

# Immigrants and Schools Study Chicago Report

June 2010

Melissa Marschall

## **About the Author**

Professor Marschall is Associate Professor of Political Science at Rice University, and in 2009-10, a Visiting Scholar at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York. Her research focuses on local politics, education policy, participation, and issues of race and ethnicity. Her book, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton University Press - coauthored with Mark Schneider and Paul Teske) was recipient of the Policy Studies Association Aaron Wildavsky Award for the Best Policy Book in 2000-2001. Her research has appeared in such journals as *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Educational Policy*, *Political Behavior*, and *Urban Affairs Review*.

## **Funding**

The Immigrants and Schools Project received support from the Russell Sage Foundation and the National Science Foundation (SES-0617644).

## **Acknowledgements**

The co-principal investigator for this project is Katharine Donato, Professor and Chair of Sociology at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Donato's broad interests focus on social stratification and demography, especially international migration between Mexico and the United States. Her research has addressed questions related to the impact of immigration policy on the economic incorporation of U.S. migrants, the relationship between gender and migration over time and across space, social network and migration effects on the health of Mexican families, and immigrant incorporation in new U.S. destinations. Dr. Donato was involved in every aspect of the data collection and research design of this project, and without her, it would not have been possible.

The University of Chicago Survey Lab oversaw all survey data collection for the project. Martha Van Haitsma, Director, and Kevin Ulrich, Assistant Director, supervised the project, and we are eternally grateful for their dedication, care, and attention to detail. Martha Van Haitsma earned a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and has co-directed or directed the Survey Lab since its inception. Kevin Ulrich holds a BA in Sociology and an MA in Social Science, both from the University of Chicago.

A number of graduate and undergraduate students also assisted with data collection: Isabel Martinez (Columbia University) coordinated face-to-face interviews in Washington Heights and the Bronx, Mimi Arnold (Rice University) played a major role in the survey of principals and field work in New York and Chicago, Victor Marin (Rice University) helped compile performance and other secondary data, and Carlos Cuellar, Renita Miller and Ngoc Phan (Rice University) assisted in fielding the principal survey. Finally, Laura Grant assisted with editing, writing, and formatting this report.

I am especially grateful to the Russell Sage Foundation staff for their assistance and support with the research and writing that went into this report.

## **Table of Contents**

Executive Summary	3
Overview & Motivation of Study	5
Study design	7
Characteristics of Chicago Communities, Schools and Respondents	9
School-Initiated Communication with Parents	11
School Outreach and other Forms of Communication	13
Parent Reports about School Activities their Own Involvement	14
Parent-Initiated Involvement	20
Parent Satisfaction with Schools and Staff	22
Summary and Conclusions	23
Works Cited	24

## Executive Summary

The study examines the relationship between immigrant parents and schools, focusing on what schools are doing to communicate with and engage immigrant parents and how immigrant parents are involved in their children's education and schooling. This report is based on survey data from Latino and Asian parents in three Chicago communities: Pilsen/Lower West Side, Humboldt Park/West Town, and Chinatown (Armour Square/Bridgeport). Roughly 824 parents/guardians participated in the survey, which was conducted between May 2007-July 2008.

Since the study targeted respondents of Latino and Asian ethnic origin in communities with large foreign (or island)-born populations, the majority of parents in our study are immigrants. While Puerto Rican respondents are most likely to be U.S. born (62%) and speak predominantly English at home (42%), most Chinese and Mexican respondents are foreign born (99% and 82% respectively) and continue to speak predominantly their native language at home (60% and 61% respectively). Below I highlight some of the key findings from the survey responses of these parents.

### ***School-initiated communication and outreach with parents and families***

- ❖ Traditional modes of communication (mailing, newsletter, telephone) are more popular than email; however, websites and regular mail are equally important sources of information for parents. Sending information home with children is the most commonly reported form of school communication.
- ❖ Overall, there is little difference in modes of communication used by schools across the three communities in the study.
- ❖ Higher proportions of respondents from Spanish-speaking communities indicate that communications from their schools are usually in two or more languages (English and Spanish) than Chinatown respondents (English and Chinese).
- ❖ Though only 3 percent of Chinese respondents report speaking predominantly English at home, Chinatown parents are most likely to report that their schools communicate with them only in English. Roughly one quarter say that all communications they receive from their school are only in English (vs. 5-13% from Spanish-speaking communities).
- ❖ More than 90 percent of parents in each of the three communities report that teachers and staff greet them by name when they visit their child's school.
- ❖ The majority of parents (78-87%) report that their child's school assigns homework that requires parent participation. However, many fewer parents report that schools provide information and support when it comes to parent involvement at home and with homework. This finding underscores the importance of parent coordinators and suggests that increased outreach in this area would be particularly effective for immigrant parents.

