

Language and policy issues in the education of immigrant students

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Introduction. The impact of immigration on U.S. institutions and society has been widely noted and commented upon. The foreign-born constitute the fastest-growing segment of the population, reaching 25.8 million in 1997, just under 10% of the population, and the highest proportion since World War II (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998). Even more striking than numbers, however, is the make-up of recent waves of immigration. Since the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated national origin quotas, Asia and Latin America have replaced Europe as the main sources of newcomers to the United States. The largest groups come from Mexico (over one-fourth of the foreign-born population), China, Cuba, India, and Vietnam. New immigrants to the United States come with diverse languages, cultures, and experiences.

These trends are by no means unique to the United States. International migration patterns show that while some countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, have relatively larger proportions of immigrant populations, many other countries also have sizable numbers of immigrants. In fact, “migration is now global and no longer unidirectional. Today, few countries are not affected by either immigration or emigration” (Edmonston and Passel 1994: 23). This worldwide movement of populations across national borders is predicted to continue and will be the norm of the future. Projections for the United States tell us that immigration will remain an important influence on the composition of our society and will be the primary vehicle for population growth in the future, barring dramatic events in the world or changes in U.S. policy that alter the current course (Edmonston and Passel 1994).

In an increasing number of schools across the United States, the foreign-born also constitute a fast increasing segment of the student population. Recent studies indicate, however, that few schools are adequately and appropriately serving these linguistic and cultural minorities. In this paper, I discuss language, education, and policy issues concerning immigrant students and the opportunities (and challenges) presented to us by their presence in our schools. We need to develop strategies to achieve a “win-win” result for our society and for the school-aged immigrants who join us.

