



Next Generation Charter Schools

Meeting the Needs of Latinos and English Language Learners

Melissa Lazarín and Feliza Ortiz-Licon September 2010



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Introduction and summary

The Obama administration has brought new attention to charter schools. The administration is encouraging states to support the expansion of high-quality charter schools by offering states that lift caps on new charters a chance to win grants from the renowned Race to the Top competition. Six states—Hawaii, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Illinois, New York, and Rhode Island—have approved bills through their state legislatures that increase the number of charter schools in their state to improve their chances of winning a Race to the Top grant.

The Obama administration has clearly singled out charter schooling as a key strategy to turn around 5,000 of the nation’s most troubled schools. It is not surprising that Latinos and English language learners, or ELLs, are disproportionately concentrated in these schools and that the vast majority of ELLs (80 percent) are native Spanish speakers.¹ Charter schools that take on this challenge of turning around schools will therefore inevitably have to consider how they are going to improve the educational outcomes of Latino and ELL students in these schools.

This report considers the role—both current and future—that charter schools have in the education of Latinos and ELLs. It examines how both the large growth of the Latino and ELL student population and the potential expansion of charter schools will influence the educational landscape.

Given that state charter school laws have a major impact on students’ likelihood to access such schools and how effectively these schools serve students, we consider the most salient state policies affecting Latinos and ELLs. Profiles of four high-performing charter schools that serve a significant proportion of Latinos and ELLs—El Sol Science and Arts Academy in Santa Ana, California; the Raul Yzaguirre School for Success in Houston, Texas; YES Prep Gulfton in Houston, Texas; and International Charter School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island—help illuminate how some of these policies are put into practice. The profiles also display effective practices that have been picked up by school leaders who are familiar with working with this population in the charter school context. The lessons they have learned are valuable to both charter schools and traditional public schools alike.

Many of the strategies that these schools have found to be effective in serving Latinos and ELLs can be immediately implemented by both charter schools and traditional public schools. These include:

- **Establishing high expectations for all students' academic, intellectual, and social growth.** This includes English language learners. Most of the schools seek this out during the hiring process to ensure that their teaching staff enter the classroom with these expectations.
- **Accelerating the pace at which English language learners engage with grade-level content.** All four schools underscored the importance of teaching a second language while simultaneously delivering core academic content.
- **Expanding learning time opportunities.** Several of the schools emphasized the importance of an expanded school schedule in their program model. More learning time can enable individualized or small group instruction to target ELLs' learning gaps.
- **Training all staff on effective instructional strategies to engage ELLs.** With a large ELL population, most of the schools felt it necessary to making ELLs everyone's responsibility. This included supporting teachers' efforts to obtain certification and additional professional development to instruct ELLs.
- **Using formal and informal strategies to promote family engagement and community collaboration.** The schools used a variety of strategies to create and foster strong lines of communication with students' parents, even in languages other than English. Translating all school materials, conducting regular home visits, and having bilingual staff are examples.

A number of states are revisiting their charter laws in response to Race to the Top and the administration's school turnaround proposals. And changes in state policies can support and further enhance some of the strategies employed at the four charter schools highlighted in this report. These include:

- **Re-examining provisions related to enrollment and recruitment.** Most states require an open enrollment policy for all charter schools as well as a lottery process in instances where demand exceeds the number of slots. The few that do not should consider following this conventional practice. States may also want to consider monitoring enrollment numbers for certain populations, including ELLs, to ensure that all students have equitable access to charter schools.

- **Considering a school’s capacity to effectively serve ELLs in evaluating charter school applications.** Such a requirement is worth considering when the school will be located in a school district zone that has a significant ELL population.
- **Providing clear guidance in state charter laws that specify equitable access to federal and state categorical streams for charter schools.** This includes clear guidance on the state-to-charter allotment for federal Title III dollars and state funding allotted for ELLs, which some charter schools have difficulty accessing.
- **Holding schools accountable for progress in closing academic proficiency and college readiness gaps and meeting growth targets.** This should be based on disaggregated outcomes across race, ethnicity, and language status, and in instances of multicampus charter networks, each individual campus should be evaluated for its performance.
- **Considering the role that charter school autonomy can have on the education of ELLs and Latinos.** The level of autonomy afforded to charter schools has made it possible for charter school leaders and educators to flexibly mold their school models in ways that have demonstrated strong results for English language learners and Latinos, including using native language instruction programs.

Charter schools and traditional public schools will continue to only see a rise in the Latino and ELL student population. The profiles included in this report provide a glimpse of what is possible in both charter and noncharter schools. And the lessons learned above serve as important guideposts as charter schools continue to gain prominence across the country—as either a school turnaround strategy or as simply an alternative option of schooling.

Why does Latino and ELL achievement matter in charter schools?

Latinos are a growing segment of the nation's school-aged population. One in five—over 10 million—public school students are Latino.² And the proportion of Hispanic school-aged children is expected to grow by 166 percent by 2050, quickly outpacing the 4 percent expected growth of non-Hispanic children.³ These numbers hold great significance for traditional public schools and charter schools alike.

The growth of the Latino population will inevitably lead to growth among English language learners. Forty percent of Latino students are also ELLs.⁴ And academic achievement among Latinos is closely intertwined with the achievement of ELLs as a result. The sheer growth in the Latino student population and their role in the nation's future economy clearly indicate that all schools will have to ensure that they can effectively prepare Latinos for college and a career.

Latinos have a significant presence in charter schools

Four of the five states with the highest number of charter schools—California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida—are among the top five states with the highest Hispanic student enrollment.⁵ It should therefore be no surprise that Latino students also happen to make up a significant proportion of charter school students. The most recent Schools and Staffing Survey, or SASS—a national representative sample survey of public and private K-12 schools, principals, and teachers conducted by the U.S. Department of Education—suggests that one quarter (23.8 percent) of charter school students are Latino.⁶

Charter schools' propensity to attract Latinos and other minority students has sparked recent debate among civil rights watchdogs. Some have argued that minority students' high enrollment in charter schools can lead to racial and ethnic segregation in such schools.⁷ Others contend that charter schools likely have little impact—positive or negative—on segregation and integration trends given their

likelihood to be located in urban neighborhoods that are already generally racially and ethnically isolated. The racial and ethnic makeup of most charter schools, they argue, generally mirrors that of the surrounding public school district.⁸

Regardless, Latinos' academic performance will in time reflect the overall strength of the American education system given that they make up a large proportion of charter school students and an increasing share of the nation's public school population.

Charter schools will increasingly play a larger role in educating ELLs

Charter schools have been recently critiqued for attracting a high proportion of Latino and minority students, but they have also been criticized for serving too few ELLs. Various charter school studies and national data sources, however, present a mixed picture of ELL enrollment in charter schools.

SASS data estimates that 16.5 percent of charter school students are ELLs.⁹ But some argue that data related to ELL charter school students are incomplete or ambiguous, and that the limited data indicate that charter schools serve fewer ELLs than local districts.¹⁰ A recent evaluation of 22 middle schools in the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP network, indicated that these particular schools served higher concentrations of low-income and black and Hispanic students, but a smaller concentration of ELLs compared to the traditional public schools from which they build their enrollment.¹¹ This is only a subset of KIPP's 82 schools and an even smaller subset of the nation's charter schools. Additional research is necessary.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan challenged the nation's charter schools in a recent speech, urging them to ensure that they are equitably serving ELLs. Duncan said:

We know where the complaints come from; we know what the issues are. One is a complaint around a lack of serving diverse populations...We hear concerns about not enough English language learners being served...if there are places—New York or other cities—that don't have enough charters serving ELL students, you guys need to collectively think through who are the players who are doing a fantastic job, who are going to step into the void, and systemically, across the country each year, start to address that issue.¹²

The unique, autonomous nature of charter schools has provided such schools with more flexibility than traditional public schools in shaping their curriculum for ELLs. Three states ban the use of native language instruction—California, Arizona, and Massachusetts. But charter schools with dual immersion and other native language instruction programs are not uncommon in these states, which also happen to have a significant ELL population.

