

# **THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRANT CHILDREN ON AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

*All Students Lose in Overcrowded Classrooms Taught by Overworked Teachers*

**An NPG Forum Paper  
by Christopher J. Daly**

## **OVERVIEW**

As a nation we have witnessed outrage after outrage during the past 15-20 years as our once-workable immigration system has fallen apart.

Today's headlines constantly carry reports on the ongoing problems related to the estimated 12 million+ illegal immigrants living in the United States. The list includes better protecting our nation's southern border, soaring costs of billion dollar entitlement programs, increasing pressure to grant citizenship to undocumented residents, and the criminal consequences of more and more states, cities, and other government entities adopting "sanctuary" policies.

What is not traditionally in the news, is that the breakdown of our nation's immigration laws and policies has put a huge strain on America's educational system — especially grades K thru 12.

The problem can be summed up by stating that from big cities to small towns, immigration overload has adversely impacted the carrying capacity of many schools. This reality means that countless young people, both natives and new immigrants, are paying for Washington's failure to get the immigration problem under control. All of this has occurred with little national debate over the ability of our schools to educate and integrate hundreds of thousands of new students into our society.

What's desperately needed is a drastic reduction in immigration rates to a truly sustainable level in order to protect our nation's many resources for generations to come. Our educational system is greatly affected by continued high rates of immigration and needs to be part of the national debate regarding realistic immigration reform.

Can such a goal be achieved? The answer to that question is very elusive. And it will take a new priority commitment from our nation's leaders to make it a reality. If we can get our country's immigration system back on a responsible and workable track, the reward will be far less overcrowded schools, far fewer overburdened teachers, a less stressful learning environment for students, and greater educational accomplishments across the board.

## **IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS**

The United States has a proud and positive history of accepting immigrants. In the early days of our country, the arrival of new people from diverse sections of the world was greatly welcomed by a nation eager to grow and expand. The ever-increasing number of immigrants from Europe that arrived on our shores in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries originally posed problems for many major cities that grew to accommodate them. However, as newcomers moved quickly into brand-

new cities and towns in the mid-west and far west, they also quickly assimilated. In essence, America's position as a "land of opportunity" enabled waves of immigrant families to adapt to America's immigration-rich culture. One of the most valuable new opportunities provided to them was a chance for their children to gain a solid education.

As new immigration restrictions started to limit immigration from Europe by the mid-twentieth century, a new wave of immigrants began to arrive in the U.S. from Mexico and Central America. Hundreds of thousands of these immigrants arrived illegally with entire families, including many children, to help farm the land and take on other hard work. As they settled into communities, the issue of educating their children became problematic in many areas. The issue of illegal students attending local schools came to the fore in a major legal case in Texas that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"In June 1982, the Supreme Court issued *Plyler v. Doe*, a landmark decision holding that states cannot constitutionally deny students a free public education on account of their immigration status. By a 5-4 vote, the Court found that any resources which might be saved from excluding undocumented children from public schools were far outweighed by the harms imposed on society at large from denying them an education."<sup>1</sup>

"A trial court found that the Texas law violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution because it amounted to a total deprivation of education without a rational basis. The court rejected the state's arguments regarding the cost of educating undocumented children, finding that the federal government largely subsidized the additional costs that the education of these children entailed and that 'it is not sufficient justification that a law saves money.'"<sup>2</sup>

With their legal rights to an education guaranteed, an ever-increasing number of illegal immigrant children, combined with more children constantly

arriving here in the U.S. legally, started to make a major impact on traditional educational policies across the nation. Today, thirty-six years after *Plyler v. Doe*, the long term impact of this major decision is evident across the country as immigration continues to be the driving force in America's population growth. Both large and small communities are working hard to create a fair and balanced education system that can serve new immigrants and native students equally. It's a serious problem that must be resolved soon, which will be increasingly difficult as our population continues to grow.

## EDUCATION DEMOGRAPHICS

The flood of illegal immigrants into the U.S. in the past 10 years has once again exacerbated the problem of illegal immigrants in schools.

Just because courts have ruled one way does not mean that the American public automatically accepts their legal decree. Even today, thirty-six years after *Plyler v. Doe*, there is outrage in many communities over how much is owed to illegal children.

