Demographic Change and Educating Immigrant Youth in New York City

White Paper Prepared for NYU’s Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools Conference on Immigration and Education

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Introduction

As the traditional immigrant “Gateway City”, New York City has long been the home to some of America’s newest residents. It should come as no surprise then that a prominent goal of public education in the city has been to help immigrant youth adapt to their new home. However, it may be easy to imagine New York City’s foreign-born populations as ever-present, but also static and unchanging. As neighborhoods continue to experience drastic change in populations, schools may be left unprepared.

In this report, we argue that educational policymakers and stakeholders can try and become more responsive to shifts in student demographics – and in particular, increases in the number of immigrant youth - to better serve students. We begin by examining a body of research that highlights the unique and important role of schools in the lives of immigrant youth. Next, we provide a series of maps that identify the specific neighborhoods where there have been significant increases in the Chinese, Dominican, or Mexican populations in the past 13 years.

Immigration in the United States

Since the late 19th century, when the United States experienced a large influx of new immigrants, public schools have been the institution charged with integrating and “Americanizing” the newcomers and providing them with the skills needed to participate in the American society, as workers, and ultimately, citizens. Positioned at the front lines to respond to the demographic changes that have transformed America in the past and continue to do so to this day, schools have been the indispensable institution, absorbing new populations, and producing and maintaining the ties that bind the social fabric (Fass, 1989; Takaki, 1989; Tyack, 2003).

Since 1990, the United States has experienced the greatest influx of immigrants in its history, surpassing even the unparalleled increase in immigration that occurred during the years 1900 – 1910 (Grieco et al., 2012). With a steady increase in the number of immigrants over the last decade and a recent crisis triggered by a sudden rise in the number of unaccompanied minors arriving at the border from Central America (Park, 2014), the nation finds itself in the throes of a tumultuous conflict over how it will respond to the current influx. The nation’s total immigrant population reached a record 40 million or 12.9 percent of the US population in 2010 (Grieco et al., 2012). It is estimated that as much as 30 percent of the total immigrant population is comprised of undocumented immigrants (Pew Hispanic Center, 2013). Additionally, whereas in the past immigration was a phenomenon most closely associated with large cities such as New York, Boston, Miami and Los Angeles, today the arrival of new immigrants is transforming communities

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1 For an in-depth discussion of the term Americanization and how it was used to describe the approach schools should take in absorbing new immigrants see Graham, P. A. (2005). Schooling America: How the public schools meet the nation's changing needs. New York: Oxford University Press.

Throughout the United States, in rural and suburban areas, as well as metropolitan centers (Zuniga & Hernandez-Leon, 2005).

New York City has seen a dramatic shift in demographics since 2000. According to an analysis conducted by New York City’s Department of City Planning, more than a third of the city’s foreign-born residents arrived in the United States after 2000, and nearly half of those recent immigrants speak languages other than English. Moreover, in 2011, more than half of all children born in New York City were born to immigrant families, one-third of whom immigrated from China, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico (New York City Department of City Planning, 2013).

Immigration and Public Schools

Public schools in communities experiencing dramatic increases in immigrant populations are once again confronted with the enormous challenge of determining how best to respond to the needs of newcomers. As was true in the past, schools have received relatively little guidance in how to handle the task of integrating and educating immigrant children. Reports from schools and data collected on the performance of immigrant children indicate that many schools lack the expertise and resources needed to address their learning needs. In many school districts recent immigrant students have the highest dropout rates and lowest rates of high school graduation and college attendance (Rodriguez, 2014). They are also frequently overrepresented in special education, often due to a tendency in many districts to misdiagnose challenges in language acquisition as a form of disability (Figueroa, 2005).

