

**The Post-Middle School Careers of Mexican
Immigrant Students: Length of Residence, Learning
English, and High School Persistence**

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Abstract

This study examines the post-middle school educational careers of Mexican immigrant students. 150 Mexican immigrant students from a port-of-entry middle school graduation class were followed through high school. Initially distinctions were made between charter students (students who began formal U.S. schooling in grades K-2.) and late entrants (students who entered U.S. schools in grades three and above). However, a comparison of their relative graduation rate revealed little about the factors associated with persistence in and secession from high school for either group. In exploring factors associated with high school success or secession, including English proficiency, six nongraduate high school careers statuses were identified. These statuses were generated from observing both student and school behavior, including patterns of academic performance, program placement, and school procedures for reclassifying and processing problem students. Our analysis of these educational career statuses, including graduates, helps illuminate the direction of the relationship between length of time in U.S. schools, English, and high school persistence. The analysis will take into account the academic preparation of middle school charter and late entrant students. The characteristics of these statuses will be described, along with the characteristics of the status incumbents.

Mexican and Mexican-American Students in Schools

Rather than directly study the adaptation of Mexican immigrant students in high school, researchers have favored an indirect approach, attempting to identify recent arrivals in large "Hispanic" data bases. This includes Buriel and Cardoza's (1988) intergenerational study that shows how Spanish language proficiency diminishes among immigrants as educational aspirations rise.

A few studies focus directly on Mexican immigrants in high school. Valverde (1987) found that limited-English-proficient (LEP) Mexican immigrants drop out less than do English dominant Mexican Americans. She hypothesizes that academic success of high school immigrants reflects both positive school orientations and a dual frame of reference that acknowledges that educational and occupational opportunities in the United States exceed those in the home country. Referring to Ogbu (1978), Valverde argues that, in general, caste-like Mexican American students have an oppositional identity and are less likely to remain in school because they “know and believe” (p. 327) that they will not receive the good salaries and other benefits that Anglos attain from education.

Valverde’s observations conflict with those of McCarthy and Valdez (1986). They found that the high dropout rate among Latinos in California is largely attributable to the presence of Mexican immigrants in high school (McCarthy & Valdez, p. 55). While educational status is much more important for occupational success in the late twentieth century than in the early twentieth century, they suggest that many of today’s Mexican immigrants are following the same educational and occupational pattern of earlier immigrant groups. Educational progress, English proficiency, and upward economic mobility will increase as Mexican immigrants lose their immigrant status and become integrated into the U.S. economy. In short, they do not subscribe to the thesis that Mexicans who become Mexican American will develop a “caste-like” oppositional identity in conflict with education.

Matute-Bianchi (1986) compared U.S. born students of Mexican descent to Mexican immigrants. Following Ogbu’s cultural/ecological framework, she argues that social experiences outside the school, especially the immigration experience, distinguish students’ views of self and schooling. Matute-Bianchi finds that Mexican immigrant students (many of whom had completed primary education in Mexico) and Mexican-oriented students (immigrant students whose educational experience in Mexico is limited) see themselves as more Mexicano than groups born in the United States. These students have a different orientation toward schooling than Mexican Americans. While successful Mexican Americans participate in mainstream school clubs and school government offices, high achieving Mexican immigrant students join Spanish-speaking clubs (such as the Sociedad Bilingüe) and play soccer. In support of Ogbu’s thesis,

Matute-Bianchi finds that the social posture of immigrant students differs from that of Mexican American students. As noted by one teacher in her study, they are “more courteous, more serious about their school work, more eager to please, more polite, more industrious, more well behaved, more naive, and less worldly” than their U.S. born counterparts. Yet Matute-Bianchi did not find that Mexican immigrant students are more academically successful than Mexican American students.

In her study of parents’ orientations toward schooling, Romo (1984) substantiates the thesis that Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants have different views of school success. While Mexican parents believe that English proficiency and school success are keys to opportunities in the United States, Mexican-American parents down play the importance of English proficiency, recognizing that even English monolingual Mexican-American students often fail in school. A history of poor relations with schools, stemming from their own negative schooling experiences, makes Mexican-American parents more hostile and alienated from schools than Mexican immigrant parents.

In a recent longitudinal study that attempted to identify and compare immigrant students to U.S. born Mexican American students, Durán and Weffer (1992) claim that Mexican immigrants are doing better in high school than previous studies reported--although limited English language skills inhibit their potential to place well on college admissions tests. They find that expanded life experience in the U.S. is directly related to mastering information found on ACT social studies tests (p. 178). Durán and Weffer argue that recently arrived immigrant students with limited time in the U.S. are unlikely to develop the reading skills necessary for subject mastery in science and that they have also missed life experiences necessary to interpret the content of social science curricula.

