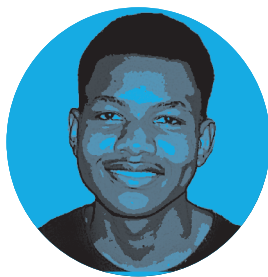




Adolescent
Immigrant
Access
REPORT
2023



AND OBSTACLES OPPORTUNITIES

SUPPORTING COLLEGE AND CAREER ACCESS
FOR ADOLESCENT IMMIGRANT STUDENTS



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TABLE OF CONTENTS



03	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
05	INTRODUCTION
09	THE NATIONAL CONTEXT Post-Secondary Access for Adolescent Immigrant Students
13	OBSTACLES Through the Eyes of Educators and Students
20	OPPORTUNITIES Educators and Students Increasing Access
31	CONCLUSION
33	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
34	REFERENCES
37	APPENDIX: CURRICULUM RATIONALE Exploring the Post-Secondary Landscape for Adolescent Immigrant Students

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In the 21st century, the United States continues to be a nation of immigrants, with over one in four students having an immigrant parent (Anderson & Hemez, 2022). Students from immigrant families bring unique assets and experiences to their educational journeys, and many achieve remarkable post-secondary success.

Nevertheless, the educational system in the United States still has a long way to go toward developing the resources, practices, and policies to adequately support all immigrant students to access and succeed in their desired paths after high school.

This report focuses on the experiences of one subset of immigrant students: those who move to the United States when they are near high school age. These adolescent immigrant students face additional obstacles because they have limited time before high school graduation and most schools are not designed with their strengths and needs in mind; as a result, they are held back from accessing the post-secondary outcomes attained by U.S.-born students and those who immigrate to the United States at an earlier age (Arbeit et al., 2016).

For this report, we spoke with two dozen stakeholders—counselors and teachers who work with adolescent immigrant students and immigrant students themselves—to better understand the barriers these students encounter on their post-secondary paths and the possibilities for serving them better. Through these conversations, four obstacles and corresponding opportunities stood out as important for educators to be aware of and address.



1 Learning Language While Learning the Landscape

← Obstacle: When adolescent immigrant students arrive in the United States, they must learn English, adapt to a new country, and navigate a new school system—all before the end of high school. As a result, post-secondary exploration is often treated as a luxury, leaving students uninformed and unprepared for options for life after high school.

↑ Opportunity: By starting college and career lessons in the 9th grade and continuing them through all four years of high school, they can become an integral part of developing English proficiency and can enhance students' adaptation to life in the United States. Doing this requires adapting lessons to fit students' English proficiency, drawing on prior knowledge to illuminate differences from students' home countries, and providing practice and exposure to potential post-secondary paths.



2 Making the Process Family Focused

← Obstacle: Families play a central role in immigrant students' lives, yet the education system is not built to involve immigrant families in the college and career process. Language barriers, inaccessible event times and formats, and different cultural expectations all make it hard for immigrant families to engage fully in the post-secondary process at schools.

↑ Opportunity: By prioritizing translation and linguistically diverse staff and by rethinking approaches to event scheduling, schools can become more family-focused. Moreover, a focus on trusting relationships and proactively addressing cultural differences can empower families and ensure post-secondary plans take family needs into consideration.



3 Addressing Systemic Barriers for Undocumented Students

← Obstacle: Along with the emotional trauma of being undocumented, students who are undocumented face substantial systemic barriers on their post-secondary paths, from being ineligible for federal financial aid to being prohibited from working in many careers that require licensure. These hurdles are often further amplified by schools that are not well-equipped to support them.

↑ Opportunity: By creating an environment that explicitly welcomes and protects undocumented students, by integrating undocumented perspectives into every post-secondary lesson, and by building capacity for specialized guidance, schools can provide the resources students need to manage and overcome these obstacles.

4 Individualized Advising for Individual Pathways



← Obstacle: Adolescent immigrant students' post-secondary applications and choices can be much more complex than U.S.-born students', yet schools frequently lack the advising capacity to provide students with the individualized support they require.

↑ Opportunity: By making investments in counseling capacity and by creating an environment that encourages trusting relationships, schools can provide personalized guidance, clarify confusions in the application process, and prepare students for a wide variety of post-secondary paths that may change over time.

Insight into these obstacles and opportunities has implications for all levels of the education system. Teachers and counselors can use these insights when working with individual students. Because this work requires a school-wide effort, this report also puts special attention on the curriculum and practices that leaders can champion and implement across a school to support post-secondary pathways. And we hope the voices shared here inspire policymakers to remove obstacles and provide schools with the resources they need to empower adolescent immigrant students to realize their enormous potential.

INTRODUCTION

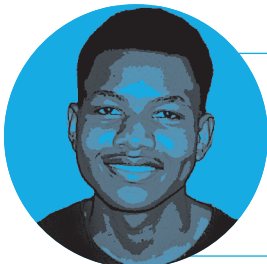


The first day of high school is a huge milestone in a young person’s life, as they head to a new building and face new expectations and challenges. For some students, the start of high school is even more monumental: it is the first day of school in a new country.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of teenagers immigrate to the United States and encounter the daunting challenges of rapidly learning a new language, adapting to a new culture, and charting a course to a new future. While these students share the common experience of moving to a new country, the paths that brought them to the United States are varied, and their aspirations for life after high school are equally diverse.

Student Profiles

The varied experiences of Omar, Gabriela, and Priya¹ offer a window into the many pathways to post-secondary education that adolescent immigrant students travel and the diverse challenges they face along the way.



OMAR

Omar grew up in the Gambia and moved to the United States on his own at age 15 with the goal of finding work and sending money back to his family. While his initial plans did not involve any schooling, he ended up enrolling in high school, becoming class president of his community college, and transferring to a four-year college, all while working past midnight every night to make money to send home.

GABRIELA

Gabriela’s family was split apart when she and her father moved to the United States to escape gang violence in El Salvador. As an immigrant without documentation, during her first years in the United States, she assumed that she couldn’t go to college. When she later learned that college was a possibility, she had to scramble to improve her grades and apply. She is now enrolled in college and working part-time at her old high school to help the next class of seniors be better informed than she was.



PRIYA

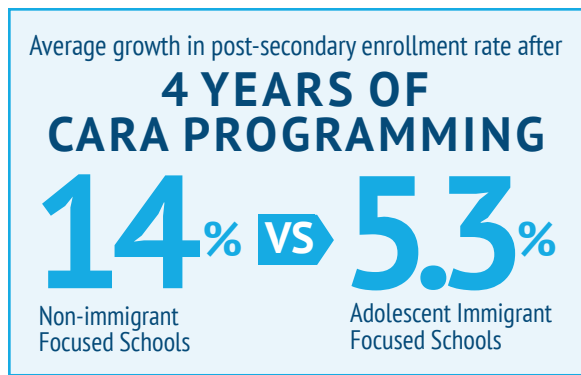
Priya came with her family to New York City from Bangladesh midway through the 8th grade. A high achiever back home and in the United States, she always assumed she would go to college to fulfill her parents’ vision of her becoming a doctor, but because of gaps in her post-secondary advising, she nearly missed an opportunity to attend a selective liberal arts college with all expenses paid.

¹All names of people and schools are pseudonyms. Some details have been altered to further anonymize identities.

The paths of this group of students—those who move to the United States late in middle school or during their early high school years—are more difficult than most of their peers. While they share a set of conditions with immigrant children who arrive at younger ages—they are more likely to be low-income than U.S.-born students, and they are too often placed in schools with limited resources—their experiences and post-secondary outcomes are also different from those who immigrate earlier in their educational careers (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).² Immigrants who come to the United States at a young age graduate from high school and enter college at roughly the same rates as U.S.-born students, while immigrants who move to the United States as adolescents are less likely to reach those educational milestones (Callahan & Humphries, 2016; Erisman & Looney, 2007).

While immigrants who move to the U.S. at a young age enter college at the same rate as U.S.-born students, those who come as adolescents are much less likely to enroll.

