



Immigration and Public Education

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Except for our indigenous brothers and sisters, we in the United States are all descended from immigrants, whether voluntary or involuntary. Caught once again in an era of intolerance, how quickly we forget that welcoming the stranger has been a blessing for us all. The education of immigrant children is not only a smart investment; as an expression of the call to love our neighbors as ourselves, it is also a moral imperative.

More than thirty years ago, when my husband and I moved to Cleveland, Ohio, I found a job with the public schools, teaching English to adult immigrants. My students' stories tell a lot about Cleveland and its economy in the 1970s and about immigration in that very different time. There were a Hungarian organist, Polish, Czech, Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian factory workers, a Romanian engineer working as the head custodian at a department store, an Italian bakery worker, a Chinese secretary, a Russian Jewish refugee doctor who could find work only in a foundry, the Japanese wife of an engineering student at Case Institute, many refugees from Vietnam, and a Laotian Hmong couple and mother-in-law who had walked for eighteen days and finally swam the Mekong River into Thailand while they carried the couple's three young children. Like most of today's immigrants, all of my students were fully employed; they had come to the United States to make a better life for their children. We did not have the benefit of bilingual education, bilingual aides, or even translators, and I, a dominant culture, English-speaking American, spoke only a little French, though there was never a speaker of French in any of my classes. Despite these handicaps, through pattern practice drills, dialogues, structured conversation, and written exercises we worked diligently on the four skills all language learners must master: listening, speaking, reading and writing.



My students' children often came along to class too. They were learning English at school, and respecting their parents' efforts, they studied silently at a table in the back of the room. It is today's immigrant children, most of them enrolled in public schools, who are the focus of this report. Seismic shifts in the global economy in these thirty years have, however, transformed the face of immigration to the United States.

Rapid Demographic Change

Demographers tell us, "America is now changing in ways few understand and many fear, changing much faster than either research or the policy discourse. Now, in the world's first predominantly suburban society, we sometimes face three or four-way racial separation and polarization spreading out into suburbs of tiny, highly divergent local governments and school systems, almost none of which really understand or have plans to manage the social transformation that is well under way."¹

Between 1995 and 2005, the nation's population of English Language Learners (ELLs) in public primary and secondary schools grew by 57

percent, to 5.1 million students from 3.2 million.² Thirteen states—Colorado, Nebraska, Indiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey and New Hampshire—experienced growth in the school population of ELLs by more than 200 percent between 1995 and 2005. During this period, for example, North Carolina's school population of ELLs grew by 350 percent.³

Today's English Language Learners (ELLs) represent many races and cultures: 68 percent Hispanic, 14 percent non-Hispanic white, 13 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, and 3.5 percent Black.⁴ The rising number of ELLs in public schools across the United States can be attributed primarily to growth in the number of Hispanic students, who now make up one fifth of our public school population—10 million of the nation's 50 million public school students. Sixty percent of total growth in the number of public school students in the United States between 1990 and 2006 is due to growth in the number of Hispanic students.⁵

Predictably, in the West in 2009, students of European heritage no longer constitute a majority; white students now make up only 45 percent of public school students, while 38.7 percent of students are Hispanic, 8.3 percent are Asian and Pacific Islander, 6.4 percent are African American, and 2 percent are American Indian.

More surprisingly, in the South, students of European heritage are also now a minority in a region with 26.5 percent African American students and a rapidly growing Hispanic student population that has reached 21.5 percent.⁶ By 2006, students of Hispanic heritage made up half of all students in California and forty percent of public school students in Nevada, Colorado, Illinois, Florida, and New York.⁷

The overall numbers, however, misrepresent the reality in particular places. Small cities and towns, in many cases homogeneously Caucasian till now, have received the children of immigrants drawn to meat packers and other industries. Springdale, Arkansas, home of Tyson and WalMart, a school district with 8,000 students and no English Language Learners in 1990, more than doubled in size by 2005 to 17,400 students, with 7,000 or 40 percent ELLs.⁸ By 2001, 25 percent of the students in Marshalltown, Iowa were of Hispanic origin.⁹ Today Lewiston, Maine's schools serve 17 percent ELLs, primarily Somali refugees. The school district of St. Paul, Minnesota now educates 41,000 students including 9,800 students whose home language is Hmong and 4,000 whose home language is Spanish.¹⁰ Florida's Palm Beach County Schools currently educate students speaking 142 native languages or dialects.¹¹

