



# Education

**Section VIII of the  
2006-2007 Travis County Immigrant Assessment**

**Conducted by  
Travis County Health and Human Services & Veterans Service  
Research and Planning Division**

**Questions and comments regarding this report may be directed to  
[rachel.coff@co.travis.tx.us](mailto:rachel.coff@co.travis.tx.us) or [koren.darling@co.travis.tx.us](mailto:koren.darling@co.travis.tx.us)**



## Education Overview

### **Community Goal**

The community goals for education in Travis County are reflected in the following statements:

*For early childhood education:*

**Increase the quality of learning environments in early childhood development programs and in the homes of families with very young children.**

(United Way, Success By 6, 2006)

*For K-12 education:*

**Ensure that the district meets the needs of all student groups, with an emphasis on high-priority student populations, including African-American adolescents and recent immigrant English Language Learners.**

(Austin Independent School District, 2005)

*For literacy services:*

**Support and expand high quality literacy services so that businesses can hire, people can work, and families can thrive.**

(Literacy Coalition of Central Texas, 2007)

Collectively, these goals emphasize the importance of educating all youth and adults. Having an educated populace strengthens the social and economic fabric of the community, and lays the foundation for community prosperity.

### **Highlights**

- A growing number of students come from immigrant families. One out of every five children in the United States is the child of an immigrant (Matthews & Ewen, 2006). More than half of immigrant students (58%) come from a limited English proficient (LEP) household (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson & Passel, 2005b).
- In Travis County schools, 16% of students are classified as LEP. Nine school districts serve Travis County. Of these, Manor, Del Valle, and Austin Independent School Districts (ISD) have the largest populations of LEP students. (Texas Education Agency, 2006)
- Travis County schools reflect the diversity in language and culture that exists throughout the community. In one of the largest LEP schools in Travis County, LEP students speak more than 63 different languages. Ninety three percent of those students speak Spanish at home. (Cornetto & Doolittle, 2006)

- In Travis County, graduation rates for LEP students are consistently lower than those of other student populations. LEP students also achieve consistently lower passage rates on TAKS tests than other students (TEA, 2006). This growing population of students faces special circumstances and may require specific interventions in order to achieve academic parity.
- Parental involvement in a child's education often plays a key role in a child's success from early childhood through college. English language proficiency and educational attainment among parents, as well as family socio-economic status generally correlate to parental involvement.
  - English language proficiency in parents affects their ability to fully participate in the education of their children. In Travis County, nearly 55% of foreign-born residents reported speaking English "less than very well" (American Community Survey, 2005).
  - Educational attainment among immigrant parents in Travis County spans the educational spectrum. However, compared to native born, more foreign-born individuals in Travis County are likely to have less than a high school education. However, foreign born and native-born residents share an identical percentage of graduate and professional degrees (American Community Survey, 2005).
  - Schools with a high percentage of LEP students often have a large share of economically disadvantaged students (those eligible for free or reduced price lunches) (Texas Education Agency, 2006). In all school districts serving Travis County, the majority of the LEP population comes from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Texas Education Agency, 2006).
- Immigrants may participate in higher education and attain degrees, regardless of their citizenship status; however, this does not ensure legal employability. Current proposed legislation (The Dream Act) attempts to address this.
- The demand for classes in English as a Second Language continues to surge as the immigrant population grows, in some instances outpacing the supply.

## Recurring Issues

Across all levels of education, immigrant students and families face greater barriers than those of the general population. While many immigrant students and families transition smoothly into our community and education system, others face significant hardships. Many immigrant parents, particularly those with children in early grades, come from low income backgrounds, are less educated than native-born parents, and have difficulty speaking English (Capps et al, 2005b), which are all factors which correlate to child school-readiness and successful school-performance.

### **Language**

English language proficiency is important in the academic setting. Nearly 45% of the Travis County, Spanish-speaking, foreign-born population reported speaking English “less than very well.” At the same time, only 10.7% of foreign-born individuals who spoke other languages reported speaking English “less than very well.” (American Community Survey, 2005)

Within the educational system today, children who are non-native English speakers are typically designated limited English proficient, or LEP. English Language Learner, or ELL is also a commonly used designation. However, the LEP designation is more frequently used as a reference within several resources and databases. The LEP data set more accurately captures the subgroup this report addresses, and can be used as a surrogate for immigrant status. Accordingly, this report will frequently use the term LEP to refer to the immigrant student population.

The LEP student population is growing and requires specific, targeted assistance in order to achieve greater academic achievement (TEA, 2007). To that end, many institutionalized systems and targeted initiatives exist to address LEP student needs. If effective, these initiatives enable LEP students to meet the same academic standards as their non-LEP student counterparts.

#### **Local Findings: Insufficient Resources/Time to Meet Desired Level of Language Proficiency**

Local providers concur with conclusions found in literature. Providers state that perhaps some of the current academic expectations for language acquisition are unrealistic. English Language Learners at every level are being asked to meet higher standards of academic English proficiency with fewer resources available to help them achieve even the most basic English proficiency level.

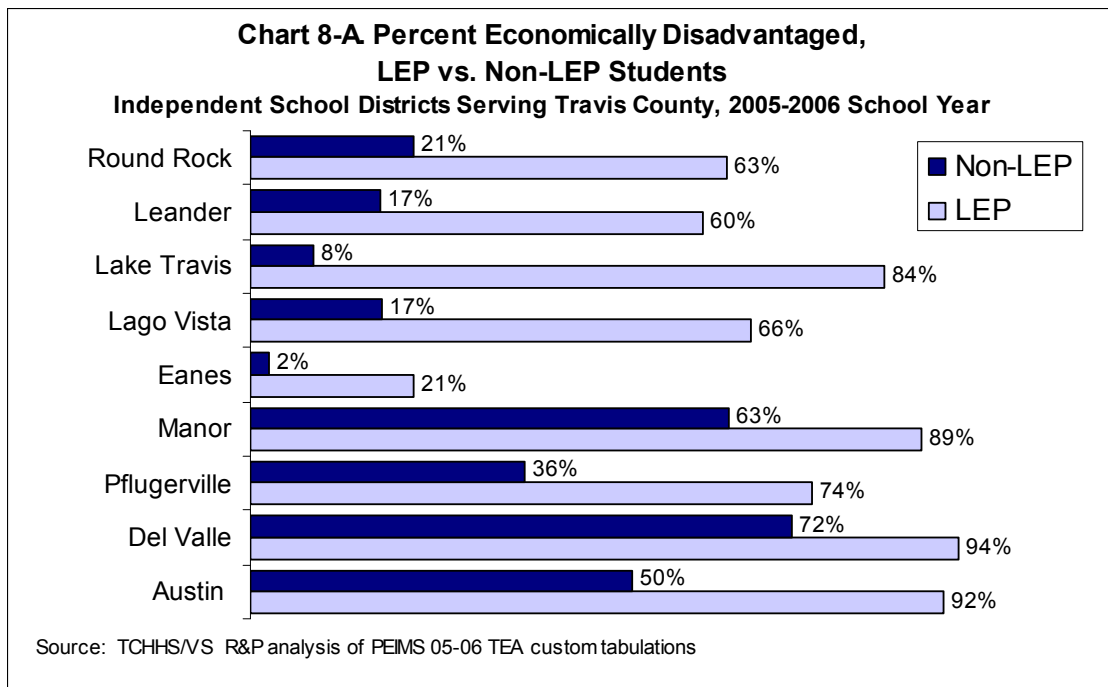
### **Socio-Economic Factors**

Parent socio-economic status can be a key determinant of child school-readiness and educational success. According to current social research, certain factors place immigrant children at higher risk for poor developmental outcomes:

- Having a mother without a high school diploma,
- Being economically deprived, and
- Living in a linguistically isolated household.<sup>48</sup>  
(Haskins, Greenberg, & Fremstad, 2004)

Recent studies indicate that more than half of foreign-born workers are in low-wage jobs and earning less than the minimum wage (Haskins et al., 2004). A significant portion of these individuals are parents. The nature of low-wage work may constrain their ability to support their children’s education. Often, the hours and shifts required in low-wage earning jobs do not allow immigrant parents time with their children to set up and support hospitable study environments in their homes. Additionally, low earnings may preclude many immigrant parents from providing critical educational resources and materials that higher income parents can provide. In short, lower socio-economic status of parents may predispose a child to lower educational outcomes.