This is a particularly troubling outcome because, like Omar, Priya, and Gabriela, so many of these students exhibit exceptional resilience, creativity, and strength as they adapt to their new country. They bring with them unique and valuable cross-cultural gifts, and, when given adequate opportunity and support, their pathways truly embody

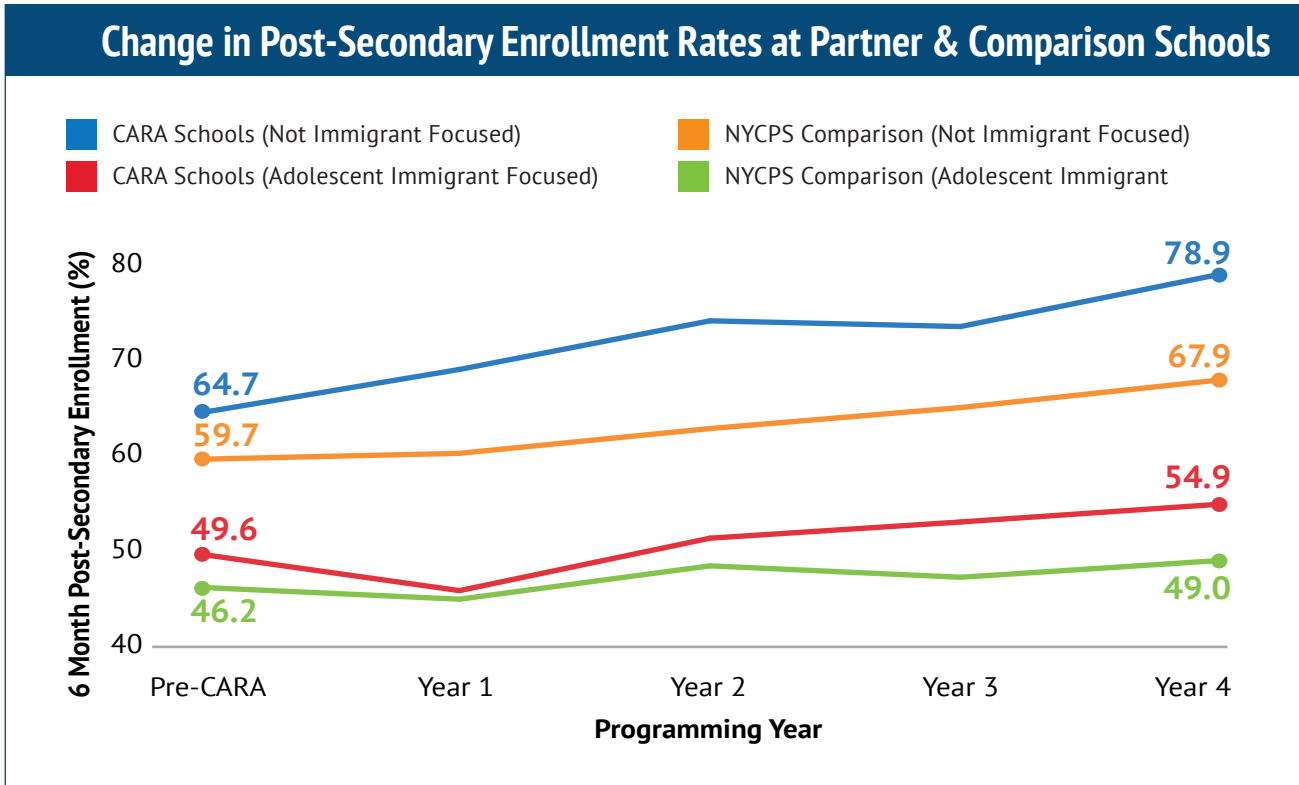


the “American dream,” for which this country claims to stand (Gurantz & Obadan, 2022; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011).

Since 2011, CARA (College Access: Research & Action) has worked closely—through both our **whole school and peer-to-peer models**—with many schools that specialize in serving adolescent immigrant students. Even before the pandemic, we were seeing the trends noted in the research above: that our programming efforts were not bearing as much fruit in these schools, in that this group of students were not moving on to college at rates similar to their non-immigrant peers. While schools we worked with serving predominantly non-immigrant students improved their post-secondary outcomes by an average of 14 percentage points after four years of implementation of CARA programs, outcomes at schools we worked with focused on serving adolescent immigrant students increased by only 5.3 percentage points. Then came the pandemic, which hit immigrant communities particularly hard, with multilingual learners (MLLs)³ leaving school at some of the highest rates of any group in the country (Lukes et al., 2021).

² Students arriving later in high school (11th or 12th grade) face even more challenges than students who immigrate at the beginning of high school, as those students have even less time to learn English and often face tremendous pressure to immediately join the workforce (Penn, 2021). These older immigrant high school students are not included here due to the demographics of the schools we collaborated with on this project.

³ We follow current NYC Public Schools usage, defining multilingual learners (MLLs) as students whose home language is not English and who need additional support learning English. Federal and other state policies currently refer to these students as English language learners (ELLs).



*Comparisons are calculated by the NYC Public Schools based on schools with similar student demographics.

Over the past several years, we have been thrilled to see a growing set of resources made available to support individual immigrant students, particularly those who are undocumented, with accessing post-secondary education, such as guides created by **Informed Immigrant, My Undocumented Life**, and **Immigrants Rising**. And, in New York City, we are encouraged by the work of New York City Public Schools' **Division of Multilingual Learners**, as well as a number of organizations focused on creating inclusive environments for immigrants, including **Internationals Network for Public Schools**, **ImmSchools**, the **CUNY - Initiative on Immigration and Education (CUNY-IIE)**, and the **New York State Youth Leadership Council**. However, we perceive that there is still a need for more work addressing levers at

the school level that can have a significant impact on post-secondary outcomes.

As we emerge from the pandemic and have an opportunity to rethink our work, CARA has been wondering: what more do we need to understand and do to realize the post-secondary dreams of these students and their families? What best practices for college and career access need to be added or altered to better support adolescent immigrant students in their schools? These are the questions we set out to answer in this report.

In order to do so, we went to the experts: counselors working every day on post-secondary access for adolescent immigrant students. Over the past year, we interviewed 18 college counselors, teachers, and leaders at nine high schools spanning four of New

York City’s five boroughs.⁴ Three of the schools were large comprehensive high schools, where immigrant students and MLLs make up about 15–25% of the student body. Three of the high schools are part of **Internationals Network for Public Schools**, which specializes in serving students who are learning English and have recently moved to the United States. Three schools were small schools with a focus on language learning that enroll a mix of U.S.-born students who want to learn foreign languages and immigrant multilingual learners. We also spoke with recent alumni of these schools—including Omar, Priya, and Gabriela—and conferred with numerous program partners to deepen our understanding and corroborate what we heard from practitioners.

Across these various groups, a set of themes surfaced—both persistent obstacles facing adolescent immigrant students and also opportunities for addressing them.

These obstacles and opportunities fell into four areas:



1 Learning Language While Learning the Landscape



2 Making the Process Family Focused



3 Addressing Systemic Barriers for Undocumented Students



4 Individualized Advising for Individual Pathways

Many of these findings align with the best practices that we promote for all low-income, first-generation college students, such as the importance of teaching about the post-secondary landscape in the early grades, the value of involving families, and the fact that personalized advising should be a right for all. Along with reinforcing the need to invest in these practices, the findings also add nuance and new directions. They highlight the essential role of integrating language learning into post-secondary lessons; they describe how to account for different cultural expectations when engaging with families; they add specific resources for supporting undocumented students to overcome systemic barriers; and they extend the notion of individualized advising to include paths that may change as students’ immigration status and English proficiency change.

In the first half of this report, we review relevant research and then trace the obstacles named by educators and students in these areas. In the second half of the report, we share possibilities—gleaned from those same students and educators—for improving schools’ practices across grades 9–12 for these students.

While our conversations were limited to New York City (and overrepresented small high schools that serve predominantly MLLs, which is not typical of schools across the country), we believe that the insights into these students’ post-secondary journeys and the suggested solutions can be relevant to many high schools serving adolescent immigrant students in New York City and beyond.

⁴ The backgrounds of the educators varied, but the majority had 10+ years of experience, had formal training in ENL education, were multilingual, and shared an ethnic/cultural background with one of the main immigrant populations at their school. About a third had been adolescent immigrants themselves.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Post-Secondary Access for Adolescent Immigrant Students



What does research tell us about how adolescent immigrant students—young people like Gabriela, Omar, and Priya—experience the post-secondary access process in the United States?

The United States truly continues to be a nation of immigrants, with over a quarter of all students having at least one parent who is an immigrant (Anderson & Hemez, 2022). While having an immigrant parent is relatively common, the vast majority of the children of immigrants were themselves born in the United States. About 2.1 million children, or 3% of all children in the United States, are immigrants themselves and only a portion of those move to the United States around high school age (Batalova et al., 2020; Lukes et al., 2022a).

common to grow up in an immigrant family (DiNapoli, 2016). These cities thus also serve a disproportionately high percentage of adolescent immigrant students.

Existing academic research on immigrant students finds there are four factors that have an especially notable influence on their post-secondary experiences and outcomes:

- > **Their age and English proficiency when they arrive in the United States**
- > **Their family’s income and education**
- > **The resources available at their school**
- > **Their immigration status**

In New York City nearly half the children have at least one foreign-born parent, and, in some city schools, it is even more common to grow up in an immigrant family.

While adolescent immigrant students make up a relatively small proportion of students nationwide, they are overrepresented in particular parts of the country that serve as “gateway destinations”: about two-thirds of all immigrants live in just 20 metropolitan areas (Budiman, 2020). In New York City, for example, nearly half the children have at least one foreign-born parent, and, in some city schools, it is even more

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Age and English Proficiency

Students' English proficiency and their age when they arrive in the United States are closely related in terms of how they shape post-secondary experiences. Research finds that there is actually an "immigrant advantage" in terms of college enrollments for the children of immigrants relative to their U.S.-born peers: a broad range of research finds that children who immigrate to the United States or who are children of immigrants generally attain higher graduation rates, college enrollments, and incomes than similar U.S.-born peers (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Kao, 2004; Kasinitz, 2008).