The Arizona state attorney general, for example, has clarified that Arizona’s English-only law does not apply to the state’s charter schools, writing, “to impose Proposition 203 on charter schools without a clear statutory directive undermines the purposes of charter schools which ‘provide additional academic choices for parents and pupils.’”¹³ Charter schools in these states offer parents of ELLs an important alternative form of schooling for their children.

Charter schools are playing an elevated role in turning around struggling schools

The Obama administration has proposed a school turnaround agenda that heavily relies on implementing charter schools in place of some of the 5,000 most severely underperforming schools in the country as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and its blueprint reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA. The restart model, which involves converting or closing and reopening a failing school as a charter school, is one of four turnaround models that the administration has urged chronically weak schools and districts to consider.

This is of great importance for Latinos and ELLs who are disproportionately in chronically failing schools.¹⁴ A quarter of Latinos (28 percent) attend schools that have been identified for improvement compared with 9 percent of white students.¹⁵ If new and existing charter schools will be taking the reins at such schools, charter school participation among Latinos and ELLs will inevitably multiply.

Charter school management organizations, or CMOs, have thus far shied away from playing a larger role in the turnaround challenge.¹⁶ But those that do step up will have to consider how to best meet the needs of the Latinos and ELLs in those struggling schools.

There are lessons to be learned from high-performing Latino-ELL charter schools

Traditional public schools continue to serve the majority of Latinos and ELLs, but charter schools continue to be touted as incubators of education innovation and can play a valuable role in informing policy and practice related to Latinos and ELLs in traditional public schools. Educators and policymakers certainly know more about what doesn't work for Latino and ELL students and less about what does work. And both traditional public schools and charter schools have much to gain from the lessons learned from high-performing charter schools that are seeing results with their Latino and Spanish-speaking ELL students.

What do we know about Latino and ELL achievement in charter schools?

Recent rigorous research on charter schools has begun to examine academic achievement by ethnicity, and to a lesser degree, language status. The findings are somewhat mixed, but research on charter school performance is largely in its infancy, and a number of variables—many of them still unknown—likely play a role.

The autonomous nature of charter schools inherently generates a wide variety of school models and strategies, to a much greater extent than is the case in traditional public schools. Yet the small amount of research pertaining to performance among Hispanics and ELLs in charter schools provides some important insight and is summarized below.

CREDO study of charter performance in 16 states

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes, or CREDO, examined charter school performance in 16 states, including states with a large Hispanic population such as Arizona, California, Florida, Texas, and New Mexico.¹⁷ It compared the average academic growth of Latinos, ELLs, and other student groups to that of their peers in traditional public schools.

Latino charter school students had significantly lower gains overall in both math and reading compared to their peers in traditional public schools. Illinois, New Mexico, and Texas—states with large Hispanic populations—were among the states that had lower gains in math and reading when the study examined individual states in the disaggregate. Missouri was the only state in which Latino charter school students performed better in both math and reading compared to their counterparts in traditional public schools.

English language learners, on the other hand, saw significantly higher gains at charter schools in both math and reading than their traditional public school peers. California's ELL charter school students mirrored similar higher results in

both math and reading. And ELL charter school students in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas had significantly higher gains in reading, but not in math, though this was not statistically significant.

New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project

Caroline Hoxby of the National Bureau of Economic Research and Stanford University led a multiyear evaluation of New York City charter schools where researchers found that charter schools were more likely to be located in predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhoods. New York City is approximately 25 percent Latino, but charter schools' neighborhoods are 38 percent Latino. Yet New York City charter school students are less likely to be Hispanic or receive ELL services than the average traditional public school student.

Hoxby and her team concluded that students who attend charter schools in New York City from kindergarten through eighth grade—regardless of their race or ethnicity—are scoring approximately 30 points higher in math and 23 points higher in English language arts than traditional public school students. The small population of ELLs in charter schools and the varying practices in how charter and noncharter schools classify ELLs made it difficult to assess how charter schools affect these students' academic achievement.

RAND study of charter schools in eight states

RAND's 2009 research examined longitudinal, student-level achievement data for students who transferred into charter schools in Chicago, San Diego, Philadelphia, Denver, Milwaukee, and the states of Ohio, Texas, and Florida.¹⁸ Researchers found no evidence that charter schools significantly affect achievement—positively or negatively—for Latinos or for other ethnic groups. This study did not examine effects on ELLs.

Mathematica study of KIPP middle schools

Mathematica compared the achievement trajectories of students at 22 KIPP middle schools—seven of which have more than a 50 percent Latino population—and students at non-KIPP middle schools.¹⁹ They concluded that students

at a majority of the KIPP schools experience statistically significant, higher achievement levels on both math and reading state assessments.

And these positive outcomes are substantial. Students at half of KIPP middle schools are experiencing math gains that are “the equivalent of moving a student from the 30th percentile to the 48th percentile on a typical test distribution” after attending a KIPP middle school for three years. The effects in reading are smaller, but still noteworthy. Students at half of KIPP middle schools gain an estimated 0.9 years of additional instruction in reading than students at non-KIPP schools after three years. These are the average student achievements at these middle schools, but researchers noted that Hispanic and ELL students at KIPP schools experience similar results.

State policies affecting Latinos and ELLs in charter schools

Forty states and the District of Columbia have enacted state laws authorizing the development of charter schools. These laws also guide charter school recruitment and enrollment policies, accountability, and their access to federal and state funding. Charter schools are largely autonomous, but these state laws play a significant role in determining the extent to which charter schools serve Latino and ELL students and their capacity to teach them effectively. They also influence the degree to which charter schools are held accountable for educational outcomes among Latinos and ELLs.

The sections that follow highlight key components of state charter school laws that affect Hispanic and ELL students. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of the elements that states and advocates should consider as they strengthen or develop their state charter school laws. Other provisions are critical and also affect Latino and ELL prospective and current charter school students, including some of those proposed in the model state charter school law offered by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.²⁰ The purpose of this section is to identify and present the aspects of state charter school laws that most affect Latino and ELL students.

Recruitment, enrollment, and lottery procedures and policies

Recruitment, enrollment, and lottery procedures that are outlined in state charter laws inevitably affect charter school demographics. Many state charter laws aim to bar discriminatory enrollment practices. But only a handful have incorporated proactive recruitment and enrollment provisions to support access to charter schools among ELLs and students of all races and ethnicities.

Open enrollment and lottery policies

Public charter schools, like traditional public schools, should be open to all students who wish to enroll. Open enrollment policies help further clarify that all students, generally within the state, can attend any state charter school. Such open policies are a first step in ensuring equitable access for Latinos, ELLs, and other students. The majority of state charter laws—30 out of 41—require charter schools to operate an open enrollment policy.²¹ States often require or encourage charter schools to give preference to students residing in the attendance area in which the charter school is located.

Most states require schools to select students using a lottery system when a school's capacity cannot match the demand for enrollment. A lottery process can help ensure that Latinos and ELL students have equitable access to charter schools. At least 33 state laws include such a provision. Three states—Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas, all of which have significant Hispanic and ELL populations—allow or depend solely on a first-come, first-served approach.²² This approach, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, “often discriminates against students who do not have parents aggressively pursuing each and every potential school option.”²³ ELL and immigrant students, whose parents may have less experience in navigating the school system, may be at a disadvantage.

