

NEWCOMER PROGRAMS

History and Rationale

DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY OF NEWCOMER PROGRAMS

What are newcomer programs?

What is providing the impetus for their growth?

Newcomer programs are specially designed educational options for newly arriving **immigrants** that help orient students to their new country, their new language, and their new school. The U.S. Department of Education website glossary defines newcomer programs as “separate, relatively self-contained interventions designed to meet the academic and transitional needs of newly arrived immigrants. Typically, students attend these programs before they enter more traditional interventions (e.g., English language development programs or mainstream classrooms with supplemental ESL services).”

The growth of newcomer programs across the United States and Canada has mirrored the tidal wave of immigration to both countries over the last three decades. For a variety of economic and political reasons, both legal and illegal immigration have hit record numbers and does not appear to be slowing down. In the United States alone, immigration doubled from about 7 million new arrivals in the 1970s to more than 14 million in the decade of the 1990s. By the turn of the century, more than a million people a year were coming into the United States legally and the number of undocumented entrants is estimated at an additional half million (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, and Herwantoro, 2005). In total, there are approximately 35 million people in the United States today who were born in another country. This is more than double the number of immigrants who were living here in 1910, the last decade of the great immigrant wave of a century ago (Camarota, 2005).

According to a study recently conducted by the Urban Institute, one child in five attending U.S. schools now lives in a home where English is not the primary language. While the majority of these children are still in elementary school, the

number of students in secondary schools is also significant. Between 6 percent and 7 percent of the students in middle and high school were born in another country and most are deemed limited English proficient according to state and federal reporting (Capps et al., 2005). Though this may seem a small percentage overall, most of these students are settling in urban areas where there are already high concentrations of second language students. Others are settling for the first time in areas not traditionally home to new arrivals. Both situations are requiring school districts to look for assistance to meet the needs of these linguistically and culturally diverse students.

For purposes of this book, **newcomer** students are defined as students who have been in the country less than 2 years and who test at the beginning English proficiency level on an initial placement exam. In a recent workshop entitled "Attending to the Needs of Newcomers," Deborah Short, a national expert on newcomer programs, listed three main categories of newcomer students:

1. *Literate newcomers*: students with on-grade-level educational backgrounds who have literacy skills and academic schooling in their own language
2. *Newcomers with limited formal schooling* (also known as Students with Interrupted Formal Education or SIFE students): students with disrupted or weak educational backgrounds and below-grade-level literacy in their own native language
3. *Late entrant immigrant newcomers*: students who enter after first quarter or semester

She stated that students in each category benefit from placement in a newcomer program while they strengthen their English proficiency and adjust to American schools (Short, 2009).

Another endorsement of newcomer programs comes from the Council of Chief State School Officers in their 2004 publication "Immigrant Students and Secondary School Reform: Compendium of Best Practices." They developed a list of the six best practices for assisting immigrants with limited formal schooling:

1. Build environments that respond to the immediate social, cultural and linguistic needs of immigrant adolescents with limited schooling.
2. Create structures that transcend high school academic department divisions to support simultaneous linguistic and academic development.
3. Form newcomer centers to ease transitions for newly immigrated students.
4. Implement flexible scheduling to reflect real needs and obligations of high school immigrants.
5. Align high school programs with higher education and adult education.
6. Use the full resources of the community to support immigrant students.

Each of these six components will be addressed in this book. All can and should be included in a successful newcomer program.

Newcomer programs are a relatively new phenomenon in the educational world, possibly dating from the opening of the Newcomer High School in San Francisco in 1969 (Chang, 1990). In fact, the entire teaching field of second language development, including both **bilingual programs** and English as a second language (ESL) programs, came on the educational scene at about the same time. TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), the organization for professionals who teach English to speakers of other languages, was founded in 1966; the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), its sister organization, was formed in 1976 to support and promote bilingual education. Both organizations were formed to help meet the demand for trained professionals to assist the wave of immigrants to learn the language and culture of their new home and be prepared to be successful members of their new society.