What do these studies suggest about Mexican immigrants in U.S. schools? Looking primarily at dropout rates, Valverde and McCarthy and Valdez come up with opposite conclusions regarding dropout rates without revealing much about important potential differences in school orientations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. While Matute-Bianchi and Romo contend that Mexican immigrants have a different school orientation from Mexican Americans, they have no solid data to suggest Mexicans are doing better than Mexican Americans in school. Attempting to synthesize these findings, one might hypothesize that Mexican immigrant

students with positive orientations toward schooling do better than alienated Mexican Americans, although the higher percentage of Mexican immigrants in schools (McCarthy & Valdez) weights the dropout statistics in favor of Mexican Americans.

Macías (1990) suggests that the quality and extent of pre-immigration education of Mexican students shape the adaptation of Mexican immigrant students in U.S. schools. While advanced math skills and high respect for teachers, both taught in Mexico, may help these immigrants to succeed in U.S. schools, certain ideological differences in social science education may make immigrant students at-risk of maladapting to the U.S. school system. Macías argues that the more immigrant students participate in a radically different social science education and the more primary education they complete in their home country, the more likely they are to be at risk of not integrating into U.S. school systems. For example, students who completed most of their social science curriculum in Mexico may have developed utopian socialist values rather than competitive individualistic values associated with success in the United States.

While Durán and Weffer and Macías as approach the phenomena of the adaptation of Mexican immigrant students from different perspectives, there is a common theme in their studies--that Mexican immigrant students with extended educational experience in their home country will be more at risk of not graduating than those with limited experience there. This thesis is also implicit in Matute-Bianchi's work. Mexican oriented students, i.e., students who maintain a positive affinity for Mexico, with limited educational experiences in Mexico are less likely to be in the English as a Second Language(ESL) classes than recently arrived Mexican immigrant students. As compared to Mexican immigrant students, Mexican oriented students are usually adept in carrying out academic work in classes conducted in English and are frequently found in the college preparatory courses. While it is the recent Mexican immigrant students who are well behaved, they are not among the most successful in high school. Durán and Weffer argue that recently arrived immigrants become at risk both because of lack of time to develop English skills and lack of expanded social experience in the United States; for Macías, they become at risk largely because they have become socialized to a competing and conflicting world view.

Macías' research on antecedent educational experiences clearly demarks the differences between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. The difference between these groups does not lie within cultural factors, but with societal factors, with the Mexican immigrant population's adaptation to U.S. schools being shaped by its prior experience in the institutions of another society--included but not limited to schools. Similarly, Durán and Weffer find that "binational" students who have recently immigrated from Mexico enter the U.S. school system in a different "trajectory" than their native born counterparts (Durán & Weffer, p. 63). Their academic success depends much more upon their individual adaptations to schools than does the Mexican American whose educational career reflects family educational history in the United States.

Mexican Immigrant Middle School Graduates: Late Entrants and Charters

This study examines the post-middle school educational careers of Mexican immigrant students to explore the relationship between length of schooling in the United States and academic success in high school. This research is part of an ongoing study of the adaptation of Mexican immigrant students in a Los Angeles "port-of-entry" school district (Baca & Bryan, 1987). In 1987, Mexican immigrant middle school students who entered the La Entrada School District in kindergarten through second grade, "charter students," were distinguished from "late entrant students," or Mexican immigrants who entered the district in the third grade and above.

While only 26% of the 156 seventh and eighth grade charter students were coded as having a foreign education, over 75% of the 144 late-entrant middle school students in La Entrada had gone to school in Mexico. Importantly, most of the late-entrants were not transfer students from other U.S. schools and had completed most of a primary education in Mexico before directly transferring from their home country to La Entrada. Interviews with both late entrant and charter students suggest that the groups are similar in terms of socioeconomic status and nationality/ethnic identity. Often members of the same large working-class Mexican family, charters and late entrants see themselves as Mexicanos/as, not Mexican Americans or Chicanos/as. The major difference between charters and late entrants is English dominance: charters are English dominant

bilinguals while late entrants tend to be Spanish dominant with developing English skills.