Chart 8-A shows that across school districts serving Travis County, a greater share of LEP students than non-LEP students are economically disadvantaged.



**Educational Attainment**

Compared with more highly educated parents, those who have experienced limited success in school may be less able, and therefore less likely, to help their children achieve school success.

<sup>48</sup> A linguistically isolated household is one in which no member 14 years old and over (1) speaks only English or (2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English "very well." In other words, all members 14 years old and over have at least some difficulty with English (American Community Survey 2005 Subject Definitions).

Lacking formal education themselves, these parents may not be able to impart academic knowledge to their children. Also, parents with past challenging school experiences (academic or otherwise) may be less likely to come into their children's school to support and advocate for their children. These dynamics are particularly significant among immigrant parents in Travis County. More than one-third (36%) of the county's foreign-born population has less than a high school education, compared to 8% of the county's native-born population, as outlined in Table 8-A. (American Community Survey, 2005)

	Native-Born		Foreign-Born	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Less than high school graduate	35,114	8%	40,760	36%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	81,334	18%	17,598	16%
Some college or associate's degree	125,864	29%	15,840	14%
Bachelor's degree	131,748	30%	21,109	19%
Graduate or professional degree	67,318	15%	17,122	15%

Source: American Community Survey, 2005

### ***Parental Involvement***

**Language, socio-economic status, and educational attainment** – all contribute to **parental involvement**. According to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was revised under the No Child Left Behind Act, parental involvement is defined as “the participation of parents in regular, two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).”

Much of a child's academic success or failure can be attributed to the preparedness and enrichment he or she receives early in life. Literature shows that certain socio-economic factors contribute to child academic-preparedness and subsequent success in school. Education level and English proficiency influence parental ability to support children in academic studies and/or to communicate with school staff. Parents with higher educational attainment and better English skills can communicate more effectively with teachers and administrators, are more readily involved in their children's education and are better able to access needed services.

#### **Local Findings: Parental Involvement – School Services**

Local immigrant focus group participants who identified as parents acknowledged that their English language proficiency, presence and involvement does make a positive impact on their children's academic success. One focus group participant stated, “There are few parents that spend an entire day of the school week at their child's school. We do that, and I think our children are getting a better education because of our involvement.”

Others stated that their English proficiency affects their participation in their children's school; however they also feel that bilingual staff help them feel more welcome. For example, one Spanish-speaking parent stated, “A good day for me is when I can speak to my child's bilingual teacher.” This same participant expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to participate in her child's education at the same level that predominantly English-speaking parents can.

### Local Findings : Parental Involvement - Transportation Access

Local immigrant focus group participants cited that a lack of access to transportation prevented them from participating in educational services to the extent they would have desired. Several cited the lack of bus stops, bus routes, bus transfers and travel time. Examples follow:

- One participant was especially concerned about transportation. She felt there was a need to increase the number of stops and the distance between stops.
- Another said, "It's really impossible to get around by bus. You get up early and miss the bus anyway. You end up running around all of the time and don't get anywhere on time."
- One other stated, "I prepare myself, my daughter, my husband for work. I drop her off at school, return home (by taking 3 bus transfers - she was very concerned about the time it took out of her day to do this) , get home, pick up a little bit and then prepare for both my daughter's and husband's return."

At a public forum held in June 2006, local providers offered input about barriers facing the immigrants they serve. Providers expressed that access to transportation may limit a parent's involvement in his or her child's school or their attendance at adult education or English as a Second Language classes.

## Early Childhood Education

Cognitive brain development occurs in the first three years of life. A child's family and surroundings shape and influence the patterns and habits for school and later behavior. Research demonstrates that high-quality early education programs are of particular benefit to low-income and other at-risk children by supporting and promoting healthy development. (Matthews and Ewen, 2006)

The share of U.S. children with immigrant parents is highest among the youngest age group. Twenty-two percent of U.S. children under age six have immigrant parents (Capps et al., 2005b), and 33% of all Travis County births are to immigrant mothers (ACS, 2005). The educational spectrum for these young children includes:

- The role of parents in the home,
- Public and private child care providers,
- And pre-kindergarten through public schools.

### **Home Environment**

The home environment is an important component of parental involvement for very young children. Early exposure to reading often occurs in the home. Research indicates that "early literacy-building activities such as teaching children letters, words, numbers, or story-telling, and teaching songs and music, translates to better school performance (RAND Corporation, 2005b)." Disparities in the home or community environment have academic consequences. For example, "Among children ages three to five in 2001, 16% are not read to regularly at home. Among children whose mothers have less than a high school education, that fraction rises to 31%" (RAND Corporation, 2005b). For lower socio-economic status families, child care

participation may provide the only opportunity for children to experience a material-rich environment that offers early literacy exposure and promotes school readiness.

### **Child Care**

Immigrant families seek child care resources on a less frequent basis than non-immigrant families due to a variety of factors. Immigrant children are more likely to live in two-parent households and less likely to have two working parents (Matthews & Ewen, 2006). Sixty-four percent of Travis County immigrant families live in married-couple households, compared to 55% of native-born families (American Community Survey, 2005). In married-couple families, child care may not be necessary as a work support. On the other hand, many immigrants work in low-wage jobs, which may limit child care options. For immigrants with low-wage jobs and irregular or non-traditional hours, such as nights and weekends, childcare becomes more difficult to both attain and retain (Matthews & Ewen, 2006).

While potentially critical for a child's development, child care is costly and can be prohibitively expensive for low-income families. The average annual cost of center-based child care in Travis County is \$6,798 – nearly one-third of the average immigrant family's income (Community Action Network, 2005). Of the foreign-born population, nearly 23% of households are at or below 100% of the federal poverty level (American Community Survey, 2005).

One alternative to costly child care for immigrant families is Head Start. Head Start has demonstrated success in helping to bridge early literacy disparities between lower income children and their counterparts. In Travis County, immigrant families who are income-eligible may participate in the local Head Start program (Strickland, 2006). In addition to Head Start, another widely accessible option for early education is public school pre-kindergarten.

#### **Local Findings: Child Care**

Some local focus group participants lived in two-parent-households, in which one parent worked in an industry such as construction or service that required long hours, while the other parent, typically the mother, took children to and from school, prepared meals for the family and performed other household chores. They commented on their daily lives:

- I prepare myself, my daughter, my husband for work. I drop her off at school, return home, get home, pick up a little bit and then prepare for both my daughter and husband to return home.
- I start my day by making breakfast for my children, helping them get ready and then taking them to school. I go in to work at 8 A.M.. At approximately 2:30 P.M., I pick them up. We eat lunch. They do chores and then do their homework. I prepare dinner. We eat, hang out and play together and then we begin our preparation for the next day. Occasionally, because I have a side job, I may take the children with me to go and clean houses after school, when I have an assignment.