"A recent Rasmussen poll found that 53 percent of likely U.S. voters said immigrants who are in the country illegally should not be allowed to attend public schools."<sup>3</sup>

In late August 2017, the United States Census Bureau put out a press release headlined: "More than 77 million people enrolled in U.S. schools." The Census breakdown of that number counted 36.6 million students enrolled in kindergarten through eighth grade.<sup>4</sup>

As recently as 1980, just 7 percent of public school students were from immigrant households, compared to 23 percent today. High immigration states have seen even more dramatic increases: 8 percent to 35 percent in Nevada, 11 percent to 34 percent in New Jersey, and 10 percent to 31 percent in Texas. Even in states that are not traditional immigrant destinations, such as Minnesota, Alaska and Kansas, 1 in 7 students are now from an immigrant household.

“U.S. Census statistics suggest that... California, now about 37 percent Latino, is expected to be majority Hispanic by 2042. A quarter of all Americans will probably be Latino in 40 years.”<sup>5</sup> “Professor Lawrence Harrison of Tufts University in Medford, MA, notes that ‘In California, fourth and fifth-generation Mexican immigrants are still speaking only Spanish and resisting assimilation.’ He says there are serious cultural barriers to the old melting-pot concept.”<sup>6</sup>

**According to the Migration Policy Institute, states with the largest and fastest-growing immigrant populations (ranked in order with 280 percent or higher growth between 1990 and 2010) are North Carolina, Georgia, Arkansas, Tennessee, Nevada, South Carolina, Kentucky, Nebraska, Alabama, and Utah.<sup>7</sup>**

With a large growth of immigrant students at the state level, the local impact can be astonishing. “Immigration has also added enormously to the population of students who speak a foreign language. In 2015, nearly 1 in 5 students in the country spoke a language other than English at home.”<sup>8</sup>

## **RIISING COSTS**

We may call it a “free education” but for most communities, education is one of the most expensive items in the budget.

As America’s elementary and high schools have been saddled with having to accommodate a rising number of immigrant children, including legal, illegal and refugee newcomers, each school district has had to deal with the problem in individual ways.

There is a wide disparity of how these entities handle this problem because of the huge array of challenges.

Many schools across America are still grappling with the huge influx of young people from Central America that arrived in 2014. These students were dispersed throughout the country, forcing school officials in many communities (some of which were not accustomed to taking in international students and were unprepared for them) to make major adjustments in schools that often stretch resources to the limit. Scott Kitzner, the superintendent of schools in Harrisonburg, Virginia makes it clear by stating: “The reality is this: The federal government gives us basically no money to support these children, so the funding is coming from the state budget and mostly from the local budget.”<sup>9</sup>

Traditionally, a community can cope with a steady flow of new arrivals in their schools by studying the need for new elementary and high schools in the future, setting forth financial plans to build or expand present school facilities, and preparing budgets to hire new teachers, etc. All of those plans go out the window when a surge of new immigrants arrive.

In many areas an extremely large number of students show up in a short period of time. This leads to an almost overnight crisis of school overcrowding, major teacher shortages, huge educational budget shortfalls, and a lack of school equipment and resources for all students.

Thus, we are confronted with a large segment of the U.S. where schools are hard-pressed to cope with radical changes in traditional education. Added to this equation is the reality that these school districts also have to manage large numbers of students who have had little exposure to education and cannot speak or read English (or are not even proficient in their own language), distracted teachers, and lower expectations from both teachers and students.

Speaking directly to this problem, Bishop Council Nedd, II, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Missionary Church in Washington, D.C., noted:

“As someone who has spent two years teaching at a public charter school in Washington, D.C., I can attest to the demands and hardships that comes (sic) with an underfunded and overcrowded classroom. While I don’t fault anyone for wanting to come to America to seek a better life, the problem posed by the current wave of humanity illegally coming across our borders is problematic and unsustainable. It creates an unfair situation for native-born students and immigrants who are here legally, teachers, lawmakers who must set budgets, and taxpayers who must pay for those budgets.”<sup>10</sup>

***“Dumping illegal immigrant children into our public schools with no recourse is a bad reaction to a bad problem.”***

—Bishop Council Nedd, II

There is definitely no “one size fits all” solution when it comes to immigrants in America’s schools. We are confronted with school districts that adjust easily and pride themselves on welcoming a growing immigrant population vs. school districts that are overwhelmed. *The New York Times* takes note of this in stating: “There are suburban school districts that smoothly absorb immigrants, particularly wealthy students with advanced skills, like many Japanese in Scarsdale or Iranians in Great Neck, L.I. Westbury also had few difficulties with earlier Haitian arrivals, many of whom had been through elite schools in their country. Then came the most recent group, impoverished students from El Salvador or Haiti, who frequently did not know how to read or write in their own languages.”<sup>11</sup>

