to provide guidance.[67]

Children: Voices for Their Parents—By Queena Lu

It's 2:30 in the afternoon and I have to rush out in the middle of my history class. My heart pounds like a drum. Fear and worry overtake me… I arrive at the hospital. I sit outside the waiting room with my older sister and I began to weep silently. My sister yells at me with frustration, "Stop crying. Mom's going to be OK. Stay here till the doctor comes. I have to go home and pick up dad."

Dr. Harrison walks down an infinite hallway with his long white coat that nearly reaches down to his feet. He comes with the bad news.

"I'm sorry to tell you this but your mom has cancer. The hemorrhoid we found turned out to be a tumor. I know that your mom doesn't speak English so can you please interpret for her."

I don't like sitting in the hospital, and I feel uncomfortable. I want to tell the doctor that I don't want to be here. But since my mom doesn't speak English, my sister Janice and I are the only ones that can help mom. The doctor looks at me and he begins to talk about my mom's medical condition. He talks to me as simply as possible, so I can understand the situation, and says my mother's cancer would require surgery and probably radiation and chemotherapy treatments afterward.

I am shocked. Surgery. Radiation. Chemotherapy. Side effects. I can't even begin to think of how I'm going to tell my mom. All this information is new to me; all those big words sound horrible. And the doctor is expecting me to tell mom this in Cantonese.

I begin to translate for my mom. She looks back at me with watery eyes. I search for comforting words in Cantonese that would help calm her, but I am lost. It's hard enough to think of the Cantonese terms for various organs, for surgery and chemotherapy.

Instead, I describe the situation in basic terms, and leave gaps in-between my explanation. Since I don't know how to say "surgery," I tell her that there will be needles, knives, tubes, and cuts into her body.

My mom bursts out crying, pushing me away. She doesn't want to see anyone.

(*Asian Week*, May 18–24, 2001. Ms. Lu was sixteen years-old when she wrote about this incident.)

The impact of this role reversal on adolescent children is further aggravated by their gradual loss of first-language fluency. By the time children of immigrants reach the age of 13, most have spent many years reading and writing in English. The vast majority attend public schools in which the goal is to transition them from their first language to English as quickly as possible. One of the side effects of such an approach is a phenomenon termed "subtractive bilingualism,"[68] when children gain fluency in a second language at the expense of losing skills in their first language. In the Portes and Rumbaut longitudinal study of immigrant children, researchers found that half of the high school graduates had the lowest level of proficiency on a combined index of ability to speak, understand, read, and write their first language.[69] Only 30 percent developed and maintained fluency in their first language.[70] This loss of first-language fluency hinders communication at a developmental stage when children need both separation and guidance from parents to negotiate the transition to adulthood.

But it is not only communication that suffers. Shared language allows the transmission of culture and values. When family members no longer can communicate in a common language, the channels for exchanging values and life lessons are blocked. Teens can lose touch with their parents' traditions and worldview. And parents, unable to speak English, may stop learning about crucial elements of U.S. culture that their children have adopted. Immigrant parents often, express anxiety about the detrimental effects of "Americanization" on their child, while teenagers frequently express frustration with their parents' attempt to impose values they view as belonging to another time and place.

Recommendations for Funders: ESL and Intergenerational Programs for Families with Adolescents

Well-designed participatory ESL programs for immigrant parents of teenagers can simultaneously build language skills while addressing parents' anxiety about their children's assimilation by providing much-needed social support.[71] Many literacy experts have long advocated that the content of English acquisition programs should address issues and concerns in adult learners' lives, including the relationship with their adolescent children.[72] To this end, funders should consider supporting programs that incorporate real-life issues into English acquisition courses. LEP parents can learn English skills through a curriculum based on topics related to parenting teenagers. The course could present background information about the issues facing U.S. teenagers, discuss problems that LEP parents and their adolescent children share, and suggest parenting strategies and activities on how to help their children make a successful transition to adulthood. Parents would have the opportunity to discuss shared concerns and learn about parenting strategies from each other. At the same time, these topics would serve as vehicles for developing English conversational and writing skills.