The 1987 middle school graduation class included 155 Mexican immigrant students. The research team followed this cohort of students through high school, reading high school records yearly and interviewing high school counselors, graduates, and students who left high school in the eleventh or twelfth grade. Initially the study was designed to compare late entrants in the high school ESL track with other late entrants and charter students in mainstream high school programs. Although enrolled in ESL programs in the middle school, most late entrants were not placed in similar programs in high school. Most of the Mexican immigrant middle school graduates were not performing at grade level when graduating, but were, nonetheless, placed in mainstream English classes. In the two high schools that educate La Entrada middle school graduates, the ESL track is generally reserved for students who transfer directly from foreign high schools without the benefit of a middle school bilingual education program. While it is not clear that this system of English placement that inappropriately assesses English proficiency helps or hinders Mexican immigrant students in high school, the analysis of school records suggests that inappropriate assessment was not limited to late entrants who have the weakest English skills. The sample of ESL students among the 155 Mexican immigrants was thus too small for meaningful within-group analysis, although inferences about ESL students are made throughout this paper.

What does this study suggest about the thesis for Mexican immigrant students that extended education in Mexico is negatively correlated with educational success in U.S. schools? A simple division of the Mexican immigrant high school graduate population into those with foreign education and those without seems to suggest that foreign education is not supportive of high school graduation (see Table 1).

Table 1
Percent of Mexico-Educated and Non-Mexico Educated
Who Graduated from High School

Charters n=73	Late Entrants n=45
27%	30%

As noted in Table 1, the percentage of foreign educated students who graduated is similar to that of non-foreign educated students. However, those coded with foreign education included charter members, most of whom having had no more than a kindergarten experience in Mexico, as well late entrants, many of whom completed a better part of a primary education in their homeland. Hence, when the foreign educated population is divided into subcategories, and charters are compared to late entrants, it becomes clear that those who completed less education in their home country are twice as likely to graduate from high school as compared to those who entered the La Entrada School District as late entrants. As noted in Table 2, 40% of charters graduated from high school as compared to 18% of late entrants. The data in this table suggest a tentative confirmation of the Durán and Weffer and Macías thesis that limited exposure in the United States makes immigrant students more at-risk of not graduating from high school.

Table 2
Percent of Charters & Late Entrants Who Graduated
from High School

Charters n=87	Late Entrants n=45
40%	18%

Graduates, Seceders, and Others

Comparing graduation rates among charters and late entrants reveals little about the factors associated with persistence in and secession from high school of either group. In our study of high school adaptations, we found that both late entrant and charter non-graduates often stay in high school for four years and those who leave secede for different reasons. In exploring factors associated with high school success and secession, including English proficiency, we identified six nongraduate high school career statuses. These statuses were generated from observing both student and school behavior, including patterns of academic performance, program placement, and school procedures for reclassifying and processing problem students. These statuses begin with those “DNE.” “DNE” is a term used by the high school records office personnel to designate a student who did not enter high school and whose middle school records were not requested by

another high school. Second is “early seceder,” a term we use to denote a student who enters high school but who leaves in the tenth or eleventh grade.

Rather than “dropout,” the term “seceder” is used. The popular term “dropout” denotes school failure and implies termination of formal education. While many students who secede from high school were not as academically successful as graduates, there are also groups of seceders who were as prepared for high school as graduates but who never entered the secondary system, as well as groups of seceders whose grades were good enough to graduate. There are many motivations for seceding from high school, academic failure being only one. Also, one can stay in school without succeeding academically in high school. For example, gang members who were at-risk in middle school entered high school and were transferred to alternative schools. Although they did not graduate, they generally stayed in school as long as their graduating class. One may not become academically successful in high school, but may realize other life goals while in high school, including finding a mate and/or a job. Such students leave high school because roles other than the student role are more pressing at the time. Also, seceders may return to enter an educational system later in life. Many of these students enroll in vocational training programs; others leave school but return to complete a Graduation Equivalency (GED) in adult school.

The third status is transfer student. This is a student who voluntarily transferred to other high school. The fourth status is retainee, a term we created for a student who was placed in alternative school after developing academic and behavioral problems in the receiver high schools. The fifth status, delayed seceder, is a student who stays in high school until the eleventh or twelfth grades. Delayed seceders are different from the small group of “persisters”, the sixth status, those who stayed in high school after their graduating class had left. Table 3 presents the high school educational career statuses for late entrants and charter students.

As noted in Table 3, late entrants are more likely to be DNE’s or early seceders than are charters. This finding along with the earlier observation that charters have a higher graduation rate supports the Durán and Weffer and Macías thesis. Late entrants are more likely to leave high school early than are charters and are less likely to graduate. However, the percentage of transfers, retainees, and delayed seceders among charters and late entrants is similar. The

similar percentages of late entrants and charters among these educational statuses suggest that length of time in the U.S. is not directly related to persistence in high school. A more in depth analysis of the educational career statuses will help illuminate the direction of the relationship between length of time in U.S. schools and high school persistence. The analysis will take into account the academic preparation of middle school charter and late entrant boys and girls. The characteristics of the statuses will be described, as well as the characteristics of the status incumbents.