Students who immigrate in high school must race to learn English fast enough to make progress toward milestones on the post-secondary pathway.

However, children of immigrants who are classified as multilingual learners in high school or who arrive in the United States after age 12 typically do not experience this advantage; instead, they are less likely to go to college than U.S.-born students, and if they do enroll, they are more likely to go to a community college (Arbeit et al., 2016; Callahan & Humphries, 2016; Erisman & Looney, 2007). One of the main reasons for this is that, while young people are remarkably versatile—capable of adapting to new languages, new cultures, and new school systems in just a few years—this adaptation process still takes time. Students who immigrate in high school must race to learn English fast enough to make progress toward milestones on the post-secondary pathway at a time that their brains are less plastic than

earlier, making language acquisition more difficult (Hartshorne et al., 2018). In New York state, for example, passing the English Regents exam is a substantial barrier to high school graduation for many adolescent immigrant students who are still mastering English proficiency (Amin, 2023). In this context, learning quickly enough to make it to high school graduation, let alone taking the SAT and building an academic record strong enough to get into college, is a significant accomplishment. These hurdles can be even higher for Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs), who have been out of school before arriving in the United States and may be two or more years below grade-level proficiency in their native language and other academic subjects.

Family Income and Education

The income and education levels of U.S. immigrants vary widely, as immigration pathways span those coming on visas for highly skilled workers to economic and political refugees. On average, however, immigrant families are more likely to be low-income than U.S.-born families (45% compared to 35%) and to have less formal education (Batalova et al., 2020). This is also the case among the nine schools included in this report, where 85% of students have "high economic need," as defined by the NYC Public Schools.

IMMIGRANT FAMILIES
ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE LOW-INCOME
THAN U.S.-BORN FAMILIES

85%

**OF STUDENTS AT THE 9 SCHOOLS IN THIS
REPORT HAVE HIGH ECONOMIC NEED**

Given the weak social safety net in the United States, growing up in a low-income setting can present tremendous barriers to academic and economic success. From the daily challenges associated with not having enough money to afford essential needs to a lack of secure housing and reliable healthcare, living in a low-income environment puts a heavy burden on students (Williams Shanks & Robinson, 2013). At multiple points in the post-secondary application process, it also places additional obstacles on students' paths, such as limited access to enrichment activities and an increased likelihood of being flagged for additional verification before receiving financial aid (Smith, 2018). These circumstances have been shown to have a negative impact on high school graduation, college enrollment, and experiences in college and beyond (Cahalan et al., 2022; Jack, 2019; Reardon, 2011).

Low-income immigrant students are more likely to attend segregated schools that suffer from chronic underfunding, have high rates of teacher turnover, and lack the academic and counseling support needed to prepare for college.

Race, ethnicity, and families' country of origin also play a key role in shaping immigrant experiences. Many immigrants experience discrimination because of the way they are racialized and viewed by others in the United States, leading to stigma, exclusion from opportunities, and negative impacts on mental health (Greene et al., 2006). On

the other hand, ethnic ties can be powerful assets, as those who move near others from the same country often benefit from social connections and community support (Kasinitz, 2008).

School Resources

Family income also shapes post-secondary attainment because of its relationship to the types of schooling one has access to. Housing and education policies make low-income students more likely to attend segregated schools that suffer from chronic underfunding, have high rates of teacher turnover, and lack the academic and counseling support needed to prepare for college (Cosentino de Cohen et al., 2005; Gandara, 2010). At larger high schools, research shows that immigrant students are frequently put at an additional disadvantage by being tracked into English as a New Language (ENL) cohorts that have fewer resources and lower academic expectations than other classes (Garver & Hopkins, 2020) and limit their exposure to post-secondary opportunities (Kanno & Cromley, 2015; Shapiro, 2022).

While specialized English instruction is essential and ENL-focused environments can be effective at preparing students for post-secondary pathways if they are well resourced and intentional in their approach (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2011; López et al., 2020)—the Internationals Network for Public Schools being a model of what this can look like when done well⁵—many schools lack such attributes, making the ENL track the de facto “lower” track (Callahan & Humphries, 2016; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2012). Moreover, humanitarian crises that lead to many new arrivals—such as asylum seekers from South America coming to New York City during the fall of 2022—can overwhelm schools with a sudden increase

⁵ See Internationals Network for Public Schools Learning Brief #2 (Lukes et al., 2022b).

in need, especially if the school district is not well prepared for these events (Amin, 2022). Adding to this, some state and school policies prohibit the use of native languages in the classroom, which can damage students' confidence and is against a growing body of research recommending "translanguaging" in ENL pedagogy (Beres, 2015).

Immigration Status

Finally, for students who are undocumented or who live in "mixed-status families" (where family members have varied immigration statuses), the impact of this legal designation is far-reaching. About a third (800,000) of all immigrant students in the United States are undocumented (Batalova et al., 2020), and even more young people—more than 5 million—live with at least one family member who is undocumented, affecting over 7% of all children in the United States (Knox, 2021). These students are vulnerable to the instability and lack of resources that people without permanent residency or citizenship face, and they live with the daily anxiety and fear of deportation (Gonzales, 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). These concerns can make families wary of coming to schools and engaging with teachers; for this reason, research has found that while undocumented families support their students' post-secondary paths, frequently making great sacrifices to do so, those efforts often go unnoticed by educators (Cuevas, 2019).

On top of this, the lack of access to federal financial aid presents a tremendous economic hurdle for undocumented students. Some states, like New York and California, provide limited state-based financial aid, allow undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition, and promise that schools will be "sanctuary sites" where U.S. Immigration

and Customs Enforcement (ICE) cannot enter (Izzi & Corbett, 2022). However, states like Alabama and South Carolina have prohibited undocumented students from enrolling in public higher education at all (National Immigration Law Center, 2022).⁶ At the high school level, research has found that many educators are not well prepared to support undocumented students, making it even harder for them to surmount these hurdles (Castrellón, 2021; Kleyn et al., 2018).

Young people's contexts of immigration may also be associated with additional traumas. Many immigrants come to the United States seeking asylum from dangers in their own country, and some young people come to the United States on their own as unaccompanied minors. These journeys can involve significant traumas in one's home country, on their path to the United States, and in their daily lives in this country, all of which can impact their mental health and thus their ability to pursue continued education (Leo, 2022).

Students who arrive as immigrants in adolescence face a daunting set of challenges in pursuing post-secondary education. Alongside others who are focusing on these issues, we hope to highlight these challenges in order to help public schools strategically support these students.

5 MILLION CHILDREN
LIVE WITH AT LEAST ONE FAMILY
MEMBER WHO IS UNDOCUMENTED

AFFECTING OVER

7% OF ALL CHILDREN
IN THE U.S.

⁶ These policies are changing quickly. We recommend looking up the most recent information for your state.



OBSTACLES

Through the Eyes of Educators and Students



As we spoke with participants for this report, we were struck by the multitude of obstacles students faced and their perseverance in overcoming them. While their experiences mirrored much of what is described in the academic literature, their voices added nuance and complexity that illuminated the lived experience of pursuing post-secondary access as an adolescent immigrant student and of working as an educator to support them.



Obstacle #1: Learning Language While Learning the Landscape

When Priya moved to the United States, she had already taken years of English at her school in Bangladesh, yet her classes had focused on writing and her teacher spoke with a Bengali accent. When she came to New York, she was shocked by how hard it was to understand her teachers. She often went home distraught, having “no idea what the homework was for the next day.” It wasn’t until Priya transferred to a high school for multilingual learners that she was able to fill in the gaps in her English comprehension and begin to demonstrate the full depth of her knowledge.

Most of the students we spoke with came to the United States with less prior English knowledge than Priya. While adolescent immigrant students learn remarkably fast, educators said that building proficiency in English makes post-secondary preparation more difficult because of the amount of new information students need to learn in a limited period of time, the unpredictable pace of language acquisition, and the need to build not just students’ ability but also their confidence in English.

In the early years of high school, the pressure to learn English makes it more difficult to build an initial understanding of the post-secondary landscape. This is partly a matter of space in the curriculum. According to one counselor, “a lot of the 9th and 10th grade teachers feel like there’s so much language and content that has to be taught right now—that we don’t have time for college stuff. It’s extraneous; it’s a luxury.”

Even when teachers do find time for post-secondary lessons, students’ emerging English proficiency can make the content hard to comprehend. One teacher told us that “in 9th and 10th grade, the language is such a barrier for some students that some of what happens around them is just not absorbed.” As Gabriela told us, “In the beginning, we are teenagers, and we have those things about English that we don’t really understand. So sometimes when we hear someone speaking in English, we just ignore it. It sounds bad, but it’s true because we don’t understand.”