The first comprehensive study of newcomer programs in the United States was conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) between 1996 and 2000. This study, funded by the National Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, focused on secondary programs because most newcomer programs service this age group. The academic disconnect for students in middle and high school is greater because the disparity between what students bring to the table and what is expected of them expands with each grade level. CAL found that more than 100 secondary newcomer programs had been established in 29 states, with more than 75 percent first opening their doors after 1990. The study mainly consisted of self-reported data from the sites, compiled into informative data-filled graphs and charts, along with information from several site visits. The results were reported first in a publication from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) entitled *Secondary School Newcomer Programs in the United States* (Boyson and Short, 2003) and later in the book, *Creating Access: Language and Academic Programs for Secondary School Newcomers* by Deborah Short and Beverly Boyson (2004).

A follow-up study to update information from the earlier study is under way. The preliminary findings of this new study reveal that newcomer programs are moving into the suburbs and into rural areas, with both areas showing double the numbers of programs in the last decade. Other changes based on the self-reported data reveal that more middle school students are being included in these programs, that twice as many programs are selecting to be housed in a separate site, and that four times as many are being established as whole school programs. Students are staying in the newcomer programs longer, and reading and literacy development have become a major focus. Ten years ago, the language delivery system offered in the reporting programs was 50 percent ESL only, 7 percent bilingual only, 3 percent **native language or L1** only, and 41 percent a combination of the three. Now the numbers have changed to 84 percent ESL only, 13 percent bilingual only, and 3 percent mixed. None are now pure L1 programs. According to Deborah Short, who reported these statistics at an Austin, Texas, CREATE Conference in October 2009, newcomer programs are reporting two major challenges: meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) as a newcomer program and graduating

students in the required 4 years to meet the cohort requirements of the No Child Left Behind federal regulations.

Two earlier studies of newcomer schools are also seminal in the field of second language programming: “Newcomer Programs: Innovative Efforts to Meet the Educational Challenges of Immigrant Students” by Hedy Nai-Lin Chang (1990) and “The Newcomer Program: Helping Immigrant Students Succeed in U.S. Schools” by Monica Friedlander (1991). The Chang study was conducted as part of the California Tomorrow Immigrant Students project. California Tomorrow is a nonprofit organization in San Francisco that conducts policy research on the educational system in California, and offers technical assistance and support to local schools in that state. Chang looked at 17 newcomer programs in operation in California at the time of the study and compared their program designs and policies.

The second significant early study of newcomer programs was conducted by Monica Friedlander for the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE) for publication as an information guide to educators. Friedlander states in her introduction: “Anyone who has come in contact with the school system—whether as an educator, student, parent, policy maker, or service provider—cannot help but notice the rapid, profound, and continuous diversification of this country’s student population in every sense of the word: racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, and social. The trend is hardly new in this country but its accelerated pace and overall impact on our society and education system in many ways is.” And she wrote these words more than 15 years ago! The trend has not only continued, but also is growing at an exponential pace. Friedlander’s study discussed programs across the country, with a detailed description of three models: a school-within-a-school in California; a half-day, separate site facility also in California; and a full-site high school in Manhattan.

It is on these three pioneering studies that I base this book, along with the 10 years of personal experience in creating and operating a newcomer program. Like these earlier studies, I too will focus primarily on secondary programming, but where applicable I will include elementary design and instructional models as well. As I explain and describe program options, curricular choices, and operational decisions, I will incorporate personal experiences in the form of vignettes. These vignettes, which I call case study examples, are sprinkled throughout the text as they apply. They are not meant in any way to indicate that this is the preferred method to create or run a program. Each district must develop the program that will best meet the needs of their particular students in their unique setting.

During our short time in operation, we have revised and reshaped our program numerous times. The program has improved through a combination of trial and error as well as changes that were precipitated by necessity. As students with new or slightly different needs arrived, the program had to morph to meet those new needs. Often, what worked one year with a certain group of students and a particular staff did not work the next year with new students and a different mixture of staff members. At other times, a flood of students in a short period forced us to revise staffing to service the new students. In fact, our program has seldom looked the same at the end of the year as it did when the school year began. The

supervisor of the second language program is constantly reminding us that the key word for our program is *flexibility*, and it is absolutely true.