### ***School-based Activities and Parent Involvement***

- ❖ Of the school-based activities we asked parents about, the parent-teacher conference is the most prevalent, followed by concerts/theatre productions, then

orientations/back to school nights and fairs/open houses. Less than half of parents indicate that their schools offer parent lounges or drop in centers.

- ❖ In general, parents in Lower West Side report higher levels of community event offerings at their schools and consistently higher levels of attendance at these events. By contrast, Chinatown parents consistently report the lowest levels of attendance at any events offered at their schools.
- ❖ Parent responses on the availability of interpreters at school events differ significantly across ethnic origin, with only 38 percent of Puerto Ricans confirming their presence and more than 75 and 70 percent of Chinese and Mexicans respectively indicating that interpreters are typically present at their children's school events. Not surprisingly, actual use of interpreters also differs substantially across groups, again with Puerto Ricans reporting the lowest and Mexicans and Chinese the highest utilization of interpreters.
- ❖ When it comes to obstacles to participation, study participants report surprisingly low frequencies of typical problems (childcare, transportation, language) posing as barriers to their involvement in school related activities. This finding is contrary to existing research on immigrant parent involvement in schools, which tends to find such obstacles playing a significant role in limiting participation. On the other hand, mean response to "other problems" (e.g., health problems, caring for other small children and/or family members, conflict with respondent's own school) is between "frequently" and "always."
- ❖ Finally, responses to questions tapping 'parent-initiated' involvement show considerable variation across activity type and ethnic origin group. Regardless of ethnic origin, parents report talking with their child about school work and grades almost daily, whereas they report talking to teachers and administrators much less frequently. Chinese parents report very infrequent communication and Puerto Rican and Mexican parents report at least monthly conversations with teachers and administrators in their schools.

### ***Parent Attitudes about Schools and School Staff***

- ❖ Overall parents tend to have favorable attitudes about teachers and principals in their children's schools. While most parents agree that teachers show positive interest in their child's culture and make them feel welcome, Puerto Ricans tend to be least positive about their principals and teachers. Chinese parents tend to feel more strongly that overcoming cultural barriers is difficult when interacting with teachers.
- ❖ Most parents and guardians in this study are quite satisfied with the quality of their children's schools; Chinese and Mexican respondents register slightly stronger support for the educational quality of their schools.

## Overview & Motivation of Study

The *Immigrants and Schools* project addresses a critical gap in the existing research on immigrant status and schooling outcomes and achievement—namely the relationship between immigrant parents and schools. Three notable recent phenomena suggest the urgency of understanding this relationship. First, a substantial body of research has linked parent involvement to an increasingly wider range of schooling outcomes, including improvements in mathematics, reading, and other subjects, student self-esteem, child-parent relationships, teacher confidence about their competency to teach, and community relations. Second, recent education reform initiatives include mandates regarding parent involvement. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) requires all districts and schools receiving Title I funds to develop a written parent involvement policy jointly with parents of children participating in Title I programs. Third, little is known about the efficacy of traditional modes of parent involvement for Latino students, the largest immigrant group in American schools, who continue to lag substantially behind their Anglo and African American counterparts on a number of key indicators. For example, in 2006 the dropout rate for Latinos was 22 percent, compared to 10.7 percent for blacks and 5.8 percent for Anglos. Further, since 1992, the Anglo-Latino achievement gap has, on average, shrunk by only one percentage point in reading and three percentage points in math; in contrast black students narrowed the gap by 4 and 8.5 percentage points respectively (Planty et al. 2008).

This study conceptualizes the relationship between immigrant parents and schools as two separate, yet highly inter-connected processes. The first process involves schools and the factors that determine how schools engage parents. As the institution at the frontline of receiving immigrants to this country, what are schools doing to support immigrant parents, foster their involvement in their children's schooling and education, and generally create strong parent-school relations? According to the "effective schools" research in education, this process should be shaped in important ways by organizational, management, governance, and leadership attributes of schools. For example, small schools as well as schools with well articulated missions, a team-based approach to governance, and leaders who empower teachers and parents to participate meaningfully in school governance are a few of the specific attributes that distinguish effective schools (Cotton 1995; Purkey & Smith 1983; Hallinger & Murphy 1986).