Understanding these systems and their complicated vocabulary is confusing even for U.S.-born students; immigrants have the added challenge of figuring out how the knowledge they bring from their

home country applies in the United States. Gabriela was discouraged when her teacher recommended she go to community college because, in her home country, “colegio” is the equivalent of middle school. As Gabriela explained, “Why would I want to go to colegio? I’m already in high school!” Rather than feeling encouraged, she understood her teacher to be telling her to repeat a grade. This type of confusion is common but often goes unresolved because, in Priya’s words, a lot of immigrant students “have a fear to speak up because they don’t know when, how, and at what moment they should speak.”

At the same time they are learning English, students who move to the United States in high school must learn to navigate a completely new education system. They need to find their classrooms and also understand a new and different grading system; they are adapting to a new culture with different norms about student-teacher interactions, while being expected to plan for their future and sort through the incredibly complex post-secondary system of the United States. Describing the overwhelming nature of this, one counselor explained, “It’s like if someone just dropped you somewhere; you don’t know how anything works, you don’t know what’s normal, you don’t know who you can trust, you don’t know where you can go for resources; you have to figure all that out. It is just a huge and wrenching change, which can be really scary.” As one student told us, “It’s like you are wiping out your self-identity... you speak another language; you have so many talents, but none of that feels like it matters here.”

By the later years of high school, most recent immigrants have gained a working knowledge of English, but educators found that the variability in students’ English abilities makes

it difficult to meet every student’s needs. “The hardest thing,” one teacher explained, “is that in 12th grade, you can’t assume anything about what students have understood from previous years’ lessons. But if you’re just doing lessons that cover the basics, some students with greater comprehension will be bored.”

Language confidence then affects how students envision their future after high school. One counselor told us that “even though their English has been improving over the last three years, they still don’t have much confidence in attending college because of the English. I always have students who worry, ‘This is too hard. My English is still poor. What is gonna happen to me when I go to college?’”

“It’s like you are wiping out your self-identity... you speak another language; you have so many talents, but none of that feels like it matters here.”

For some students, this concern was warranted. However, predicting how much they should take their current English proficiency into account is complicated for educators and for the students themselves by the very individual and unpredictable pace of language acquisition. As one teacher told us, adolescent immigrant students “may be behind when they start, but once they get started, they can really get going.”

Finally, educators told us that learning about post-secondary paths can be difficult because new immigrants have few reference points to work from. They have often never been on a college campus in the United States or met someone who went to a trade school, so when educators speak about these post-

secondary options, they sound like empty words. As one counselor told us, “Without minimizing their prior knowledge, a lot of them are coming in with very limited exposure to different things. They might have come from an agrarian environment or a little city where they saw a handful of jobs, so it’s quite limited in terms of the kind of thinking and exploration that we would want them to do... they’ve never been on college campuses or inside workplaces.”

Without prior exposure to post-secondary options, it can be difficult for students to discern the quality and fit of different paths. This led some students to enroll in predatory for-profit institutions, while other students were overly wary of every post-secondary opportunity being offered to them. Priya, for example, almost missed an opportunity to attend a private liberal arts school because when she received a financial aid letter saying 97% of the tuition would be covered, she never replied or told anyone because she assumed it must be a scam.

Whether they move to the United States with family or make the journey on their own, families play a central role in adolescent immigrants’ lives. This close connection with family is a powerful asset that can provide a sense of motivation and a valuable network of relatives and community connections. Yet, having extensive family responsibilities can take time away from completing post-secondary milestones, and many schools struggle to adequately incorporate immigrant families into the post-secondary process because of a lack of translation resources and limited ability to meet with families in flexible ways. Moreover, different expectations around parental engagement (i.e., some cultures may view asking questions as disrespectful) and different views around appropriate post-secondary paths (i.e., is it okay for a child to leave home for college?) can cause confusion or even conflict if left unspoken and unaddressed.

“It’s about making sure my parents are good, my siblings are good, my grandparents are good. It’s not ‘my goals,’ it’s ‘our goals.’”

Most immigrant students come to the United States motivated by wanting a better life for themselves and their families. Describing the immigrant students he works with, one counselor told us, “They come from multigenerational households, so their goals are about community: it’s about making sure my parents are good, my siblings are good, my grandparents are good. It’s not ‘my goals,’ it’s ‘our goals.’” This family-oriented motivation can enrich students’ post-secondary paths because receiving a good education is often part of their vision for attaining economic mobility; according



Obstacle #2: Making the Process Family Focused

When Omar moved to the United States, he came on his own, but because of the economic situation in his home country, he explained, “When I came here, it was like it was for my entire family.” Education was not originally part of the plan; Omar was supposed to make money to send home. But after seeing the difficulty of making money and being inspired to go to high school by a distant uncle, he eventually made a compromise that he could go to school if he also worked full time. And, despite their distance, Omar continued to make sure his family approved of his plans throughout his educational journey.

“Many students are working to support family members and even taking care of the whole family. Some students are covering everything: rent, food, all the expenses.”

to one parent coordinator,⁷ “Students want to graduate from high school to help their families.” In line with this, many immigrant students are eager to learn English, both for themselves and so they can translate for their families. Accordingly, the educators we spoke with found recent immigrants to be overwhelmingly hardworking, with positive attitudes toward teachers and school.

Yet, as is the case for many families at or below the poverty line, immigrant families’ practical needs, such as extensive childcare and work responsibilities, can also add obstacles to students’ paths. As one counselor explained, “Many students are working to support family members and even taking care of the whole family. Some students are covering everything: rent, food, all the expenses.”

Once Gabriela’s brother was able to move to the United States, for example, she became his primary caregiver anytime she wasn’t at school. Omar regularly worked from 5 p.m. until 2 or 3 a.m., getting so few hours of sleep that he often reached “the point where I would not be able to concentrate in school.” Obligations like these make it more difficult for students to stay focused on school and to do homework and other enrichment activities outside of school.

Connected to this, while most immigrant families have high educational expectations for their children (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008),

some families with particularly acute financial needs were less sure of post-secondary education’s immediate relevance. As one school’s parent coordinator told us: “Sometimes families don’t agree that their kids should spend more time in school; they want them to go out and work. The idea is to graduate from high school because it is the law and then work to help pay bills.” While this was far from the case for all families, when it did happen, educators found that it often left students feeling torn between family responsibilities and their own desires for the future.

For students whose families do want their children to go to college, cultural expectations can still be in tension with American educational institutions. The idea of going away for college, for example, is usually held up as the academic and cultural ideal in American middle-class families but is hard to relate to for many immigrant families who have just been dislocated from all that is familiar; why would they want to create additional upheaval and distance from each other? The prospect of leaving home for college was especially challenging for some female students whose family’s cultural or religious beliefs did not view it as appropriate; we heard multiple stories of young women earning full-rides to selective out-of-state colleges but encountering substantial apprehension from their families.

Like many low-income U.S.-born parents, many immigrant parents were also wary of sharing the tax information required for financial aid applications, or they had a strong aversion to taking out loans. In their case, however, their wariness was compounded by cultural beliefs from their home countries, making it harder for educators to convince them to come on board with sharing this information.⁸

⁷ We use “parent coordinator” in lieu of the more inclusive “family coordinator” because it is the official NYC Public Schools job title.

⁸ See Boatman et al. (2017) and Cunningham & Santiago (2008) for more on cultural aversions to loans.

Finally, educators note that language barriers add to the already difficult challenge of connecting with working parents and guardians about the post-secondary process and engaging with them when challenges arise. The timing and format of events can be difficult for family members who don't work 9 to 5 and often have multiple jobs; as one student told us, because his parents didn't speak English and they worked such long hours that they couldn't come to events at school, "Everything they know [about college] comes from me telling them so." On top of this, as one ENL teacher told us after seeing families' disappointed faces at a new student orientation, "If events aren't translated, the reality is that families feel excluded on day one."

Virtual events help solve some problems while creating others because of families' lack of access to the internet or devices at home. The fact that some adolescent immigrant students are living with guardians who are not their parents or with parents who they were separated from for many years further complicates the notion of "family involvement."

All of these complexities can leave teachers feeling exhausted, because even when their efforts to involve families are beneficial, that impact may not be immediately visible to educators. As one alumna told us, her parents appreciated receiving information sent home about post-secondary options, but they never attended parent-teacher conferences because, in their culture, asking questions of a teacher was viewed as disrespectful.

undocumented or live in mixed-status families. On a fundamental level, being undocumented or having a close family member who is undocumented takes up significant time, mental effort, and emotional labor, making it more difficult to focus on and pursue post-secondary paths. As one ESL teacher explained, undocumented students can "have a lot of court dates where they might be out of class, so they miss a lot of stuff. And, just in thinking about college, they have the immigration issues in the back of their heads, so even when we tell them college is an option for you, they might not really internalize that because all this other stuff is going on in the background." Along with disrupting post-secondary paths, educators described the negative impact this has on students' mental health.