Proactive recruitment, enrollment, and capacity policies

A handful of state laws go beyond the conventional policies of requiring open enrollment and lotteries. These states are proactive in their approach to achieving racial and ethnic balance in their charter schools, or they require that charter schools, at a minimum, mirror the demographics of the surrounding school district. These states include Arkansas, Hawaii, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, and South Carolina.²⁴ Nevada's statute, for example, states that charter schools should take steps to ensure that the racial composition of their school does not differ from the racial makeup of the surrounding district by more than 10 percent.²⁵

Other forward-thinking states are intentional in their efforts to recruit and serve ELLs. Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, and Rhode Island are among such states.²⁶ Massachusetts's new, enhanced charter law may now be the most aggressive state law with respect to recruiting and enrolling ELLs in charter schools. Once authorized, charter schools must develop a recruitment

plan and enrollment goals for ELLs, as well as low-income, special education, and other at-risk students.²⁷ Charter schools must also submit an annual report to the state education board that describes the school's progress toward the enrollment goals. The Massachusetts law was only recently revised and its effects remain unclear, but it may serve as a useful model for states that are interested in strengthening their law to ensure equitable access for ELL students and other potentially underrepresented groups. A bill with similar provisions is currently underway in the California state legislature.²⁸

Few states' charter laws consider prospective charter schools' capacity to effectively educate ELLs when reviewing their applications. Iowa is one state in which the application process requires the school to describe the manner in which they will provide instruction to ELLs. Massachusetts's updated law has also struck new ground here. The state now requires prospective charter school operators to have a record of running at least one school that has demonstrated academic success serving ELLs, low-income, special education, and other at-risk students, in order to be eligible to apply for a new or expanded charter.²⁹

Other enrollment preferences

Other enrollment preferences that are included in some state charter laws can affect the enrollment and education of Latinos and ELLs. Several of the charter school directors interviewed for this report, for example, identified the significance of allowing preferences for siblings of students currently enrolled in the charter school. Such a preference, they reported, helped foster a family environment at the school, which they believed important to parents of ELL and Latino students. At least 26 states plus the District of Columbia require or allow preferences for students' siblings.³⁰

Several states, including Arizona, Colorado, Florida, and Nevada, also allow charter schools to give preference to children of founders, governing board members, and full-time employees. Some argue that, "access for at-risk students tends to be hampered when charter schools grant a preference to students who are children of founders and teachers."³¹ The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, however, recommends that states give charter schools a choice to reserve a limited percentage—no more than 10 percent—for such students. They reason that school founders and full-time employees dedicate a great deal of time and personal commitment to the school, and some return on this investment is

therefore reasonable. Since most charter school teachers work long hours, it may be practical to have a capped, allowable preference for at least these individuals.³² This may also contribute to a school’s family-friendly environment, which can be an important factor in choosing a school for Latino parents.

Funding

Jack Buckley, recently nominated to be commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, examined the representation of ELLs in New York City charter schools and points to what is likely a common problem among charter schools across the country—inequitable access to funding to adequately serve ELLs. He writes that the “powerful role that funding can play in creating incentives and disincentives for schools to serve harder-to-educate students means that charter school funding mechanisms should be reexamined and where necessary, revised when incentives are misaligned with the broader educational goals of equity and access.”³³

Such is the case in New York, where state law requires districts to give charter schools a proportional share of state and federal funding.³⁴ New York charter schools often lose out on their share of federal Title III funds—dollars targeted to English language learners and immigrant students—because these funds are dispersed in the form of district-based allocations. As a result, “individual charter schools [in New York] rarely meet the minimum number of students required to access them”³⁵ even though they are considered local education agencies or have school district status for federal funding purposes.

The circumstances in New York are not uncommon for charter schools in other states, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools’ model charter law therefore includes language that provides public charter schools equal access to categorical funding streams and recommends clear guidance on how federal and state funds reach charter schools.³⁶ This point cannot be underscored enough. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute concluded in its review of charter school funding in 16 states and the District of Columbia that, “an important source of the district-charter funding gap is that so many states, in so many aspects of school funding, treat charters differently in *statute* than in *practice*.”³⁷ They estimate that charter schools receive approximately 22 percent less in funding in comparison to traditional public schools. Improved clarity and specificity in state laws regarding charter school funding can help improve parity in the funding gap between charter schools and traditional schools.

The disconnection between policy and practice has inspired some creative maneuvering in New York. Several charter schools formed a consortium to meet the threshold for the minimum number of students needed to access their share of federal Title III dollars. This tactic may have some success, but should not be necessary.

Accountability

Charter school accountability frameworks that appropriately and assertively include Latinos and ELLs are necessary to address their educational outcomes, as is the case with traditional public schools. Charter authorizers have been more aggressive in pursuing accountability, but few state charter laws address this issue adequately.³⁸

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' model law again offers some important guidance and includes some important accountability elements that are relevant for Latino and ELL students in charter schools. This includes reforming state laws to require authorizers to assess schools' performance on a framework that includes progress in closing achievement gaps in proficiency, growth between major subgroups, and progress toward college readiness benchmarks disaggregated by major student subgroups.³⁹

Some state charter laws weaken accountability by aggregating assessment results for multiple campuses that operate under a single charter contract. Parents of charter school students in Illinois, for example, are at a great disadvantage because the state reports performance for multicampus charters in the aggregate, making it difficult to decipher how well each school is preparing Latinos and ELLs.

This places high-performing charter schools that are grouped with their less successful counterparts in a difficult position, complicating their efforts to effectively communicate their progress and performance with parents. This is the case with Chicago International Charter School's West Belden campus—a strong charter school that has a large Latino student population and a significant number of ELLs. Chicago Public Schools publishes an annual performance report that disaggregates performance for each campus, which is a useful first step.⁴⁰ But even this report lacks individual campus performance data disaggregated by each student subgroup.

Autonomy

Autonomy is a cornerstone feature of charter schools. Many state laws therefore give charter schools the flexibility to operate independently from a variety of statutes and regulations that govern traditional public schools, excepting civil rights laws and regulations. Some statutes, like those for D.C. charter schools, offer charter schools an automatic exemption from many state and district laws and regulations. Other states require schools to apply to the state or local board for a waiver. Regardless of the process, this autonomy can provide significant opportunities for ELLs in particular.

Autonomy from state laws has given charter schools in Arizona, for example, the flexibility to offer dual-language immersion programs and other forms of native language instruction, which is barred from traditional public schools. Yet charter autonomy is in some respects hampered here since charter schools forfeit their share of federal Title III funds and other state dollars for ELLs if they do choose to offer a language instruction program other than English immersion. Given at least the choice, some Arizona charter schools have continued to provide an alternative program to English immersion.⁴¹ And the degree of autonomy afforded to charter schools in restrictive states such as Arizona has shielded them from some of the political swings that can overrun education and has allowed charter school leaders and educators to operate school delivery models that they believe best serve their students.

In the immediate years ahead, the Race to the Top fund and the administration's focus on school turnaround may continue to trigger changes in state charter school policy. Perhaps more states will consider efforts and strategies to expand the presence of charter schools in their state. As they do so, it seems appropriate to also identify ways in which their charter laws can be shaped to more effectively respond to the needs of the growing ELL and Latino student population. Statutes and charter law provisions related to recruitment and enrollment, funding, accountability, and autonomy are good starting points.

