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American-dream schools

By Jennifer Wheary

With a focus on immigrants, these institutions raise the bar

Here's some encouraging news about education in New York City. We are making progress in figuring out how to help students from immigrant families achieve more.

A few of the city's public high schools are designed specifically to serve immigrant children. These schools use length of time in the U.S. and a native language other than English as admissions criteria. Many immigrant students are from impoverished homes with parents who do not hold a high school diploma, let alone a college degree. Yet these schools are graduating a larger percentage of students than the citywide average, and a higher percentage of their graduates plan to go on with their education.

Take Brooklyn International High School, for instance. Sixty-eight percent of the students have been in the country three years or less, but 61% of them graduate, compared with an average rate of 54% citywide, according to the city's Annual School Reports.

In Queens, where 60% of the students at International High School on the campus of LaGuardia Community College are recent immigrants, 66% of the students graduate - 12 points higher than the city average.

All but 5% of the students at another Queens school for immigrants, Newcomers High School: Academy for New Americans, have been in the U.S. less than four years, and in a city where 67% of high school graduates plan to pursue postsecondary education, 90% of Newcomers' graduates plan to go on in school.

What is working at these schools? They offer English-language learning opportunities for students and families, small classes, assistance in finding internship opportunities and college counseling - including financial aid seminars.

These successes, though, touch only a small portion of the city's immigrant families. Clearly, the efforts of New York's public schools to serve immigrants and their children are far from perfect or complete.

According to the School Reports, the number of recent immigrants - children who have been in the country three years or less - enrolled in the city's public schools grew 24% between 2002 and 2004. The city's public school students speak 140 different languages and are from more than 200 countries. Fifty-three percent of the city's children live in immigrant-headed households.

We must expand services and continue to strive to beat formidable odds if we are to ensure that the large and growing number of immigrant students in all our schools have the opportunity to succeed. Dedicated efforts to support the aspirations of immigrant families translate into economic opportunity - the ability for an individual to make ends meet, not to mention save, invest and live a stable existence.

Over the course of a lifetime, a high school graduate earns \$300,000 more than someone who lacks a diploma. Someone with a two-year degree earns \$530,000 more. And someone with a degree from a four-year college earns about \$1.2 million more. That is serious money.

As citizens in a city awash with wealth, we can support private scholarships for first-generation college students. We can develop new ways to educate immigrant families about opportunities for financial aid and grants. We can also pair with immigrant students as mentors.

Such efforts would go a long way in ensuring that more of New York's immigrant families see their children achieve the American dream.

Wheary is a senior fellow at Demos, a public policy organization in New York City.