"Just in thinking about college, they have the immigration issues in the back of their heads, so even when we tell them college is an option for you, they might not really internalize that because all this other stuff is going on in the background."

As noted earlier, another major barrier for undocumented students is financial, as they are not eligible for federal financial aid. While the Senator José Peralta New York State DREAM Act is a major step forward in this area, several counselors noted that it is generally "not enough to [fully] cover their tuition and fees, let alone books,



Obstacle #3: Addressing Systemic Barriers for Undocumented Students

Students and educators spoke to us about the many ways that the education system is not set up for students who are

transportation, and all other expenses.” This means students are forced to work longer hours, search for scholarships, take risky private loans, or abandon their dreams and pursue less expensive post-secondary paths.

Being undocumented also closes off post-secondary opportunities that are open to students with official resident status. In the early grades, many work-based learning programs—which can be invaluable in helping students explore potential occupations and get a foot in the door for jobs—do not allow undocumented students to participate because of legal prohibitions on paying them. Similarly, some of the careers that students are most familiar with, including teachers and the healthcare profession, require state licensure, which in turn requires documentation status.

These restrictions can extinguish students’ academic motivation; when students learn that their dream job is not possible because of their immigration status, they may foreclose the idea of post-secondary education entirely. Gabriela told us, “I wanted to be a police officer since I was 12 years old, but then when I came to the United States,

“I wanted to be a police officer since I was 12 years old, but then when I came to the United States, I checked the requirements and you had to be a citizen. I was devastated because that was my dream, so after that I just blocked my mind about college.”

I checked the requirements and you had to be a citizen. I was devastated because that was my dream, so after that I just blocked my mind about college.”

Critically, all of these challenges can be exacerbated by the difficulty of getting high-quality information and guidance. Multiple undocumented alumni told us that some school staff felt uncomfortable discussing immigration statuses and were not well informed about available resources, leaving students without key information. As one previously undocumented alum told us, “I had a really big doubt whether I could go to college or not, because I was not eligible for FAFSA, not eligible for opportunity programs, and, until I met my college counselor, no one told me about the DREAM Act.”

Finally, even when well-informed counselors were available, some students didn’t utilize them. This was sometimes because students didn’t know they were undocumented until late in high school, and sometimes it was because they didn’t “feel comfortable sharing their immigration status or their struggles” for fear of their status being exposed. Similarly, several counselors told us that some family members were wary of filling out financial aid information and coming to school to talk with staff for fear of their immigration status being disclosed. While individual educators work to allay these fears, this is always complicated by the fact that they are officially employees of the very system that families do not trust.



Obstacle #4: Individualized Advising for Individual Pathways

All the factors described above make immigrant students' post-secondary paths particularly complex. Differing levels of English proficiency influence what types of post-secondary options students can pursue and if they will need to complete supplemental courses before enrolling. Family responsibilities and immigration statuses often mean students need to explore alternative forms of financial aid and varied course schedules, like taking classes part-time or beginning at one college and transferring to another. All of this makes the already complicated post-secondary application process even more intensive, requiring a higher degree of personalized attention.

Gabriela, for example, needed to find a college that had her major, that she could commute to from home, and that had a scholarship fund for undocumented students since the DREAM Act did not fully cover her tuition. For many adolescent immigrant students, it is only through the trust built through individualized advising that they feel comfortable asking for help. As Omar explained, "sometimes you have a fear of speaking up because in class with other people, you will not feel comfortable sharing personal information."

Despite its importance, providing this individualized support for all immigrant students is difficult for schools to achieve. Educators are "overworked and tired everywhere," one counselor explained, but with immigrant students, "there's just more piled on" because, in addition to their ordinary responsibilities, staff are working with language acquisition and supporting students personal and emotional needs, "like when a student blows up at you and then

runs out of class, and then you find out it's because their mom was just deported."

With so many issues to attend to, counselors said they were not able to meet with as many students as they wanted to, and post-secondary advising frequently took a back seat. And, especially at bigger, comprehensive high schools, we heard of instances of recent immigrant students getting less attention than U.S.-born students. One counselor explained that the college access community-based organization (CBO) her school had partnered with prioritized the applications of students in the highest tier of academic achievement, which meant immigrant students were often the last ones worked with because their emerging English proficiency meant they had less impressive academic records.

A final challenge for schools was building institutional knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds and needs, and keeping that information current as demographics rapidly changed. Educators strived to adapt their work to students by offering translation in the students' native languages, learning about families' cultures and customs, and building connections with associated community groups. Yet, as one counselor told us, "whatever was happening in the news with immigration was playing out in the classrooms. If the news was about unaccompanied minors crossing the border in the south, those students were in our classes." This meant that schools needed to rapidly pivot whenever the student population changed.

"Whatever was happening in the news with immigration was playing out in the classrooms."



OPPORTUNITIES

Educators and Students Increasing Access



Over the past decade, CARA has worked to identify essential school-wide practices for supporting the post-secondary aspirations of low-income and first-generation college students. Because many low-income students’ families have not been afforded the knowledge or resources to navigate the extremely complicated college application process, we find that schools striving for equity must create a program where all students can complete their entire college and career process within the school day.

As described in our **2020 policy brief**, we have found that it is essential to integrate post-secondary lessons into the school day from grades 9 to 12, ensure every student can meet a trained counselor one-on-one in 11th and 12th grade, and create a school environment where all staff are trained to support post-secondary work, so every student has access to trusted adults with accurate, culturally relevant information.

These strategies grow out of our experience working with students who are predominantly low-income, first-generation to college, and students of color. In our conversations with educators for this project, we found that these key tenets were also essential for supporting adolescent immigrant students. However, educators also highlighted additional ways they needed to fit their work to the unique experiences of adolescent immigrant students.

We share their insights as solutions—“opportunities”—for the four obstacles explored above, tackling them in the same order.



Opportunity #1: Learning Language While Learning the Landscape

As noted earlier, there is so much to cover in a new immigrant student’s first year of high school that some educators believe learning about college and career pathways in 9th grade is a luxury. However, one of the most consistent recommendations we heard was that post-secondary lessons should begin as soon as possible, and, in fact, doing so can help enrich students’ language learning and their transition into high school.

To do this, educators described the following strategies:

- > **Adapt and scaffold lessons**
- > **Draw on existing funds of knowledge**
- > **Spiral learning**
- > **Provide post-secondary exposure**
- > **Build confidence through practice**
- > **Use careers as a gateway**

Adapt and scaffold lessons

To begin college and career lessons in the 9th grade, educators found it necessary to adapt post-secondary lessons to fit students' English proficiency and their experiences as immigrants. As one principal described after receiving ten of CARA's post-secondary lessons, "those lessons had to be totally redone [to fit our students]. They had really helpful content, but had to be scaffolded and differentiated." More specifically, the school used the following strategies to adapt lessons:

Adapting Lessons

One school's strategies for adapting lessons.

- > **Make it visual:** Use displays to make concepts more accessible.
- > **Break it down:** For complicated tasks like financial aid applications, go through them step by step.
- > **Space it out:** Lessons intended for one class are often better split across two or more.
- > **Spiral it back:** Re-introduce key concepts, and don't be afraid to repeat lessons.

Depending on their approach to language learning, some schools also translated aspects of lessons into students' first languages in order to help them access the content more fully.⁹

Draw on existing funds of knowledge

Educators used vocabulary as an entry point for introducing key concepts in a way that drew on students' prior knowledge. For example, one teacher spent time unpacking the word "college." She started by asking students, "What word would you use for

college, and what is college like where you're from?" Then in the next lesson, they spoke about what college is like in the United States. This exercise affirmed what students already knew, helped unearth students' unspoken assumptions about who could go to college (ideas like "you only get in if you take an exam, or it's only for rich kids"), and exposed key differences in language, like the confusion between "college" and "university" mentioned by Gabriela above.

Spiral learning

Given how much there is to learn and the fact that lessons often take longer for MLLs, educators did not try to cover too much at first. Rather, they picked a few lessons for 9th grade to help students see themselves in the overall post-secondary landscape. Starting this process early allows educators to revisit content each year to reinforce concepts and vocabulary as students gain experience and proficiency in English.

See Appendix I: Curriculum Rationale: Exploring the Post-Secondary Landscape for Adolescent Immigrant Students for an overview of key areas to cover.

Provide post-secondary exposure

As one counselor told us, post-secondary concepts are hard for adolescents to understand "until they see them and feel them," and this is even more true for immigrant students. For this reason, educators arranged job shadowing events, alumni panels, and college visits to expose students to new opportunities and help them see themselves on these paths. While these visits took time away from traditional subjects, educators said the time was more than paid back in how it enriched students' understanding and inspired their learning.

⁹Another key curricular adaptation is including undocumented perspectives; see Opportunity #3 below.

