

*Immigrant Students, Urban High Schools:
The Challenge Continues*
by Lucy Hood

The goal of Carnegie "Challenge" papers is to lift up ideas and issues in a way that we hope will elevate them to the national agenda. The subjects we deal with, along with questions we explore, grow out of the work of Carnegie Corporation of New York but do not necessarily represent the focus of our programs. For more information about the Corporation's grantmaking activities, please visit our web site: www.carnegie.org.

Carnegie Corporation of New York was created by Andrew Carnegie in 1911 to promote "the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding." Under Carnegie's will, grants must benefit the people of the United States, although up to 7.4 percent of the funds may be used for the same purpose in countries that are or have been members of the British Commonwealth, with a current emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa. As a grant-making foundation, the Corporation seeks to carry out Carnegie's vision of philanthropy, which he said should aim "to do real and permanent good in this world." Currently, the foundation focuses its work in four program areas: Education, International Peace and Security, International Development and Strengthening U.S. Democracy.

Carnegie Corporation of New York • 437 Madison Avenue • New York City, NY 10022

We want our immigrants to be Americans [but] the method of shifting the burden to the foreign born has failed. We can no longer rest content with opening schools and then counting the number who avail themselves of our generosity. The quantitative standard, the interest in, "How many are you teaching?" must give place to the qualitative standard, to the interest in, "What and how are you teaching?"

That demand for improvement in the quality of education provided to immigrants newly arrived in America appears in *Schooling of the Immigrant* (Harper & Brothers), written by Frank V. Thompson, superintendent of the Boston, Massachusetts Public Schools and published in 1920. The book was part of a series about "Americanization" funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York when this foundation was not yet a decade old and World War I had been over for less than two years.

Concerns about educating immigrants in American schools go back even further than that, according to the *Forward*, one of America's oldest immigrant-driven newspapers still publishing today. A 2001 *Forward* article reports that, "New York set up a bilingual public school in 1837 to prepare German-speaking students for regular classes." In the years that followed, local school systems around the country—some, as in the case of the New Mexico territory, not yet even official states of the union—undertook similar efforts to help immigrant youngsters cope with what for many of them was their first experience of being thrown into mainstream American life: entering public school.

And yet, in many ways, as a recent RAND Corporation study notes, "The United States is closing the 20th century the way it began," with a large influx of immigrants who are not only reshaping the country's ethnic composition but once again challenging the nation's schools to find new and innovative ways to help them become educated citizens, productive workers and full-fledged participants in our American society. (And yet again, as with the wave of European immigration at the beginning of the last century, challenging those in the American public who are concerned about the influence on American life and culture of large numbers of non-English-speaking newcomers.) This paper will explore some of the innovative programs that are meeting that challenge and highlight issues yet to be addressed as we go forward into a new century that seems to demand a new educational framework that will serve today's students and tomorrow's as well.

New York: An International High School Takes Shape

One of those hopeful places is the International High School at LaGuardia Community College, an educational haven for immigrant students founded in 1985 and run by Principal Burt Rosenberg. The school is situated in Long Island City, a changing neighborhood in New York City's borough of Queens. Just 30 years ago, about 80 percent of Queens residents were born in the U.S. and only 3.5 percent were not citizens. Today, only 54 percent of those who live in the borough were born in the U.S. and those from Asia and various Central and South American countries make up about 40 percent of the population.

International High School, a bustling, busy place led by urban energy, is a collaborative effort between the New York City school system and LaGuardia Community College. It's located on the community college campus, where it benefits from such communal perks as access to the college's library and student store. Plus, Rosenberg says, the community college students provide an everyday example of what the high school students are striving for—not only a high school diploma, but a college education. Ninety percent of the students continue on to some form of postsecondary education. The graduation rate is also 90 percent, as is the attendance rate. All three 90s are amazing achievements given the students' background: not one of them was born in the United States. Instead, they more than likely took their first steps and spoke their first words in Central America, South America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa or Asia. There are 450 students who represent 40 countries and speak 36 languages.

As newcomers to the United States, they often acquire new responsibilities beyond the classroom. They may be called upon to work in order to help support their families, to translate for their parents or to care for younger siblings while their parents work. So a top priority is to increase personalization for these students, to help fill in the gaps. To that end, "We are nosy," Rosenberg says. "We get into people's business. That's the kind of attention we provide."

The International High School is also organized into clusters. Each one has 75 kids, four teachers, a teacher/counselor and a full-time paraprofessional. The same group of adults stays with the same group of students for two years, and teachers design their classrooms in a way that brings students together. There are very few traditional school desks at the International High School. Instead, students tend to sit in small groups around a table, and they work together on assignments, often learning much about each other's language and culture in the process. Classes alternate between brief periods of teacher instruction and longer periods of group work and student presentation, all carried out in English.

The school also provides intense doses of English-language instruction. It's part of what every classroom—math, science or social studies—does. It's the overriding focus for each of the 33 teachers at International High School. "We are a school that teaches kids English, so everybody teaches English," Rosenberg says.

One particularly remarkable example of the “everybody teaches English” idea is that as a visitor wanders the halls of the school, the language he or she is likely to hear spoken is English, despite the fact that it is not the native tongue of a single student. What English does become, though, in a school where so many different languages are spoken, is the common denominator—a way for kids from different parts of the world to connect, to trade gossip, homework assignments and even to ask for dates. Still, there is an emphasis throughout the school on helping students to stay connected to the language and culture of their home country.

The International High School has received high marks for its work, which has led New York City to begin adapting the model—which includes the idea of bringing together small groups of English-language-learners who speak different languages in order to increase their English-language interaction—in two additional districts. Unlike most schools, which are “are hampered by the ambiguity of their goals,” a report by the Institute on Education and the Economy (IEE) says that International High School has benefited from a strong sense of direction that relies, in large part, on creating small learning groups. To achieve that, IEE notes, it has departed dramatically from the traditional high school format in the United States.