



# Equity Dispatch

## The State of Education for Immigrant Students: Equity Considerations



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### Meet the Authors:

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### Equity Spotlight



Luz Elena Schemmel, a native of Mexico, is an educator, community organizer, and advocate for students and families in Cincinnati, Ohio. She

Jump to...

- o [Educate](#): Learn more about immigrant education.
- o [Engage](#): Discover how Burmese Community Center for Education (BCCE) empowers the immigrant communities from Burma.
- o [Empower](#): Explore these resources to better serve your students.
- o [Spotlight](#): Read about Luz Elena Schemmel's work to support immigrant populations.
- o [Upcoming Events](#): Attend an event in Region V.

### IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life.

--John F. Kennedy

## Educate

Crowned, the Statue of Liberty stands holding a beacon of light, promising opportunity to those who crossed an ocean to reach the shores below her gaze. As we consider our relationships with newcomers to this country, this image and the words most often associated with the iconic statue - "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" - should prompt reflection. In many ways, the image and words reinforce dominant notions about America's relationship with an extremely heterogeneous population. Huddled masses? By emphasizing yearning and need, this narrative does not include recognition of the incredible wealth of resources that

immigrant families bring to our communities and schools. At the same time, we should acknowledge that the promise of liberty has been and often still is unrealized. Under the Statue of Liberty's very gaze, immigrant families have changed their names in the first of many sacrifices to obtain some sense of belonging in American society. Accordingly, as we consider how best to serve the nearly one in ten students who were born in a country other than the U.S. (Grieco et al, 2012), we must honor their stories and work to center the assets of immigrant students and their communities through open and reciprocal engagement.

Early beliefs about the desired outcomes for immigrants within the U.S. educational system presumed that assimilation was necessary and related to upward mobility (Noguera, 2004). Learning to speak and write in English, as well as adopting common American attitudes, values, and lifestyles, was, arguably, the price of entry into the upper echelons of American society (Bisin & Verdier, 2000). Yet, many questioned the appropriateness of assimilation, asserting immigrants' rights to maintain heritage cultures and languages (Banks, 2008). While this movement toward preservation of immigrant right is promising, some schools remain subtractive. That is, some have - knowingly and unknowingly - disregarded and devalued students' languages and cultural backgrounds, effectively removing or subtracting them from the cultural capital immigrant families possess (Valenzuela, 1999). A push to deconstruct these systems and to identify, describe, and help create schools or programs that are successful in enabling immigrant children to achieve exemplary social and educational outcomes that add to rather than diminish their identities and funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) has ensued.

Attention to the experiences of this growing population is necessary. In 2005, one in five children was born to immigrant parents and 17 million children spoke a language other than English at home (Rong & Preissle, 2009). This group is extremely heterogeneous in culture and language as well as their reasons for migrating to the United States. Their experiences upon arrival to the U.S. also vary significantly, with immigrants who have family in the U.S. finding it easier to settle compared to those who come on their own. Families may come for economic opportunities, to reunite with relatives, or to seek refuge from a danger (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011). Among the 10.4 million seeking safe haven, more than half are children (UNHCR, 2013). Further, many children who come as refugees have endured great mental stress and traumatic experiences (McBrien, 2005).

Upon arrival, immigrant children are more likely to attend under-resourced schools in urban areas (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011; Rong & Preissle, 2009). Furthermore, many immigrant students report feeling that their teachers hold unfavorable views of them (Peguero & Bondy, 2010) and experience patterns of social and academic isolation at school (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011). Such isolation may be exacerbated for undocumented immigrant youth, of whom nearly half leave high school before obtaining a diploma (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011).

Through research and practice, we know the benefits of creating spaces that not only celebrate the experiences, contributions, and voices of non-dominant groups, but also make them central to students' learning experiences (Gorski, 2012). Research indicates a strong relationship between immigrant students' sense of belonging and their achievement in school (Gibson & Koyama, 2011). For example, some research has shown that English Language Learners who develop and maintain their native languages in school are likely to outperform their English-only counterparts (Baker, 2011; Krashen & McField, 2005). In addition, immigrant students who enter school with lower performance on math and reading tasks improve more rapidly when they attend schools with high-performing peers, well-supported teachers, and services specifically devoted to immigrant families (Han, 2013). In other words, moving away from structures and practices that marginalize immigrant students may be challenging, but it is worthwhile and necessary work.

