



# EDUCATION NEWS

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## Charter Schools and ELL Students: What's the Story?

*The current Department of Education under the Obama Administration places considerable stock in charter schools. Both the President and the Secretary of Education have publicly acknowledged their admiration for various charter organizations and schools. They have further put this faith in policy by giving charter schools a prominent role in the on-going reform efforts; this is evidenced in the eligibility requirements for Race to the Top funding, which rewards states for lifting the cap on charter schools, as well as in the ESEA Blueprint for Reform, which contains the Administration's proposals for Congress' reauthorization of The Elementary and Secondary Schools Act.*



The Administration, through the Blueprint, endorses charter schools as an effective vehicle for public school choice—noting their support for the expansion of “high performing” charter schools—as well as for being a feasible option for the turnaround of failing schools under the “restart” model.<sup>1</sup> These endorsements are strong indications that charter schools are good options for students in low performing schools.

As a civil rights organization and member group of the Campaign for High School Equity, LULAC is particularly concerned about access to high quality education for traditionally underrepresented minority groups, such as students of color and English language learners (ELLs). We are supportive of replicating effective schooling models, particularly as they pertain to the students on whose behalf we work. Unfortunately, the domain of charter schooling is relatively new, and as

such, its success with these students is not universally accepted, specifically with regards to ELLs. A recent study by scholars at The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA raised renewed concerns regarding this special population and their protection under the law and in charter schools.

The legal landscape of states' policies for charter schools as they apply to ELLs is in no way a uniform picture. Analyses conducted by researchers at UCLA's Civil Right Project revealed that there is huge variance across states as to the extent of the provisions regarding ELLs in state legislation for charter schools. Thirteen states have nothing in their charter laws that speak specifically to ELL students or programs. States that do contain provisions range from having very limited regulations regarding funding to regulations requiring close monitoring of all charter schools for compliance with laws regarding ELLs. For example, Michigan, among the top 10 states in terms of number of charter schools,<sup>2</sup> contains no provisions for ELLs in charter law.<sup>3</sup> The District Columbia, which has over eighty charter schools,<sup>4</sup> contains no provisions for ELLs apart from a funding stipulation that public charter schools will receive quarterly payments for services provided to ELLs students.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Rhode Island, with a relatively low number of ELLs, has codified into law the provision that the “makeup of the charter public school must be reflective of the student population of the district. . .

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## Charter Schools and ELL Students

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[and] no charter shall be authorized for a school with a student population that does not include students with limited English proficiency.<sup>6</sup>

Above and beyond the problem of inconsistency between states regarding their legal treatment of ELLs in charter schools, there are systematic difficulties in obtaining accurate counts of the number of ELLs enrolled in charter schools. According to Frankenberg et al., this difficulty stems from the fact that reporting requirements vary: obtaining enrollment numbers is more feasible in districts comprised solely of charters, as opposed to those districts made up of both traditional public and charter schools, and at least four states do not report ELL students.<sup>7</sup> One of the summary implications of these realities is that ELLs may be under-counted and, thus, the impact of certain schooling models—in this case, charters—may also be under- (or over-) estimated.

The efficacy of charter schools on ELL students' learning is also mixed. There have been several prominent studies in the last few years that have weighed in on this question and borne different results. Scholars at Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) have conducted numerous studies at the city, state, and national levels that have compared the academic gains of various subgroups of students in charter schools relative to their peers in traditional public schools.<sup>8</sup> The most recently published of these reports, released in January of this year, was conducted in New York City, where there were 30,400 students enrolled in 99 charter schools in 2009.<sup>9</sup> The report revealed that the charter schools in the study produced significant gains for Hispanic and Black students in both math and reading, but that there was no distinction between the performance of ELL students in traditional public schools and charter schools. CREDO's national study, which was released a year ago, produced more mixed results. It revealed that on the whole, students in charter schools did not perform significantly better than students in traditional schools; however, the report did make positive findings for certain sub-groups of students, including for ELLs, who reportedly made further academic gains in charter schools than their peers in traditional public schools.<sup>10</sup>



Depending upon the design of a study, then, and the level of comparison, one will have different interpretations of the efficacy of charter schools on ELLs.

Another prominent study in the literature, Caroline Hoxby's "How New York City Charter Schools Affect Achievement," was able to extrapolate that charter schools in New York City would help to significantly close the race achievement gap for students who attend them for all grades, K-8.<sup>11</sup> However, the report did not parse out the effects of charters on the achievement of ELLs, which the author attributed to the unreliability of any such comparison, due to the relatively low enrollment of ELLs in charter schools compared to traditional public schools. Depending upon the design of a study, then, and the level of comparison, one will have different interpretations of the efficacy of charter schools on ELLs.