Example of an Adapted Lesson: What Is Financial Aid?		
Original Lesson	Adapted Lesson	Rationale for Changes
ACTIVITY 1: True/False <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Teacher reads a statement about financial aid and students move to the “true” or “false” side of the room. > Teacher asks for feedback on why students think the statement is true or false. 	ACTIVITY 1A: What I know <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Students write what they already know about paying for college. > Allow students to translanguage and write in their native languages. 	ACTIVITY 1A: Rationale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Before beginning the True/False activity, elicit students’ existing knowledge.
	ACTIVITY 1B: True/False <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > With a partner, students discuss the true/false statements. 	ACTIVITY 1B: Rationale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Adapted activity adds opportunity for language practice and allows students to translanguage at their own pace.
ACTIVITY 2: Vocab Matching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Using cut-out terms and definitions, students walk around the room to find their card’s match. > Class goes over the answers together to check for understanding. 	ACTIVITY 2: Vocab Matching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Same activity, but occurs the next day, and adds images to vocabulary cards. 	ACTIVITY 2: Rationale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Spacing the learning over multiple days and makes the new terms more visual.

As is true for U.S.-born students, counselors also stressed the importance of thinking through how different spaces may impact students’ identities when arranging these experiences. For example, one counselor contrasted visiting a local community college where “the students could see themselves in the space because there were so many students in hijabs and speaking Spanish” with another campus visit where the maintenance staff were “the only people students saw who looked like them.” Visiting campuses and workplaces where alumni from the high school can lead students on a tour is a great way to create welcoming visits.

Build confidence through practice

A lack of confidence in English can be one of students’ biggest hurdles, holding them back from paths they are in fact qualified to pursue. To build their confidence, educators created opportunities to use English in a college-style

setting. For example, they began working on college essays in 11th grade, so the format would become familiar to them, and they encouraged students to take dual-enrollment or AP classes, so they could see for themselves that they could pass a college-level class. They also scaffolded students’ engagement with college offices; one counselor described how, when there was a need to call a college about paperwork, “instead of doing it for them, I will be sitting with them, and we’ll make the call together. I will prep with the student what they are going to say... but then the student will make the call. When they see they can answer in English, they feel much better.”

Use careers as a gateway

Because of the central role that economic opportunity plays in immigrant students’ lives, one counselor told us, “If you talk about careers first, students get more excited.” At this counselor’s school, the post-secondary program began with a career fair in 9th grade,

and then, in subsequent years, students learned about different jobs and the education they required, with a focus on how career paths can be different in the United States compared to home countries. Not only did this help students explore options, but it also made students' academic classes feel more relevant. As was the case for Gabriela, if students don't think their education will connect to a career, they are less likely to be academically engaged.

with community organizations to bring in interpreters, and if nothing else was available, technology served as a backup.¹⁰ As one counselor told us, "Anything that's being messaged heavily, we try to make sure it is put out in every language that we have in the building."

In terms of connecting with families, educators described a shift in thinking from what works for the school schedule to what works for families. They described, for example, a range of strategies to make themselves accessible to families at different times and in different formats:

- > Hosting post-secondary events in the daytime and evening, in person and virtually.
- > Scheduling family-teacher conferences individually with families at times that worked best for them, rather than scheduling them all on pre-set days.
- > Integrating college and career discussions into existing family touchpoints, such as parent association meetings and parent-teacher conferences.
- > Creating worksheets that mirror post-secondary lessons happening in the classroom that students take home, so families can see what their children are doing and learn along with them (see "Connection to Home" below).

"Anything that's being messaged heavily, we try to make sure it is put out in every language that we have in the building."

Opportunity #2: Making the Process Family Focused



Given the central role families play in adolescent students' lives, educators described the importance of making them an integral part of the post-secondary program in order to leverage families' many assets and to ensure that students' post-secondary plans were responsive to their families' needs. More specifically, educators strove to make themselves available to families, focused on building trusting relationships, and proactively addressed potential cultural tensions.

- > **Make the post-secondary program accessible for families.**
- > **Put relationships first.**
- > **Proactively bridge cultural differences.**

Make the post-secondary program accessible for families

To welcome immigrant families into their schools, educators began with a focus on language. School leaders prioritized hiring multilingual staff who could translate for families and create multilingual materials to take home. In the absence of multilingual staff, schools partnered

¹⁰ Federal regulations require that parents with limited English proficiency be provided information in a language they understand. Correspondingly, districts must offer translation support. Nevertheless, given the advantages of real-time translation, educators recommended building this capacity in-house for common languages.

Post-secondary Lessons for Families



CONNECTION TO HOME

- > Students can share the answers to Question #4 (One thing I learned that I would tell my parent/guardian is...) with their trusted adult/family member. They could elaborate on this piece of writing or write a longer thank you letter, explanation, or empowering message and share that.
- > Students and family members or trusted adults can watch the videos together from the lesson or any listed in the Follow Up section and discuss the family members' experiences with educational and career hopes, plans, and dreams when they were young. Students can ask the following questions and record the answers:
 - > What was your experience in school as a student like?
 - > What was your dream when you were my age?
 - > In what ways did your parents communicate with you about their expectations for your future?
 - > If you could do anything in the world, what would you like to do if you didn't have to worry about money?

All of these approaches aimed to make families an integral part of the post-secondary process from the 9th grade on; by helping families be more aware of what their children were doing in each grade, educators empowered families to support their children's completion of post-secondary milestones.

Put relationships first

Educators sought to make trusting relationships a foundation of the post-secondary program. As one counselor described it, "[My goal is for parents to] trust me as an ally working toward the same end, which is to do whatever is best for your child and family." One way educators did this was by creating opportunities to interact with families in non-academic settings. For example, one school hosted family nights with games and food that were just for fun—these didn't focus on college but did create informal opportunities for families, teachers, and counselors to meet. Some

schools also worked to provide resources to families, connecting them with food banks, literacy classes, and legal support. Along with supporting families, these interactions helped educators get to know their communities, the organizations they trusted, and the types of issues they encountered.

Proactively bridge cultural differences

As educators deepened their knowledge of the communities they served, they recommended proactively addressing common post-secondary concerns raised by immigrant families. For example, to

"My goal is for parents to trust me as an ally working toward the same end, which is to do whatever is best for your child and family."

alleviate fears about sharing financial information, one counselor started in the 11th grade by “messaging why it is needed and letting them know it would be kept safe.” And, for any parents who might be undocumented, they “explained that putting a zero on FAFSA wouldn’t make ICE come.” For families’ concerns about students making enough money or being able to take care of siblings, counselors spoke about the possibility of working while in college and enrolling part-time. For communities inclined to only apply to the closest colleges, educators spoke about the value of applying to multiple colleges to expand options and get better financial aid, and for communities who tended to only apply to the most prestigious colleges, they spoke about the quality of local public colleges and had alumni from those institutions speak about their experiences. By knowing students’ communities and the common concerns they have, counselors were able to preemptively provide solutions.

However, issues inevitably did arise, and when this happened, educators described the importance of reaching out to families directly and doing so not from a place of trying to resolve a problem but rather from a place of showing grace and wanting to develop mutual understanding. This

“I understand you because my parents are also immigrants, and they were afraid about the same things.”

outreach was especially impactful when done by someone who had preexisting relationships with families. For example, when Priya realized she could go to college out of state, it took “a lot of convincing,” but she and her family had a “really good relationship with my mentor, so he talked to my parents and explained that [the school would be] paying for almost everything.”

It also helped if the person doing the outreach was an immigrant themselves or shared the same ethnic background. For example, one school had a dedicated parent coordinator who spoke Spanish and emigrated from Peru, allowing her to share her own experiences, telling parents, “I understand you because my parents are also immigrants, and they were afraid about the same things.” To provide similarly relatable outreach, other schools employed immigrant alumni or **peer-to-peer advisors** to support family outreach, or they brought alumni back to share their experiences at events for families.

Finally, sometimes the best thing to do is help students have difficult conversations with their families themselves. As one counselor told us, “Sometimes students need to sit down with their parents and have that conversation, and as school faculty, we can advise them with that process.” Some strategies included role-playing conversations, starting conversations with questions about parents’ own experiences (like those in the Connection to Home on page 24), or even creating an “assignment” to take home, as some parents view “real homework” as more important to complete.



Opportunity #3: Addressing Systemic Barriers for Undocumented Students

Given the added systemic barriers on undocumented students' paths, educators found they needed to take additional steps to adequately support students who are undocumented or have family members who are.

- > **Create a safe and welcoming environment**
- > **Integrate undocumented perspectives into every lesson**
- > **Build capacity for specialized support**
- > **Protect student information**

Create a safe and welcoming environment

To get the help they need, undocumented students and families need to feel their school is a safe and welcoming environment. To do this, one thing educators did was share with students and families the protections that do and do not exist in their schools. For example, federal guidance prohibits ICE from entering schools, and FERPA (Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act) protects student information, but many communities still have fears about their safety. By sharing information during class presentations, putting posters in the hallways, and partnering with local immigrant advocacy organizations to host "Know Your Rights" events, schools helped to clarify policies and allay some concerns. Schools, districts, and regions can also enact policies to make their protections stronger or more clear. For example, because New York has a "sanctuary city" policy, counselors at one school felt empowered to "let students know that everything is confidential and that the college office is a safe space." Through this, counselors "built a culture where people feel safe to go to us."