### **Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K)**

Presently, Texas does not require students to enter school until the age of six (Compulsory School Attendance, n.d.). As a result, students may show widely disparate learning experiences when they do enter school and may be insufficiently prepared.

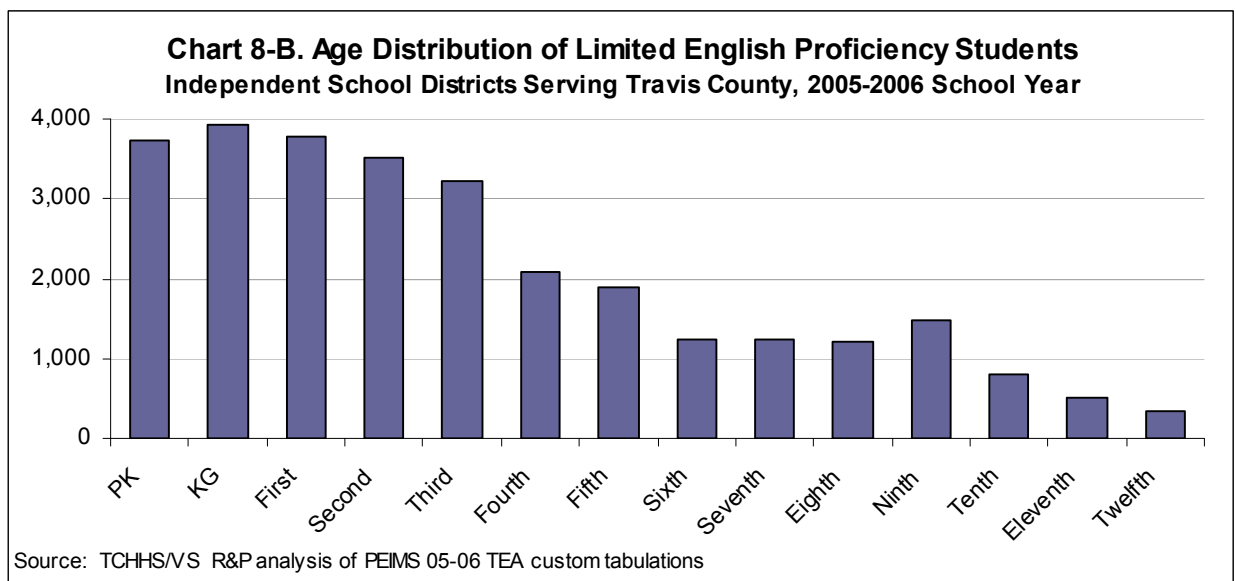
In order to fill this gap for high risk students, the 68<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature (1985) passed legislation that made public school pre-k widely accessible. The law stipulates that any school district *may* offer pre-k classes, but school districts with at least 15 eligible (unable to speak or understand English, educationally disadvantaged or homeless), four year-old children, *must* offer a pre-k program. The ultimate goal of this legislation was to increase reading readiness so that every child can achieve an appropriate reading level by third grade.

The pre-k system, however, unlike other elementary grade levels, is not included in the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) requirements. Districts and teachers are provided with guidelines to follow rather than requirements for classroom curricula. Inconsistencies in the experience of pre-k children may occur as each district or teacher develops and implements their own respective pre-k programs. Class sizes, curricula, and teaching methods may also vary greatly, leading to vastly different results for students.

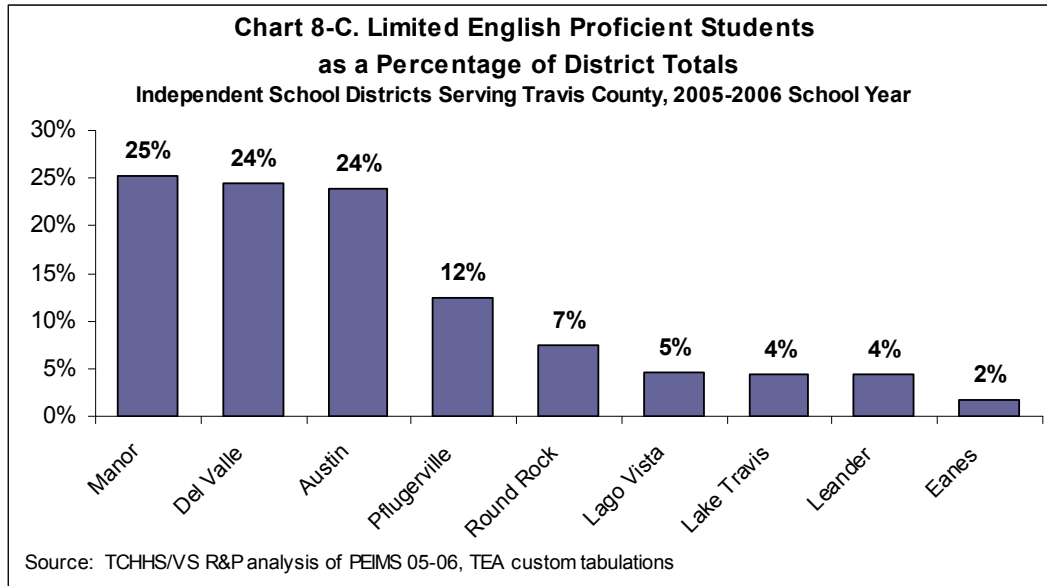
Additionally, the pre-k system does not mandate transportation (Jones, 2006). Providing transportation is a discretionary decision per district. When districts opt to not provide transportation, pre-k becomes less viable for many low-income, immigrant families with limited transportation. Some parents with limited transportation do manage to utilize public pre-k. However, lack of access to personal transportation and reliance on the public transport system may make parental involvement in school more difficult.

## Elementary and Secondary Education

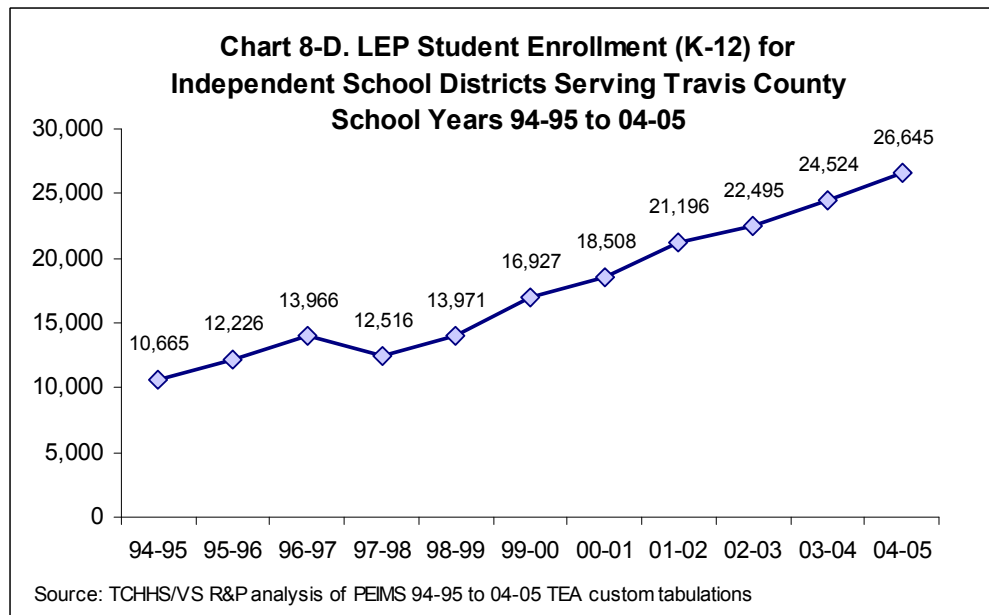
Understanding the distribution of immigrant children in the educational system may help policymakers and administrators determine where to best allocate resources. In the nine school districts serving Travis County, there is a larger concentration of LEP students in pre-k through third grade than in any subsequent grades, as is shown in Chart 8-B.