Today the majority of English Language Learners in U.S. public schools are citizens of the United States. The National Council of La

Raza estimates that 91 percent of Latino children under age 18 living within U.S. borders are U.S. citizens.¹² Seventy-three percent of the children of undocumented immigrants were born in the United States.¹³

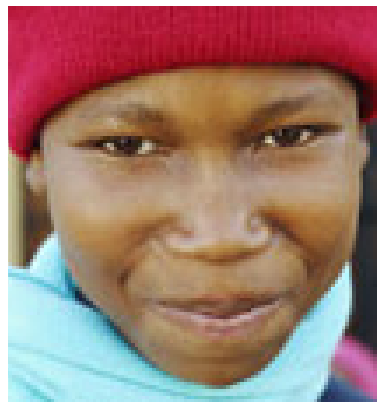
In the Church We Welcome the Stranger and We Welcome Children

Here are the words of National Council of Churches General Secretary, Michael Kinnamon reflecting on Jesus' call to care for children: "Each and every child is the earth's most precious resource, an amazing gift from God. This, of course, is not how they were regarded in Roman culture at the time of Jesus, which is why some of the stories found in the gospels would have been utterly shocking to the original audience. My favorite is from Mark 9: 'Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them. And taking the child in his



arms, he said to them [the disciples], 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me – and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the One who sent me.' ... Little children, we are told, are the representatives, the ambassadors, of Jesus and, thus, of God! They are to be welcomed, cared for, because of their special relationship with our Lord... This is part of the eschatological reversal of scripture: Greatness is redefined as caring for, as receiving, the most vulnerable among us."¹⁴

United Church of Christ General Synods have affirmed the call to welcome children, whatever their ethnicity or culture. General Synod 26 challenged the UCC to "tear down all the borders we have built between us so that we may see each person as a child of God, so that we may learn to love and welcome all of God's children as members of one family and one world."¹⁵ General Synod 19 anticipated the multicultural nation we have become: "We must recognize that racial and ethnic diversity provides the best opportunities for renewal and rebirth, the key to a multiracial and multicultural renaissance needed in the twenty-first century United States where European Americans will become a numerical minority."¹⁶ Speaking specifically to public education, General Synod 18 pronounced, "We need to reaffirm and enlarge our commitment to quality, integrated and multicultural education for all and to build

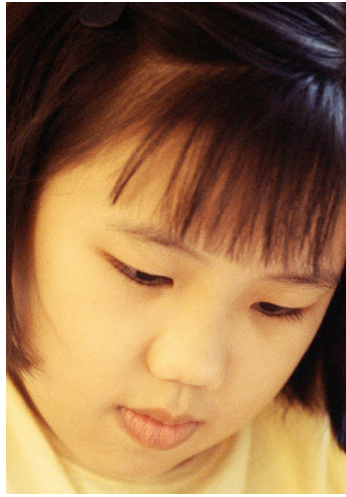


that commitment into the experience of the vast majority of our nation's children, those who attend our public schools."¹⁷ Supporting the rights of individuals, families and communities to use their primary languages, General Synod 23 proclaimed: "...our children deserve a life that is filled with the richness and beauty of our culture, conveyed through

our mother languages, and deserve to speak the language of their ancestors which reflects a positive self-image leading to self-assurance in life."¹⁸

A United Church of Christ Public Education Task Force appointed by General Synod 23 visited public schools in Arizona soon after passage of a constitutional amendment banning bilingual education and requiring that only English be

spoken and taught in the schools of Arizona. The Task Force wrote: The church can and should speak to the issues in such public debates, which involve racism, xenophobia, and public morality... Language is a gift of God. It is how we express who we are as a people."¹⁹ That Task Force brought multicultural educator, James Banks, to address a pre-General Synod 24 conference: "Educators often try to help students develop strong national identifications and attachments by eradicating their ethnic and community cultures... (But) individuals can develop a clarified commitment to and identification with their nation-state and the national culture only when they believe that they are a meaningful part of the nation-state and that it acknowledges, reflects, and values their cultural group and them as individuals."²⁰



The Laws and the Courts Promise Access to Education and Opportunity for English Language Learners

Welcome cannot be legislated, but the right of access to school services for children whose families do not speak English at home has been protected by federal law. Legal challenges have, however, primarily protected the right of access to English instruction; less attention has been paid to protecting instruction in native languages.