Table 3
High School Educational Career Stages:
Late Entrants and Charters

	Early				Delayed		Grads n=44	Total n=150
	DNE n=14	Seceders n=25	Transfers n=18	Retainees n=26	Seceders n=20	Persisters n=3		
Charters n=87	6%	15%	9%	14%	13%	3%	40%	100%
Lates n=45	18%	22%	9%	18%	16%	0%	18%	101%
Total n=150*	9%	17%	12%	17%	13%	2%	29%	99%

* Includes 18 middle school graduates whose educational experiences in Mexico are unknown.

Students Who Never Enrolled in High School - DNE's

Teachers and staff in the La Entrada Middle School know that most of their Mexican immigrant graduates do not complete high school. A popular misconception among staff at the middle school is that Mexican immigrant students who do not go on to high school return to Mexico. Of the total 150 Mexican immigrant students in our study, only five (3%) were known to have returned to their home country.

Only fourteen (9%) of the 150 Mexican immigrant students in the study did not enroll in high school in the Fall of 1988. This includes three of the five students in our study who had returned to Mexico. Two of these students were late entrants who scored high on secondary school English placement tests and would have entered college preparatory classes in high school. These students, thus, did not become DNE's because they were academically failing or had insufficient exposure to schooling in the United States. They were identified as successful students in our middle school study

(1989). The other student was a charter member who had completed only the first grade in Mexico and whose return to Mexico was also not associated with lack of an extended experience in U.S. schools. Returning to Mexico, while not prevalent among our study group, does not seem to be associated with students who have limited experiences or poor performance in schools in the U.S.. Persons in the DNE group are just as likely to be boys as girls. A comparison of the few charter DNE's (5) with the larger group of late entrants DNEs (8 of the 13 for which there is data on prior education in Mexico) suggests that middle school academic status is similar for both groups. The fact that only two of these 13 students were late entrants who would have entered the ESL program in high school does suggest that the DNE status is not directly associated with low level skills in English. In a system that invariably overestimates all immigrants' English skills, those labeled ESL (not allowed to enter regular English classes) would be presumed to be most likely to secede early from high school. However, it does not seem to be ESL placement that detracts Mexican immigrant students from entering high school.

Interviews with middle school counselors suggest that out-of-school experiences of late entrant DNE's and charter DNEs are similar; late entrant DNE's are no more likely to be in gangs or be pregnant than charter member DNEs. There are cases where charter member girls become pregnant and charter member boys end up in gangs, as well as cases where late entrant DNE's do neither--rather, they enter the U.S. work force. Not entering high school does not seem to be associated with a lack of educational experience in English for late entrants nor a proclivity to have a limited and negative socialization experience in the U.S. for late entrants.

Early Seceders

Twenty-five or 17% of the 150 Mexican immigrant middle school graduates left high school in the ninth or tenth grade. As with the DNE's, there is no gender distinction in this group; early seceders are equally likely to be boys or girls. Ten of the 23 students for which there is data on educational history were late entrants (22% of late entrants). Most of these late entrant students who were in school long enough to get academic placement were placed in ESL programs--six of 10. The remaining early seceders were charters (13 or 15% of charters). Only one of these 13

charters entered the ESL program in the ninth grade; the other 12 were placed in regular English classes.

The high proportion of ESL placements among late entrant early seceders seems to suggest that ESL status is associated with being at-risk early on in high school. However, charter member early seceders were not, for the most part, placed in ESL classes, suggesting that there were other factors than lack of English skills leading charters to secede early. Early seceder charters are not a subset of charters who failed to develop their English skills while in primary school.

The analysis of school records indicates that the lack of English skills is not in itself associated with academic failure for early seceders. First, a number of charters not only had sufficient English skills to enter regular English classes in high school, but also were coded as being in the “second tier” college preparatory program.¹ These early seceder charters were presumed to be college-bound when they entered the ninth grade. Second, school failure for early seceders is not associated with failure in English or any other academic subject. The pattern of failure is generally extended to nonacademic courses such as shop, dance, ceramics, drafting, and physical education. Thus, the typical early seceder is failing at school on the whole, not only failing challenging academic subjects which could include English for the ESL student.