Data from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) 2006 indicates that LEP student enrollment is 16% (29,000) of all students (186,000) in the nine districts serving Travis County (Austin, Del Valle, Eanes, Lago Vista, Lake Travis, Leander, Manor, Pflugerville, and Rounds Rock). Of these nine districts, the largest LEP student populations are in Manor (25%), Del Valle (24%), and Austin (24%), as shown in Chart 8-C. This high percentage of LEP population has varying implications for service delivery to immigrant students.



These nine school districts located within or across Travis County boundaries have all experienced growth in the total number of LEP students relative to the total student enrollment. The LEP enrollment figures for all these schools combined has more than doubled from 10,665 in 1995 to 26,645 in 2005, as shown in Chart 8-D.



### ***No Child Left Behind Act***

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), passed in 2002, brought sweeping reforms to public education across the country. Central to this reform is the requirement to track progress of LEP and other historically challenged student subgroups, in order to ensure that they perform comparably to other, less challenged groups. (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwanto, 2006)

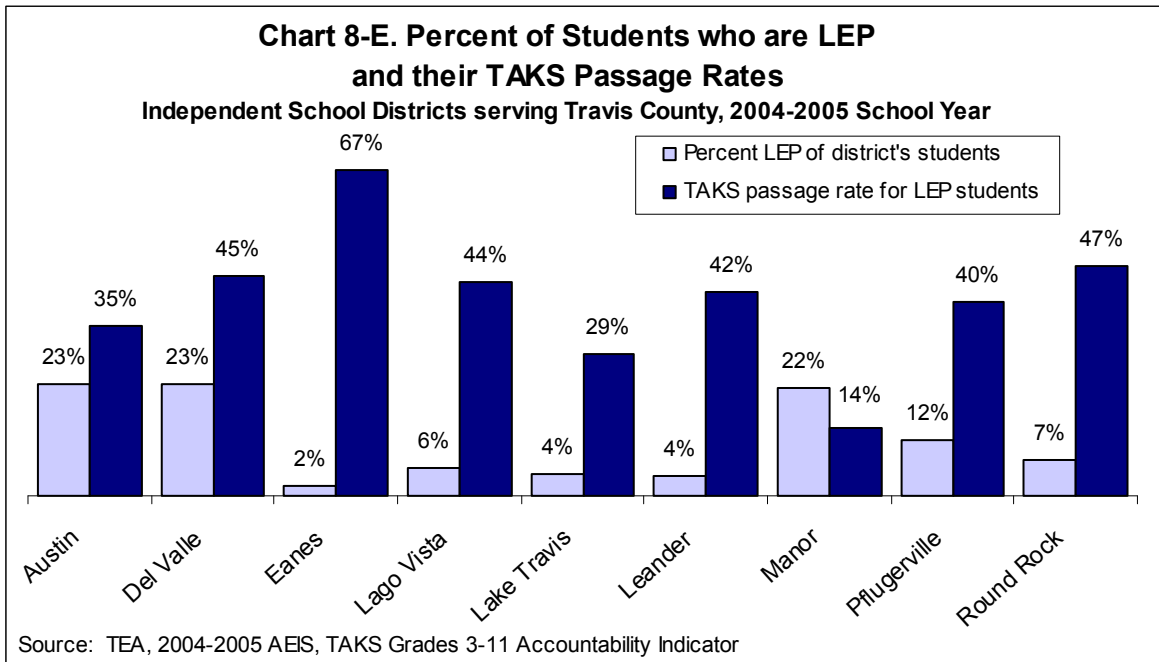
Under NCLB, schools are required to: 1) assess all students for both current English proficiency status and change over time, starting in third grade; 2) report overall student performance, as well as performance of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and economic minority groups who are historically under-served; and 3) improve performance of all subgroups. Title I mandates that schools focus on improving performance of LEP students in reading and math beginning in third grade. Title III requires schools to measure and improve student English proficiency. (Capps et al, 2006). Public schools in Texas employ a set of standardized student tests such as the Texas Oral Proficiency Test (TOPT) and the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), among others, to measure such performance. A series of progressive accountability sanctions are also in place for schools that fail to meet adequate performance standards.

The NCLB accountability structure creates both opportunities and burdens for LEP students. In order to achieve parity across all student groups, districts and campuses with high LEP concentrations (or other key underserved populations) may provide increased resources and special services, such as intensive summer English or after school classes, in order to meet NCLB performance standards. These resources and interventions are geared to promote greater academic success and meet NCLB performance standards (Capps et al., 2006). However, they may require that LEP students focus too narrowly on standardized test-related subject matter and participate in a greater number of related tests without respect for the challenges of learning a new language (Capps et al., 2006). For example, a third grade student who arrives from El Salvador may be placed in a bilingual classroom and afforded supplemental education services, such as a reading specialist and additional after-hours curriculum; yet that child must also prepare for and pass all the necessary standardized test, such as the TOPT and the TAKS. As a result, standardized testing may affect “the quality or nature of an immigrant and/or LEP student’s” overall education (Capps et al, 2006).