## **COST TO NATIVE CHILDREN**

The crisis of too many immigrants in the classroom seems to know no bounds. A recent

study from Denmark addressed this issue in that country. Its findings are 100% applicable to U.S. schools: “One of the most direct consequences of having many immigrant children in the classroom might be that the teacher’s attention and time are diverted from the native children. Since immigrant children typically have a poorer command of the host country language, the teacher may need to spend more class time providing individual assistance. The teacher may also slow the pace of instruction to accommodate immigrant children with limited language proficiency or a weak educational background. As a result, teachers may cover less of the curriculum than the class would otherwise have covered. It is also possible that the teacher may adopt less language-intensive pedagogical methods, which could harm the learning experience of the native children in the same classroom.”

“The problem is often reinforced by the so-called ‘native flight’ from schools with a high share of immigrant children if, in response to a high concentration of immigrant children, native parents move their children to other schools, in particular to private schools.”<sup>12</sup>

## **ADDITION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SCHOOLS**

Columnist Peter Brimelow notes: “The impact of immigration on education is very specific. One aspect of it is that it enormously increases the cost of the overall education system in the country.... Well, one of the reasons they’re spending so much is that educating children in foreign languages is extremely expensive. It costs nearly twice as much per head, per capita, to educate a child in a foreign language than it does to educate a native-born child in English. And in some areas, the immigrant impact is very large. I think perhaps a quarter of the kids in the California school system are actually being educated in foreign languages. In Los Angeles and New York they’re educating in over 100 different languages. This is enormously expensive and is one reason for the enormous cost burden of immigration



on education right now. The second aspect of the impact of immigration on education which intrigues me is the impact of this on the native-born. In other words, if you have a school system like you have in California with one-quarter of the kids in it who can't speak English, doesn't that distract the teachers from the native-born kids who do speak English? And wouldn't that show up in the performances?"<sup>13</sup>

While there are many educators who advocate for ever-expanding bilingual classes in U.S. schools, the non-profit group U.S. English relates a story of how it often does not serve the best interests of native students:

*"Imagine a five-year old boy who speaks only his native language. On the first day of school, he is placed in a classroom where the teacher and other students speak a completely different language, one which he has never heard before. There is no special program to help him learn the language — for him, it's "sink or swim." The boy's father asks the school to transfer him out of the class into one more suited to his needs, one where he can actually understand what is going on in the classroom. The school refuses." [the father has filed a lawsuit].*

*Bilingual education's defenders would probably say that this story is a perfect example of why we need bilingual education. They would be wrong, because it is actually about a bilingual program run amok. In this case, five-year-old Travell is an English-speaking African American who was placed in a Cantonese-speaking kindergarten class in Oakland, California."*

In relating this tale, U.S. English goes on to explain that the school had not made a mistake, this move was intentional. It served a dual purpose of filling in extra space to round out a class size and it increased the amount of federal dollars the school could receive for placing — and keeping — students in bilingual classes. In focusing on this absurdity U.S. English underscored the fact that bilingual proponents do not always act in the best interests of the children. Their demand for reform

of such policies is driven by the organization's simple declaration: "In America, a child shouldn't be forced to file a lawsuit to get his education in English."<sup>14</sup>

Speaking on the issue of bilingualism in 2005, former Colorado Governor Richard D. Lamm stated: "I have a secret plan to destroy America. We must first make America a bilingual-bicultural country. History shows, in my opinion, that no nation can survive the tension, conflict and antagonism of two competing languages and cultures. It is a blessing for an individual to be bilingual; it is a curse for a society to be bilingual."<sup>15</sup>

A similar assessment of bilingualism was put forth by NPG researcher Edwin Rubenstein in 2017 when he noted: "In schools struggling to deal with a multiplicity of foreign languages, the quality of spoken and written English among students from immigration households suffers. For many of them, the American Dream will remain a dream."<sup>16</sup>

## OVERCROWDING

Overall consensus is that classrooms should be kept as small as possible — especially in early grades when kids are ages 5-8. Today's teachers have little or no time to provide one-on-one attention or give immediate feedback to troubled students.