Four high-performing Latino and ELL charter schools

Latino students continue to lag behind their non-Latino counterparts in most educational indicators of success despite a rooted history and growing presence in the United States. The underperformance of Latino students and their staggering dropout rates have galvanized the civil rights community to take action and rally support behind comprehensive and transformative school initiatives. The prolific growth of charter schools in the Latino community is one outcome of this reformatory action.

The National Council of La Raza, or NCLR, is working with a charter network of approximately 100 community-based schools dedicated to increasing educational opportunities for Latinos by focusing on the following core areas: rigorous instruction to prepare all students for college success, integration of literacy development strategies across the curriculum, and effective strategies for ELLs. These highly regarded areas were conceptualized in 2008 into an educational framework known as NCLR's "core qualities." The core qualities, like many educational models for high-performing schools, focus on vital areas such as high expectations and high supports, collaborative leadership, partnerships with institutions of higher education, sustained meaningful relationships, family engagement and community collaboration, and continuous performance-based assessment.

Two other core qualities are specifically unique to NCLR affiliate schools—cultural competence and bilingualism-biliteracy. It is NCLR's strongly held belief that adherence to these eight core qualities will ensure that schools are providing the best instruction for Latino children while taking advantage of the strengths these children and their families contribute to the school community.

NCLR affiliate schools approach the educational process from a comprehensive perspective that takes into account both the academic and nonacademic needs of students and their families. Such is the case of El Sol Science and Arts Academy, or El Sol, and the Raul Yzaguirre School for Success, or RYSS. These two NCLR affiliates have received local and national recognition for academic

excellence in two impoverished Latino communities—Santa Ana, California, and Houston, Texas, respectively.

The profiles that follow, which include El Sol and RYSS, as well as two other non-NCLR-affiliate charter schools—YES Prep Gulfton in Houston, Texas, and International Charter School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island—highlight best and promising practices that have served the schools well when addressing the overall needs of their Latino students, and ELL students in particular. All four schools offer valuable lessons in how to better recruit, educate, and serve Latino and ELL students.

El Sol Science and Arts Academy, Santa Ana, California

El Sol Science and Arts Academy demographics

534 students grades PK-8 in 2009-10

Hispanic/Latino	96%
African American	1%
White	2%
Asian, Pacific Islander	0%
Native American	0%
English language learners	64%
Special education	3%
Free or reduced lunch	75%

Source: Educational Demographics Unit California Department of Education, "Enrollment in Educational Options for the Year 2009-10," available at <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/> (last accessed August 2010); California Department of Education "2009 API school reports," available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/apireports.asp> (last accessed August 2010).

El Sol Science and Arts Academy is nested in one of the largest Spanish-speaking communities in Southern California, and opened its doors to Santa Ana residents in September 2001 with approximately 120 kindergarten and first-grade students.⁴² El Sol has added one grade level per year since the charter school's opening and currently provides an academic program to almost 600 preschool through eighth-grade students.

El Sol is fueled by the mission "to provide a rigorous academic environment that prepares students for entrance into a college preparatory track at the high school of their choice," and has combined need, commitment, and high expectations to offer a predominately low-income, Latino student population with the academic, social, and linguistic skills needed to compete in a rapidly globalizing market. The school has an intellectually rich curriculum and a dual immersion program that promotes bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Spanish. The latter curricular component is perceived as a necessity for students to be successful in a workplace and community where 75 percent of city residents speak Spanish and 15 percent "do not speak English at all."⁴³

Recruitment and enrollment efforts

The school's dual immersion program has served as its prime marketing tool for families within the larger Santa Ana community. El Sol Executive Director Monique Daviss explains, "The initial idea was to have a true dual immersion language model, but because we do a lottery and serve neighborhood students, we

can't manage our enrollment to arrive at that balance. We also have kids who are maybe third or fourth generation Latinos who don't speak Spanish. This is why we have almost 100 percent Latino student body, but not 100 percent ELLs."⁴⁴ The school initially had outreach strategies to recruit students to El Sol, but it eventually moved to "word of mouth" and relied on the school's "reputation" as a successful school to attract students. The school currently fills the limited number of seats that are available with students on the waitlist.

California charter law entitles El Sol to a 10 percent set-aside to allow the children of staff members to attend the school, bypassing a randomized lottery system. But the number of staff children attending El Sol is far less than the state's permissible set-aside. There was also once a sibling priority system, but the school had to retract that policy and have siblings enter the general lottery since demand was so high. All preschool students admitted through the lottery are automatically enrolled in kindergarten upon their successful completion of the preschool program, which includes parent volunteer hours. These admission pathways make it so that approximately 80 percent of El Sol's students are neighborhood kids.

Curricular framework

Focusing on ELL students' language needs, many of whom are of Latino origin, is essential to the success of El Sol's 90/10 dual language program. The school follows a structured, state-based protocol when identifying, designating, and reclassifying students in the ELL subgroup. El Sol uses the California English Language Development Test, or CELDT, to evaluate ELL students' English language mastery, but it also has designed internal assessments that determine the academic levels of students in the four domain areas—listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The practice of continuous assessment is complemented by differentiated instructional strategies employed via small and whole group instruction. The ultimate goal of the school's language program is for students to attain fluency and literacy in both Spanish and English and to meet or exceed grade-level proficiency at all academic benchmarks. Kindergarten students are immersed in Spanish instruction 90 percent of the day and exposed to English instruction the remainder 10 percent of the time in order to develop linguistic and academic competence. The percentage of Spanish and English instruction is then reduced and increased in intervals of 10 percent, respectively, until the fourth grade student reaches 50/50 bilingual instruction.

Teacher practice and professional development

Implementing the dual immersion program with fidelity, and tailoring instruction to meet the linguistic needs of a substantial ELL population, requires consistent collaboration along vertical (subject areas) and horizontal (grade-level) lines. This educational model calls for committed teachers as well as ongoing, in-depth professional development trainings.

El Sol receives about \$50 per designated ELL student from Title III funds, which go directly to the school site. It is clear that the school will struggle to achieve its desired academic goals with only this limited federal financial assistance. The school will have to focus on strengthening its human capital—the teachers—to lift achievement. El Sol highly prioritizes teacher recruitment and preparation for this reason. Given the school’s demographics and instructional model, El Sol actively courts teachers who “reflect the students and their families,” possess high literacy levels in English and Spanish, and hold a Bilingual Crosscultural, Language, and Academic Development, or BCLAD, certification that demonstrates their capacity to teach English language learners.

Daviss describes El Sol’s teaching philosophy, saying, “We found that Spanish language skills and English skills are closely tied so if a student does well in Spanish, they will do well in English and vice versa. The goal is to get grade-level proficiency in both languages. This means we do a lot of work with our teachers. Teachers have access to workshops and they team teach so they do a lot of work together to build their competency levels.” The school has partnered with a local university to identify the “best candidates” for their dual immersion model.

The school’s commitment to its teachers is evidenced by the 95 percent teacher retention rate.⁴⁵ El Sol’s high teacher retention rate can also be attributed to an effective and widely embraced teaching model where teachers are viewed and treated as professionals and content area experts. The teacher practice model was originally designed to promote team teaching by grouping three teachers per grade level. Each grade level would have one teacher focused on language acquisition and language arts, one on science and math, and one who would integrate the humanities through the fine and performing arts. All grade level teams are unified and driven by the school’s mission, the curricular framework, and the goal of exceeding grade-level state content standards.⁴⁶ El Sol has implemented a wide range of interventions during and after the school day to ensure that this ambitious goal is feasible and accessible to all students.