Funders wishing to take a more comprehensive approach can support intergenerational programs for parents and adolescents, modeled after family literacy efforts involving parents and preschool-age children. Such programs have the potential for bridging the gap between LEP immigrant parents and their teenagers. They can provide the parents English instruction and information about being a teenager in the United States, while their adolescent children can participate in activities to provide psychosocial support and learn how to negotiate conflict with their parents. Because the lack of a shared language is a primary source of conflict between LEP adults and their children, comprehensive programs should help re-establish channels of communication. A variety of strategies can be used. Programs could help children maintain their native language so that they can continue to communicate with parents who are still learning English.

As noted earlier, maintaining or developing these children's bilingual skills is associated with improved outcomes on a number of educational and psychological measures. At the same time, these programs should also help adolescents understand the history and values of their parents. Helping these youths develop a sense of pride in their cultural heritage can result in re-establishing the connection that they have to their parents' culture. Finally, such programs could also offer structured parent-child activities designed to promote respect and understanding between generations. For instance, young people could put together a collection of oral histories gathered by interviewing elders in the community. In this way, language and literacy can be used to connect the generations as opposed to pulling them apart.

While experts have long recognized the value of providing intergenerational literacy programs to immigrant families with adolescent children,[73] most existing programs are in the preliminary stages of development and have yet to be evaluated or replicated on any scale. For instance, an innovative program in St. Paul, Minnesota offers Spanish-English and Hmong-English "Circles" where LEP adults learn English and prepare for citizenship exams through instruction and tutoring by college and high school students. A Children's Circle offers the children of participating LEP adults the opportunity to learn, among other things, about their families' cultures and heritages.[74] Other programs have also successfully trained college students to help with ESL and citizenship courses, and many attempt to nurture intergenerational relationships to the benefit of both LEP adults and the young participants. But most do not specifically address the intergenerational conflicts and communication issues faced by many immigrant families with adolescent children.

One of the challenges of developing intergenerational English acquisition programs in this area is that government funding for family literacy is largely limited to serving families with young children. Given this gap, foundations can play a particularly critical role in developing effective programs that strengthen the connection between LEP parents and their adolescent children. Because of the paucity of programs, the challenge for funders is to identify innovative work already being done in their communities and support documentation of curriculum, outcome evaluation, and, eventually, replication. In addition, funders should consider supporting partnerships between university researchers and knowledgeable community-based programs to create and evaluate pilot programs that address these families' needs.

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Summary of How Foundations Can Invest

To help improve immigrants' English skills, foundations can support a wide range of programs, including those seeking to increase job prospects and earnings, as well as family literacy programs for parents, young children, and adolescents. Each of the program areas described in this paper is tied to a specific subpopulation of LEP immigrants—such as educated workers, parents of young children, and parents of teenagers—and to a specific set of outcomes, such as increased earnings, school readiness, and improved intergenerational communication and relationship. Funders wishing to invest in this field should begin by identifying the populations of interest to them, determining how English acquisition programs can best address the needs of these populations, and considering the outcomes they want to achieve through their grantmaking. Establishing a set of criteria will help foundations develop a grantmaking strategy that fits within their giving priorities and advance their organizational goals.

ECONOMIC OUTCOME ➠ INCREASED JOB PROSPECTS AND EARNINGS

To help immigrants who have more than 12 years of education, foundations can consider:

A. Investing in the expansion of existing ESL classes to meet demand.

B. Funding vocational ESL programs that also work toward improving workplace English and other job-related skills. Successful programs generally share the following qualities:

1. Teach workplace or occupation-specific English;

2. Teach basic computer and workplace skills;

3. Offer job counseling and placement services; and

4. If applicable, provide basic training to help participants pass entrance test or obtain credentials.

To help immigrants with less than 12 years of education—particularly those with nine or less years—funders can consider supporting enriched language acquisition programs that include job training components. Some key questions to consider include:

1. How does the proposed English acquisition program address the targeted population's educational and job skills needs?

2. What are the economic and employment trends in the area and how can LEP job seekers benefit from them?

3. What other kinds of supportive services—such as case management, child care, and family services—does the target population need to achieve the best possible outcome?