A U.S. Court of Appeals first struck down school segregation in 1947, in *Mendez v. Westminster*, declaring that segregation of Spanish-speaking children violated the due-process and equal protection clauses of the U.S. Constitution.²¹

Legislatively in 1968, Congress added the Bilingual Education Act to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), passed originally in 1965. ESEA had embodied the philosophy of providing additional resources through Title I for school districts serving children in poverty; the Bilingual Education Act added Title VII, providing federal aid for English Language Learners, better training for their teachers, and support for parent involvement.²²

In 1974, in *Lau v. Nichols*, a case originating in San Francisco, parent plaintiffs argued that although mastery of English was required for high school graduation, their children were not receiving special language instruction. This U.S. Supreme Court decision guaranteed the right, codified in the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, to instruction in English for students whose primary language is not English.²³

The 1982, U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe* established 14th Amendment protection of the right to primary and secondary education for children of undocumented immigrants. Writing for the majority, Justice William Brennan declared: "It is difficult to understand precisely what the state hopes to achieve by promoting the creation and perpetuation of a sub-class of illiterates."²⁴

History of the Language Wars in Public Schools

In 1968, when Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act, it added Title VII to bring protection for English Language Learners into the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. That this law named and fully endorsed bilingual programs was not controversial at the time; Congress passed the law with bipartisan support and little opposition.²⁵ But while 1971 federal regulations for Title VII grant applicants instructed that the goal was a student who could function well in two languages, consensus soon began to unravel when states including Massachusetts and Illinois passed laws to require "transitional" programs that incorporated the native language only until the child mastered English.²⁶



After 1974, when *Lau v. Nichols* protected immigrant students' right to instruction in English, federal policy further shifted toward ensuring the right to English language classes. In 1978, Congress stopped supporting developmental bilingual programs and limited funding to "transitional bilingual education." In 1985, William Bennett, Ronald Reagan's Education Secretary, sought to fund only pilot programs in structured English immersion, further limiting use of the student's primary language.²⁷

The backlash against bilingual education—developmental and even transitional—culminated in ugly battles beginning in June 1998, when Californians passed Proposition 227, a state constitutional amendment mandating English-instruction-only. Proposition 227 permitted a year's sheltered instruction in English after which students were expected to absorb English in mainstream academic classes.²⁸ Ron Unz, the business tycoon who bankrolled the campaign for Proposition 227, supported similar constitutional amendments in a number of states, successfully banning bilingual education with passage of Arizona Proposition 203 in 2000²⁹ and Massachusetts Question 2 in 2002.³⁰ Four other states, Arkansas, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin passed somewhat less restrictive legislation to curtail bilingual instruction.³¹

No Child Left Behind Act Silences Discussion for Now; Tests Only English

The rage and clamor of the English-instruction-only ballot initiative battles was significantly quieted with the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the law that had included the Bilingual Education Act since 1968. In the fall of 2001, with virtually no discussion about the needs of English Language Learners, Congress reauthorized ESEA in a version now called No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Although the law does not explicitly ban bilingual education, in practice it mandates rapid acquisition of English. Schools are given a one year grace period to teach English to ELLs before these students, right along with their English speaking peers, are expected to test at grade level on exams usually administered in English. NCLB renames the federal Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs established in 1968; it has now become the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited-English-Proficient.

Teachers complain that scores on the tests required by NCLB surely cannot be measuring whether English Language Learners are mastering grade level content in reading, math, and science because in two or even three years, most of these students cannot have mastered the requisite English to understand the tests. Not surprisingly schools everywhere have responded to the test and punish reality of NCLB by establishing a laser focus on the subjects tested, which means schools are now less likely to provide instruction in students' native languages. And in a system where students are tested primarily on basic skills in reading and math and where commercial text book and test design companies have considerable power to establish the point of view of the materials and the selection of items to be tested, there is less reason for students to spend classroom time reflecting on multicultural issues or for anyone to remember that multiple choice tests may not accommodate the very different ways culture affects our understanding. Thus the newest version of the federal education law

has further silenced the multicultural sharing of points of view and in this way limited important contributions public schools can make to the functioning of a rich democracy.

