



NCSE | National Center for School Engagement

Working with Highly Mobile, Immigrant Students
in Houston, TX: Perspectives from a Provider

National Center for School Engagement

March, 2006

**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
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Promoting attendance, attachment and achievement

Working with Highly Mobile, Immigrant Students in Houston, TX

By Susana Herrera, MSW

Editors note: The following article is based on the experience and reflections of the author, Susana Herrera. Ms. Herrera received her MSW from Michigan State University. She is currently the Program Coordinator of the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project for the City of Houston Mayor's Anti-Gang Office. She has 5 years experience working with immigrant families from Mexico and Central America.

Background

The following article is written about the Gulfton neighborhood in Houston, TX. Gulfton is a 3.4 square mile apartment community with a large multi-ethnic immigrant population. Social service agencies and government officials working in Gulfton estimate the population of Gulfton to be 60,000, of which more than 20,000 are juveniles. This represents the highest population density of any Houston community.

In Addition:

- Gulfton's median family income of \$18,733 is nearly 30% below the city's median.
- In the 97-98 school year, 75% of Gulfton students were eligible for free/reduced lunch.
- Nearly 95% of Gulfton elementary and middle school students are "economically disadvantaged", nearly double the Texas rates.
- More than 70% of Gulfton students have limited English proficiency, compared with 27.6% in Houston Independent School District and 13.4% statewide.

Truancy remains one of the prominent risk factors for youth in Houston's Gulfton neighborhood. The Gulfton Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project works to reduce the incidence of truancy and associated juvenile delinquency among high-risk, ninth grade youth who attend Robert E. Lee High School (see Table 1 for demographics of Lee High School). The program's overriding purpose is to educate the community about truancy and the need to prevent truant behavior, provide early identification, assessment and intervention with truant youth and their families, and improve juvenile and parental accountability for truancy by providing immediate and meaningful consequences.

Table 1: Lee High School Demographics

	Enrollment	Hispanic	At-Risk	ESL	Special Ed	Attendance Rate	Free/Red Lunch
Robert E. Lee	2,086	79%	89%	36%	9%	92.3%	95%

As part of their participation in OJJDP's Truancy Reduction Project, the Gulfton site sought to provide services to 250 ninth grade students attending the target area high school, Lee High School. Houston police officers conducted home visits to issue warning notices regarding excessive unexcused absences, assess causes of truancy, counsel on the legal responsibility to attend school, and issue citations for failure to attend school. In addition, the Project provides direct services ranging from facilitating Spanish parenting classes via the Houston Area Council on Alcohol & Drug Abuse, to providing court-based case management through the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office Juvenile Accountability Court Program.

Introduction to the Problem of Truancy In Houston's Gulfton Neighborhood

Truancy remains one of the most prominent risk factors for youth. It is frequently mentioned that truancy is a gateway offense that can lead to juvenile delinquency and victimization. Despite being dismissed as a low level offense, it is well known that truancy can and does lead to more serious offenses and places youth in danger of potential victimization. Addressing truancy and establishing methods to effectively re-engage students into the United States public school system remains one of the most challenging issues faced not only by educators and practitioners but by society as well. In the midst of national controversy on immigration laws and reform, effectively transitioning immigrant students into the United States' public school system is a sensitive and multifaceted process that requires specific training and knowledge. This article discusses the unique challenges faced by immigrants, the majority of whom are from Mexico and Central America, who reside in Houston's Gulfton neighborhood and suggests strategies to engage these students and families in school.

Profile of Highly Mobile Immigrants

The initial step to addressing truancy among immigrant youth is to acknowledge and understand that the underlying motivation behind most migrations to the U.S. is social as well as economic. Immigrant families in Houston tend to be highly mobile and often relocate a minimum of two to three times within a given school year. This is due to a lack of economic opportunities that meet the needs of the family.

Immigrants are often challenged by language barriers and have little knowledge of the laws and school policies in the United States. Typically, immigrants continue to follow their own cultural norms, values and lifestyle and adapt them as best they can into their new environment. Often Houston's immigrants have minimal formal education, and family members as young as 12 are expected to contribute to the household income. In general, all family members are needed to assist in the development of the family structure either through economic or domestic support. Contributions include caring for siblings and maintaining the household. However, these economic and familial expectations are inconsistent with the educational and employment policies in the United States. As a result, some parents are forced to work multiple jobs to adequately maintain the household. Consequently, this can place them out of the home for up to twelve hours each day, and children are often left with inadequate supervision. Furthermore, the lack of supervision due to parental employment not only makes it difficult for the parents to remain actively involved in their children's lives but can also lead to additional changes in the family dynamic and result in increased incidents of teen pregnancy, gang affiliation, and victimization.