4. Does providing these services require collaboration among multiple service providers, and what kinds of organizations are best positioned to provide services?

NON-ECONOMIC OUTCOME ➠ INCREASED LEVELS OF SCHOOL READINESS

Funders wishing to assist immigrants who have nine or fewer years of education and who have children up to the age of five should strongly consider supporting family literacy programs. Effective programs should include the following four components:

1. Adult basic education emphasizing literacy in the participants' first language and ESL classes for parents. The materials used to teach these classes should draw on parents' experiences raising young children.

2. Parenting education programs designed to introduce the main precepts of early childhood development and the importance of shared language activities. These programs should incorporate materials designed to introduce immigrant parents to the U.S. school system.

3. Early childhood education programs designed to bolster the skills children will need to succeed in school. The focus should be on pre-literacy skills, such as vocabulary building and verbal expression.

4. Time for the adults and children to participate together in literacy activities that they can also do at home.

NON-ECONOMIC OUTCOME ➠ IMPROVED INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

To help immigrants with children between the ages of 12 and 18, foundations should consider supporting multigenerational language acquisition programs designed to bridge the communication gap between the first and second generations. Program options include:

1. Well-designed participatory ESL classes for parents, so they can build language skills while addressing anxiety about their children's assimilation and providing much-needed social support.

2. Intergenerational family literacy programs that work to simultaneously improve parents' English skills, help teenagers maintain their first-language fluency, and bridge the widening communication and culture gap between the two generations. These programs connect parents' English learning activities with discussions on what their children may be going through as teenagers in the United States. At the same time, their adolescent children participate in activities designed to offer the psychosocial support necessary to negotiate conflicts with their parents.

Conclusion

By investing strategically in programs to help LEP populations learn English, foundations can play a central role in helping immigrant families overcome one of the most critical challenges to integrating into their new communities. Improved English skills can lead to increased earnings, greater school readiness for children, improved intergenerational communication and relationships within immigrant families, and the confidence to engage in civic life.

Unfortunately, federal and state funding for English acquisition programs has not kept pace with the growth of the LEP population. Many of these programs continue to teach immigrants very basic skills, or what some have characterized as "survival English," often with the goal of pushing participants into the workforce as quickly as possible. While foundations alone cannot fully address the growing demand for high-quality English programs, they can help spur and support the development of innovative models that expedite the learning process and address the full array of immigrant families' needs. With recent demographic changes and the pivotal role that immigrants and their children play in the future of our country, the development of effective English acquisition programs is critical to helping newcomers strengthen their families, enhance their economic security, and achieve their full potential as contributing members of our community.

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RESOURCES

ADULT EDUCATION AND LITERACY ORGANIZATIONS

American Association of Community Colleges
http://www.aacc.nche.edu

California Department of Education Outreach and Technical Assistance Network
http://www.otan.us/login/login.cfm

Center for Adult English Language Acquisition
http://www.cal.org/caela

Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy
http://www.caalusa.org

National Institute for Literacy
http://www.nifl.gov

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY

Center for Law and Social Policy
http://www.clasp.org

National Immigration Law Center
http://www.nilc.org

Urban Institute
http://www.urban.org

FAMILY LITERACY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

California Tomorrow
http://www.californiatomorrow.org

National Center for Family Literacy
http://www.famlit.org

National Even Start Association
http://www.evenstart.org/

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

U.S. Census
http://www.census.gov

U.S. Census, Language Use and English-Speaking Ability
http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf

Modern Language Association
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