



Next Generation Charter Schools

Meeting the Needs of Latinos and English Language Learners

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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.

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