Highly Mobile Immigrants and the United States Educational System

The myriad of cultural and logistical challenges that immigrants in Gulfton face contribute in many complex ways to school absenteeism. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with US laws, high mobility, the lack of adult supervision, and familial norms are all barriers to attending school.

Parents who are unaware of laws and have limited English skills may unintentionally violate school policy and truancy laws. Although public schools distribute bilingual informational literature, this process does not appear to be particularly effective with this population due to their high mobility. Therefore, the schools have the responsibility to seek alternative methods such as telephone calls and home visits to inform these families. The results can be two-fold: the school verifies that the family was informed and/or confirms an incorrect address.

The fact that immigrants often relocate creates difficulty for the schools as well. Outdated contact information creates an immediate barrier in communicating with the student and family. For example, when a student is chronically absent and has an outdated address, it can be very difficult for the school to contact the student and locate the family. As a result, the school is faced with the dilemma of having to withdraw such students for nonattendance and classify them as “dropouts” (which the schools prefer to avoid).

Undocumented parents and older siblings often work twice as hard for half the pay in comparison to their documented counterparts. Most parents are very supportive and understand the importance of education, and the pressure for students to succeed academically has increased. However, their acculturation process remains a challenge especially when students are placed in English-only classrooms and rely on bilingual students to translate instructions and assignments. These bilingual students may not understand the content enough to explain it adequately. Consequently, immigrant students who have difficulty understanding and passing their classes due to language barriers feel incompetent, which impacts their level of motivation and self-esteem. As a result, students may feel frustrated and angry, which can lead to behavioral problems in the classroom, absenteeism from school and ultimately dropping out. At the same time, students also feel guilt for attempting to continue their education and limiting their contribution to the family household.

Due to limited adult supervision, a lack of school engagement, and in some cases, devaluing education, students miss classes and find other avenues to entertain themselves during school hours. Consequently, truant students receive warning notices for excessive absences. Some parents enable the truant behavior by making excuses for the student to avoid legal ramifications. In other cases, parents continue to be unaware of the absences due to an incorrect mailing address or language barriers. When the student is responsible for translating for parents, the student becomes the source of information and takes on a more powerful position in the family than would normally occur. Eventually, if students do not return to school, a citation for failure to attend school is issued to the student, parent or both. In this case, the student and possibly the parent becomes involved in the juvenile justice system and additional emotional and financial burden is placed on the family.

Solutions to Engaging Immigrant Students in School

Schools that do not understand the needs of new immigrant students and their families hinder these students from successfully reaching their full potential and progressing through the educational system. Failure to address the needs of immigrant populations may contribute to the stigmatization of the school as being culturally insensitive to their student body’s needs. Partnership with the school counselor and school-based support services must be developed and

reinforced in order to create an effective referral base for these students. *A referral base should include counseling, mentoring and mediation services to connect students, parents and school administrators.* In addition to creating such a partnership, schools must collaborate with parents and work toward a common goal of excellence by assisting parents in becoming more involved in their children's education. This would assist both the students in reaching their full potential and the school in gradually eliminating any potential social stigma of being culturally insensitive.

One Houston high school has demonstrated cultural competency by advocating for the development of a charter high school that met the needs of newly arrived immigrants. As a result, the district developed a charter high school that addresses factors relating to the acculturation process within the educational system. This school is designed for those students who have migrated to the United States within the last three years and for whom traditional school settings are not practical. The school embraces the Latino culture in a number of ways. The goal is to meet the interests of their student body rather than typically having the students integrate to the culture of the school. For instance, there is a soccer team instead of the traditional American football team and during their homecoming game, they have a mariachi perform during their half-time show.

In conclusion, the majority of truant immigrant students are absent for a variety of reasons. These students not only have to adapt to a new setting but also cope with other factors relating to their process of acculturation. These factors include the clash between their cultural belief system and the mainstream belief system, the level of education and acculturation among family members, and their low socioeconomic status. School administrators and service providers must comprehend the social and familial factors that challenge immigrant students. Once these students have successfully begun to transition into the public school system and into society, they are capable of coping with the traditional challenges faced by adolescents. On the other hand, it should be noted that some students prefer to postpone or suspend their education because of the economic benefits of doing so. It is difficult for education to be a priority when contribution to the family household is essential, especially when the family does not have an extended support system. Nonetheless, cultural assets should be built upon to strengthen and not hinder the student, their family and the academic and social community. In assessing and supporting these students, the needs of both student and family must be acknowledged and addressed. It is important to understand that focusing on the needs of the student also addresses the needs of the family. Cultural strengths should be utilized as a learning tool to address the needs of the student. Lastly, academic institutions must be dedicated to cultural competence and sensitivity, and to providing the highest level of education for these students.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.



National Center for School Engagement

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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