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Connecting Disadvantaged Immigrant Students to Community Resources May Boost School Achievement

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Can Community and School-Based Supports Improve the Achievement of First-Generation Immigrant Children Attending High-Poverty Schools?

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The number of children in the United States who are immigrants has risen rapidly in recent years. Immigrant children are at risk for poor school achievement, particularly when they are from low-income families. In a new longitudinal study, first-generation immigrant children who took part in a community-based intervention had higher scores on math and reading tests than their first-generation immigrant peers who did not participate in the program. The intervention also appeared to narrow the achievement gap between English language learners and children proficient in English.

The findings, from researchers at Boston College, appear in the journal *Child Development*.

“Poverty affects not only the amount and quality of learning support a child receives, but also the likelihood of experiencing stress, chaos, and violence,” notes Eric Dearing, professor of applied developmental psychology at Boston College, who led the study. “For immigrant children, these risks may be aggravated by language barriers, documentation status, and discrimination.”

In the study, 292 first-generation immigrant children who attended eight highpoverty, urban elementary schools in Boston took part in the intervention, called City Connects, in the early 2000s. The mean age of the children was 11; about 40 percent were Hispanic, about 30 percent were Asian, about 25 percent were Black, and about 5 percent were White. Most of the students were from low-income families and two-thirds were English language learners. The comparison group included 375 first-generation immigrant children of similar racial/ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic status who attended the same schools before the intervention was implemented.

At each school, a trained site coordinator—a licensed school counselor or school social worker—collaborated with classroom teachers to evaluate how children were doing academically, behaviorally and socially, and in terms of their health. Using the information gleaned from the evaluations, the site coordinators and teachers worked together to develop a support plan for each student based on the child's strengths and needs, determining, for example, the services and supports that would help each child (e.g., afterschool programs, tutoring, mentoring, family counseling).

Then, the site coordinators located service providers to support the students based on their identified needs as well as the circumstances of individual children and their families (e.g., school schedules, transportation needs, access to insurance). Families were consulted about the plans and adjustments were made as needed. Finally, children and their families were connected with the services—the most common being tutoring, after-school programs, mentoring, arts and music enrichment programs, sports programs, and mental health counseling—and site coordinators used a database to track the support plans and follow up.

Children with intensive needs (8 -10 percent of those in the study) were connected with a wider team of professionals (e.g., school psychologists, teachers, principals, nurses, and community agency staff) to develop additional supports. Students whose families had acute needs (e.g., homelessness, food and clothing needs) were offered services directly (e.g., delivery of food and clothing).

Eight weeks after the first review of the students' needs and again in the second half of the school year, site coordinators met with teachers to evaluate the plan and the children's progress. Children who took part in City Connects for at least a year did better on state math exams than children in the comparison group who didn't participate in the intervention. Children who took part in the program for two years did better on state reading exams than those who didn't take part or who took part for just a year. The more time children spent in the intervention, the better their achievement. Furthermore, immigrant children who were learning English and participated in the intervention had achievement scores on those state tests that were nearly as high as the achievement scores of classmates who were proficient in English.

"Connections to community and school-based supports that build on children's developmental strengths and address barriers to learning and health can improve the achievement of first-generation immigrant children, particularly those who enter school not fluent in English," explains Mary Walsh, Kearns professor in urban education and innovative leadership at Boston College, who coauthored the study. "Policies and programs that build on this approach may have considerable implications not just for newcomers but for

their schools and communities.”

The study was supported by the Foundation for Child Development, the Barr Foundation, and the Charles Hayden Foundation.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Can Community and School-Based Supports Improve the Achievement of First-Generation Immigrant Children Attending High-Poverty Schools? by Dearing, E., Walsh, M., Sibley, E., Lee-St. John, T., Foley, C., and Raczek, A. (Boston College). Copyright 2016 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.