This pattern of nonspecific academic failure was prevalent among late entrants who were ESL and charters who entered regular English courses. Again this suggests that there is no direct relationship between being an ESL student and being at-risk of early academic failure in high school. There are no major differences between predominantly ESL late entrants and charters in general programs in terms of the percentages of classes failed. Among the 18 of the 23 early seceders who stayed in high school long enough to receive grade reports (10 late entrants, 13 charters, and 5 whose

¹ General program students enter the 9th grade to complete basic high school math and English courses. They are distinguished from college preparatory students who take Algebra I and Academic Science in the 9th grade. “Second tier” college preparatory students are assigned to Algebra A in the 9th grade, a lower level Algebra class that can lead to completion of college track requirements--Algebra C and D. “Second tier” students can complete math and other requirements for college placement but were not academically prepared to enter a college preparatory program. ESL students are rarely placed in college preparatory programs, but some make take a college preparatory class.

prior educational status is unknown), all but two failed half or more of their classes the first semester of the ninth grade; most were failing in all classes. The grades and pattern of school failures of early seceders suggest that they are not oriented to school success. Early seceders are students who routinely came late to school, ditched classes, did not dress for gym, did not complete or do homework, and spent more time outside of school than in classes. Although they became at-risk early in their high school careers, they did not see counselors. Counselors also did not reach out to these or other at-risk students nor demand that they attend school or go to summer school to catch up. None of the charter and late entrant students who failed the first year of high school went to summer school in the ninth grade. Similarly, none of the charters and late entrants who returned to high school and failed in the second year went to summer school after the tenth grade.

Most of these students were between 15 and 16 years old when they left school. For the most part, early seceders were not perceived as behavioral problems by counselors. This does not mean they were not involved in gang life or were perpetual truants and/or academic failures. However, their negative school orientations were not manifested in behavior that required the mandatory attention of counselors. High school students are given two years to complete their first year of high school without mandatory counseling or intervention by the school. Had early seceders been identified as behavioral problems in the early ninth or tenth grade, they could have been referred to the alternative school. There they could have been "retained" in school longer as academic failures.

Transfer Students

Eighteen or 12% of the 150 students in the study transferred to another high school after being assigned to one of the two receiver schools serving the La Entrada district. Transfers included an equal number of males and females. About half these students transferred before completing the ninth grade. Eight of the transfer students were coded as charters (9% of the total charter population). Fewer transfers, four, were late-entrants, still 9% of the total late population. (There was no information on education in Mexico for six of the foreign-born transfer students.)

The post-middle school placement of transfer students in high school programs is consistent with that of early seceders and

retainees. For the population of students who stayed in school long enough to be placed, most charter transfer students were placed in regular high school English classes while most transfer late-entrants were placed in ESL classes. Thus, those who transferred to another high school were no different in terms of middle school English skills than those who left the regular high school early or stayed in the alternative school.

Most of the transfer students entered one particular high school near the La Entrada community; none of these students graduated. A handful of the transfer students moved out of the area, both late entrants and charters. Interviews with staff in these transfer schools found four graduates, both lates and charters, who were counted in the graduate population. The majority of the transfer students did not graduate. Transfer students or those not graduating were neither a special elite group experiencing upward mobility, seeking better high schools outside of the La Entrada area, nor are they a special group with poor English skills seeking special high school programs that would help them improve their language skills.

Transfer students who were enrolled but left the receiver high schools were not doing better academically than their peers. They were not advanced students who left La Entrada to seek an academically enriched high school program elsewhere. Like early seceders, these students were not doing well in high school before they transferred. For example, among the six students who completed both the ninth and tenth grades in the receiver schools, only one started out well in high school before failing the tenth grade.

Retainees

The two high schools serving La Entrada are members of a secondary school district that has several alternative schools. One of these schools specializes in providing high school education to students known to be involved in gangs. This alternative school supervises the students closely and provides small classes and an individualized academic program, which includes classes designed to make up academic units.

Twenty-six or 17% of the 150 middle school graduates were placed in the alternative school for disciplinary problems. The number of alternative school students is, thus, nearly equal to that of early seceders. Like early seceders, alternative school students tend to fail early in high school. Unlike early seceders, they are more

active in gangs. Because alternative school students can persist in school despite academic failure, they are called retainees. They are retained in the education system regardless of their persistent academic failure. They spend four years in the school system -- unlike the early seceders who fail and leave within two years.