What Are the Real Issues in the Bilingual vs. English-Only Debate?

It is important to be very clear. The debates between proponents of instruction in English-only versus bilingual education, or between those who argue about the relative virtues of developmental versus transitional bilingual education are political debates; there is really no argument among linguists and educators. Academic research conclusively demonstrates that developmental bilingual education not only bestows upon each child a growing facility in the child's primary language but also works best for ensuring mastery of English and other academic subjects.³²

Developmental bilingual education emphasizes teaching children to read—literacy education—in their home language, where all of their native language abilities, including speaking, listening, latent vocabulary and conceptual framework, will support the development of reading and writing. Students in the developmental bilingual program then learn to transfer their reading ability to their new language, English. As students move along in school, developmental bilingual education takes advantage of the much deeper content knowledge each student can best access and express in her or his native language and continues to build upon this content knowledge in the primary language at the same time the student is learning English. While it may sound counter-intuitive, people can and do learn in more than one language at a time.³³ In this way, students are not forced to set aside all other learning, in math, science, the social studies, and literature, while they stop for several years to learn enough English to function at the relatively high linguistic level required for study of academic subjects.



On the other hand when students, insulated in sheltered English programs or English as a Second Language tracks, stop studying other subjects in depth while they are removed for several years to learn English, they may learn English, but they have fallen so far behind in other subjects that they struggle to catch up, ever. Students expected to learn English by immersion in mainstream classes for

native speakers of English fail to learn English and also miss instruction in other subjects because they cannot understand. For these reasons too many English Language Learners in sheltered and immersion programs never catch up in time to graduate from high school.

Bilingual education advocate James Crawford believes that most people understand the bilingual/English-instruction-only debate from one of three perspectives. People in one group consider language as a resource. According to Crawford, this is a human capital approach that emphasizes the practical as well as the theoretical and moral advantages of bilingual education both for individuals and for a society that can benefit from the skills of functionally bilingual teachers, entrepreneurs, psychologists and doctors.³⁴ The members of Congress who framed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968 articulated this view. Today this is the perspective primarily of linguists, anthropologists, educators and members of communities whose primary language is not English.

People in a second group understand language as a right,³⁵ although they disagree about the kind of language study to be protected. Some have focused on the right of English Language Learners to instruction in English. Adherents of this position include parents who have filed lawsuits seeking more funding and better programs explicitly to teach English. Such

advocates have addressed a very real need in a nation with an acute shortage not only of bilingual teachers but also of trained teachers in English as a Second Language. In under-resourced schools and schools facing a sudden and rapid growth in the number of ELLs, advocates for better resourced services for ELLs have played an important role. The No Child Left Behind Act itself, with its demand that students learn English and move out of sheltered programs into mainstream academic classes, has been defended by civil rights advocates who charge that many school districts, underfunded or facing sudden surges in the number of ELLs for which they were unprepared, never would have established effective English as a Second Language programs without the pressure of NCLB.



In the church our General Synod resolutions and our biblical heritage call us to welcome the stranger and help prevent the loss of immigrants' primary language. We understand language as a right, but we are part of a second group who defend the right not only to instruction in English but also to developmental bilingual programs where English Language Learners can continue learning to listen, speak, read, and write their home languages.

With anthropologists we would observe today's bilingual debate in a time of rapid immigration through the lens of another period when English superiority was politically promoted. During the latter part of the 19th and through much of the 20th century, the federal government used boarding schools for the stated purpose of eradicating the language and culture of Native American children. The meaning of language loss has been documented as part of that history:

“Embedded in [the heritage] language are the lessons that guide our daily lives. We cannot leave behind the essence of our being.” [Richard Littlebear, Lakota]. Language is the means through which parents and grandparents socialize their children and grandchildren, imparting all that a community and a people believe their children ought to learn and become. When that bond is broken, intergenerational ties and community relationships also are ruptured. Hence, rights to language are fundamental to collective and personal identity, and efforts to resist language loss cannot be decoupled from larger struggles for personal and communal well-being, self-determination, and cultural survival.”³⁶

Powerful social forces today pressure immigrant children to learn social English and assimilate. The lure of the electronic media and the marketplace and teenagers' desire to “fit in” virtually guarantee considerable assimilation into the American teen-culture melting pot.³⁷ Bilingual study can strengthen strong family and community ties even despite the lure of U.S. popular culture.