Yet, class size in almost every room in every school district is on the rise. The main reason for this is the lack of funding which would enable the school to hire more teachers. Governments seem to be financing public education less and less every year. Instead of keeping down the number of students in every classroom, schools are increasing the amount of students to a questionable total. What is considered too many students in a classroom? The simple answer is when it affects each child's learning.<sup>17</sup>

"The nation's two largest teachers' unions endorse smaller class sizes. The American Federation of Teachers 'strongly advocates for reducing class size to help raise student achievement, especially

in high-poverty at risk schools' of between 15 and 19 students per class. The National Education Association similarly 'supports a class size of 15 students in the earliest grades of regular school programs and even smaller classes in programs for students with exceptional needs.'"<sup>18</sup>

About 14 percent of schools exceed their capacity by six to 25 percent, and eight percent exceed it by more than 25 percent. To alleviate overcrowding, more than one-third of schools use portable classrooms. Adding to the inability of schools to accommodate more students is the fact that the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) reported that in 2017 "Almost a quarter (24%) of all public schools were rated as being in 'fair' or 'poor' condition. Among schools with temporary buildings, the share in 'fair' or 'poor' condition rises to 45%."<sup>19</sup>

Laura Preble, a teacher in Santee, CA, notes: "In my nearly 20 years teaching in my district, we've had several occasions to protest, trying to make our board of education sit up and take notice. One button read: 'Grossmont Students Lose With Class Size of 34 to One'. It's black printing on a bright yellow button. I have it pinned to my bulletin board. Now, I'd give almost anything to have 34 students in my classroom. This year, I have 40 in every single section (that's five sections...200 kids). Where we used to lack space, now we lack seats within rooms. Kids sit on counters, on the floors, wherever they can find a space. Teachers struggle to be heard above the din of 40 plus kids, and kids struggle to hear the teacher and keep up with instruction. While we're racing to the top and leaving no child behind, we're burying them."<sup>20</sup>

"Unlike a shrunken police or fire department, the impact of school cuts isn't always obvious. There are no bodies in the streets, no charred evidence of harm done. That has made school systems attractive targets for austerity-minded politicians across the country. But impact of these cuts is visible...and the ripple effects can last a lifetime. Earlier grades are

especially important, because that's when students learn the fundamentals — how to read, write, add and subtract — that undergird the rest of their education. Studies have shown that students who don't learn to read proficiently by third grade are much more likely to drop out. Third grade is also the year students start taking standardized tests, which can alter their educational futures."<sup>21</sup>

"The California State Department of Education estimates that 16 new classrooms will need to be built every day, seven days a week, for the next 5 years. That's effectively **one new school per day!** The number of teachers will need to be *doubled* within ten years, meaning that 300,000 new educators will be required."<sup>22</sup> That's just in California!

Will we also see ballooning numbers of young people crowding into schools across the United States in the coming years? It is hard to answer that question until all of the dust settles on the promises of major reform in our nation's failed immigration system which has created such educational havoc.

## CONCLUSION

It is expected that immigration will account for 96 percent of the increase in the school-age population over the next 50 years. "If mass immigration continues, the education of all children in America will continue to be undermined. Education costs will continue to escalate and quality of education will continue to decline."<sup>23</sup>

Steve Camarota of the Center for Immigration Studies makes a valid point in stating: "A key immigration policy question for our nation going forward is whether it makes sense to continue to admit 1 million legal permanent immigrants each year, and to tolerate widespread illegal immigration, without regard to the absorption capacity of our schools."<sup>24</sup>

Population activist Frosty Wooldridge notes: "At the current rate of mass legal and illegal immigration, our country expects an added 138,000,000 people within 35 years. That means a doubling of our 35

most populated cities. That means New York City jumps from 8.3 million to 16.6 million; Chicago, Illinois increases from 5 million to 10 million; Los Angeles grows from 11 million to 22 million.”<sup>25</sup>

Can America's educational system survive such numbers and still meet its goals? Perhaps. But we need essential changes immediately. Unfortunately, they will not come easily especially as our nation continues to rush toward a population of more than 400 million people by mid-century.

If major efforts for immigration reform in the Second Session of the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress fall short

and do not fix the failures of our nation's present immigration system, we're in trouble.

Without question, the most effective way to “fix” many of the problems of our nation's educational system would be for our nation's leaders to work toward a smaller population. That means radically cutting the present number of approximately 1 million legal immigrants annually welcomed into our country. Without this action, we will only witness further exacerbation of today's educational problems. Toward that end, our children and our nation will greatly suffer.

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**NOTE:** The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.



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