

Making Grade in U.S. Schools

Foreign-born children are far more likely to drop out if they had a poor educational record before immigrating, report says.

By Mitchell Landsberg

Times Staff Writer

November 2, 2005

A study released Tuesday confirms what many teachers have long suspected: The performance of immigrant children in U.S. schools may reflect the education they received — or didn't — in their home countries.

Foreign-born children, especially those from Mexico, are far more likely to drop out of high school if they had a spotty educational record before coming to the United States, according to the study by the Pew Hispanic Center. But those who start U.S. schools by the second grade are scarcely more likely than native-born American children to drop out, the findings show.

Adding to the debate, data also show that immigrant students from Asia, Eastern Europe and the Caribbean are far less likely than their American-born peers to leave school.

The report helps illuminate the challenges facing U.S. educators, particularly in states such as California, as they struggle to cope with the largest wave of immigration in the nation's history.

"There's no question that that rings true," said Kathleen O'Connell, an assistant principal at Belmont High School in Los Angeles, where district data show nearly half of 5,500 students are still learning English.

"You're talking about teaching them the whole notion of schooling, teaching them content that they've never had ... giving them algebra and biology and history and geometry when they've never learned to read," she said.

The Pew study, which was based on census data, examined 15- to 17-year-olds who had come to the United States from more than 40 countries. Those from Mexico — by far the largest group of foreign students in California schools — were the most likely of any nationality to have left school, or never to have enrolled in a U.S. school.

Overall, nearly one-quarter of Mexican teens were dropouts (or had never enrolled), compared with 16% of those from El Salvador, 5% from Nicaragua, 3% from Jamaica, 2% from Ukraine and 1% from Hong Kong and India.

But for those Mexican students who immigrated no later than the second grade, the dropout rate was a relatively modest 8%. Those who came later than the second grade and had not attended school continuously in Mexico dropped out at a staggering 83% rate, the study found.

Andrew Conroy, a counselor at Belmont High's Newcomer Center, said his school struggles to educate students who arrive with little or no literacy skills in their native language. Differences among nationalities, he said, may tell more about where the immigrants come from within their own country than about the country itself.

Urban, middle-class students from any country probably arrive with grade-level skills in their own language, Conroy said, but students from some countries, including Mexico, are more likely to come from impoverished, rural areas where schools are rudimentary and attendance spotty.

For instance, Conroy said, while urban Chinese students tend to do very well in American schools, "We have some rural Chinese students who are very confused, just struggling, I think on a level with our Mexican students who come from the country."

Although the study suggests that American educators are not solely to blame when immigrants fail, another study by Pew raises questions on whether Latino students — both foreign-born and U.S. natives — have access to the same quality of education as their peers.

The second study says that Latinos, on average, attend far larger, more crowded high schools than non-Latino whites or African Americans. Other research has shown that large high schools do a significantly worse job than smaller schools at educating students. That has prompted many large school districts, including L.A. Unified, to begin breaking up big schools into smaller, quasi-independent "learning communities."

Richard Fry, who conducted the research for Pew, said the ideal high school size is 600 to 900 students, but more than half the Latinos in the United States attend schools that are larger than 1,800 students.

Most urban schools in California are far bigger than 1,800 students, and many are more than twice that size.

"This, in and of itself, will worsen their outcomes," he said in a telephone conference call to discuss the studies.

Fry's research showed that while Latino and African American students are equally likely to attend school in central cities — as opposed to white students, who are far more likely to attend suburban or rural schools — the Latino schools tend to be much bigger, with larger class sizes.

"This to me was one of the most startling findings," Fry said. He said he wasn't sure why Latinos tended to go to bigger schools than African Americans, but that the difference might be explained by immigration flows overwhelming schools.

A map of new schools under construction in L.A. Unified would correspond closely to the areas that have incurred a big surge in Latin American immigration, said Richard

Alonzo, a local district superintendent, whose area includes the dense immigrant communities in the Pico-Union area.

A third study by Pew, also released Tuesday, said Latinos are more likely than ever to attend college, but that most attend two-year schools, whereas white students are increasingly likely to go straight to a four-year college.

Marta Tienda, a sociology professor at Princeton University who has done extensive research into ethnic and racial stratification, said she found the college study to be the most disturbing of the three, with profound implications for the U.S. economy. For the United States to remain competitive internationally, she said, the work force will have to become better educated than it is today.

The Pew Center, based in Washington, is a nonpartisan research organization supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

*

*

Educating immigrants

Recently arrived teens* whose education in their native countries was interrupted before they came to the U.S. are very likely to drop out of school here. The average dropout rate for native-born U.S. teens is 3.3%.

Recent arrivals with interrupted schooling abroad: 71%

Recent arrivals with continuous schooling abroad: 10%

Early childhood arrivals: 5%

*15-17 years old

Source: Pew Hispanic Center