Crawford describes a third group: people who view native language as a problem that must be overcome by those whose home language is not English.³⁸ The goal from this perspective is for immigrants to learn English as quickly as possible and rid themselves of their primary language, that is considered a stigma and an impediment to assimilation. In this category are those who have supported the English-instruction-only state constitutional amendments and those who redesigned the federal education law.

Those who view native language as a problem have dominated much of the public conversation since the 1990s. It is likely that the backlash that transformed the 1968 Office of Bilingual Education into the 2002 Office of English Language Acquisition is a political response to today's massive demographic change when “each generation of Americans is living in a country very different from that of the last generation.”³⁹ Crawford certainly blames promotion of English-only on fear. He theorizes that heated periods of political debate over language teaching have usually reflected profound social upheaval:

“Language conflicts generally incorporate symbolic struggles over cultural, religious, ethnic, or national identity. Yet they represent more than contending philosophies of assimilation and pluralism, disagreements about the rights and responsibilities of citizens, or debates over the true meaning of ‘Americanism.’ Ultimately language politics are determined by material interests—struggles for social and economic supremacy—which normally lurk beneath the surface of the public debate.”⁴⁰

Many Issues Besides Language Learning Challenge Immigrant Children

Challenges for immigrant children are not limited to language instruction policy. Immigrant children's prospects have been limited by broader welfare and immigration policies created to discourage their parents from settling in the United States. Immigrant students, many of them children of color, also continue to encounter the barriers of racial and ethnic segregation in schools where virtually all students are poor and where unequal access to education diminishes their opportunities.

Policies Designed to Punish Immigrant Parents Limit Opportunity for Children

Reflecting on John 21:15-17 in a keynote address at the UCC's 22nd General Synod, the writer Jonathan Kozol described social policy designed to blame the vulnerable rather than to strengthen the institutional ladder out of poverty: “When Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘If you love me, feed my sheep,’ he didn't say, ‘only the sheep who dwell in the green pastures.’ He didn't say, ‘only the sheep whose mothers please us by acceptable behavior.’ He didn't say, ‘only the sheep whose fathers have good jobs and mothers come to PTA.’ He didn't say, ‘only the sheep whose parents make smart choices.’ He didn't say, ‘only the sheep that have two parents in the pen.’ He just said, ‘If you love me, feed my sheep.’”⁴¹

Kozol was describing the 1996 welfare reform act, technically named the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, intended to “motivate” parents into looking harder for jobs by seriously limiting public aid to families with dependent children.

Despite evidence that immigrant families are highly employed, welfare reform restricted services that would support children when immigrant families fall on hard times. Welfare reform punished even those immigrant families with legal status at the time of the law's passage by making them ineligible for food stamps and Social Security Income (SSI). Documented immigrants arriving after 1996 were banned from food stamps and SSI, and made to wait five years for eligibility for Medicaid and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.⁴² Although some states have been able to pass progressive policies to limit the damage of federal welfare reform, others including Arizona, Colorado and Oklahoma have passed such stringent documentation requirements that families who may include one or more undocumented members have been forced into the shadows.⁴³ An undocumented parent may feel obligated to avoid healthcare or pre-school services that are fully available for U.S. citizen children, because the undocumented parent fears discovery and deportation if a service provider were to learn the parent's status. Fortunately the 2009 reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) eases some of the pressure on families by requiring states to provide coverage for children even as families wait to produce required documentation.⁴⁴



Fragmentation of programs and language barriers are also likely to limit children's access to educational programs. Early Head Start, Head Start and Migrant Head Start are exempt from verifying immigration status,⁴⁵ but these model programs remain relatively small, serving only 1,071,697 children and pregnant women nationwide in 2006-2007.⁴⁶ *Chicago Catalyst* estimates that in Chicago, only 46 percent of eligible immigrant children are enrolled in early childhood education programs compared to 63 percent of their native-born peers.⁴⁷ Kindergarten at the neighborhood elementary school is much easier for immigrant parents to locate.