Teacher recommendations for student-oriented intervention programs are based on a host of assessments and observations, and academic performance. These interventions are aimed at equipping all students, in particular ELLs, with the language and academic skills needed to fully access the school's rigorous curriculum. Daviss describes the school's schedule and supplemental services explaining that El Sol, "offers an extended year, longer days, and summer school."

Students in kindergarten through fifth grade attend school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., while middle school students attend from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Approximately 65 percent of students stay on campus until 6 p.m. for the extended learning portion of the day. And after-school instructors meet with the classroom teachers on a daily basis to ensure a seamless curriculum and alignment in instructional strategies. This collaboration is ultimately evaluated by a series of final assessments administered on a biweekly basis to measure students' progress.

Supplemental curriculum and wraparound services

El Sol's academic excellence has garnered the attention and recognition of the authorizing local educational agency and the California Department of Education, and the school's wraparound services have attracted a diverse group of community partners and local families in dire need of social services. El Sol serves as a community hub that anchors the delivery of diverse social services.

El Sol operates a fully functioning campus Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. with "no less than 400 people on-site on a daily basis." This comprehensive approach to education is firmly rooted in the belief that a "child's success at school is tied to the overall well-being and health of the family and community."⁴⁷ The plethora of services offered to El Sol families stem from the after-school program called the Family and Children Learning Center—a robust center that attracts volunteer nurses, retired doctors, and organizational partners that focus on citizenship classes, English as a second language classes, and pro-bono legal advice.⁴⁸

Attracting this volume of community members to the school site requires intense work as the school's leadership and staff must establish and nurture school-community relations as well as a culture of mutual and cultural respect. The school has intentionally integrated culturally relevant materials into the curriculum and has cultivated a school culture where Latino parents are viewed

as an asset and important partners in students' educational process. Parents' invaluable contributions are encouraged and celebrated by a school community that embraces parents' talents and skills, and promotes nonconventional avenues for parental involvement such as cooking, organizing materials, and teaching students ballet folklórico.

Academic achievement

Allowing teachers to focus on subject matter specialization, coupled with high expectations, a culture of continuous assessment, and a comprehensive supplemental program, have all contributed positively to El Sol's academic growth as measured by the state accountability tool. The Academic Profile Index, or API, ranks schools on a scale of 0 to 1,000. El Sol has increased its API score from 559 in 2003 to 843 in 2009—a 284-point gain in only six years.

El Sol students have also achieved impressive gains in their state test scores since the extended day program was implemented. They have accomplished a full 157-point gain since the first 42 students began participating in extended day learning activities during the 2005-06 school year.⁴⁹ These gains are significant as they represent “an increase in students who score proficient and advanced but they also come from a concentrated effort to move those students who were below basic and far below basic out of lower level achievement tiers.”⁵⁰

El Sol debunks stereotypes of Latino parents lacking interest in their children's education and the notion that Latino students, specifically English language learners, cannot perform at proficiency levels on par with their white counterparts. El Sol's curricular and instructional model also offers a blueprint for charter and traditional public schools that work with a substantial ELL population yet struggle to meet this population's linguistic and academic needs. Yet rigor and relevance are not the only factors that attract families to El Sol. Daviss succinctly states, “It's the way we see people and what they bring like assets that make people feel like they rather choose the charter option. Because if we can see their [parents] assets, we can see their kids' assets.”

Raul Yzaguirre School for Success, Houston, Texas

The Raul Yzaguirre School for Success, or RYSS, was conceptualized as an integral part of the Tejano Center for Community Concerns, or TCCC, and established in 1996 to address the academic inequities experienced by Hispanic students in Houston, Texas. The school initially opened its doors with 100 seventh and eighth graders, but has since grown to a PK-12 configuration with 650 students.

Students in the East End communities of Houston reportedly gravitate to the school site because of its small and safe atmosphere, caring staff, and family-like feel.⁵¹ The well-acknowledged bond of trust and respect between teachers and students also appeals to families in the immediate vicinity. And RYSS has gained recognition by the Texas Education Agency, or TEA, as a “model for highly effective dropout prevention strategies” and for matriculating nearly 100 percent of graduating seniors to institutions of higher education.⁵²

Recruitment and enrollment efforts

RYSS has an open enrollment pattern as per the school’s charter agreement with TEA. It draws from nine primary zip codes and six secondary zip codes, which define the school’s attendance zone. Recruitment efforts are concentrated within the identified communities, which are predominately low-income, Latino neighborhoods.

Recruitment is largely done by “word of mouth,” a method that has proven “most effective” given the school’s legacy in the community. Principal Carlos Rodriguez described additional recruitment efforts saying, “We also have banners made and hung up facing Broadway Street for all to see when needed.” Rodriguez further explained that new students are admitted to the site through the waitlist process or a lottery system if demand exceeds availability of seats. But RYSS tends to “grow” its own student body, and the majority of students enter the school at the elementary level and stay through high school.

Raul Yzaguirre School for Success demographics

650 students grades PK-12
in 2008-09

Hispanic/Latino	99.1%
African American	0.2%
White	0.8%
Asian, Pacific Islander	0%
Native American	0%
English language learners	39.4%
Special education	7.7%
Free or reduced lunch	95.8%

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, 2008-2009 Campus Profile, available at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2009/campus.srch.html> (last accessed August 2010).

Curricular framework

RYSS has demonstrated steady and significant gains in all core subject areas such as math, reading, science, writing, and social studies.⁵³ These academic gains can be largely credited to teaching practices that are tailored to fill students' academic gaps, particularly ELLs'.

Onsite instructional strategies supplement and augment the school's limited Title III funds. Teachers design an Individual Education Plan, or IEP, for each child to monitor their growth and reinforce areas in need of improvement through targeted interventions. ELL students' IEPs are complemented by individual instruction, language strategies, and a transitional bilingual program offered in the primary grades. Many "homegrown" students who first enter RYSS in their early years and stay through their later academic years lack English-speaking skills in the lower elementary grades but have an accelerated fluency and comprehension rate in the upper grades.

RYSS has implemented a 50/50 dual English-Spanish language program for pre-K through grade two to accommodate ELLs' linguistic needs. Students who demonstrate English mastery at the end of second grade, as assessed by the Reading Proficiency Test in English, are mainstreamed to all-English, third-grade classrooms. Students who have not acquired sufficient academic language remain in a language transitional program in grades three through five.⁵⁴ And students who meet exit requirements anytime between first and sixth grade are reclassified and mainstreamed into the all-English curriculum.

The great majority of ELL students reclassify by the end of fifth grade. Only 7.5 percent of high school students are designated as having limited English proficiency skills. RYSS meets the linguistic needs of this high school subgroup, by partnering with NCLR to train all high school teachers in the use of Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners, or ExC-ELL strategies. ExC-ELL is a professional development program developed by Margarita Calderón at Johns Hopkins University that equips teachers with the instructional strategies and routines that help ELLs master academic language, reading comprehension, and writing skills for subject matter learning. ExC-ELL is still in its preliminary stages, but its outcomes are being carefully evaluated and discussed during professional development trainings.

The school leadership and staff work earnestly to ensure that students acquire academic English skills, but they also affirm the importance of preserving the

home language. RYSS has instituted a rotating practice of “language of the day” where certain days are designated as English or Spanish-speaking days to promote students’ cultural background. The social use of language by the school staff during recess and lunchtime also affords students the opportunity to practice their oral language skills in very natural settings and to learn the “English equivalent of words familiar to them in Spanish.”⁵⁵

Teacher practice and professional development

The quality of learning and teaching at RYSS is assessed on a weekly basis by professional learning communities. PLC is an initiative that enables teachers to collaborate, mine data, reflect on practice, and align instruction. The school’s instructional leader, Maria Barrientos, described the PLC as “a valuable forum for sharing data so that everyone has an understanding of the big picture as it affects the whole school and also how this is vital to their work as classroom teachers.”

