

Public Schools and the Border Surge: Challenges for School Administrators

Dr. Melissa Arrambide

Dr. Arthur J. Borgemenke

Texas A & M University – Commerce
United States

Introduction

The recent surge of undocumented and unaccompanied minors arriving in the United States presents multiple political and ethical challenges for social systems. This article focuses on the issues of educating children who arrive on the doorsteps of our local schools unaccompanied with undocumented immigration status. The challenges presented to the United States educational system are vast and impact all areas of schooling. School campus administrators are on the frontline of the battle to ensure these children receive appropriate services while their immigration status is determined.

Contextualizing the Issue

An Influx of Children

The number of immigrant children enrolled in US schools has been on the rise for many years and has been a longstanding educational challenge for US schools. In March 2008 it was estimated that undocumented children and American born children of immigrants comprised 6.8% of our total enrollment in US schools (National Center for Public Policy Research, 2014). The most recent influx of immigrants boosts this number to heights that stress an already taxed public education system. Emerging data indicates a total of 240,000 migrants crossed the border in recent months. Of the 240,000 border crossers, 52,000 were unaccompanied minors (Medina, 2014). Many of these school-age children have been transported to varying sites across the nation and are now enrolled in far-flung school systems. Additionally, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) “offers a 2 year reprieve from deportation and provides temporary work authorization for many unauthorized work immigrants who were brought to the US as children...MPI estimates there were 473,000 children under age 15 at DACA launch who met the program’s year and age of entry requirement” in 2012 (Migration Policy Institute, 2014)

Public Sentiment

Public sentiment regarding this issue varies widely. Many feel that these children have arrived here illegally, should be repatriated to be reunited with their families and we should only assume the additional burden of educating the large numbers of unaccompanied minors until they are returned to their countries of origin. Many others feel that these children are refugees fleeing from oppressive living conditions and should therefore receive some sort of special immigration status. *Plyler vs. Doe* (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982) has removed the question as to whether or not undocumented children are to be educated in U.S. Public Schools. In this case, the courts ruled that denying undocumented children the benefit of public education was a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (U.S. Const. amend. XIV).

Recently the Assistant Secretary of Education for Civil Rights, Catherine Lhamon, issued a policy directive in the form of a “Dear Colleague” letter warning against the exclusion of any students who were not able to produce documentation of immigration status. The Obama administration further warns that discrimination based on race, color, or national origin can be a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which protects individuals against such acts (National Center for Public Policy Research, 2014). Thus, regardless of sentiment, rulings such as *Plyler vs. Doe* (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982) and more recent policy directives have clearly delineated the obligation of our public school system to provide all children with public education services. To that end, whether or not to educate undocumented minors is no longer the question. The new question at hand is how to adequately prepare our education system to meet the needs of this growing population of students.

“No longer just a border problem, the surge is now an issue for officials in communities throughout the country, where 126 counties or cities have at least 50 children, almost all of them school age, who have been placed with relatives or foster families within their jurisdictions” (Washington Times, 2014).

Second Language Learners in Public Schools

Beyond the obvious challenge of increasing student numbers in our public school systems, the recent influx of undocumented children places others strains on the public school classroom. These children have arrived in our schools with unknown prior schooling opportunities. One could reasonably assume that their skills in a second language will not be sufficient to support adequate school performance. The issue is two-fold. Student’s lack of educational opportunity in their native tongue may cause them to enter our school systems with an absence of elementary educational learning skills. Couple this issue with little to no knowledge of the English language and one will encounter students who are struggling to be academically successful in U.S. schools. Jim Cummins (1981) helps to contextualize the issue of educating second language learners when he explored the development of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language processing skills (CALPs). BICS refers to the language skills that second language learners typically develop initially and are acquired and used in everyday social situations interacting in the new language. CALPs differ from BICS in depth and complexity of second language acquisition. These language skills are more formal academic learning and include listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material. Mastery of the CALPs is essential for academic success in US schools and students are not afforded the gift of time required to exhibit success. This process is known to take from five to seven years and some research has shown that with no prior schooling it may take seven to ten years for ELLs to catch up to the mainstream peers (Collier, 1987).

Students' Skills Vary

Glen Cove schools Superintendent Maria L. Rianna said her district typically sees enrollment from students who are new to the country through the first few months of each school year. The students, she said, arrive at different proficiency levels, which means educating them properly is not just about placing them in English and bilingual classes. Some have had little or no formal education. "It's difficult, it's costly and you have to design programs that meet their various needs and that don't always align with the programs we have for students who have that consistency in their instruction," Rianna said. "I don't know that it's very fair to them to put them in a high school program when they are behind the eight ball like they are" in many cases and "may lack the skills to be successful at that level." (Ramos, 2014).

District Impact

In a report released last summer the Texas Legislative Budget Board estimates the surge effort at the border will cost Texans up to \$18 million per month. The board report says over four thousand children have been released to sponsors in Texas, with more projected to be on the way. The release of children to sponsors, such as family members, is a normal part of the immigration process while children await proceedings.

The cost to the state for educating the unaccompanied children for a year could be about \$75 million, according to the report. “If we have expenses now placed upon us that we didn’t anticipate, that’s going to take away money from children in this state right now,” said Sen. Nelson. “I think the numbers are overstated,” said Sen. Hinojosa. “We really do not have a clear handle on how many of those children are staying here in Texas. Most of them are traveling up north. Most of them will at some point, more than likely get deported under federal law. So that’s just a pretty rough estimate.” (Schwaller, 2014) This type of dialogue among educational leaders indicates the vague nature of the issues at hand.

Addressing the Issue

What can we do to ensure all students continue to receive an equal and quality education in the public schools of the United States? Resources required to meet the distinct needs of English Language Learners (ELL) are vast. District resources include personnel, facilities, and instructional materials to name a few. It is reasonable to assume that districts who already have large populations of ELL’s have programs in place and are better able to accommodate their needs. Districts, however, who do not already have bilingual and/or ESL programs in place are in greater need of rapid preparation. A mayor in Essex County reports a recent influx of 204 of the unaccompanied children, many of whom presumably would be entering school.

Likewise, New York's Nassau County, on Long Island, has taken in 1,096 of these children and Harris County in the Houston area of south Texas has received 2,866 recent students (Emanuel, 2014). Clearly, many global issues also remain unresolved. These issues include:

- Funding sources
- Health concerns
- Housing
- Lack of educational opportunity
- Second language acquisition
- Emotional/mental health

As previously noted, mastery of the CALPS is essential for academic success in US schools. Students need to be provided repeated opportunities to explore language within the context of academic content. Thus, our academic efforts need to be geared towards targeting instruction using the methods that are most known to be successful in educating second language learners.

Conclusion

The United States will continue to face the challenges of educating undocumented minors. How well we address these issues will be the determining factor in the success or demise of this unique population of students. Fortunately, the United States has the resources to ensure their success. The United States public school system must act quickly as time is of essence in meeting the educational demands of our undocumented, unaccompanied minor student population.

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