However, it is not clear whether and how these factors work in schools that serve predominantly immigrant populations. Further, the very nature of parent involvement, including the forms it takes, may need to be reconsidered in light of evidence suggesting that immigrant parents engage in non-traditional ways. For example, schools tend to define parent involvement as participation in formal activities, such as volunteering in school events and attending meetings (Scribner et al. 1999), thereby privileging these forms of participation and neglecting culturally specific perspectives of immigrant populations. This in turn may deflect attention away from the school's responsibility to establish effective parent involvement programs for marginalized groups (Singh et al. 1995). In short,

developing partnerships between schools and immigrant parents may require schools to explicitly focus on cultural differences and find ways to accommodate them.

The second process focuses on how parents are engaged in their children's schools. To what extent do immigrant parents know about and participate in school-based activities and programs? Do immigrant parents get involved in traditional ways or do they define new modes of interacting with schools? Although few studies have systematically documented racial, ethnic, or nativity differences in school involvement, those that have find lower rates of participation for these parents than for Anglo or U.S. born parents (Moles 1993; Floyd 1998). Explanations for these differences focus largely on individual and structural factors that pose as barriers to participation. For example, immigrants are more likely to experience language difficulties, mixed legal status, and poverty than are Anglo and non-immigrant parents and may have lower incidents of interracial contact. On the other hand, cultural factors, including ethnic identity, parent-child relations, and language maintenance (Louie 2006) presumably play an important role in shaping parents' expectations and behaviors. However, it is not at all clear how these factors operate across different structural-cultural settings. For example, are there specific modes or patterns of involvement for Chinese parents, and if so, do these exist in both Chicago and New York?

Sorting out the complex ways in which school and parent attributes shape immigrant parent involvement represents the central work of this project. To understand these interactions and the interdependent nature of school and parent attitudes and behaviors, the study relies on insights from "coproduction," a theory developed by Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom and other public administration scholars to explain service delivery. Coproduction emphasizes the critical role of both citizen/client involvement and institutional arrangements in determining the quality, efficiency and equity of public goods and services (Brudney 1984). It ranges from formal roles (e.g. charter schools), to less formal and supportive roles (e.g. school volunteers) and involves the conjoint action, attentiveness, and communication of both parents and school personnel.

By understanding the relationship between immigrant parents and schools, the project is well situated to explore an additional and highly salient question: How does involvement in schools foster immigrant participation in community and political life? The segmented assimilation experiences of immigrant groups suggest variable patterns in their political and social incorporation. As Zhou and Logan (2003) note, the degree to which organizations in immigrant neighborhoods are interconnected offers opportunities for interaction among residents, and between residents and outsiders. However, if these interactions are restricted to particular immigrant groups, they represent a form of exclusion whereby some immigrants will remain socially and politically unincorporated. As a central institution in local communities, schools may provide a moderating influence by transmitting information, establishing and reinforcing norms of participation, and even providing formal civic education. Moreover, dominant theories of political behavior find that schools and other non-political institutions play a pivotal role in facilitating not only the development of organizational and communication skills relevant for political participation, but also the social ties and networks of recruitment that promote involvement in civic and political life (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1995).

## Study design

The project systematically analyzes the linkages between parent involvement policies, the forms of immigrant parent involvement, and immigrant civic and political participation in the context of Chicago and New York, two immigrant gateway cities that have continuously attracted immigrants for the last 100 years (Singer 2004). These cities were chosen as research sites because they share a number of similarities with respect to the context of reception (both are continuous gateways), their immigrant populations (both have large foreign born populations, 36 percent in New York and 22 percent in Chicago in 2000, roughly 40 percent of whom represented new arrivals in the 1990s), and overarching organizational structure (both are mayor takeover districts). On the other hand, there are important differences in the degree to which immigrants and noncitizens are incorporated into the school systems, supported by school personnel, and encouraged to participate in their children's schooling and education. In particular, unlike New York, Chicago has retained more features of its decentralized governing arrangements, including extending noncitizens the right to vote and run as candidates in Local School Council elections.

Within each city, three communities were selected for study--two that reflected the primary Latino ethnic origin groups, and one targeting the predominant Asian origin group. The Chicago communities include Pilsen/Lower West Side (Mexican), Humboldt Park/West Town (Puerto Rican), and Chinatown (Armour Square/Bridgeport). The New York communities include Washington Heights (Dominican), the University Heights area of the Bronx (Puerto Rican) and Chinatown. Respondents were screened on the basis of being of either Latino or Asian ethnic origin and being the parent or guardian of at least one school-aged child (grades 1 through 9).