A second but equally important focus of the professional development trainings is the college prep component of the school model. A college prep culture permeates every aspect of the school curriculum and learning environment at RYSS. The goal of fostering a college-going atmosphere is evident by the college pennants that decorate the school walls and the powerful messaging on the draping banners reminding students that, “Failure is not an option!” and that they are “college bound.” Students and their families are exposed to local colleges and universities during day trips; high school students are granted the opportunity to participate in dual enrollment courses; and each graduating senior receives a \$500 college scholarship as well as \$250 for every dual credit course completed.

Supplemental curriculum and wraparound services

The school has made a cognizant effort to implement NCLR’s core qualities, which provide a research-based framework for educating Latino students. The school has placed a strong emphasis on engaging parents and cultivating community relations in accordance with the core qualities. The longstanding history of Tejano Center for Community Concerns, and the wraparound services which emanate from this community-based hub, work hand-in-hand with the school vision and mission.⁵⁶

Tejano Center for Community Concerns Founder and CEO Richard Farias explains that TCCC's family-g geared programs were developed to help fulfill its mission of empowering local residents and stabilizing the community. To arrive at this end, RYSS has established multiple avenues to communicate and interact with parents, such as promoting an open-door policy, providing bilingual materials, paying annual home visits to all students, and keeping parents abreast of their child's academic standing and behavior through the use of progress reports, phone calls, and teacher conferences.

The school also has a full-time parent coordinator who leads a number of initiatives including a parent curriculum, GED courses, ESL classes, and other weekly classes that range from anger management, teen parenting, health, finance, and nutrition, among other relevant topics. It is this spirit of partnership and unwavering commitment to disadvantaged students that has solidified RYSS's position within the community and among prominent educational circles.

Academic achievement

RYSS joined a group of five NCLR affiliate schools in a school improvement pilot project in 2008. It built on prior efforts and worked to develop a school improvement plan that identified goals, outlined measurable outcomes, and established a timeline to implement a seamless curriculum and streamline instructional practices to render improved results. This comprehensive plan was limited to the high school grades, but the deliberate and conscious efforts reverberated across the entire school community.

The TEA accountability ratings for 2010 classified RYSS as a "recognized school." The state's "recognized" rating is the second-highest rating within the TEA accountability system. It requires "80 percent of all students and each evaluated student group to pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, or TAKS, compared to 75 percent in previous years. Additionally, the school or district must achieve an 85 percent completion rate and must have an annual seventh and eighth-grade dropout rate of 1.8 percent or below."⁵⁷

Student achievement at the high school level demonstrated progress over three years in English language arts, math, and science. For instance, "ELA achievement has risen from 70 percent passing in 2006-2007 to 83 percent in 2008-2009. Gains in math and science are even more impressive with scores moving from

36 percent to 89 percent in math and in science from 37 percent to 72 percent in the same time period. In social studies, the increase was from 56 percent to 94 percent.” Despite these impressive gains, the school has set even higher expectations and ambitious targets for the upcoming academic year.

YES Prep Gulfton, Houston, Texas

YES Prep Gulfton is one of the newer campuses in the YES Prep public charter school system in Houston, Texas. Secretary Duncan highlighted YES as a good example of charter school network that is serving ELLs in a recent speech to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools where he urged the charter school community to do a better job of reaching out to English language learners and students with disabilities.⁵⁸

YES Prep Gulfton is entering its fourth year in fall 2010 and serves 515 students in grades 6 through 9. But like other YES schools, it has plans to expand one year at a time up to grade 12. The YES Prep 6-12 hallmark model features an expanded school schedule, a strong commitment to community service, and a robust early college awareness initiative.

Recruitment and enrollment efforts

The open enrollment public charter school primarily serves students residing in the Gulfton area near Houston—a predominantly Hispanic and immigrant community. The school draws its students from the school’s neighborhood, and the school has a large Latino and ELL student population as a result. Approximately 88 percent of YES Prep Gulfton students are Latino, and 26 percent of all students are English language learners.⁵⁹

“The YES name has been in Houston for 10 years so that helps in itself,” co-school director Jake Schmitz says as he describes his student recruitment efforts.⁶⁰ The school’s substantial pool of applicants is largely due to “word-of-mouth,” but “we hit community centers and pass out fliers at apartment complexes,” says Schmitz. He and his staff also make presentations at the surrounding elementary schools and some of the middle schools that allow them the opportunity. Staff are willing to do whatever it takes to familiarize the surrounding community with their school and have been known to make presentations at apartment complexes and serve free pizza for even the smallest audience. “Sometimes it’s just five people, but it varies,” he says.

YES Prep Gulfton demographics

515 students grades 6-9 in 2010-11

Hispanic/Latino	88.1%
African American	10.3%
White	0.4%
Asian, Pacific Islander	1.1%
Native American	0%
English language learners	26.1%
Special education	6.5%
Free or reduced lunch	92.7%

Note: YES Prep will expand by one grade level every year, up to grade 12.

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, 2008-2009 Campus Profile, available at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2009/campus.srch.html> (last accessed August 2010); Personal communication from Jake Schmitz, school director, YES Prep Gulfton, and Carlos Villagrana, Instructional Coach/Language Services, YES Prep Public Schools.

The school's recruitment efforts are not influenced by the state or the YES model, though their strategies are based on best practices used by other school directors. It is "very localized" to the Gulfton campus and the staff's efforts. And Gulfton staff always make sure that they communicate in both English and Spanish because of the community's large Spanish-speaking community. "Every single document that is sent out to the community is translated by staff," Schmitz says. This includes all recruitment materials and often means that a staff person who speaks Spanish is available when they go out to recruit in the community.

YES Prep Gulfton can be described as a neighborhood school. If students were not attending the Gulfton campus, they would likely be attending one of the traditional public schools in the neighborhood. The open enrollment school typically has a waitlist and therefore selects students using a lottery system from approximately six surrounding primary zip codes after giving first priority to enrolled students' siblings.

Curricular framework

The expanded school schedule is a trademark of the YES Prep model. The school day at YES Prep Gulfton goes from 7:30 a.m. to 4:35 p.m.—approximately two hours longer than the typical school day. The additional time allows for two hours each of mathematics and English language arts.⁶¹ Students have the opportunity to participate in various enrichment activities in the afternoon, including athletics and school clubs. Students also attend school one Saturday per month, which is typically spent on service learning activities. YES Prep Gulfton also has a summer school program that is targeted at helping English language learners and students who are performing below grade level strengthen their reading skills.⁶²

The school places a strong focus on reading and literacy. "Literacy and reading was a hurdle for most of our students so we've tried to incorporate more reading throughout the school...We've told everyone on this campus that they are a reading teacher," says Schmitz. The school has set up a system so that every teacher knows the level at which each student is reading and their level of fluency in English. Every student in grades 6 through 8 gets three hours of reading instruction daily, and struggling readers may get as much as four hours of reading. The instruction occurs in the form of classroom instruction as well as small group instruction.

ELL students benefit from YES Prep's focus and added time in reading. But the method of instruction is also important. YES Prep ensures that language instruction for ELLs is based in academic content instead of occurring in isolation.⁶³ A literacy specialist, in addition to the classroom teacher, is often working with them during class, either in a small group or one-on-one setting. A well-developed library that includes Spanish language and bilingual books and magazines further supports the school's intensive literacy activities.