Rationale for Newcomer Programs

Why have newcomer programs gained such popularity?

What specific void do these programs fill that is different from traditional bilingual or ESL programming?

Teachers and administrators have learned that language learning alone is inadequate to ensure newcomer children's success in school. Many newcomers have had little schooling even in their native languages, or have suffered educational interruptions. They may require adapted or re-designed curricula and help to catch up with their peers. Psychological and social supports are often necessary to help children overcome traumatic histories, to adjust to the new culture and school systems they will face in the United States, and to ensure that the children's primary support systems—their families—are not left behind. It is in these areas that traditional interventions often fall short. (Chang, 1990)

There are two major stimuli behind the rapid growth of newcomer programs: one is the decreasing academic level of the students who are entering our schools and the other is the ever-increasing level of academic requirements being placed on both students and schools. As Wilkinson, González, and Rumbaut (1993) noted in a study of the newcomer program in Austin City Schools,

Increasing numbers of non- or limited-English-speaking immigrants, many with little or interrupted schooling in their home countries and poor literacy skills in their home languages, are coming to the United States. The influx of these students is having a tremendous impact on school districts which are insufficiently equipped to deal with their special linguistic and educational needs.

Students with significant gaps in their education pose challenges to school districts that cannot be met in traditional programming. This gap grows with each year of education that is missed. In addition to the challenge of developing academic English, a process that studies show can take from 4 to 10 years depending on the previous schooling of the learner and the type of educational programming available (Thomas and Collier, 1997), students must become proficient in all content areas and prepare for life in an increasingly technological society. Unfortunately, the academic calendar does not stand still until the students catch up. These students are constantly trying to hit a moving target.

The challenges for secondary students are especially severe. "Late-entering foreign-born students [those who enter at middle school age or later] may have difficulty learning English, mastering academic subjects, and graduating in the limited time they are in U.S. schools. Immigrants who become discouraged by these difficulties may be inclined to drop out of school" (Capps et al., 2005). Because of the missing years of education, many of these students cannot be placed in the

proper grade for their physical age. This is particularly true of high school students who must be placed by credits earned, not by age. One study revealed that up to 20 percent of second language students in high school and 12 percent of those in middle school have missed 2 or more years of schooling (Fleischman and Hopstock, 1993). It is this group of students who most need intensive academic assistance to make up for the lost years of education.

I want to insert a personal statement here that placing a student significantly below his or her appropriate grade level can have an extremely adverse affect on a student's self-esteem. Our school district discourages this practice with the exception of cases in which the age on the child's documents is inaccurate according to the parents, a situation that arises quite often with **refugees**.

There are two groups of immigrants who are the most likely to fit into the limited formal schooling (LFS) category: students from rural areas of Latin America, Asia, or Africa where school may not have been available on a regular basis or the conditions were so primitive that the education was at the most rudimentary level, and students from war-torn areas who may come to the United States or Canada as refugees. With more than 60 percent of our recent immigrants coming from these conditions (Capps et al., 2005), it is easy to see why the growth of newcomer programs is so explosive.

What exactly does a newcomer program provide that is not found in a more traditional bilingual or ESL program? Fred Genesee (1999), editor of an educational practice report for CREDE, listed four considerations that influence the decision to create a newcomer program:

1. The need to address the unique literacy needs of English language learners more effectively than is possible in a classroom with both literate and nonliterate students
2. The belief that a welcoming and nurturing environment is beneficial to older immigrant students (those of secondary school age, 12–21 years old) who may have limited prior experience with schooling
3. The need to provide middle and high school immigrant students with core academic skills and knowledge that fill gaps in their educational backgrounds and move them closer to their age-level peers, better preparing them to participate in mainstream classrooms
4. The assumption that the chances of educational success for immigrant students are enhanced when connections between the school and students' families and communities are established and reinforced