Unlike the DNE and early seceder groups, there are more males in the retainee group; only seven of the 26 are females--but similar percentages of charters and lates. Twelve of the 20 retainee students for which there is information on educational history in Mexico are charters. This represents 14% of the charter population. Eight students were late entrants, 18% of the total late entrant student population. While there is a diversity in the returnee group in terms of high school readiness scores, with a minority who entered high school in the college preparatory program, most retainees were in general high school programs. Most charters who became retainees entered high school taking lower level but regular English courses, not ESL courses. Conversely, most late entrants who were retained began high school in the ESL track. In terms of English placement in high school, retainees were no different than early seceders or transfers. Most retainees entered the alternative school in the tenth and eleventh grades, charters and late entrants alike with few academic credits, having failed most of the ninth and tenth grades. There was no difference between charters and late entrants in terms of educational careers in alternative schools. Most stayed for the better part of the eleventh and twelfth grades. They made little progress toward graduation and ended up as DNE's in the alternative school. Only one charter and one late entrant went on to adult school; one charter left the alternative school without graduating in order to make up credits at a local community college; and one late entrant persists in the alternative school and is trying to graduate.

Like others who seceded, most of the retainees who left the alternative school did not return to Mexico. Only two of the 26 students were cleared to return to Mexico. Conversely, four were cleared to enter the California Youth Authority to work off juvenile sentences.

Late Seceders

There were 20 students that were classified as late seceders, slightly fewer than retainees. These are students who stayed in the receiver high schools without being transferred to the alternative

schools but did not graduate in the Spring of 1991. They did not persist by returning to high school in the Fall of 1991.²

Most of these students persisted in high school for three and a half years; all but two of these students were enrolled in the receiver high school during the first semester of the twelfth grade, but left high school before the Spring. There are more boy late seceders than girls, but a similar percentage of late and charter members in this group, 16% of late entrants and 13% of charters.

Late seceders are more heterogeneous than early seceders or retainees in terms of high school program placement; late seceders include both general and college preparatory students. Although most were performing poorly in school, late seceders tried to master graduation requirements or make up requirements, often enrolling in summer school or the off-campus vocational training program. Late seceders lacked units towards graduation, but they were not students with behavioral problems.

Charter member late seceders began and remained marginal students in high school. They were not better students than late entrant late seceders, again suggesting that marginal high school academic performance, as associated with the status of late secession, does not reflect limited time in primary and middle schools. Among the 20 late seceders are three late entrant students who entered high school in the ESL track. These ESL late entrant students who seceded from high school in the twelfth grade began their U.S. schooling in the middle school years. One might presume that they failed to graduate because they did not have sufficient time to develop English skills. Yet, like their charter peers who were late seceders, these ESL late entrant students did poorly in several subject areas, i.e., their relatively poor academic performance is not specific to English courses.

The records of the three late entrant ESL delayed seceders supports this point. One, a female, did well in advanced ESL in the ninth grade and transitioned into a regular English class in the tenth grade, receiving a grade of B. However, in the twelfth grade, she

² **Persisters:** Only three of the 150 students in our study persisted in taking courses in high school during the 1990-91 academic school year. That is, these persisters are different than late seceders in that late seceders have not returned to their high school even though those who were interviewed intended to return. All of the persisters were charter immigrant students and all were doing poorly in school from the start of high school. None can be expected to graduate in the near future.

barely passed most of her classes, receiving a D - in English, D - in French, and a D in U.S. Government. During summer school before the twelfth grade, she completed 10 units of vocational education. Community informants note that she left school in the twelfth grade because of an unplanned pregnancy.

Another ESL late entrant student developed major academic problems early in the ninth grade. She failed intermediate ESL, basic math, and P.E.. This pattern of failure continued the second semester, suggesting that this young woman was failing school across the board rather than failing subjects in school. She enrolled in the summer school after ninth grade, getting a D in intermediate ESL. The pattern of low grades continued, but she did better in her English classes in the twelfth grade receiving a C in a mainstream senior level English class. During the summer after the tenth grade, she took another mainstream English class and received an A. She is now working, and like many other delayed seceders hoping to return to school in the future.

The other ESL delayed seceder, a young male student, began relatively well in the ESL track, but his grades progressively declined as time went on in high school. He received C and B grades in ESL classes in the ninth grade, but failed ESL classes, a beginning algebra class and a computer studies class in the tenth grade. In the 11th grade he received no credits the first semester, getting an "Incomplete" in typing and no credits or F's in his academic courses. This student went to summer school twice during his high school career, the first time receiving a C in a mainstream American literature course. Like so many students with academic problems, the range of his grades varied more by semester than by subject matter.