Some schools and districts are struggling to meet the needs of immigrant students simply because there is an absence of personnel who possess the language and cultural skills to communicate effectively with students or their parents. Miscommunication and cultural conflict are more likely when school personnel lack the linguistic and cultural expertise to communicate with parents. Choices that might seem nonsensical and even negligent to American educators, such as the decision to send children to their native countries for extended periods during the school year, may seem perfectly normal to an immigrant family. However, there is also some evidence that when district leaders embrace the challenge of educating immigrant youth the entire system is more likely to find ways to help reduce the strains caused by social adjustment and to treat their educational needs as central rather than peripheral concerns for schools. In many schools that serve recent immigrants, a student’s inability to speak English with fluency, or more precisely to display a command over academic literacy, is used as a justification for placing the student in courses designated for English Language Learners (ELLs). While such placements are frequently rationalized as a way to ensure that recent immigrant students learn English in a “sheltered” environment, often in classes designated for students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL), in many schools large numbers of immigrant children fail to acquire proficiency in English, and in many cases, lose proficiency in their native language as well (Gandara & Rumberger, 2009; García, 2009). Once a student is enrolled in ESL courses they frequently are unable to access the courses needed to fulfill the requirements for college (Gandara &

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3 It is important to note that not all recent immigrants are English language learners and not all ELLs are recent immigrants.
Contreras, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Noguera & Wing, 2006). Moreover, teachers assigned to teach ELLs frequently lack the training, expertise and resources needed to meet their students’ needs (Garcia, 2009). As a result, courses that are designated to help ELLs often serve as a means through which immigrant students are tracked and marginalized (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Kao et.al., 2013). Tracking on the basis of language difference is one of the factors that has been cited by researchers as contributing to the high dropout rates common among recent immigrant students (Gandara & Rumberger, 2009). Moreover, as schools across the country prepare to implement the common core curriculum or some similar version of it, pressures related to high-stakes testing may disadvantage particularly recent immigrants (Bartlett and García, 2011; Menken, 2008). For example, recent results obtained from states such as New York, Florida, Louisiana and California suggest that English language learners, many of whom are new immigrants, are more likely than other groups to fare poorly on the new assessments (Hernandez & Gebeloff, 2013; Smiley & Vasquez, 2014; Williams, 2014).

Immigrant youth face a number of challenges that are directly related to their adjustment to life in the US that place them at greater risk of experiencing negative life outcomes. The challenges are particularly acute for Mexican and Central American youth whose families are typically poor, have low levels of education, work in low wage (and often dangerous) jobs, and are more likely to be undocumented (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002; Smith, 2006). Some of these include: stress related to acculturation and social adjustment (Gonzalez & Chavez, 2012; Suarez-Orozco, et.al. 2008), and instability caused by difficulty in maintaining ties with family members abroad (Suarez-Orozco, et.al. 2008; Bartlett & García, 2011). Existing research suggests that when these risks are not addressed, immigrant students often experience a heightened degree of vulnerability to negative social, psychological and educational outcomes. For example, in many communities immigrant youth have higher rates of teen pregnancy (Thom, 1997), depression (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002), suicide attempts (Perreira & Ornelas, 2011), gang involvement (Conchas & Vigil, 2010) and are more likely than others to drop out of school (Rodriguez, 2014). Without effective supports immigrant youth are more likely to experience poor educational and life outcomes.

Immigrant parents, especially those without documentation, are often unaware of how to effectively advocate for their children in the US public school setting. Often accustomed to “trusting” educators and schools more than native-born parents and lacking the language skills and social capital to navigate schools and advocate for the needs of their children, they are frequently at a significant disadvantage (García Coll et al., 2002; Kasinitz, 2008; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2008). Moreover, immigrant children often acculturate more quickly than parents, and frequently acquire skills in English and become familiar with the rules and customs of their new society at a pace that exceeds that of their parents. When this happens an imbalance in the relationship between parent and child may occur as the child assumes the responsibility of translator and negotiator.

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4 As political opposition to the common core has grown, several states that adopted it have now abandoned it. In many cases they have adopted a curriculum that closely resembles the common core but simply changed the name (Associated Press, 2014).