A key component of Genesee's list is the area of literacy. For students with little or no previous educational experience, learning to use print may be occurring for the first time at an age when most American students are thinking about getting a driver's license and what to wear to the prom! Yet, the requirements for graduation are the same for all students. For these older students especially, time is critical. Most states have a cutoff age for free public education, usually around 21. If students cannot complete their educational career by this time, they are forced into adult programs

with little chance to ever receive the coveted high school diploma. Literacy is the gateway to all other academic courses and the only hope for employment at a decent wage. Newcomer programs fill in the academic gap for these students through courses that develop basic literacy and numeracy skills, and at the same time offer academic subject preparation and orientation to school and society. Most newcomer programs use a combination of bilingual or sheltered instruction in core subject areas, native (L1) literacy development when possible, and ESL to build student's English language proficiency.

Newcomer programs also differ from traditional bilingual or ESL programming in that they seek to provide a broader array of supplemental services than are normally available.

Newcomer programs emphasize safe educational environments, building bridges to U.S. institutions and society, helping children and families get access to needed services, and involving parents in their children's education. They are designed for flexibility, so they can respond directly to students' needs and to the mobility of the student population. Some programs are more ambitious and comprehensive than others, but all are designed to meet a broad range of academic and social needs in the belief that academic performance is influenced by non-academic factors. While some bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) classes have incorporated features that offer additional help to newcomer students, it is the broad integration of academic and non-academic supports that makes the newcomer programs we studied unique. (Chang, 1990)

Newcomer programs focus district resources for students and families that often are in the most need. At times they may function as educational trauma units; at other times they resemble the one-stop shopping model that is being utilized by many social service agencies. Through the use of bilingual personnel, trained educators, and extensive support personnel, families can be connected to community services in a timely manner. (This book looks in detail at a number of the services available to students and their families in Chapter 13.)

Friedlander compared newcomer programs to "cultural shock absorbers" because they assist students in the adjustment to their new life. One valuable aspect of this adjustment is time to build basic English language skills, while offering a safe haven for the new arrivals. Moving to a new school is difficult for any child, but moving to a school in a new country with a new language can be terrifying. Educators who work with second language learners have seen the pain and fear on newcomers' faces as they retell experiences of prejudice and hostility. Chang quotes a 16-year-old Mexican girl as she recounts why she decided to quit school:

I dropped out of school because the other students were so rude and mean. The work was hard too. Nothing was right. I was scared of the girls who act so tough and embarrassed because everyone knew more than me. When I tried to speak everyone made fun of me, so I never wanted to try to speak again. I couldn't understand what the teacher was saying. On one test at school I didn't write a single word because I didn't understand. That was the last day I went to school. I felt happier at home with my sister.

Newcomer programs can lessen the impact of the transition, providing a safe and welcoming environment in which *all* students share a common experience. Personnel are available who speak the language of the new arrivals and all the students have accents and limited proficiency in English. Courses are designed to build basic skills and students can progress through the program at an individualized pace. Many educators see this aspect of newcomer programs to be their most valuable asset.

Many immigrants find that going to school in the United States is a traumatic experience filled with hostility and prejudice. The psychological impact of such conditions can be enormous, particularly when many students already suffer from post-traumatic stress caused by war, political violence, and the difficulties involved in moving to the United States. . . . Such harsh experiences are clearly damaging to recent arrivals' self-esteem and have provided an impetus for the creation of separate programs for newcomers. Many educators feel newcomers should not be thrust immediately into classrooms with their U.S. peers, but placed, at least for a short time, in a more protected environment. They try to offer students a safe haven where they can feel comfortable learning, test new skills, and experiment with English without being ridiculed. In newcomer programs, students are with peers who are equally unfamiliar with U.S. culture and language, and instructed by teachers who understand their situation. The separate programs provide a kind of "decompression chamber" to boost students' self-confidence and academic skills simultaneously. (Chang, 1990)

For all of these reasons, newcomer programs have been growing in number and size across the continent. The remainder of this book will focus on specific aspects of newcomer programs such as language instruction and program design models, planning and implementing a new program, curriculum and assessment modifications, and support services for students and their families. Whether you are just beginning to consider this model for your district or are looking to improve your current program, I hope that you will find information to assist your new arrivals through this critical period in their academic lives.