The other four late entrant students who seceded in the twelfth grades were in regular English classes. Having transitioned from bilingual programs by the end of middle school, these delayed seceder students were never in ESL programs during high school. They entered the La Entrada School District in the middle elementary school years, mostly in the fourth and fifth grades. However, most of them were like their ESL late entrant and charter counterparts in that they developed academic problems early in their high school careers. An analysis of their academic files supports the observation that poor performance spreads across all subjects.

The secession of these late entrant students who were placed in regular English courses cannot be attributed to poor proficiency in

English. In fact, their English grades were often better than grades in other subjects. One of these students who received F's in the ninth grade in typing and P.E. received a D+ in the English class. Another student failed driver's education and P.E. in the tenth grade but received a C in English.

Graduates

Nineteen males and twenty-six females graduated from high school in the Spring of 1991. More charters graduated than late entrants, 35 charters (40% of the entire charter population) as compared to nine late entrants (20% of the late population). Three of the late entrants were in ESL programs.

Most graduates were in the college preparatory program in high school, 28 or 62% of the 45 graduates. This includes four or 44% of the nine late entrant graduates (one ESL college preparatory student) and twenty-four or 69% of the 35 charter graduates. Most of the students completed both the college preparatory life science series and algebra and geometry.

Top academic Mexican immigrant students tended to enroll in French rather than the Spanish courses to meet university foreign language requirements. College preparatory students tended to take more math classes than needed for university admission, selecting as electives AP Calculus and Math Analysis. While there were few late entrants in the graduating cohort, ESL as well as students in the general and college preparatory programs, the minority of late entrants were among the best students of the graduating class, including the one ESL student who completed the college preparatory program. In fact, the most outstanding student in the entire graduating class, a student honored at graduation, was a late entrant.

Much of this student's high school academic career typifies those of the college preparatory students, both lates and charters. This student entered the La Entrada School System in the seventh grade and while he decided to do well by focusing on math, English was difficult for him in the middle school. He belonged to the middle school math club that regularly sends members to state math competitions and prepares middle school students in algebra so that club members can enter "honors geometry" in the ninth grade. With only two years of U.S. schooling before entering high school, this late entrant young male student was placed in an intermediate level English class. Because of his English rating, he was also placed in

a basic science class in the first semester of ninth grade, a class designed for students in the general track. Although he received an A+ in honors geometry the first semester, an A in English, and an A in the basic science class, the high school staff retained this student in the general education track another semester. As noted in an interview with his high school counselor, the high school did little to motivate or help him enter the college preparatory program; rather, in the words of the counselor, "he pulled himself up in the tenth grade." Forced to skip Academic Science in the ninth grade, this student enrolled in the more advanced biology class in the tenth and received an A. He also entered the college English track program and received B grades in the tenth and eleventh grades and an A in the first semester of the twelfth grade college preparatory English class. With a 4.0 GPA, this outstanding late entrant student was accepted by an engineering program at a nearby major four-year university.

The outstanding late entrant graduate is among a small minority of graduates (3) who were to enter a four-year college or university. Most graduates, like most delayed seceders, planned on attending a community college in the La Entrada community. Financial needs lead most of the graduates to the community college and to delayed college enrollment for others. In the summer of 1991, many students were planning to delay attending community college in favor of a semester of work. In fact, most of the Mexican immigrant graduates began working half to full-time in their junior year, less to help out the family than to buy clothes and class rings or go out on dates.

College preparatory track charters varied greatly in their academic performance. Only three did as well in school as the top three late-entrant college preparatory students. None performed as well as the top Mexican late entrant immigrant student in the 1991 graduating class. While the few college preparatory late entrant students did extremely well in high school, there are a number of charters in the top academic program who performed marginally. Although most received C or C+ GPA's, these students typically received D's and C's in the academic science and math classes. They generally did better in elective courses but received only average grades in English. Interestingly, charters do not seem to have done better in the college preparatory program because they learned English earlier than late entrants did any more than facing the problems of catching up in English deterred the success of the few

college-bound late entrants. English dominant charters were not the best among the college preparatory students, although more charters graduated than college preparatory students.

Conclusion

A number of observations from this study suggest that entering late in middle school does not put immigrant students at risk in high school because of insufficient time for developing English skills. Immigrant late entrants are more at risk of not graduating from high school, but their lower graduation rate does not appear to be directly related to lack of time to develop English skills. First, middle school eighth-grade ESL status does not seem to be related to not entering high school. If late-entrant middle school graduates believe that being in an ESL program in high school is detrimental to their chances of graduating, are fearful of not being able to catch up, and thereby psychologically give up on high school before they enter, then there should have been a higher percentage of ESL students among the ‘did not enroll’ group. In fact, there is a greater proportion of ESL students in the early seceder group than in the DNE group.