To begin this work, we can first challenge ourselves to refrain from group essentialization, or the assumption that immigrant students from a particular point of origin share similar views, values, and skills (Gibson & Koyama, 2011). These assumptions put students at risk in a number of ways: (a) they may be over- or under-identified for special education (Artiles, Bal, & Thorius, 2010; Skiba et al., 2008); (b) they may be punished - formally or informally - for failing to adhere to rules and norms that were not made overt or do not align with their past experiences or values; (c) they may be tracked or segregated educationally; and (d) they may develop oppositional identities (Lew, 2004). Rather than assume, we must get to know our students as unique individuals with multiple, overlapping, changing identities. At the same time, we can recognize and prepare for the fact that many immigrant students face common challenges. Children who leave behind relatives and familiar surroundings may experience isolation and discomfort as they adjust to a new locale. Because children may learn English before their parents, many immigrant children may be asked to take on additional responsibilities as interpreters and negotiators (Kugler & Price, 2009). The burden of mediating for their families is significant as children assume the roles of linguistic, informational, and even cultural mediators (Chu, 1999), which require an excellent grasp of both heritage and host cultures. Yet, many children have not had the chance to develop these skills. Further, this reversal of roles between children and parents may contribute to intergenerational conflict (Zhou, 2011). For some students, these challenges may be compounded by psychological distress as a result of exposure to violence in their home country (Jaycox et al, 2002). Too often, these needs and responsibilities go unidentified, unacknowledged, and unaddressed (Kugler & Price, 2009).

Recognizing strengths and responding to needs requires educators to build relationships with families. This can require persistence, humility, and resources; in addition to new languages, families bring with them past relationships

earned her master's degree in public administration from Indiana State University. Among other projects, she currently serves as Director of the Santa Maria Community Services' International Welcome Center (IWC) in Cincinnati, OH, a program that provides education and support to immigrant families in that area.

Luz was once a client of the Santa Maria Center; her family used their services when she moved to Cincinnati eight years ago. Years later, when she decided to re-enter the work world, she found a place at Santa Maria's working with other newcomer families.

While Luz migrated to the United States from Mexico, she has come to understand that her experience is unique and she can not depend on it to speak for all immigrant experiences. As the Director of the International Welcome Center, Luz charges her staff to participate in diversity workshops and cultural learning that will expose them to the ethnic, cultural, and religious differences amongst immigrant populations. Luz argues that understanding within-group diversity is vital for all people interested in working with immigrant populations.

Luz also challenges her staff and volunteers to empower families so that the educational experiences of students are enhanced. By providing English conversation classes, coffee hours, and educational resource courses, Luz and her staff are improving family members' abilities to advocate for and support their children. Luz reflects, "We help them help themselves. We give them the tools to do what they need." As an Equity Assistance Center, we commend Luz for her commitment to empowering immigrant families.

## Upcoming Events

### Illinois

May 22-23, 2014

[2014 Chicago International Conference on Education](#)  
Chicago, IL

### Indiana

May 27-31, 2014

[National Conference on Race and Ethnicity](#)  
Indianapolis, IN

with schools and schooling that may inform how they respond to educators' advances (Rah, Choi, & Nguyen, 2009). Creating a welcoming school climate that includes signs and materials in multiple languages as well as personal outreach and rapport-building are excellent starting points for these relationships (Kugler & Price, 2009). Deeper work might entail enlisting families' assistance in critically examining school culture and curriculum, including the hidden curriculum of norms, idioms, and expectations (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). This critical analysis may lead to the development of spaces for all students to "identify problems in society, acquire knowledge related to their homes and community cultures and languages, identify and clarify their values, and take thoughtful individual or collective civic action" (Banks, 2008, p. 135).

Radical transformation of school spaces by and with immigrant families will require educators to commit to relationship-building. This, in turn, entails recognizing the multiple ways in which we are all constrained by our identities and are "yearning to breathe free." Once we have recognized this, we can write new rules for citizenship and opportunity that recognize the dignity and value of each person.

