

# Helping Newcomer Students Succeed in Secondary Schools and Beyond

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A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Executive Summary

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**A**s a nation, we have started to make some progress in serving underperforming students in secondary schools through targeted interventions, such as small-school approaches and reforming “high school dropout factory” schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Many of these interventions, however, have not focused specifically on English language learners (Advocates for Children of New York & Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2009). Yet, English language learners are the fastest growing student group in the preK–12 school population, and compared with their non-English-language-learner counterparts, they have struggled to succeed in school.

Adolescent students who are newly arrived immigrants and who need to learn English are among the most vulnerable subgroups of English language learners, especially those with gaps in their educational backgrounds. They are held to the same accountability standards as native English speakers while they are just beginning to develop their proficiency in academic English and are simultaneously studying core content areas. With their low levels of literacy in English, these adolescent newcomers are not prepared for secondary level texts and assignments. New to the country and the language, they face acculturation issues too, making engagement with their schools, peers, and teachers challenging. When one considers the likelihood of these students succeeding in traditional school settings, it is difficult to be optimistic.

However, a number of school districts around the United States have tried to address the challenges and pressures on these students by developing and implementing newcomer programs. We have defined these as *specialized academic environments that serve newly arrived, immigrant English language learners for a limited period of time* and have found through our research that the main goals of these programs are the following:

- Help students acquire beginning English skills
- Provide some instruction in core content areas

- Guide students’ acculturation to the school system in the United States
- Develop or strengthen students’ native language literacy skills

*Helping Newcomer Students Succeed in Secondary Schools and Beyond* has been written for educators and policy makers in order to focus attention on these newcomer adolescent English language learners at the middle and high school grades and to communicate promising practices for serving their educational and social needs. The report is based on a 3-year national research study, Exemplary Programs for Newcomer English Language Learners at the Secondary Level, conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics on behalf of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This research project consisted of a national survey of secondary school newcomer programs; compilation of program profiles into an online, searchable database; and case studies of 10 of these programs, selected for their exemplary practices.

The findings in this report will show that there is no one set model for a newcomer program. Middle and high school newcomer students exhibit a variety of characteristics and thus programs must be carefully designed to meet their needs. Besides newcomers’ different native languages and countries of origin, the differences in their literacy skills and educational backgrounds prove to be the most important factors for a newcomer program’s design. This report explains how the characteristics of newcomer students interact with program goals to determine an appropriate design for a newcomer program.

After students complete a newcomer program, they typically make the transition to their school’s regular language support program that may have ESL or English language development and sheltered content or bilingual content classes. (Students in full, 4-year newcomer high schools are an exception.) The courses established in the newcomer program therefore should act as on-ramps to the broader educational program. For example, many programs in our

research study offer courses that focus on developing the students' basic English and academic literacy skills, acculturation to U.S. schooling, and fundamental subject area knowledge to prepare them for the regular school program.

Our case study investigation has revealed several aspects of newcomer programs that are working well, including the following:

- Flexible scheduling of courses and students
- Careful staffing plus targeted professional development
- Basic literacy development materials for adolescents and reading interventions adapted for English language learners
- Content area instruction to fill gaps in educational backgrounds
- Extended time for instruction and support (e.g., after school, Saturday, and summer programs)
- Connections with families and social services
- Diagnostics and monitoring of student data
- Transition measures to ease newcomers into the regular school programs or beyond high school

However, a number of policies and issues were also raised by many of the newcomer programs as potential inhibitors to student success, such as

- Family reunification and student experiences with trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder
- No Child Left Behind accountability measures
- Special education services
- High school graduation credits
- Postsecondary options

*Helping Newcomer Students Succeed in Secondary Schools and Beyond* addresses the successes, challenges, and day-to-day implementation of newcomer programs, drawing from information provided by the programs that participated in the national survey and those that served as case study sites. After describing the variety among newcomer students and their educational settings in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 presents an analysis of the student demographics, instructional and assessment practices, program design features, staffing, and transition measures as represented by the 63 programs in our database. Chapter 3 offers an inside look at the promising practices we found at the case study sites, which represent urban, suburban, and rural locations; ESL and bilingual language instruction; and three location types—programs within a school, separate-site programs, and whole-school programs. Chapter 4 highlights the connections between the newcomer programs, parents, and the broader community in which they are located. Chapter 5 examines student performance at the case study sites and recommends procedures to evaluate program success, and Chapter 6 highlights key policies and issues that have affected newcomer programs and makes recommendations for the future. Resources for educators interested in creating or refining a newcomer program are found throughout the chapters and appendices.

Adolescent newcomer students are at risk in our middle and high schools, and districts across the United States have been looking for better program models to serve them. This report shows how successful newcomer programs develop students' academic English literacy skills, provide access to the content courses that lead to college and career readiness, and guide students' acculturation to U.S. schools and their eventual participation in civic life and the global economy.