Some schools also created *Dream Teams*, student groups open to anyone who wants to advocate for undocumented students. Educators found these teams deepened knowledge about undocumented students' rights across the school and helped "connect undocumented students to each other, so they know they aren't alone."¹¹ Counselors also spoke about the importance of mental health support for immigrant students, especially those who are undocumented, given the traumas many of them carry.

Integrate undocumented perspectives into every lesson

Another component of creating an undocu-friendly program is integrating undocumented student perspectives into every post-secondary lesson. As one counselor told us, how the post-secondary process works for undocumented students and mixed-status families should be included "not as an aside but as part of the general disclosing of information, so that it is on the same footing and doesn't feel like an afterthought." For example, when talking about financial aid, this counselor would speak about how the FAFSA works for students whose parents are married and those whose parents are not, and then she would describe how it looks for students whose parents are documented and those whose are not.

How the post-secondary process works for undocumented students and mixed-status families should be included "not as an aside but as part of the general disclosing of information, so that it is on the same footing and doesn't feel like an afterthought."

¹¹ We have also heard that online connections with peers can provide valuable support, especially in schools with fewer immigrant students. Many of the websites linked on page 27 provide opportunities for making connections.

This approach provides knowledge and removes stigma. As another counselor explained, “It’s like speaking about disability resources at a college in the same breath as other resources. Many teachers do that for other identities but are still learning to do that for students who are undocumented.” Integrated messaging like this helps ensure students like Gabriela don’t go years before they learn they can go to college. In fact, after Gabriela shared her experience with her school counselor, they began adding lessons on post-secondary options for undocumented students into grades 9 and 10.

Build capacity for specialized support

From legal assistance to securing financial aid and understanding what jobs are possible, undocumented and mixed-status families’ post-secondary paths are usually more complicated than other students’ and require more time and expertise from counselors. Educators described investing in resources such as professional development for staff and forming partnerships with other organizations in order to build this capacity. They found these connections through legal aid organizations, undocumented student support offices at universities, and professional trade programs that are free or have expenses covered for undocumented students. They also used guides created by national organizations and New York-specific organizations. See some sample resources to the right.

Protect student information

Providing individualized support for undocumented students requires knowing who those students are, but for obvious confidentiality reasons, educators cannot ask students to disclose their status, nor

should they write down that information if they hear it. To account for this, the approach most educators took was regularly sharing information in classes about where undocumented students could go to get help privately. When students did disclose their status, schools either kept no records or they used proxy data to keep an approximate list of students, such as assigning all undocumented students to the same counselor or tracking what financial aid applications students were working on (this works in New York state because the DREAM Act applies to more than just undocumented students). This way, they could balance students’ privacy with proactive support.

Organizations & Resources: Guides for Undocumented Students

NATIONAL

- > [Informed Immigrant](#)
- > [My Undocumented Life](#)
- > [Immigrants Rising](#)

NEW YORK FOCUSED

- > [NYC Public Schools’ Culturally Responsive Advising Guide](#)
- > [CUNY’s Immigrant Student Success Center](#)
- > [CUNY-IIE](#)
- > [ImmSchools](#)
- > [New York State Youth Leadership Council](#)
- > [CARA’s Undocumented Students Toolkit](#)



Opportunity #4: Individualized Advising for Individual Pathways

While all first-generation college students need individualized advising about post-secondary pathways, helping adolescent immigrant students realize their potential means doing even more to understand their situations and explore what they want and what seems possible.

- > **Help students find their own values and paths**
- > **Clarify common application confusions**
- > **Prepare for long and winding paths**

Help students find their own values & paths

One of the barriers adolescent immigrant students face is a fear of sharing the issues they are facing and exposing what they don't know. One antidote to this is teachers being proactive in reaching out to students; as one student told us, "If I were able to change a school, I would tell the teachers: don't wait til a student comes to you for help." A related solution is building trusting relationships with students. Omar, for example, often felt uncomfortable sharing personal information in class, but he said, "When you have that one-on-one conversation, you're able to be honest about your situation, especially if you trust the person you are having the conversation with." To develop this type of relationship, educators spoke about the importance of not immediately trying to resolve problems but rather helping students become more self-directed in their college and career paths.

"Even if you don't enroll immediately, it is powerful to know that college is always an option. You should know what it can do for you."

Many immigrant students, for instance, feel split between their parents' culture and American culture. Instead of telling students what choice to make, educators helped students explore these tensions for themselves. As one counselor explained, "The approach needs to be student-centered. I can't come in with, 'You need to do this.' Of course, we help students weigh the pros and cons, but the most important thing is helping students identify their own values." Omar is a case in point for this; his connection with his counselor helped him navigate his sense of obligation to his family and his desire for higher education, ultimately helping him find a community college where he could go to school and get a job on campus to send money back home.

Prepare for long and winding paths

In many students' home countries, post-secondary paths are quite rigid: if one does not go to college immediately after high school, there's no option to start later in life. The United States, on the other hand, is flexible in this regard, and starts, pauses, and transfers are especially common for adolescent immigrant students, whose lives are frequently in flux due to changing family obligations or new immigration statuses. Moreover, depending on their English proficiency, age of arrival, and family situation, students' paths may be highly differentiated, from those like Priya who are looking for extra AP classes in their senior year to more recent arrivals who may be looking to work full-time while continuing their English learning after graduation.

Because of this, the counselors we spoke with intentionally prepared students and families for these varied and winding paths. This included sharing information about options like starting college long after high school, transferring from one institution to another, shifting from a vocational program to a university, or enrolling part-time. Counselors

described what these transitions looked like, often sharing stories from their own careers. For students enrolling immediately in college, many high schools offered summer bridge programs, and some schools connected students with other alumni going to the same college, so they would have an immediate connection there.

For those students not enrolling directly in college, educators provided connections to workforce training programs and supported students in their search for family-sustaining work. Importantly, they also made sure that students knew that future education was always a possibility because, as one counselor told us, “Even if you don’t enroll immediately, it is powerful to know that college is always an option. You should know what it can do for you.” Finally, given how common it was for students’ paths to change after graduation, counselors told students that they would always be available for alumni to come back for questions and support.

Students’ varying English abilities also call for careful advisement. At the start of high school, it is beneficial to assess new students’ language ability in both English and their native language, as the latter is often more indicative of the amount of academic support they’ll need.¹² At the end of high school, those with less English fluency may benefit from programs like **CUNY CLIP**, which provides English language preparation for those interested in enrolling at CUNY. Students with greater proficiency may have the academic credentials to get into selective colleges, but many may benefit from being informed about how to find language support once they get to campus, where the level of academic challenge often increases significantly.

Clarifying Confusions in the Application Process

> **Creating college lists:** Counselors find that the idea of applying to many colleges and the concept of finding the “best fit” are new to many immigrants. Counselors encourage students to apply to many colleges—including a range of two-year, four-year, public, and private institutions—to maximize acceptances and financial aid. Ensuring these lists reflect students’ personal and family needs requires substantial one-on-one attention.

> **Holistic admissions:** The concept of holistic admissions is confusing to many immigrants from test-centric countries. Counselors recommend providing scaffolding for holistic admissions, such as providing opportunities to be leaders of school clubs and helping students adapt their life experiences into rich college essays.

> **Standardized tests:** The technical English required by the ACT and SAT is a hurdle for many immigrant students. To address this, some schools provide test prep, while others encourage finding colleges that are test optional or use holistic admissions.

> **Financial aid:** Given the financial disadvantages many immigrant families face, counselors should prioritize financial considerations from start to finish, collecting information forms in 11th grade to get an early understanding of aid eligibility, working closely with families to find schools that meet their needs, and helping make sense of aid letters.

> **Foreign transcripts:** Counselors recommended collecting any foreign high school (or even college) transcripts in 11th grade, getting them translated, and reviewing them with students to see if they might impact applications or be eligible for credit.

¹² You can find one multilingual literacy screener [here](#).

Building Capacity in Different School Contexts

The recommendations described in this report require developing programs and investing in staff capacity, which can take different forms depending on a school’s mission, students, and existing programs. The profiles below show two schools’ experiences with this process.

District High School

As a large, comprehensive school serving both U.S.-born and immigrant students, District High School (DHS) has focused on differentiating its programs and building community partnerships to meet the diverse needs and interests of its students.