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

## Engage



Situated in Indianapolis, the Burmese Community Center for Education (BCCE) seeks to "strengthen and empower the newly resettled refugee-immigrant communities from Burma to become informed, self-sufficient, independent, and positive contributing members of the broader society in Indianapolis areas and beyond, through formal and informal education programs leading toward their self-realization, confidence and sufficiency" (BCCE, 2011). Serving a number of ethnic minority communities from Burma, BCCE's mission speaks to the complex interplay between the pressure to assimilate in America and the desire of many immigrants to preserve their cultural heritages. Many Burmese refugees come to this nation with little or no formal education (BCCE, 2011). As a result, the community's aspirations for self-determination and independence are oftentimes threatened. This is a primary reason the BCCE was founded.

In responding to community-identified needs and desires, BCCE offers a range of formal and informal education programs focused on: 1) education; 2) environmental education and ecological preservation; 3) community and public health; and 4) cultural and ethnic diversity. In each area, BCCE consciously considers the conditions of their community. In other words, when deciding if and how to participate in any endeavor, BCCE carefully considers whether it will lead to reconnecting with their cultural roots and heritage as well as advancing individual and collective freedom. Their organization stands firmly on seeking opportunities that endorse peaceful coexistence and encouraging respect for all groups (BCCE, 2011). Recently, BCCE was awarded a federal grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement to support its Community Self-Empowerment Program (CSEP). The premises of the program are: 1) empowerment of its community members is essential to the success of the community; 2) a critical understanding of individual rights and responsibilities is crucial for both individual and collective growth of the community; 3) diversity is a strength of the community, and 4) education is key to ensuring community progress. More specifically, the BCCE CSEP serves the community by centering family voice and choice in ways that honor

### Michigan

May 5-7, 2014

[The 74th Annual Statewide Special Education Conference](#)  
Grand Rapids, MI

May 15-17, 2014

[31st Annual Michigan Home Education Conference](#)  
Lansing, MI

### Minnesota

February 21-22, 2014

[Minnesota Conference on Science Education](#)  
Mankato, MN

### Ohio

January 27-29, 2014

[Educational Technology Conference](#)  
Columbus, OH

### Wisconsin

January 22-24, 2014

[2014 Joint State Education Convention](#)  
Milwaukee, WI

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cultural values and foster meaningful engagement in school, community, and political life.

Through their multifaceted approach to empowering a diverse Burmese community, BCCE has not only connected the Burmese populations with Indianapolis but has also educated the Indianapolis community at large about the issues and concerns of the Burmese people. BCCE is an example of how an organization can pursue self-determination within a broader community context. Their dedication to serving as agents of empowerment is the reason for our selection of the Burmese Community Center for Education of Indianapolis for this month's Engage section.

## Empower

### Something to Read!

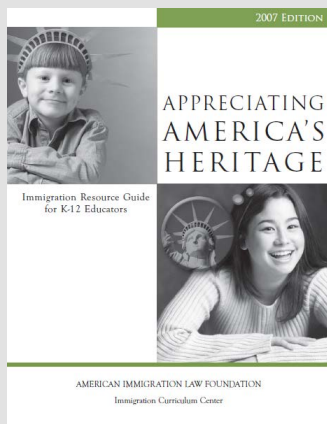
Immigrant and refugee students may experience challenges as they adapt to life in the United States, including, but not limited to language barriers, emotional isolation, limited access to mental health care, and disconnection from the dominant culture. Stereotypes about immigrant students and their families may diminish the opportunities they can access. As a critical part of students' lives, families should be recognized as powerful contributors to their children's growth and assisted in accessing the resources students need to achieve success behaviorally, emotionally, and academically. Accordingly, the article offers strategies to:

- Build relationships with families
- Break down stigma associated with receiving mental health
- Work with community, cultural, and religious leaders
- Recognize the trauma and stress families may be experiencing

To explore more about how to help immigrant and refugee students succeed, please check [here](#).



### Something to Use!



[Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services](#) offers a number of resources for educators. In addition to videos and documents that may help you understand refugee students more comprehensively, the site also provides [lesson plans](#) and resource guides for student learning.

### Something to Watch!

[Youth ST\(W\)ARRIORS: Education as a Practice of Freedom](#)

This [video](#) focuses on the youth members of the Burmese Community Center for Education, the organization highlighted in our Engage section. By engaging youth in interviews and conversations with BCCE members, the BCCE encourages students to think democratically and critically in order to make meaning of lived experiences in the United States. For them, education is a practice of freedom, and they are the youth warriors in that battle.



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