



The Independent Voice for Kentucky's Children

KENTUCKY
YOUTH
ADVOCATES

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Kentucky's Immigrant Youth Face Tough Transition to Adulthood

Louisville, KY – In Kentucky, as across the nation, children in immigrant families are a growing part of the population and future workforce. However, as the number of immigrant youth has increased in recent years, programs and services that would help them succeed in school and become productive adults have not kept pace, according to a new issue brief released today by Kentucky Youth Advocates.

The report, *Making their Way: Helping Kentucky's Immigrant Youth Successfully Transition into Adulthood*, found that language and cultural barriers are leading more immigrant youth to drop out of high school and enter a cycle of low-paying jobs and unemployment. According to the brief, 41 percent of Kentucky's older immigrant youth, aged 16 to 19, speak English "not well" or "not at all." These youth have limited time to gain proficiency in English before facing standardized testing, college and job applications. The result is a drop out rate that is nearly five times higher (43 percent) than the rate among U.S.-born Kentucky youth.

"Kentucky's immigrant youth are an important resource that our state cannot afford to waste," said Terry Brooks, Executive Director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. "That means schools cannot take the easy path to working with immigrant youth. It means we cannot allow the state's obsession with test scores to supersede the interests of any student – and that includes immigrant youth."

Currently, Kentucky has one of the highest percentages of "disconnected" youth who are not attending school and not working, ranking 45th in the nation. Research shows that the vast majority of immigrant youth fare as well as their peers on measures of physical and mental health and avoidance of high-risk behavior. Yet far fewer are likely to graduate from high school, increasing their risk to be disconnected from education, the work force or military.

"English proficiency is the number one predictor of whether older immigrant youth successfully transition into adulthood in Kentucky," said Jenessa Bryan, the report's author and a policy analyst at Kentucky Youth Advocates. "Effective programs that increase immigrant youth's English skills – especially programs that integrate immigrant youth with native-English speakers while encouraging them to retain their first language -- are critical to keeping youth in school."

The brief noted that while the number of immigrant youth in Kentucky remains relatively small, it has grown significantly in recent years. Between 1990 and 2005, for instance, the number of students learning English as a second language increased from 1,300 to over 11,000. In the 2004-2005 school year, 10,415 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 12 were eligible for federal funding for Limited English Proficient (LEP) education.

The study suggested several measures for helping this growing population achieve educational success and make a smooth transition to adulthood. These include:

- Better tracking of those students who complete LEP programs to determine how successful schools have been in preparing them to make the transition into mainstream education.
- Increasing outreach to immigrant parents through school programs that introduce them to the U.S. educational system and help them understand how to support their child's education. Schools should also offer language accessible parent-teacher conferences, provide written materials to parents in their spoken language, and give adequate support to teachers and school staff, such as family resource officers and English as a Second Language teachers.
- Providing multicultural programming through schools and community agencies that allow immigrant youth to embrace their heritage while acclimating to the United States. Research shows such offerings make immigrant youth less likely to drop out of school. Programs that encourage them to teach others about their cultural heritage or tutor youth in their language can also help foster leadership skills.
- Increasing awareness of Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education policies that ensure all Kentuckians can pursue higher education, including eligibility to enroll in public postsecondary institutions and eligibility for in-state tuition, for all graduates from Kentucky high schools.

“If Kentucky’s economy is to become dynamic in the future, the commitment to ensuring a productive adulthood for immigrant youth is not an option. It’s a mandate,” said Brooks. “Taking a few simple but important steps will not only help them – it will help the entire Commonwealth.”

For a complete copy of the report, visit www.kyyouth.org.