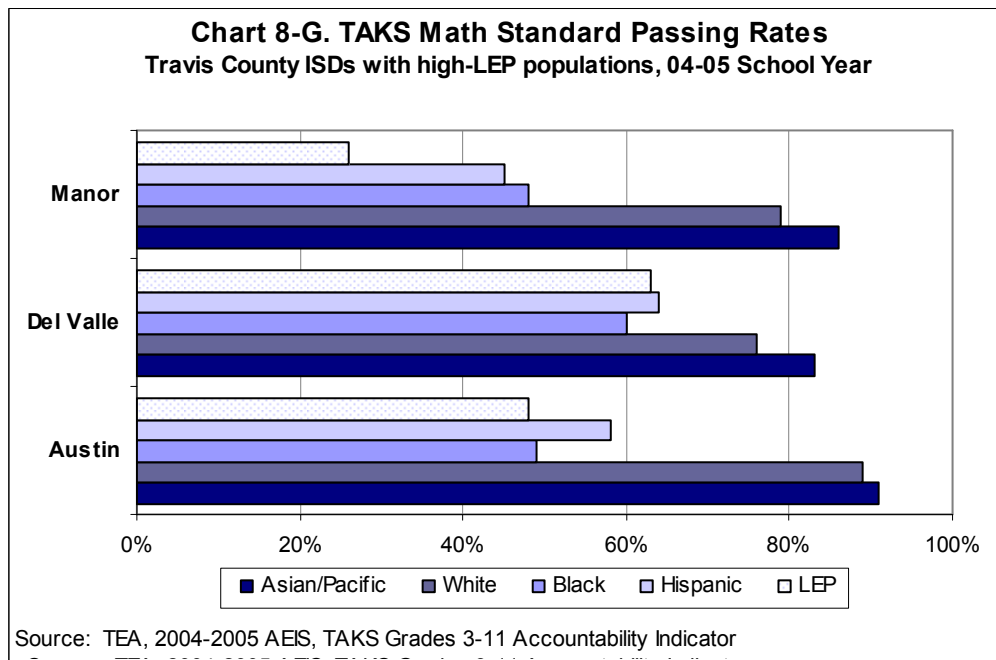
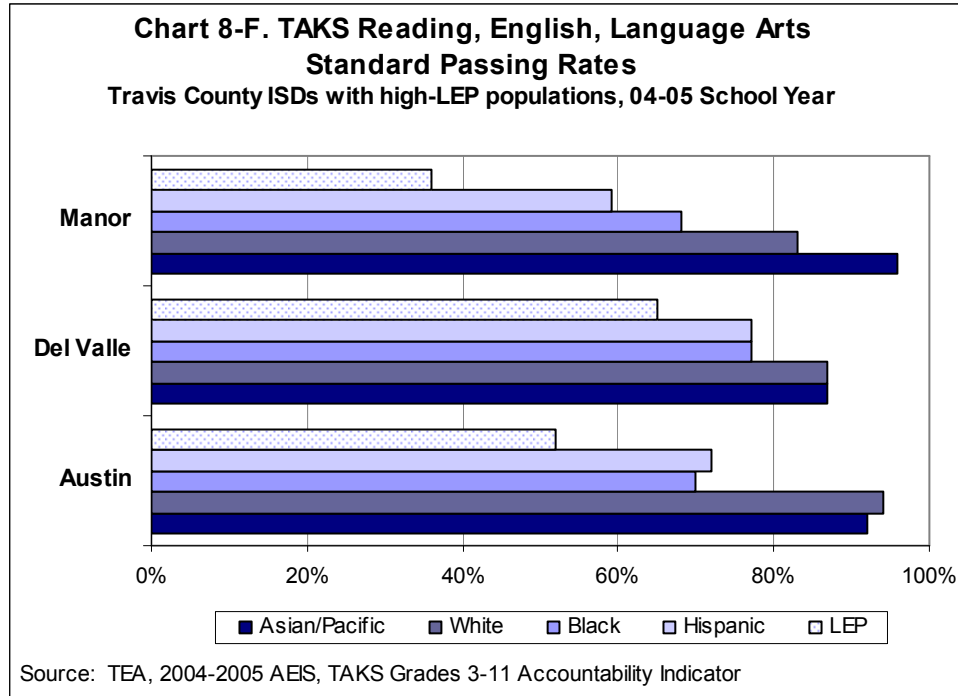
Education researchers have found that an emphasis on standardized testing can be particularly detrimental to older immigrant students (those students who enter the school system after fifth grade). These late-entering LEP students may tend to score lower on tests, have more difficulty learning English, and drop out of school at higher rates, due to a variety of factors (Capps et al, 2006). Additionally, LEP students who enter later in school are often low-literate or illiterate in their native languages, and may encounter limited resources, particularly if they enter smaller LEP school districts. Presently, the specific issues facing late-entering immigrant students are unclear and provide a basis for further study.

**Standardized Test Performance in Schools, K-12**

LEP student standardized test performance indicates significant gaps in graduation rates and overall academic performance. Schools with higher percentages of LEP students typically have a higher percentage of Title I funding allocated to provide support and services that assist the LEP student population (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding, & Clewell, 2005). These additional resources, however, may not translate into greater academic success for LEP students. Most LEP students in high LEP Travis County school districts have lower TAKS cumulative scores than LEP students in school districts with lower LEP percentages, as illustrated in Chart 8-E:



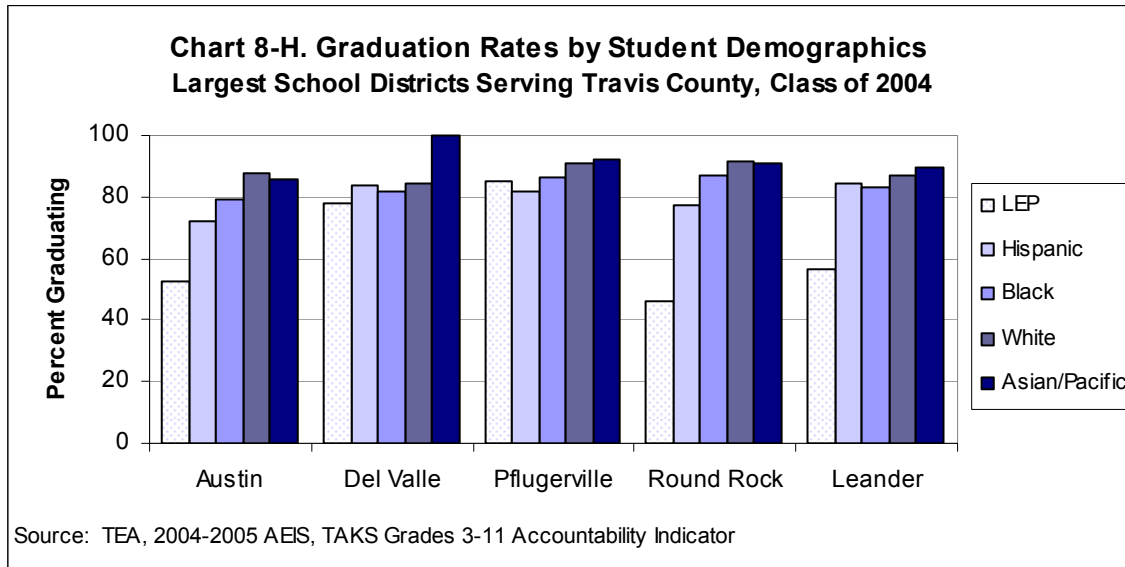
Within the high-LEP Travis County school districts (Austin, Del Valle, and Manor), the LEP student population that took the 2004-2005 TAKS tests achieved consistently lower passage rates than students from other categories, such as the White, Asian/Pacific and Black students, in both Reading and English Language Arts (chart 8-F, on the following page), and Math (chart 8-G, on the following page).



**Graduation Rates**

Trends indicate lower LEP graduation rates in the largest LEP Travis County school districts. Chart 8-H demonstrates that LEP graduation rates in Travis County are consistently below other racial/ethnic student groups. In Round Rock ISD, the second largest school district

serving Travis County, nearly 89% of the total 12<sup>th</sup> grade class graduated in 2005, whereas only 45% of LEP students graduated.



**School Structure**

School staffing composition may complicate the school experience for LEP students. Many schools with high LEP student concentrations have more new teachers than those with fewer or no LEP students (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding & Clewell, 2005). This trend appears to be true for several Travis County campuses. A separate analysis<sup>49</sup>, comparing elementary campuses in Austin ISD (a high LEP district) to elementary campuses in Eanes ISD (a low LEP district), shows that districts with higher LEP student percentages had teaching staffs with less average experience, while conversely, the lower LEP schools within Eanes ISD had teachers with a greater amount of teaching experience.

**Local Findings: Improving access to educational services**

Local service providers mentioned several school-based initiatives to improve LEP students’ parental involvement in the educational system. Some include:

- **Adult Education programs:** Some programs provide early childhood education and childcare to parents enrolled in English as a Second Language, computer literacy, or other types of adult education classes.
- **Parent Support Specialists:** These specialists serve as liaisons between campus staff and parents, families, and the community. They provide general outreach to parents through home visits, serve on special teams and groups, and facilitate parent-teacher conferences.
- **Translators and Interpreters:** Because of the growing population of students with diverse linguistic needs, schools employ professionals who translate key information in publications and other documents, and serve as interpreters at school and community meetings for these students and their families.