Stepped up workplace raids by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have catastrophically impacted immigrant families, children, and public school districts. The Urban Institute researched the meaning for families and schools of three 2006 daytime ICE raids at Swift meat packing plants in Colorado, Nebraska, and Massachusetts, raids where 900 adults were arrested and 500 children directly affected: “Many arrestees signed voluntary departure papers and left the country before they could contact immigration lawyers.... Detained immigrants had very limited access to telephones to communicate with their families, and many were moved to remote detention facilities out of the states in which they were arrested.... Many of the arrested parents were afraid to divulge that they had children because they believed that ICE would take their children into custody as well.”⁴⁸

School districts had to identify hundreds of children of parents who were arrested and to arrange quickly for their short and long term safety. “The Grand Island school district implemented a plan to contact every child whose parents worked at the Swift plant and to determine adult supervision for them.... No young children were left behind in school, left at home without adult supervision or taken into foster care. Some younger children remained in the care of babysitters for weeks or months.”⁴⁹

After a 2008 daytime ICE raid at the Agriprocessor, Inc. meat packer in Postville, Iowa, the school superintendent described the human devastation: “If you have ever been to a natural disaster where people lose their homes—the only difference was that it was a man-made disaster, not a natural one. People were in shock. Children were without parents.”⁵⁰

School Inequity Complicates Growing Segregation by Poverty, Race, Language

Since No Child Left Behind became law in 2002, federal policy makers have prescribed that public schools alone, through a massive test and compliance strategy, create upward mobility for poor children. If we mandate high enough expectations for children during the school day, we have been told, achievement gaps will be eliminated, and children of all races and ethnicities will become upwardly mobile according to merit, despite such challenges as poverty, the need to learn English, special developmental needs, and the need for health care services. However, the test-and-punish NCLB has not appreciably closed achievement gaps. Despite modest test-score improvement on the annual state standardized tests mandated by NCLB, scores among 13-year-olds on the one national test, the National Assessment of Education Progress, have not significantly risen.⁵¹

At the same time school segregation by race and poverty has grown steadily, and school resource inequity in and across the states has widened. While NCLB has punished schools that cannot quickly raise scores, it has been silent about the need to allocate more money to expand the opportunity to learn. According to the Schott Foundation for Public Education, African American and Latino students in 2009 have only half the access to high schools that graduate the majority of their students on time and college-ready when compared to more privileged, primarily Caucasian children.⁵²

Growing immigration has altered the demographics of school segregation. Children in Black and Hispanic families are now more likely to find themselves segregated together in schools serving neighborhoods where virtually all children are extremely poor:

“Schools remain highly unequal, sometimes in terms of dollars and very frequently in terms of teachers, curriculum, peer groups, connections with colleges and jobs, and other key aspects of schooling. Segregated black and Latino schools have less prepared teachers and classmates, and lower achievement and graduation. Segregated nonwhite schools usually are segregated by poverty as well as race. Being in a school where everyone is poor, teachers transfer out as soon as they can, parents are powerless, and gangs sometimes shape the environment of the community.... These schools have the most students with chronic health and developmental problems, the most disruptive neighborhood conditions.... These are the schools with the most children whose native language is not English and they are filled with students who arrive at their first day of school very far behind in preschool skills such as recognition of letters, numbers, range of vocabulary...”⁵³

The Civil Rights Project describes tension among students, “...in California, for example, (where) blacks segregated from whites do not find themselves attending black, Afro-centric schools, but, on average, attend schools where there are more Latinos than fellow blacks. In the South, where there is now massive Latino immigration well under way, the opposite situation often occurs with Latino students who are segregated from whites finding themselves in schools where blacks may be the majority.” Schools in these communities need “to improve relations between two or more disadvantaged nonwhite groups, who are often divided by issues of language and culture as well as racial stereotypes.”⁵⁴