Organized field trips also play a significant role in the school's curricular model. They help put learning into context. "If the sixth-graders are learning about the solar system, we do a field trip to NASA," says Schmitz. Such outings have also included college campus visits and lectures from book authors. The field trips also help broaden students' cultural horizons, or help students develop a greater understanding of their own background.

Teacher practice and professional development

A strong focus on human capital supports the school's curricular model. Schmitz, a Teach for America alumnus, draws nearly 50 percent of his teachers from the alternative pathway program. The school actively seeks teachers who are bilingual in English and Spanish and makes this a requirement for most of its front office staff who interact regularly with Spanish-speaking parents.

Aspiring YES Prep teachers will find the hiring process rigorous—it includes a behavioral interview, a classroom presentation, and a technical interview. But those who are hired benefit from generous professional development opportunities. All new YES Prep teachers undergo a year-long induction program that pairs them with an instructional coach. First-year teachers also participate in bimonthly professional development Saturday sessions. Teachers in their first year at YES Prep learn how to work with English language learners and other special populations, how to manage classroom discipline, and how to communicate with students' families.⁶⁴

Supplemental curriculum and wraparound services

When asked why parents of Latinos and ELLs choose to send their kids to YES Prep Gulfton, Schmitz says, "The atmosphere that we have here allows parents to feel

like they can walk through the door. I've been to numerous parent meetings where they say they would never have been able to talk to the principal." The school also provides all teachers with a cell phone so parents can reach teachers at any time.

YES Prep Gulfton encourages an open-door policy and finds ways to help ensure that parents are active partners in their child's education. School staff hold parent meetings and seminars—approximately bimonthly—in which parents learn more about how to support reading activities at home, how to use the Internet, how to help their child deal with stress, and other helpful topics. The school will often invite outside organizations to deliver these seminars

Schmitz sums up why parents and students alike are satisfied with YES Prep Gulfton, saying, "we do have high expectations, a longer school day, and may be more strict, but because we talk to parents, do cool things, the kids and parents are satisfied with our school."

Academic achievement

YES Prep campuses have had impressive academic achievement outcomes, and YES Prep Gulfton is no exception. The average student enters YES Prep Gulfton two grade levels behind, according to school staff.⁶⁵ Yet 70 percent of ELLs at YES Prep Gulfton met the state standard in reading/English language arts during the 2008-09 year, and 85 percent met the state standard in mathematics.⁶⁶

YES Prep Gulfton's first graduating class is a few years off, but all of the school's high school seniors are likely to graduate with acceptance into a four-year college if the YES network's track record gives any indication of what is to come. All YES schools require students to secure acceptance into a four-year university to obtain their diploma. Students will visit nearly 20 colleges and universities before they graduate.⁶⁷ "The ninth-graders here know that they're going to college," says Carlos Villagrana, an instructional coach and language services coordinator.

The Texas Education Agency recognized YES Prep Gulfton with the state's highest accountability rating—"exemplary"—for the 2009-10 school year, along with five of the other six YES Prep campuses (the seventh campus earned the second-highest rating of Recognized). Schools that are rated as exemplary have at least 90 percent of students pass the TAKS.⁶⁸ The recognition is not new for YES Prep Gulfton. The school received an exemplary rating in the preceding year as well.

International Charter School, Pawtucket, Rhode Island

English, Spanish, and Portuguese are all overheard through the hallways at International Charter School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. The Pawtucket K-5 charter school builds on Rhode Island's sizable Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking population and is as recognized as much for its dual language program model as it is for its academic excellence.

ICS students are instructed in English 50 percent of the time and in either Spanish or Portuguese the other half of the time. ICS was the only charter school to be recognized as one of 20 Regents Commended schools in June 2010. This honor came as a result of the school's success in narrowing achievement gaps between white and minority students, as well as closing gaps between ELLs and non-ELLs.⁶⁹

Recruitment and enrollment efforts

International Charter School is open to Rhode Island students statewide, but 85 percent of its students reside in Providence or Central Falls. Another smaller proportion comes from Pawtucket.⁷⁰ School principal Julie Nora describes the demographics of her school compared to traditional public schools in the same area, saying, "We have a higher percentage of ELLs; a higher percentage of students living in poverty; and a higher percentage of Latinos."

Her primary recruitment method is "word of mouth," but the school does have its share of recruitment strategies. "We advertise on local radio stations in Spanish, English, and Portuguese. We send our materials to schools across the state and print this in all three languages, too," says Nora.

Nora believes that the unique dual language program model is attractive to parents for different reasons. For Spanish-speaking parents, "it's to preserve their own language; for others, it's to learn another language...it's wanting their child to be in a school that values their language and culture or to appreciate the languages and cultures of Rhode Island," she says.

Rhode Island state law and recent affirmative action decisions have shaped ICS's enrollment. According to Nora, state law requires charter schools to meet the needs of at-risk students. This was once interpreted to mean that enrollment at charter schools should mimic the surrounding district's demographics. But Rhode

International Charter School demographics

303 students grades K-5
in 2009-10

Hispanic/Latino	49.5%
African American	20.1%
White	29.4%
Asian, Pacific Islander	0.1%
Native American	0%
English language learners*	56%
Special education*	8%
Free or reduced lunch*	66%

* Based on 2008-09 data

Source: Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, RIDE Data, "School and District Statistics," 2009-2010 October Enrollment" available at <http://www.ride.ri.gov/applications/statistics.aspx> (last accessed August 2010); Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and University of Rhode Island, "Information Works!" 2009 ed.

Island charter schools are now encouraged to recruit more broadly to reduce the likelihood of being in conflict with national affirmative action policy.

Curricular framework

The school's dual-language program model is inarguably one of the school's most influential curricular features. The commitment to the school's language instruction program is reflected as deep as the school's board of trustees, which actively seeks to include bilingual Spanish and Portuguese speakers when looking for new members.

ICS's instructional model maintains that the integration of a second language is more effectively accomplished in the context of academic content than in isolation. Students therefore develop content knowledge as they learn a second language. Academic instruction is provided in English half the time and in either Portuguese or Spanish the other half. ICS uses a week-to-week model where students receive instruction in one language for the entire week. Instruction is then provided in the other language the following week.

Most of ICS's students enter the school in kindergarten, which improves their chances of developing a strong foundation in a second language as they progress year to year. "We have a lot of first-generation students so they have probably grown up listening to Spanish or Portuguese but maybe they have some exposure to English ... hopefully over time, if those kids stay with us, they're able to even out their language proficiency," says Nora.

Literacy instruction is delivered in the form of reading and writing workshops, which include a mini-lesson, guided reading and writing, independent practice, and discussion between students and teachers. This is complemented by word study activities that encourage students to examine word and letter patterns.⁷¹

The school also recently earned a grant to develop a social studies curriculum, which Nora describes as "very student- and family-centered." The standards are aligned with those proposed by the National Council for the Social Studies.

ICS's curricular model also includes a strong focus on behavioral and emotional skills. ICS uses an approach known as Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports, which "focuses on teaching, modeling and acknowledging positive behaviors."⁷²

Teacher practice and professional development

ICS struggles with finding teachers that are appropriate for its program model. “It’s definitely a challenge for us. Very few institutions of higher education provide the type of pre-service that we need, particularly for dual language,” says Nora. The school vigorously recruits teachers from outside Rhode Island, including Puerto Rico, Colombia, Spain, and states across the country.

ICS also invests a great deal in ensuring that their teachers are prepared for the classroom. Nora explains, “we realize and have accepted that we have a big burden on us to spend a lot of time on professional development, language coursework, and training in how to teach ELLs.” The school offers and pays for the necessary coursework for teachers to earn the state’s endorsement to teach ELLs, and has even brought a local professor to the school’s campus to provide two of the three required courses.