We can expect that the proliferation of charter schools will in turn fuel more and more scholarship on the effects of this model of schooling for all groups. It will be important to monitor future studies and policy decisions to get a better sense of what kind of charter model—if any—works for ELLs. In this edition of the newsletter, we highlight one charter school with a large population of ELLs, whose students have made notable gains.

### Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, ESEA Blueprint for Reform, Washington, D.C., 2010.
- 2 [uscharterschools.org](http://uscharterschools.org); accessed May 28, 2010
- 3 Frankenberg, E., Seigel-Hawley, G., Wang, J. (2010). *Choice without Equity: Charter School Segregation and the Need for Civil Rights Standards*. Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA; [www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu).
- 4 [uscharterschools.org](http://uscharterschools.org)
- 5 Frankenberg et al.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 For more information or to download studies, see: <http://credo.stanford.edu/>
- 9 New York City Charter School Center ([nyccharterschools.org/learn/quick-facts](http://nyccharterschools.org/learn/quick-facts)); accessed June 11, 2010
- 10 "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States." Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). June 2009.
- 11 Hoxby, Caroline M., Sonali Murarka, and Jenny Kang. "How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement, August 2009 Report." Second report in series. Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project, September 2009.

# English Language Learner Charter Schools

*A rise in the Hispanic population in the United States has brought more charter schools focusing just on ELLs—some with great success*

In districts with Hispanic populations, English language learning is a priority, particularly in the elementary grades, which many students enter still speaking Spanish as their primary language. In affiliation with the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), a private, non-profit organization focused on reducing poverty and discrimination and improving opportunity for Hispanic Americans, about 100 community-based charter schools serve districts like these across the United States.

**By Alan Dessoff**

None of the schools serves only English language learners (ELLs); each has “a different proportion” of them, says Delia Pompa, NCLR’s vice president for education, since many students who enter the schools already have learned English, often through their families that have been living in the country for several generations.

But ELLs represent “a significant portion of the Latino student population,” according to a statistical brief—“Missing Out: Latino Students in America’s Schools”—that NCLR issued last year. It reported that 39 percent of all Latino children were ELLs in the nation’s public schools in 2005 and nearly 80 percent of ELL students were Hispanic.

Some of the schools operate under NCLR’s Charter School Development Initiative, which the organization launched in 2001 as a response to the “increasingly alarming educational outcomes” of Latino students at that time. Others function as part of NCLR’s Early College Project, created in 2002 to increase high school and college graduation rates for Latinos.

With President Barack Obama’s initiative to get states to remove any limits on the number of new charter schools while shutting down ineffective ones, the Hispanic schools are drawing increased interest. Here are three case studies of schools that serve mainly ELL students and that have seen some noteworthy success, despite some drawbacks.

## Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, Los Angeles, Calif.

The MacArthur Park neighborhood west of downtown Los Angeles is one of the poorest and most densely populated neighborhoods in the city. Most of its residents are immigrants from Mexico and Central America. In 2000, Pueblo Nuevo Development, a non-profit community development corporation in MacArthur Park, founded Camino Nuevo Charter Academy as part of NCLR’s Charter School Development Initiative. It opened with two K5 campuses, followed by two middle school campuses the next year and Camino Nuevo High School in 2004.

Now it is a network of schools serving more than 1,500 students from preschool through grade 12. Ninety-eight percent of its students qualify for free and reduced-price meals, based on their household size and income under state eligibility guidelines, and ELLs are “the core of our student population,” representing more than 90 percent of entering students every year, says Ana Ponce, the academy’s executive director and CEO. “We build our instructional program on that foundation,” she says.

But Camino Nuevo’s mission is broader than teaching ELLs. As stated in its literature, it is “to educate students in a college preparatory program to be literate, critical thinkers and independent problem solvers who are agents of social change.”

Camino Nuevo does it by carefully tracking data on each student’s progress. “We are data-driven. We identify what’s working and the gaps where things are not working and then try to fix them,” Ponce says. She cites a difference in third-grade test scores that administrators noticed between the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 school years.

As they tried to identify the reason for the gap, they looked at differences between the third-grade teachers in the two years. “It came down to teacher quality,” Ponce says, and so administrators focused on coaching the teacher who had produced the lower scores.

She explains that when a teacher needs support, the principal or a designee meets with the teacher to review the teacher’s techniques and lesson plans as well as students’ work, and also observes the teacher’s classroom at least once a week. In addition, quarterly benchmark assessments are closely reviewed for each of the teacher’s students.