<sup>49</sup> This analysis was conducted using 2004-2005 PEIMS Data from TEA.

### **Services for LEP Students**

High LEP schools are more likely to offer Title I and other special support services (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding & Clewell, 2005). While a variety of structures within the school system address the needs of the LEP population, the most integral part of the child's education is the curriculum. Several educational models exist, the most common of which include bilingual education and English as a Second Language.

**Primary (K-6):** In primary grades, a district or campus may choose to adopt different bilingual education models. Some examples include sheltered immersion, complete immersion, and dual language. Common features for all of these models include a classroom setting with a single bilingual teacher, and a defined curriculum to support and promote learning among LEP students and their families in both English and their native languages. (Faltis and Hudelson, 1998)

Two main types of bilingual educational or ESL approaches are used to teach LEP students: transitional and maintenance. The transitional approach utilizes both the native language of the student and English for instruction until the student is functional in an English-only classroom (Faltis and Hudelson, 1998). The goal for this type of program is to have learner grade-level achievement in English in three years or less. Students in transitional programs also receive ESL classes in order to develop basic oral and written language proficiency and better participate in their classes (Faltis et al, 1998).

A maintenance approach, similar to the transitional approach is in both the native language and English; however, the maintenance approach allows for additional time for native language support. This allows LEP students an additional support mechanism for their coursework and to realize academic achievement (Faltis et al, 1998). The transitional approach is more prevalent in secondary schools today. These educational approaches set the framework for the secondary LEP student's educational experience and academic outcomes (Faltis et al, 1998).

**Secondary (7-8) and (9-12):** At the secondary level, several structural dynamics may impact the learner's outcomes: teacher's proficiency in learner's native language, time-limited learning opportunities, and classroom setting. Teachers at this level may not have the proficiency needed to convey subject matter expertise in the learner's native language. Additionally, LEP students who enter the school system at an older age must learn academic English in a short amount of time. Several factors may compound this challenge such as student's age, year of entry into the U.S., previous school experience, and literacy proficiency in student's native language (Faltis and Hudelson, 1998; Ruiz-del-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). Pressure is growing for LEP students to meet performance expectations, with the continued emphasis on standardized testing, rapid language acquisition and English proficiency.

The basic structure of the U.S. secondary school system is departmentalized and requires that students interact with a series of different content teachers throughout the school day (Ruiz-del-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). LEP students may be placed in transitional bilingual or English

immersion programs in separate buildings or classrooms, potentially linguistically isolating them from their native-English speaking peers and the exposure needed to build English proficiency. Additionally, the separation of the language and content teachers may prevent the teacher collaboration needed to affect immigrant student performance (Ruiz-del Velasco et al., 2000). The result may be the LEP student's educational plan is less structured and more linguistically varied at the secondary grade level (Faltis and Huddleson, 1998).

According to educational literature from the bilingual field, English Language Learners need a minimum of 4-7 years of bilingual schooling to acquire academic English language proficiency levels (Faltis and Hudelson, 1998). Schools' growing emphasis on standardized testing, however, pushes for learners' academic English proficiency to be acquired in a shorter, perhaps unrealistic timeframe that may be detrimental to an English Language Learners' school experience.

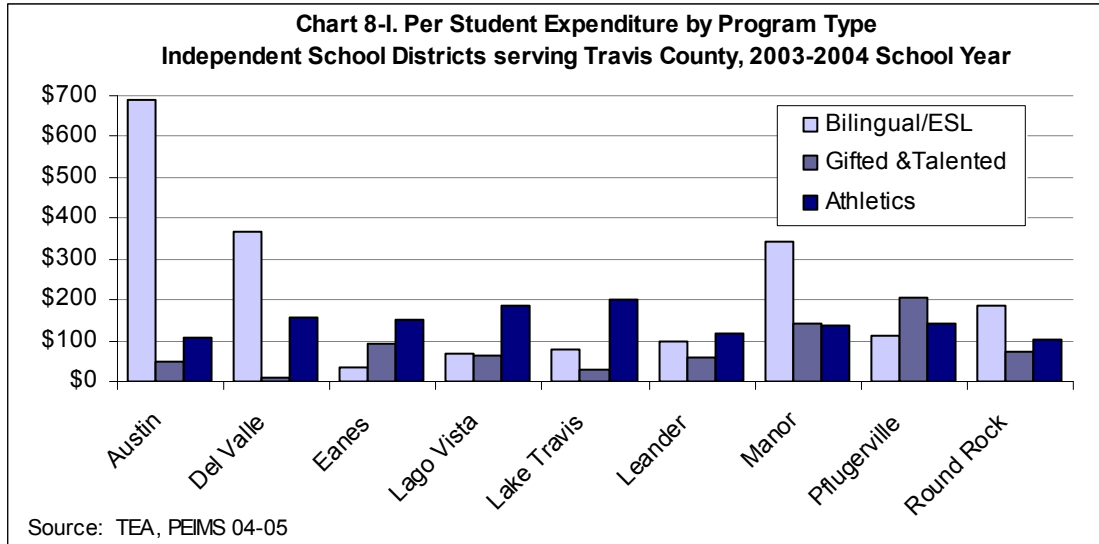
**Local Findings: Cultural Competency, Sensitivity & Diversity**

Secondary school students who served as local immigrant focus group participants indicated a strong need for increased cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of school personnel. The systems currently in place may not necessarily be the most culturally or linguistically appropriate to the unique needs of individuals from this age group and/or varied cultural backgrounds. A majority of the participants who attended local secondary schools within Travis County shared numerous instances of perceived racism on behalf of school personnel. Some of the reported comments from school staff ranged from stereotyping students as "always late" and/or "lazy" because they were a member of a certain racial/ethnic group, to criticism for low English literacy skills.

Providers serving immigrants in the Austin/Travis County community echoed statements made by focus group participants. They stated that one of the barriers students may face in schools is a lack of understanding of immigrant issues, as well as low expectations for immigrant student achievement.

At schools with a higher LEP enrollment, the provision of specialized services is cost effective and a high priority, which increases the likelihood of service availability (Consentino de Cohen, Deterding & Clewell, 2005). In Travis County, these types of services may include such initiatives as after-school programming, Intensive English Summer Institutes and newcomer centers.

Local school budget expenditures indicate that the bilingual/ESL per student expenditure is higher for those schools with a higher LEP student concentration. Yet, this investment does not always equate with high academic results. As previously discussed, the high-LEP schools within Travis County do not necessarily have higher TAKS results. This suggests that additional factors - such as type and level of instruction and other socio-economic factors - may have greater influence than financial investment on the success of these students. These factors merit further examination regarding how to best meet LEP student needs and achieve successful academic results.



## Higher Education

According to federal law, all students, regardless of their legal status, are entitled to a free elementary and secondary education (K-12) (*Plyler v Doe*, 1982). Post-secondary or U.S. higher education is not a guaranteed provision. Post-secondary education becomes complex in light of immigration or legal status of a student (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, June 2005). The following discussion of immigrant students in higher education focuses on three basic considerations:

- **Eligibility:** To what extent are immigrants eligible to participate in higher education?
- **Access:** To what extent are eligible immigrants able to participate in higher education?
- **Participation:** To what extent are immigrants represented in higher education today?