In terms of curriculum, DHS has worked to differentiate programs while also ensuring all students have strong foundational knowledge of the post-secondary process. This begins in the 9th grade, when students attend a pathways fair to learn about different professions. Then, in the 11th and 12th grades, all students take a college and career seminar to explore post-secondary options and get support with the application process. District High School also offers a section of this course for multilingual learners, taught by an ENL teacher. Importantly, the post-secondary options and the resources included for immigrant students are the same in both versions. To run this course, DHS had to cut one of its electives, but they’ve found the results have been worth it.

District High School also leverages community-based organizations. It partnered with a South Asian CBO to bring in an additional counselor who advises students and runs cultural clubs. And it teamed up with an initiative at a local university that provides support for undocumented students and provides translation at financial aid events. DHS has also worked with CARA to employ trained alumni mentors in the college office. These collaborations have deepened staff knowledge, expanded advising capacity, and made the staff more representative of the students they serve. Finally, as a large school with varied programs and staff, DHS’s leadership has played a key role in coordinating this work and emphasizing it at school-wide professional development sessions.

Language High School

As a small school serving adolescent immigrant students, Language High School (LHS) has language learning and individualized support built into its DNA, but it has had to stretch to add college and career programming across all grades.

When CARA began working with Language High School, it had a 12th-grade college seminar, but, given the time students needed to learn English and adapt to life in the United States, LHS felt there wasn’t time for additional post-secondary lessons. After a couple of years of disappointing college enrollments, however, the school decided to try. Language High School made space by adding just a few lessons in the 9th and 10th grades, and then it dropped an elective class in the 11th grade to add a new college and career seminar. Since then, LHS has seen college applications increase by 15 percentage points.

As a small school, LHS has long excelled at building trusting relationships with students, but those didn’t necessarily focus on the students’ lives after high school. By running full-school professional development sessions and creating a post-secondary coordination team, staff are now having more conversations with students about post-secondary paths and sharing information between grade levels. For several years, LHS has partnered with CARA to employ an alumni College Bridge coach, and they recently added a full-time parent coordinator who counsels students and provides outreach to families. Through these efforts, students are learning more “through osmosis” as conversations about college and careers are normalized across the school community.

CONCLUSION



After high school, Gabriela, Omar, and Priya all enrolled directly in college, and they have now either earned their degrees or are making steady progress toward them. Omar became class president at his community college and recently transferred to a four-year school; Priya is now enrolled in graduate school to become a counselor. Gabriela is progressing toward her degree while also working as an alumni advisor at her high school; she told us, “It’s just an amazing thing to be helping my friends and seeing them graduate.”

These successes came in spite of the systemic barriers all three of them faced. Gabriela had to transfer from one community college to another; Omar has continued to work long hours and has had to enroll part-time some semesters; and Priya found the environment at her predominantly white institution to be a culture shock, and she never fully felt at home. But, through the post-secondary preparation they received, the support they have from their families for their plans, and the strong relationships they have maintained with counselors and teachers from high school, all three are moving ahead on their post-secondary pathways. And as many school counselors note, while not all students will choose college as they did, what is critical is ensuring that students and families have these types of preparation, support, and relationships to make informed choices about those pathways.

While the schools we spoke with for this report are all striving to do more, we selected them because they are already doing exemplary work. At too many schools, adolescent immigrant students like Omar, Gabriela, and Priya only begin learning about post-secondary

options at the very end of high school or are placed into under-resourced English learner tracks where they receive little exposure to post-secondary options (Garver & Hopkins, 2020). Many students’ families are not invited into the post-secondary process, and many live in states with few resources for undocumented students, or they are not informed about the resources that do exist. Too many immigrant students are put at the bottom of the list to receive personalized counseling support.

At too many schools, adolescent immigrant students only begin learning about post-secondary options at the very end of high school or are placed into under-resourced English learner tracks where they receive little exposure to post-secondary options.

In order to begin to remedy this situation, we hope this report provides resources and recommendations for all levels of the education system. Teachers and counselors, for example, can use the strategies included

for involving families and adapting post-secondary lessons, and they can draw on the resources linked for undocumented students. However, one of our main learnings from this report is that post-secondary support for adolescent immigrant students must also be organized at the school level and above.

This calls on school leaders to be dedicated and inspiring champions of their school's efforts to support adolescent immigrant students' post-secondary paths. This means devoting class time in grades 9 through 12 to post-secondary lessons for all students, as well as dedicating staff resources to adapt these lessons. Translation support (i.e., hiring linguistically and ethnically diverse staff or using translation software) and policies for connecting with families outside traditional school hours are also needed at the school level. A team needs to be identified that can develop the expertise to guide undocumented students. And investing in individualized advising capacity usually requires hiring staff, creating community partnerships, or training and paying students or alumni to support counselors with the college process.

This requires the commitment of funding to reduce high counselor-to-student ratios, train counselors in post-secondary access, and support schools more broadly to build

strong post-secondary cultures. The good work described in this report was enabled, in part, by funding structures in New York and school fundraising efforts that enabled these schools to have a stable staff, strong leadership, and extra resources per student, which is not typical of many schools serving low-income, multilingual learners across the country (Cosentino de Cohen et al., 2005). As noted elsewhere, these efforts will benefit all low-income students, but they are even more needed to support adolescent immigrant students.

There is also opportunity for cross-organization collaboration: sharing curriculum across schools reduced the time needed for lesson planning, and CBOs focused on supporting undocumented students were able to share knowledge across many schools. However, this too requires adequate funding in order to be successful and sustainable.

Finally, change is needed in the law. Gabriela told us that her school was her "safe place," which would not have been possible if New York were not a sanctuary city. And, when Gabriela realized she could go to college because most of her tuition would be covered by the New York DREAM Act, it was life-changing for her. Along with California, New York state is one of several that can serve as a model for other states across the nation about the transformative potential of providing in-state tuition and state financial aid for undocumented students.¹³

Supporting adolescent immigrant students in these ways provides the opportunity for them to become the informed and capable citizens and residents that we all agree our country needs.

One of our main learnings from this report is that post-secondary support for adolescent immigrant students must also be organized at the school level and above.

¹³ There is also a need for policymakers to ensure that the immigrant students who are not included within the focus of this report, such as those who immigrate as young children or at the very end of high school, have support that is appropriate and differentiated for their specific needs.

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About CARA

CARA's mission is to ensure that first-generation college students, low-income students, and students of color have the knowledge and support necessary to enroll in and persist through postsecondary education. CARA works with high schools, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions to move access and success guidance from an 'enrichment for some' to an 'entitlement for all' model, and conducts applied research with practitioners and young people to advocate for more equitable postsecondary pathways.

www.caranyc.org

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APPENDIX



OVERVIEW

Curriculum Rationale: Exploring the Post-Secondary Landscape for Adolescent Immigrant Students

Research with first-generation college immigrant students and their families indicates that they often haven't had access to experiences that will build their familiarity with higher education, including the following key areas:

- 1 Mapping the landscape of college:** Higher education functions differently in the United States than in many other countries, and students and their families need to discuss and understand these differences. To make things even more challenging, the landscape in the United States is larger by several factors than in most other countries (there are over 3,000 colleges and universities, and the number is growing). Thus, students are faced with a bewildering array of choices. Since arriving in the United States, they may have heard of Harvard and NYU and of their local community college, and they might have a sense that the former are "better" than the latter. But what, actually, are the differences? And what are the options in between? Which ones might make sense for them from a financial, academic, and familial standpoint?
- 2 Understanding the college application process:** Similarly, the college application process in the United States is considerably more complex and has more steps than in many home countries. In order to understand what schools will be asking about in relation to their high school performance (transcripts, recommendations by teachers and guidance counselors, extracurricular activities), and what they will be asked to produce during the application process itself (an essay, filling out applications, sending transcripts, money to pay for it, test scores), students and their families need to become familiar with this process. They also need practice, beginning in the 9th grade, with the cultural norms and expectations around filling out forms, so that they are proficient in this by the time they get to the application process in the 12th grade.
- 3 Exploring careers:** While some aspire to professional careers—doctors, lawyers, and accountants—first-generation college students often have little exposure to adults who work in these fields; or, with parents who were professionals in other countries, they and their families are not familiar with these trajectories as they function in the United States. Students require exposure over time to the nature of professional work, the fields of study with which they intersect, and the paths to and through college (and beyond) that lead to them, as well as the opportunity to explore how their own interests and talents might fit into the world of adult work and what shape those "fields" take as majors in college study. In order to engage students who are not sure if they are college-bound, it is also important to include fields and jobs that may not require a B.A. or even an A.A. degree.
- 4 Paying for college:** Too many first-generation college students either cross college off as an option because they believe they and their families cannot afford it, OR don't take finances into account at all in their college search and application process. Research documents that while these students may apply and be accepted to college under these circumstances, they are unlikely to matriculate at or graduate from college. Students—and their families—need to begin learning about both the costs of college and the financial aid available to help pay a portion of that cost early in their high school career and in increasingly specific ways as they get closer to graduation. For students who are undocumented, it is critical to begin early, helping them understand and plan for their options as well as connecting them to legal and political organizations advocating around immigration in the United States.