Secondly, being at academic risk early on in high school does not seem to be associated the problem of mastering English. One might assume that the higher percentage of ESL students in the early seceder group reflects the failed attempts of ESL students to master high school English requirements or, perhaps, frustration associated with being in high school as an ESL student. However, the pattern of academic failure so prevalent among early seceders, ESL-lates, and others, is not specific to failing English nor even failing at academic subjects. ESL students, as well as other early seceders, are failing at school, receiving “I’s” (incompletes) or F’s in physical education, shop, and non-academic, non-English dependent electives.

Thirdly, the pattern of being academically at risk early in high school does not seem to be a sound predictor of the high school career status that immigrant students achieve. Just as being at risk early is not associated with struggling with English in school, so becoming at risk early is not a predictor of length of time the immigrant students stay in the receiver high schools. Early seceders become at risk early, failing at school not failing subjects in school, and they leave before the end of the tenth grade. The transfer group also includes students who got into academic

trouble early and left the receiver high schools for another high school--but did not graduate. Likewise, retainees were at risk early on but stayed in the alternative school for four years without graduating. All of these three groups include late entrants and charters. Factors other than preparation for high school, including proficiency in English, must account for why some late entrants and charters secede early, transfer, or remain in high school as academic at-risk students for four years. Furthermore, charters who transferred or who seceded from high school were not better students in high school than late entrants, nor were they a special group of charters who were poorly prepared in the middle school and placed in high school ESL classes. Also, not being prepared for high school English cannot account for why some lates became retainees and failed at school while others fail and leave early.

Lastly, charters who completed the college preparatory program were not doing better academically although they had a longer time to develop English skills than late-entrant college-bound immigrant students. While proficiency in English is related to high school success and doing well in English helps a student do well in many subjects, the larger group of charters in the top college bound program were not doing better in high school than a smaller number of graduate late-entrant college bound students who had fewer years to catch up to high school English norms. Charters in the college preparatory track were not doing better in high school because they have become bilingual English dominant students anymore than the problem of catching up in English has deterred the academic success of a limited number of excellent late-entrant college bound students.

Taken together, these observations provide little support to the Durán and Weffer "limited exposure--at-risk" thesis. Durán and Weffer focused on standardized test taking skills of immigrants and, therein, lies the weakness of the generalization they would like to make about late-entrant immigrant students and school success. It is certainly likely that late entrants are more at risk of not passing standardized college placement tests than charters, but it is highly unlikely that most late entrants will take these tests. Hence, generalizations about test taking performance have little relevance for the understanding of why late entrant students do not do well in high school and do not go on to college.

Our study findings suggest that late entrants are more at risk of not graduating from high school than are charter members; but that English proficiency is not the major factor in accounting for the

lower high school graduation rate of late entrant students. The high school status that late entrants attain, as well as that of charters, is likely to reflect factors that are “beyond language.” Sociologists often point to family and peers as key factors in explaining differential high school success of minority students of the same socioeconomic background. Our in depth interviews with graduates and late seceders suggest that family and peers are not major factors. Graduates are not isolated with other graduates from the general population of La Entrada middle school students in high school. Interviews with graduates suggest their high school success was not attributed to their involvement in school clubs and organizations, positive relations with counselors, or membership in cliques of academically oriented students. Likewise, parents of graduates were no more involved in the high school experience of their offspring than are parents of late seceders. For the most part, parents of graduates did not help with home work, regularly attend school events, help select classes, or interact regularly with high school counselors. Graduates do not have better educated parents nor are they more likely to be in families where older siblings have graduated. Graduates, like late seceders, were also working their way through high school, acquiring part-time to nearly full-time jobs by the eleventh grade.

Late entrants and charter graduates alike were more likely to follow the academic program outlined in the student handbooks than other immigrant student status groups. Taking the prescribed academic courses in math and science, they were described by other immigrant students as “being into school,” isolating themselves from serious dating and sports. We hypothesize that late entrant graduates are positively oriented toward high school as a consequence of their place and experience in their family’s chain migration process. Late entrants with a school experience in their home country recognize the better opportunities for going to school in the United States, and they are likely to have a social conscience regarding the hardships their families faced in coming to the United States. Those students who view their educational success as a symbolic “payoff” for the suffering associated with immigration are likely to persist in high school regardless of the struggle to learn English.

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