### **Eligibility**

In order for a non-U.S. citizen to *enter* the country to study, he or she needs a SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System)-generated document (either an I-20 or DS-2019) issued by a U.S. college or university, or a Department of State-designated sponsor organization. These documents are necessary in order for potential immigrant students to obtain the application for a visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate required to study in the U.S. Immigrants already residing in the U.S. may participate in higher education if they have a certain type of visa, or in some cases, are without documentation. Citizenship status does not necessarily preclude an individual from participating in U.S. higher education, as explained below. (Williams, 2006)

The main visa types that authorize study in the U.S. include:

- The **F1 Student Visa** is the most common for those who wish to engage in academic studies in the United States. It is for people who want to study at an accredited U.S. college or university.
- The **J-1 Exchange Visitor Visa** is mainly for educational and cultural exchange programs.
- The **M-1 Student Visa** is for those who will be engaged in non-academic or vocational study or training at an institution in the U.S.

(U.S. Visa and Immigration-Related Information. (n.d.)

The visa process does not account for U.S. undocumented immigrants, including students who may have gone through the entire U.S. K-12 system and never became residents or citizens. Each year, approximately 65,000 undocumented immigrants will graduate from U.S. high schools (National Immigration Law Center, 2006). Many of these graduates may be denied admission to colleges or lack access to federal financial aid due to their visa status.

Currently, states have the discretion to determine the parameters of immigrants' access to higher education. Within the past few years, nine states with high concentrations of immigrants have either introduced and/or passed legislation<sup>50</sup> allowing undocumented immigrants to receive in-state tuition (AASCU, 2005). These laws typically require a certain number of years of state residency, graduation from a state high school, acceptance to a college or university, and submission of an affidavit stating they will file for legal residency.

Current Texas law allows students, regardless of their citizenship status, to be considered Texas residents for admission consideration, to receive in-state tuition, and to be eligible for state-funded financial aid (Williams, 2006). To qualify for the benefits under this law, an individual must have:

- Graduated from a Texas high school, or received a General Education Development (GED) degree in TX,
- Resided in Texas for 3 or more consecutive years, and
- Signed an affidavit to seek legal residency at the earliest opportunity to do so.

(Determination of resident status, n.d.)

## **Access**

While immigrants, both documented and undocumented, may be *eligible* for higher education in Texas, they may still be unable to *enroll*. Frequently, financial aid can be a barrier. In order for an individual to be eligible for *Federal Student Aid*, such as grants, loans, or work-study programs, students must meet one of the following criteria:

---

<sup>50</sup> The states that have enacted this legislation (at the publication of this document) include: California, Washington, Utah, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Kansas, Illinois and New York and Texas.

- Be a U.S. Citizen,
- Have a valid Social Security number,
- Comply with selective service registration,
- Have a high school diploma or a GED Certificate or pass an approved “ability-to-benefit” test, or
- Be enrolled or accepted for enrollment as a regular student working toward a degree or certificate in an eligible program at a school that participates in the federal student aid programs.

(U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)

An undocumented immigrant deemed a “Texas resident” for admissions purposes and accepted into a Texas higher education institution may apply for state-funded aid, such as the TEXAS (Towards Excellence, Access and Success) Grant (Williams, 2006). This grant ensures that well-prepared high school graduates with financial need can attend college and provides financial assistance based on academic performance each semester. For the 2006-2007 school year, eligible students attending a public university or state college may receive up to \$2375 per semester (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, n.d.). This grant and other state-funded financial assistance programs help many students with this status attend college.

### **Participation**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 5.4% of college or university students who attended and received a degree from a U.S. postsecondary institution in the 2002-2003 school year were foreign-born individuals with a visa authorizing their study in the U.S. Of these students, nearly 43,000 received bachelors degrees and approximately 71,000 received masters degrees. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2005)

In Texas, 62,385 students were awarded bachelors degrees at public universities. Of these, 3% were foreign born. Twenty thousand total students were awarded masters degrees, and 21% were foreign born. (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), n.d.)

The University of Texas at Austin, the largest higher education institution in Travis County, awarded a total of 8,463 bachelors and 2,650 masters degrees in 2003 (THECB, n.d.). Foreign-born students comprised 4% of all bachelors degrees and 26% of all masters degrees awarded (THECB, n.d.). Data for undocumented, post-secondary, immigrant students (those without previously mentioned visas) is largely unavailable or inaccurate. Education institutions in Texas typically count undocumented immigrants as Texas residents.

### **Post Graduation**

Many undocumented immigrants who complete their post-secondary studies face challenges securing employment due to their citizenship status, regardless of years spent in the U.S. school system or level of degree obtained in post-secondary institutions. Citizenship status may preclude successful students from fully contributing to their communities and local economies.

(However, for certain professions with shortages of personnel who have specific language skills, such as teaching or nursing, the U.S may specifically target and/or enter into cooperative work agreements with countries whose supply of professionals fit the needed skill-set.)

As a result, since 2001, a bipartisan effort has pushed for the passage of federal legislation that would tie college graduation to a change in legal status. This legislation is better known as the **DREAM Act, or Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act**. (National Immigration Law Center, 2006)

The DREAM Act targets individuals who have been in the U.S. for more than five years and were 15-years-old or younger when they arrived, demonstrate good moral character, and graduate from a high school. Passage of the DREAM Act would allow these individuals to apply for conditional status for up to six years of legal residence. Students would be required to attend a two-year college, complete two years of a four-year college degree or serve in the U.S. military. At the end of the six year period, if students meet these requirements, they would be granted permanent resident status. (NILC, April 2006)

The DREAM Act and related legislation has been incorporated into pending immigration legislation at the national and state levels. The status of this piece of legislation is undetermined at this time.

## Adult Language Proficiency and Literacy

### **Overview**

The term *adult education* typically refers to a broad range of programs including basic skills, adult secondary, postsecondary, continuing education and other types of education (TX Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning, n.d.). The term *adult education* here refers primarily to ESL and family literacy classes to non-native English speakers with limited English language proficiency and/or low literacy skills.

### **Needs**

While many definitions of *literacy* exist, one commonly accepted among service providers is the ability to use printed and written information to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential (Sum, Kirsh & Yamamoto, 2004)." As previously mentioned, of the approximately 29,000 foreign born individuals (five years of age and older) who reside in Travis County today, nearly one in three speak English less than very well (ACS, 2005). Thirty-six percent of foreign born received "less than a high school" education, as compared to 8% of native-born residents (ACS, 2005). An immigrant's literacy level often correlates with his or her socio-economic status and needs.

Findings from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) which measured the literacy proficiency of adults 16 years of age and older, indicate that the literacy proficiency for

immigrants was significantly lower than for native-born individuals. The 16-65 year old foreign born population has some of the lowest literacy level scores on the NALS scale. Literacy proficiency directly correlates to employability, job earnings and level of community and civic engagement. ( Sum , Kirsch & Yamamoto, 2004)