Nearly 20 years ago, political philosopher Benjamin Barber described public funding for public education as a way to realize our nation’s ideal of justice for all: “Equality is achieved not by handicapping the swiftest, but by assuring the less advantaged a comparable opportunity. ‘Comparable’ here does not mean identical... Schooling allows those born poor to compete with those born rich....”⁵⁵ Today Deborah Meier, perhaps the most respected educator in America, despairs: “I have spent 45 years demonstrating that school can do a lot if we focus on challenging the intellectual and social imaginations of the young. But I never had the chutzpa to claim that I could strip away the impact of being a despised loser in a nation that claims all can be winners (if they but will it), nor that we can unlink the relationship between money and schooling... We need to more equally share the same world while also honoring each child’s own special one.”⁵⁶

Lack of Access to College and Employment Denies Children of Undocumented Immigrants a Chance to D.R.E.A.M.

While many children and adolescents in undocumented families are born in the United States and are therefore citizens of the United States, many undocumented adolescents were brought to this country as young children. They have no citizenship status and no process by which they can enter a path to citizenship. These students may have come to the United States as babies and toddlers; they may neither remember their parents’ native country nor speak its language. These young people include high school valedictorians, honor students, musicians, athletes, and artists. Yet our society has forced them to live in the shadows.

Each year approximately 65,000 graduates of American public high schools cannot qualify for

in-state tuition, college scholarships, employment, or the military because these young people are undocumented. Each year for nearly a decade bipartisan versions of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (D.R.E.A.M.) Act have been introduced into both houses of Congress. If passed, the D.R.E.A.M. Act would permit children who entered the United States when 16 years or younger, and who have lived in the United States for five years, to apply for conditional permanent residency if they have demonstrated moral character and earned a high school diploma. Six years later, they could apply for permanent residency, and five years after that, for U.S. citizenship. Passage of the D.R.E.A.M. Act would create a legal process by which these young people could become employed, join the military, or eventually qualify for in-state college tuition, state and federal grants and loans, and private scholarships.⁵⁷

Recognizing the injustice, and added economic folly, of denying college to undocumented high school graduates, ten states—California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and Washington—have passed laws to grant in-state college tuition rates to these students.⁵⁸ However, most states continue to deny in-state tuition as well as scholarships for high school graduates who are undocumented.

A Nation Off Track

In the spring of 2001, not long before Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act, a panel of scholars published *Diversity Within Unity*, twelve principles for better preparing American

public schools to serve our increasingly diverse society. The goals seem laudable and not very controversial all these years later: help teachers learn more about the complex characteristics of ethnic groups in the United States; ensure that schools guarantee opportunity to learn through equitably providing good teachers, a supportive school climate, small classes and a rigorous curriculum for all students; help students grasp that knowledge is socially constructed—that the story very often reflects the point of view

of the teller; provide all students with good co-curricular activities to help them meet people from different backgrounds and improve social and academic engagement; ensure that students are part of groups with students from different demographic backgrounds; teach about stereotyping and bias; ensure that students think about the values shared by virtually all cultural groups—values like justice, equality, freedom, peace, and compassion; give students opportunities to socialize with people from other demographic groups; let students observe collaborative decision making among educators at their school; fund schools equitably; and ensure that teachers use culturally sensitive techniques to teach and assess complex cognitive and social skills.⁵⁹

In the nine years since the *Diversity within Unity* task force proposed these principles, public education in the United States has been reduced to a mass of multiple choice tests and increasingly scripted curricula to prepare students for tests. Gone from many schools are bilingual programs, the arts, co-curricular activities and even recess. When so much staff development is taken up with the minutia of core competencies, teachers have less time to reflect on the role of students’ cultures in their education. Collaborative

decision making has been increasingly replaced by scripted lessons. Drilling down on basic skills has used up the time for history, the social studies, literature, and the opportunities these subjects provide to explore the points of view by which knowledge is constructed. With less attention to the development of individuals or the points of view of children from many cultures, standardization has become the dominant ethos of a test-driven curriculum.

In the 21st century church our faith calls us to consider serious questions. As public schools become more diverse racially and culturally and as children of the white dominant culture become a minority, will we be leaders advocating for schools that equip all children, honor their cultures,

and celebrate diversity? Will we be leaders building support for funding public schools to help all children realize their promise and to ensure our collective future?

(Endnotes)

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