Supplemental curriculum and wraparound services

Family engagement is an important component of ICS’s program model. The school offers a number of formal and informal opportunities to engage parents in the school’s instruction and learning. School staff conduct home visits for every student enrolled at the start of every school year.⁷³ The school also conducts parenting classes to strengthen the relationship between students and parents at home and at school. ESL classes are also offered to parents and are open to the public free of charge.

Nora believes that the school’s dual language instructional model offers parents an opportunity to engage in their child’s education that is less likely to occur in most charter and traditional public schools. The language program enables Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking parents to “have access to the curriculum on a daily basis.” Parents of ELL students are better positioned to support their child’s homework because the language barriers are minimized. Parents can write any comments they have for the school and teachers in any language they choose. “The parent gets elevated,” Nora says.

Academic achievement

Rhode Island has recognized International Charter School for its success in closing achievement gaps, particularly between Latino and white students, and

between ELLs and non-ELLs. ICS Latino and ELL students still have room to grow, but they are significantly outperforming their counterparts across the state. Forty-five percent of ICS fourth-grade ELLs are proficient in reading compared to 22 percent of fourth-grade ELLs across Rhode Island, and 67 percent of ICS Latino fifth graders are proficient in reading, compared 55 percent of Hispanic fifth-grade students across the state.⁷⁴ ICS Latinos and ELLs perform at similarly higher rates in math compared to their peers statewide.

Conclusion and lessons learned

El Sol, Raul Yzaguirre School for Success, YES Prep Gulfton, and International Charter School all demonstrate that English language learners and Latinos can and will meet high proficiency levels if they are properly served with effective teachers, rich curriculum, effective and culturally relevant instructional strategies, and comprehensive services that enhance the school's academic program.

The outlined practices, attitudes, and outcomes at these schools are not representative of all charter schools that have a high proportion of Latinos and ELLs, but they demonstrate what is possible in these schools. They are valuable models from which traditional public schools and other charter schools can learn innovative and responsive strategies to immediately reverse ELL and Latino students' often downward academic trends.

Several lessons have surfaced as a result of our discussions with the charter school leaders and staff highlighted in this report, as well as our review of the body of literature and state charter school policies that affect ELL and Latino students. Indicators and measures found within NCLR's core qualities toolkit may also serve as guideposts for schools seeking to identify the missing link that has trumped their success with ELLs or find validation for currently implemented practices.

Promising practices that are immediately actionable

Charter schools have the advantage of operating in an environment where they have more freedom and flexibility to deliver instruction in ways that they believe best meet their students' needs. But many of the high-performing charter school strategies highlighted in this report are transferable to the traditional school context and, of course, to other charter schools. And many can be implemented immediately.

All four schools establish high expectations for all students' academic, intellectual, and social growth, and that includes English language learners. All of the schools

ensure that their teaching staff enter their first classroom with this all-important value. And many of the schools seek this out during the hiring process.

Curricula and instruction often reflect the schools' high expectations. This follows research, which stresses the importance of accelerating the pace at which English language learners engage with grade-level content.⁷⁵ The language instructional model varied across the four schools—from dual immersion to more transitional instruction programs—but all four schools underscored the importance of teaching a second language while simultaneously delivering core academic content.

Several of these schools, including YES Prep Gulfton and El Sol, highlighted the importance of an expanded school schedule in their program model. Early research on expanded learning time appears to indicate that a longer school day, week, or year allows for individualized or small group instruction to target ELLs' learning gaps.⁷⁶ This is more easily transferable to charter schools, which have greater autonomy in their school schedules, but it is also readily possible and increasingly popular in traditional school districts.⁷⁷

Many of these schools also assume a great amount of responsibility in ensuring that their teachers can effectively work with ELLs. Making ELLs everyone's responsibility and training all staff on effective instructional strategies to engage ELLs is an important if not necessary step in today's schools—regardless of subject matter expertise, grade level, or language instructional model.⁷⁸

Finally, all four schools incorporated formal and informal strategies to promote family engagement and community collaboration. They actively reached out to parents—in their home language if needed. Their recruitment efforts, which often included bilingual presentations, materials, and even radio spots, reflect this. The four schools stand out in their efforts to engage parents in school-related activities once they have enrolled their child—whether it is the annual home visits that Rhode Island's International Charter School conducts or equipping every teacher with a cell phone so they are easily accessible to parents, as is the case at YES Prep Gulfton.

State policy considerations

Charter schools may have a great deal autonomy, but they are still bound by state charter laws and statutes. And some charter provisions that are currently on the

books can have the unintentional effect of hindering schools' efforts to attract and effectively serve ELLs. States are continuing to strengthen their charter laws, perhaps in response to Race to the Top or other federal policy changes related to school improvement, and it is therefore worth re-examining provisions related to enrollment and recruitment, criteria for charter school authorization, funding, accountability, and autonomy.

Enrollment and recruitment policies obviously affect the level of access that Latinos and ELLs have to charter schools. Most states require an open-enrollment policy for all charter schools as well as a lottery process in instances where demand exceeds the number of slots. The few that do not should consider following this conventional practice.

Massachusetts made several important changes related to English language learners when it revamped its law to expand charter schools in early 2010. The outcomes from these recent changes are still unknown but may serve as a useful marker for other states. The state now requires prospective schools to describe their recruitment strategy in the application process and to consider enrollment goals for ELLs. This is particularly applicable to charter schools located in areas that have a high Latino and ELL population. Massachusetts charter school authorizers must also now consider a school's capacity to effectively serve ELLs in evaluating charter school applications. Such a requirement is especially important when the school will be located in a school district zone that has a significant ELL population.

States should also provide and clearly specify equitable access to federal and state categorical streams, including federal Title III dollars and state funding allotted for ELLs. State law does not always result in the intended practice, as is the case for many New York charter schools that struggle to access Title III dollars. Yet the more clearly defined funding provisions are, the less likely these discrepancies are to occur.

Accountability for results is equally important for parents of ELLs and Latinos in charter schools as it is in traditional public schools. Charter school laws should be explicit about holding schools accountable for progress in closing academic proficiency and college readiness gaps and meeting growth targets. This should be based on disaggregated outcomes across race, ethnicity, and language status. In instances of multicampus charter networks, each individual campus should be evaluated for its performance. This is currently not the case in Illinois, which makes it difficult to evaluate how high-minority charter schools are performing.

Finally, it is important to consider the role that charter school autonomy can have on the education of ELLs and Latinos. Charter schools in states with large ELL populations such as California and Arizona have the flexibility to operate a language instruction model that may not be possible without the autonomy that such schools enjoy. The effective use of native language instruction may continue to be debated in the years to come, but what is most important is that the level of autonomy that is afforded to charter schools has made it possible for charter school leaders and educators to flexibly mold their school model in ways that have demonstrated strong results for English language learners and Latinos—even in the most restrictive state environments.

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Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the staff at El Sol Science and Arts Academy, International Charter School, Raul Yzaguirre School for Success, and YES Prep Gulfton who shared their time and perspectives so generously with us in the course of developing this report. We would also like to thank Cynthia Brown, Isabel Owen, and Annie Schutte from CAP, as well as Delia Pompa and Raul Gonzalez from La Raza, for their invaluable review and feedback. And we would like to thank The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation for their sponsorship of this publication as well as their ongoing support of our education programs. The thoughts and opinions presented in this report are those of the Center for American Progress and the National Council of La Raza alone and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the foundation.

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