5 In New York City between 2007 and 2011, 16 percent of foreign-born young adults ages 17-24 dropped out of high school (i.e., do not have a high school diploma and are not currently enrolled in school). At the same time an estimated 46 percent of young adult Mexican immigrants dropped out of high school. Comparatively, an estimated 11 percent of all young adults citywide are high school dropouts (New York City Department of City Planning, 2013)
with landlords, service providers and the school system (Orellana, 2009). Several studies have shown that such imbalances can contribute to strains within families and exacerbate the estrangement that immigrant children may exhibit toward their parents (Olsen, 2008; Giguère et al., 2010).

In some communities, the political backlash against the growing presence of immigrants has negatively influenced how local schools have responded to the needs of immigrant children (Olsen, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002). As has been true in the past (Roediger, 1991), resistance to the influx of new immigrants has occurred in many communities across the US and led to the enactment of local and state ordinances aimed at making it more difficult for undocumented immigrants to work, drive a car, obtain health services or even rent a home (Massey & Sanchez, 2012; Yoshikawa, 2011). Immigrant children and families lack representation in local government, civil service, and education professionals, which contributes to the scarcity and inadequacy of services for this group.

The Purpose of this White Paper

This white paper will begin to address the needs of immigrant youth in New York City by first identifying areas of marked increase in foreign-born populations (Valenzuela, 1999; Garcia, 2009). We have chosen to concentrate this initial inquiry on the recent settlement and immigration patterns of Chinese, Dominicans, and Mexicans in New York City. Collectively, these three groups represented over 900,000 New Yorkers in 2013 and comprised 30 percent of New York City's total foreign-born population. We will analyze the areas of the city that have experienced notable immigrant growth in recent years and discuss how schools in the city - and especially those in neighborhoods with large numbers of recent immigrants - can anticipate, prepare for, and serve immigrant youth and their families.

Summary of Results

Between 2000 and 2013, the foreign-born population in New York City increased by nearly seven percent. The three largest immigrant groups in the city - Dominicans, Chinese, and Mexicans - all experienced disparate rates of change during this time period. The largest immigrant group, Dominicans, grew by about four percent. Meanwhile, Chinese-born residents increased by 35 percent and Mexican-born residents increased by 49 percent during the same time period, far exceeding the city-wide increase.

There are neighborhoods across New York City that, in the last 13 years, have experienced exceptional growth in the foreign-born population. The recent settlement patterns of the three largest groups shared only minimal overlap in terms of the boroughs and neighborhoods in which they choose to live. Since 2000, the Chinese-born population increased significantly in Queens and the southeast area of Brooklyn. Growth in the Dominican-born population occurred almost exclusively in the Bronx - especially the far northern areas of the borough. Growth in the Mexican-born population was more

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6 2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
7 In this report, Chinese immigrants include residents born on the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.
widespread than growth in the other two groups, with all five boroughs experiencing at least some increase in the Mexican population. The Mexican population grew most dramatically in the southern and central areas of the Bronx, with several neighborhoods in the area experiencing growth of 200 percent or more since 2000. Mexican residents also tended to settle in the northern shore of Staten Island and the East Elmhurst area of Queens.

Figure 1: Map of Neighborhoods with Dramatic Increases in Chinese Foreign-born Population between 2000-2013

As can be seen in Figure 1, notable growth in the Chinese-born population in New York City occurred in every borough except the Bronx. Most of the population growth occurred in Brooklyn and Queens; the Queens neighborhoods of Maspeth, College Point, Murray Hill, and Ft. Totten-Bay Terrace-Clearview and the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Dyker Heights and Seagate-Coney Island all experienced growth of 100 percent or greater. Some growth occurred in the central and southern neighborhoods of Manhattan, and in two Staten Island neighborhoods.
It should be noted that the foreign-born Chinese population in New York City is a very socioeconomically diverse community. For example, New York City’s largest Chinatown, Sunset Park, is composed of census tracts with poverty rates between 30 and 40 percent, which is well above the city average of 20.3 percent (US Census 2015). In some census tracts, the majority of residents reside in poor households. Moreover, approximately a quarter of Asian Americans in New York City do not have a high school degree, which is three times the rate for Whites. In contrast, a quarter also have a Bachelor’s degree, which is similar to the rates of college degrees among Whites.