The Survey Research Lab at the University of Chicago conducted the survey of immigrant parents, completing 1,660 interviews between May 2007-July 2008. As the disposition of survey respondents in Table 1 indicates, nearly all sample respondents from the Chinatown communities in New York and Chicago are Chinese (93% in each case). It is also in these neighborhoods that we are most likely to find other Asians, which include Filipinos, Koreans and Vietnamese in Chicago and Vietnamese in New York. In addition, while roughly 94 percent of Pilsen/Lower West Side respondents are Mexican and 77 percent of Washington Heights respondents are Dominican, each group also represents the largest group of respondents in Humboldt Park/West Town and University Heights, respectively. That Puerto Ricans represent only 36 and 24 percent of the Humboldt Park/West Town and University Heights samples is consistent with the fact that Puerto Ricans are less segregated than the other groups in our study. Nevertheless, these neighborhoods have historically been Puerto Rican enclaves and they remain important centers for Puerto Rican culture and identity. Finally, as Table 1 indicates, our sample also includes a non-trivial number of other Hispanics (123). In Chicago, other Hispanics are predominantly Guatemalans, Ecuadorians, Peruvians, Hondurans and those with 'mixed' racial/ethnic identities, while in New York they include these groups as well as Salvadorans, Columbians, and Costa Ricans.



The lab utilized a multi-modal strategy that included probability samples, complete enumerations of some blocks, and volunteers. While some of the interviews were conducted over the phone, given high mobility rates, the low incidence of land-line telephones, and greater distrust among inner-city immigrant residents, the data collection relied heavily on field workers to make initial contact for screening purposes and to conduct face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Fujinese. Drawing on the lab’s expertise in surveying hard to reach populations and its extensive knowledge of the Chicago communities, we were able to collect high quality data despite the increasingly hostile, anti-immigrant political climate that took place during our field effort.

**Table 1: Disposition of Survey Respondents by City and Ethnic Origin**

	Chicago (May-Sept., 2007)			New York (March-July, 2008)			Total
	Lower West Side	West Town	China town	Wash Hghts	Univ Hghts	China town	
Mexicans	242	135	9	22	21	1	430
Dominicans	1	1	0	287	132	2	423
Puerto Ricans	1	93	0	18	61	5	178
Other Hispanics	10	30	0	44	38	1	123
Chinese	0	0	281	1	0	204	485
Other Asian	0	1	10	1	1	6	19
Total	254	260	310	373	253	219	1,658

The parent survey instrument included questions pertaining to specific parent involvement programs and practices in the two research sites, parents’ knowledge about various activities and events at their children’s schools, whether/how often they participated in these activities, and how they were involved in their children’s education at home. It also included a battery of questions about parents’ involvement in community and political life, attitudes toward their schools, community and local government, migration experiences, and demographic characteristics.

From the list of schools attended by the children of our respondents, we constructed a sample of schools in Chicago (130) and New York (185). We then surveyed principals in these schools, focusing our questions on school-initiated parent involvement policies and practices (which were also asked in our parent survey), the form and frequency of school communications with parents, teachers’ and administrators’ cultural awareness, and features of school and district governance and organization. This web-based survey was conducted in the spring and summer of 2009.

## Characteristics of Chicago Communities, Schools and Respondents

In this first section of the preliminary report on parent involvement in Chicago, I begin by reporting descriptive data for the three communities featured in the study. I then provide an overview of the parents included in the sample, comparing demographic, socio-economic, and other characteristics of these parents by their ethnic origin.

Data in Table 1a reports the total population and racial/ethnic composition of the three community areas from which we surveyed parents: (1) the Pilsen neighborhood of the Lower West Side, (2) West Town,<sup>1</sup> and (3) the Chinatown neighborhood of the Armour Square and Bridgeport Community Areas. As these data show, the West Town community is nearly twice as large as the other two communities. Although Latinos are the largest group in West Town, they are not a majority (only 46.9%), and the community has the largest percentage of white residents (39.4%) as well as the smallest percentage of foreign-born (22.8%) of the three communities. The Lower West Side is the most ethnically homogeneous (89% Latino). Nearly half of all Lower West Side residents are foreign-born, and 82.8 percent speak a language other than English at home, the largest percentage of all three communities. In Chinatown, Asians just barely represent the largest racial/ethnic group (35.3%), only slightly larger than whites (34.7%). Indeed, Chinatown, even more than West Town, is a very racially/ethnically mixed community: nearly one quarter of its population is Latino. About half of all residents in both Chinatown and West Town speak a language other than English at home. Notably, blacks are less than 10 percent of the population in all three communities.