Camino Nuevo helps parents play an important role in their children’s learning. A Latino family literacy program provides parents of younger students skills for reading with their children at home and talking with them about what they are reading in their classrooms. A parent coordinator on every campus works with parents to keep them engaged. “We don’t want parents to just show up. We want them to be advocates for their children’s education, not just in terms of what teacher they get but in terms of preparing them for the option to go to college,” Ponce declares.

The academy is operating with a budget this academic year of \$14.5 million, down from \$15.6 million last year. “We are funded like any other public school, and clearly we are being impacted by the downturn in the economy,” Ponce explains. That also is impacting grants Camino Nuevo receives from private foundations.

Last year, it received more than \$1 million in grants but is anticipating probably no more than \$400,000 this year, Ponce says. But the school “does not rely on private fund-raising to operate our programs and therefore has not been significantly impacted by the drop in private funding,” she says.

Camino Nuevo’s rigorous academic approach produced a 97 percent graduation rate for its first high school graduating class in 2008. In addition, all the graduates went to college, with 62 percent admitted to four-year institutions and the rest to community colleges.

With an academic performance index (API) of 759 out of a possible 900, the high school outperformed the statewide API average of 702 and the Los Angeles Unified School District API average of 683. The API, the cornerstone of California’s Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, measures the academic performance and growth of the state’s schools. “We are demonstrating that these kids have what it takes to perform at high levels, and we are pushing the system to compete with us,” Ponce says.

(Used with permission, District Administration, February 2010, English Language Learner Charter Schools, [www.districtadministration.com](http://www.districtadministration.com))

# The Condition of Education 2010, How do Latino Students Fare?

As summer approaches, we find ourselves in the thick of the graduation season; high school students across the country are receiving diplomas and preparing to go on to college and jobs. Not all students who entered high school four years ago are graduating this year, though. A special section in *The Condition of Education 2010* paints a picture of the nation's high-poverty schools in which students are most likely to be black or Hispanic, teachers are less qualified than their peers in low-poverty schools, average reading and math scores are far below those of students in low-poverty schools, and students are less likely to graduate and go to college.<sup>1</sup>

Using the most recently available data, for example, in the fall of 2003, 4,184,345 students enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> grade in public high schools in the U.S. Four years later, 3,266,302 students were enrolled in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>2</sup> Within that gap—those students who didn't make it to 12<sup>th</sup> grade—the majority were students who dropped out of school and the majority of those students were poor students and students of color. The latest data available, from the 2006–2007 school year, reveal that there were 2,871,129 high school graduates that year. Of all of the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who dropped out during that same year (4.4 % of all students), students of color, on average, had the highest dropout rates: 6.8 percent of Black students dropped out, 6.5 percent of Hispanic students, 2.6 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 7.6 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students.<sup>3</sup> That same year, over 25% of 16- to 24-year-olds in families with incomes in the bottom two quartiles were considered to have dropped out (they were not enrolled in school nor had completed a high school program), while the same was true for less than 10% of students in families with incomes in the top two quartiles.<sup>4</sup>

Students without high school diplomas face dim job prospects, among many other difficulties they will come up against. In its annual "Condition of Education," the



Department of Education recently outlined the reality facing new graduates. In 2008, for example, the median income of workers with high school diplomas or the equivalent was \$6,500 higher than the median income of students without a high school diploma.<sup>5</sup> In addition to higher earnings, individuals with a high school diploma or its equivalent are less likely to be unemployed than their peers who did not complete high school. In 2004, for example, in the age group of 25–34, those with a high school diploma faced an unemployment rate 3 percentage points lower than those who had not completed high school.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Black and Hispanic adults were more likely to be unemployed in 2004, and those with less education within each subgroup were more likely to be unemployed than their peers with more education.

LULAC, as part of the Campaign for High School Equity (CHSE), is working towards policies that will ensure that more students in these vulnerable groups graduate from high school. In doing this, we hope to change the life trajectories of the individual students, as well as to positively impact the community of which these potential graduates are a part.

## Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, ESEA Blueprint for Reform, Washington, D.C., 2010.
- 2 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education," 2003–04, 2006–2007.
- 3 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education," 2006–07 and 2007–08, and "NCES Common Core of Data State Dropout and Completion Data File," 2006–07; and unpublished tabulations. (This table was prepared November 2009.)
- 4 U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October 1970 through October 2008. (This table was prepared August 2009.)
- 5 Aud, S., Hussar, W., Planty, M., Snyder, T., Bianco, K., Fox, M., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., Drake, L. (2010). *The Condition of Education 2010* (NCES 2010-028). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.
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