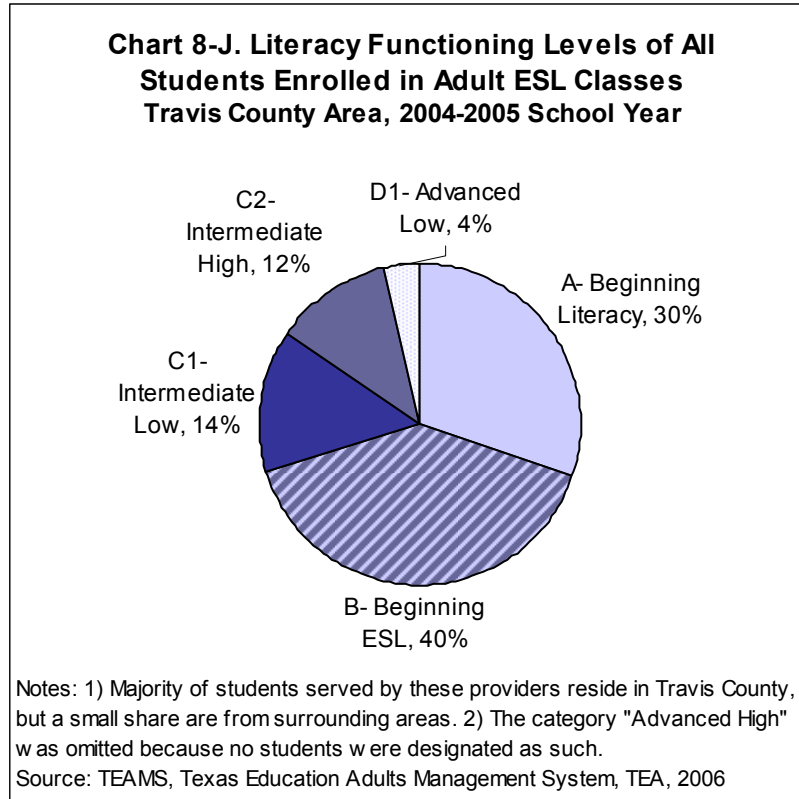
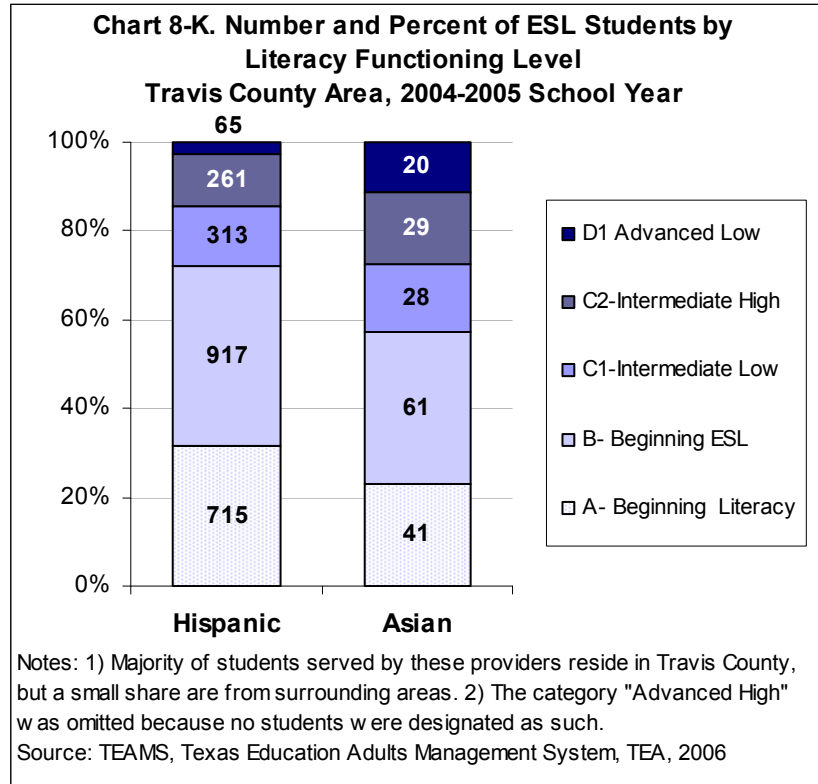


Chart 8-J shows Travis County literacy levels collected through the Texas Adult Education Management Information System. These levels capture the literacy functioning levels of individuals who participate in Travis County's six largest ESL programs.<sup>51</sup> The literacy functioning levels assess listening and speaking levels, basic reading and writing levels, and workplace language skill levels. They range from beginning literacy to advanced literacy. A Beginning Literacy designation means that an individual cannot speak or understand English, or understands only isolated words or phrases, and has no or minimal reading or writing skills in any language (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2001). Beginning ESL designation means the individual can understand basic greetings, simple phrases and commands, and a limited number of words related to immediate needs. The Beginning ESL learner speaks slowly and with difficulty, and may demonstrate little or no control of grammar (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2001). Thirty percent of students participating in Travis County's ESL programs are designated as Beginning Literacy and 40% as Beginning ESL (Texas LEARNS, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> The 6 primary ESL programs serving Travis County are Austin Community College, Austin ISD, Austin Learning Academy, AVANCE, La Fuente and the Austin Asian Chamber of Commerce.

The majority of participants (54%) in Travis County’s ESL programs are Hispanic females (Texas LEARNS, 2006). Additionally, Chart 8-K shows that nearly 71% of Hispanic participants have either a beginning literacy or beginning ESL functional level designation whereas only 57% of Asian participants have similar designations.



The previously mentioned National Adult Literacy Survey (1992) highlights significant positive correlations between years of school, the age that one starts learning English, and length of U.S. residency, with mean literacy proficiency scores. The socio-economic status of non-native English speakers is also linked with levels of English proficiency. Some key effects of increased English proficiency include:

- Increased job opportunities (employability and mobility),
- Increased civic participation (e.g. parental involvement in schools), and
- Increased access to and utilization of needed social services. (Sum et al, 2004)

Many non-native English speakers recognize that high English proficiency leads to improved communication, higher employment prospects, and ease in social communication. (Kim, Collins, Westat Inc., McArthur & NCES, 1997; TCHHSVS, 2006). Individuals with limited English proficiency are enrolling in ESL classes in record numbers. According to the National Institute for Literacy, ESL programs have historically been the fastest growing component of the state-administered adult education programs, growing from 33% in 1993-94 to 48% in 1997-98. (National Institute for Literacy, n.d.). Local trends are similar. Approximately 85% of the total calls received through the *Literacy Connection Line* – a program of the Literacy Coalition of

Central Texas - are requests for referrals to ESL classes (Miller, 2006). Austin Community College (ACC), the primary sponsor for the Adult Education Program of the Travis County Consortium has also seen a growth in the demand for ESL classes. During the 2006 fiscal year, ACC and its partners served more than 3,000 students, 64% of whom were in ESL, the majority of them immigrants. (Borden, 2006)

### **Barriers**

A number of barriers and challenges prevent some immigrants from enrolling in ESL classes, or cause them to prematurely terminate their course of study. Some of the most common challenges mentioned in national research include time commitment, financial cost, childcare and transportation (Kwang, 1997). Local providers and focus group participants also cited time commitment and transportation as their primary barriers (TCHHSVS, 2006).

**Local Findings: Inconvenient class scheduling, limited or lack of transportation**

According to Travis County service providers and immigrants in the community, not enough classes are offered at times that accommodate diverse work schedules (e.g. Sundays, and other times that accommodate shift work). Immigrants who share one vehicle among several people, or who rely solely on public transportation, also face transportation as a barrier to attending classes.

Depending on their respective backgrounds and life situations, immigrants approach ESL with differing objectives and skill levels ranging from basic to industry-specific level English. According to David Borden (Summer 2006), Adult-Education/ESL Coordinator for ACC,

*“For every 150 potential students at our ESL orientation, there are 150 different needs and motivations. Although often more highly motivated to learn than other basic education student populations, it is very difficult to design cost effective services that meet the needs of large numbers of immigrants because each one brings a unique set of challenges, dreams and skills.”*

As the U.S. foreign born population continues to grow, it is increasingly imperative to address these emerging educational issues. If the current low adult literacy proficiency levels persist, they will more than likely affect not only our educational and social service infrastructures, but our workforce in future generations.