**Table 1a: Chicago Communities Profile**

	<b>Lower West Side</b>	<b>West Town</b>	<b>Chinatown</b>
Total population	44,031	87,435	45,726
% White	8.1	39.4	34.7
% Black	1.8	9.1	.5
% Latino	89	46.9	23.2
% Asian	.3	1.8	35.3
% Foreign Born	49.1	22.8	37.4
% Language other than English at home	82.8	52.6	51.1

Based on 2000 Census data. Table entries for white, black, and Asian include non-Hispanics and one race only.

The data in Table 2 focus on demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the parents and guardians who participated in the *Immigrants and Schools* study. Rather than compare across community areas, this table reports data by the ethnic origin of

---

<sup>1</sup> The community area known as West Town includes a portion of the Humboldt Park neighborhood, specifically, the 104-block area east of Humboldt Park, west of Western Avenue, and north of Chicago Avenue. While Humboldt Park is also a separate community area, our study did not include this area.

respondents. As these data reveal, these groups vary significantly on a number of different indicators. Puerto Rican and Mexican respondents have lower rates of full-time employment, home ownership, home access to the internet, and high school completion than do their Chinese counterparts. However, Mexican and Chinese respondents are most similar with regard to foreign-born status: while the majority of Puerto Ricans (62%) are U.S. born, only 18 percent of Mexican and 1 percent of Chinese are. Related to this factor, the dominant home language is less likely to be English among Chinese and Mexican respondents (60-61% speak predominantly Chinese/Spanish) than among Puerto Ricans (16% Spanish). On the other hand, more Chinese and Mexican respondents are married or living with a partner (85-100%) than Puerto Rican respondents (57%). Further, these two groups are slightly less likely to send their children to public schools (Mexican respondents have the highest rate of attendance at neighborhood schools, 87%). Finally, Mexican respondents have the largest household size and most number of children under 18 of all four groups, while Chinese respondents have the least number of children under 18 (less than 2).

**Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents, by Ethnic Origin**

	<b>Puerto Rican</b>	<b>Mexican</b>	<b>Other Hispanic</b>	<b>Chinese</b>
Months employed full time	5.66	5.69	7.43	8.97
% High school degree	68	45	73	72
Household size (number of persons)	4.19	4.87	4.78	4.42
Number of children < 18	2.17	2.56	2.30	1.93
% U.S. born	62	18	40	1
% Speak predominantly English at home	49	14	38	3
% Speak both English & Spanish (Chinese) at home	35	25	24	37
% Speak predominantly Spanish (Chinese) at home	16	61	38	60
% Married/partner	57	85	68	100
% Home owner	27	31	58	54
Years in neighborhood	17.56	13.13	13.85	11.88
Years in Chicago	20.49	15.34	15.18	12.96
% Internet at home	57	54	68	86
% Public school	96	92	93	91
% Neighborhood school	77	87	73	78
% Lower West Side	1	63	25	0
% West Town	99	35	75	0
% Chinatown	0	2	0	100
Number of respondents	94	386	40	282

Puerto Rican and Chinese respondents are most concentrated by neighborhood: 99 percent live in West Town and 100 percent in Chinatown, respectively. While a majority of Mexican respondents live in the Lower West Side neighborhood, over one third live in West Town (75% of other Hispanics also live in West Town).

### School-Initiated Communication with Parents

Parents who completed this survey were asked about communication with their schools, specifically the various ways in which their school transmitted information, from routine items such as the academic calendar and school closings, to important events like parent-teacher conferences and school productions, to special honors and accomplishments of students, faculty and the school community.<sup>2</sup> As the data in Table 3 reveal, parents across all three communities (Lower West Side, West Town, and Chinatown) report that the most popular form of school-initiated contact was sending information home with the child. Indeed, roughly 90 percent of parents in each of the three communities indicate that their school communicated with them this way during the school year. About half of parents in all three communities report using school websites as a source of information.<sup>3</sup> There are some differences in communication across communities, however, with more Latino parents in Lower West Side and West Town reporting that their schools communicated with them via phone and newsletters than Chinatown parents. Electronic communication is the least common form of school initiated contact for parents in the survey, although there are differences here as well: more Chinatown parents (12%) report receiving emails from schools than Lower West Side (6%) and West Town parents (7%).