Figure 2: Map of Neighborhoods with Dramatic Increases in Dominican Foreign-born Population between 2000-2013

2000-2013 Change in Dominican Population by Neighborhood

Neighborhoods with <400 Dominicans in 2000 excluded from analysis
Data source: 2000 Decennial Census and 2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
Map source: New York City Department of City Planning

Figure 2 shows growth in the foreign-born Dominican population occurred almost exclusively in the Bronx. Two Bronx neighborhoods, Woodlawn-Wakefield and Co-op City, experienced an increase in the Dominican population of over 200 percent. Several

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8 This statistic was not available for Chinese Americans in New York City.
neighborhoods in Queens and Brooklyn saw modest increases, though in general the Dominican-born population did not grow significantly during this time period. While Dominicans are prevalent in the northernmost neighborhoods of Manhattan, only one Manhattan neighborhood experienced notable growth.

**Figure 3: Map of Neighborhoods with Dramatic Increases in Mexican Foreign-born Population between 2000-2013**

As can be seen in Figure 3, the Mexican-born population in New York City grew significantly in all boroughs of the city between 2000 and 2013. For the Mexican population, the threshold for total residents in each neighborhood was lowered from 400 to 200 to better capture the explosive growth of this population throughout the city. In Staten Island, most of the growth occurred along the northern shore of the island. In the Stapleton-Rosebank neighborhood, the Mexican population increased by 204 percent. In Queens, the East Elmhurst neighborhood experienced an increase of 215 percent. However, neighborhoods in the Bronx experienced the greatest increase in the Mexican-
born population. The Mexican-born population Westchester-Unionport increased 409 percent and in East Tremont, the population increased 224 percent.

**Implications for New York City Schools**

While the total foreign-born population of New York City increased by seven percent between 2000 and 2013, the Chinese-born and Mexican-born populations in the city grew at a much faster rate; foreign-born Chinese increased by 35 percent and foreign-born Mexicans increased 49 percent. Dominicans, the city’s largest immigrant group, increased four percent in this time period.

How might these demographic shifts impact schools in areas with large influxes of recent immigrants? Schools with growing immigrant populations must be adequately prepared to work with students who do not speak fluent English and provide support for students and parents in their native language. According to a 2014 brief from the New York City Independent Budget Office, 59 percent of New York City teachers in 2011-12 were White, 20 percent were Black, 14 percent were Hispanic, and 6 percent were Asian. In the same year, 15 percent of New York City students were White, 29 percent were Black, 40 percent were Hispanic, and 15 percent were Asian. Clearly, the demographics of New York City teachers do not match that of the existing student population, and new waves of immigrants will likely increase this disproportionate representation. To prepare teachers to work with newcomers, schools can offer teachers professional development opportunities that focus on culturally responsive education and teaching methods for immigrants and English Language Learners. The goal of this type of professional development is to help teachers support students as they transition to a new life in the United States and learn a new language and cultural norms. Schools can also be more intentional about hiring teachers and support staff who speak the language of the dominant immigrant group in their community. Furthermore, administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and other school staff should be aware of the unique challenges faced by recent immigrants and be in a position to address these needs through direct service, referrals to outside agencies, or other supports. Whether it be mental health services, housing assistance, or legal help, schools should consider appropriate and effective ways to provide this support to students and their families.

Future research and analysis should make the explicit link between large demographic shifts in student populations and academic achievement. In future versions of this paper, we will explore the historic academic achievement of schools in the identified neighborhoods to determine the link, if any, demographic changes have had on school performance.

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9 2011-12 Demographic Snapshot: http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm
Works Cited


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