**Table 3: School-Initiated Communication with Parents, by Community**

	Lower West Side	West Town	Chinatown
Newsletter	0.85	0.85	0.73
Send info home with child	0.91	0.90	0.91
Mail	0.52	0.51	0.40
Email	0.06	0.07	0.12
Telephone	0.83	0.79	0.54
Website	0.47	0.47	0.50
Number of respondents	257	260	301

Table entries are proportions of parents indicating this form of communication.

We also examined school-initiated communication by ethnic origin. While responses across the three Latino groups are quite similar, a couple of areas of difference also stand out. In particular, Puerto Rican respondents are significantly less likely to report that their schools

<sup>2</sup> If the respondent had multiple school-aged children, they were asked which had the next birthday, and all questions were specific to this child.

<sup>3</sup> A substantial number of parents also indicated that they did not know if their school had a website. 41 percent of Lower West Side and Chinatown parents, and 43 percent of West Town parents weren't sure about websites for their schools.

communicated with them by mail (40%) than either Mexican or other Hispanic respondents (55% and 54% respectively). And, a significantly higher proportion of other Hispanic parents say their schools used both email and phone than Puerto Rican parents (and Mexican parents for email).

In addition to asking respondents about modes of school communication with parents and families, we also asked about which language(s) were used in each of these forms of communication. In Table 4 I report the proportion of parents indicating that communication was either in English only versus English and the other predominant language of their community (Spanish or Chinese). As these data reveal, by and large parents from all three communities report that newsletters and information sent home with their child were more likely to be available in multiple languages than were mail or telephone communications.

**Table 4: Language of School Communication with Parents, by Community**

	Lower West Side		West Town		Chinatown	
	English Only	English & Spanish	English Only	English & Spanish	English Only	English & Chinese
Newsletter	0.05	0.48	0.13	0.47	0.26	0.34
Send info home with child	0.06	0.53	0.13	0.47	0.27	0.47
Mail	0.05	0.26	0.11	0.23	0.22	0.12
Telephone	0.11	0.26	0.23	0.24	0.23	0.08

Note: since additional response categories (“Spanish only” or “Chinese Only”) were also available (and not reported), column entries do not necessarily sum to 1.

In general, Lower West Side and West Town respondents say they were more likely to receive information via any means in both English and Spanish than Chinatown parents were to receive any communications in both English and Chinese. Indeed, parents in these two communities, dominated by Spanish-speaking immigrants, were always more likely to receive dual-language communications than English-only communications. By contrast, both mail and telephone communications received by Chinatown parents were more likely to be English only (22-23%) than both English and Chinese (12% and 8% respectively). In fact, nearly one quarter (22-27%) of all communications received by Chinatown parents were English only, as opposed to 5-13% of communications received by Lower West Side and West Town parents (except for phone calls in West Town, which were 23% English only).

Apart from the language used to communicate with parents and families, we were also interested in the accessibility of the written materials schools send home. Since many of our survey respondents have not completed their schooling (either in the U.S. or in their country of origin), their ability to read and comprehend written material in English or even their own language may be limited. In our sample, roughly 30 percent of Chinese and Puerto Rican respondents and 55 percent of Mexican respondents had not earned a high school diploma or its equivalent. In a separate question, we asked respondents how well

they understood written materials from their school. While nearly 90 percent of Puerto Rican respondents indicate that understanding this material was either somewhat or very easy, only 75 percent of Mexicans feel this way. Chinese and other Latinos are in the middle, with about 80 percent agreeing that these materials were somewhat or very easy to understand. Overall, this pattern of responses suggests that parents with greater language barriers are still struggling to understand written materials sent to them by their schools.

## **School Outreach and other Forms of Communication**

Some research on immigrant parents and schools has found that immigrant parents feel intimidated or unwelcome by school personnel and schools more generally. While some of these feelings may stem from insecurities parents have about their legal status, their limited English language proficiency or their lack of understanding about schooling in America, schools also contribute to these sentiments via formal and informal policies they set and the broader culture and climate they promote. Regardless of origin, such feelings typically discourage parent involvement in school activities and events.

Another area where immigrant parents may be less involved than their non-immigrant counterparts is in assisting or supervising their children with homework. Many immigrant parents we interviewed were frustrated about the lack of information schools provided with regard to what students were learning, what teachers were assigning with regard to homework and what schools' expectations were concerning parents' involvement in homework. Nearly all parents expressed interest in helping their children, but many also felt discouraged and inadequate because the limits of their own education and/or English proficiency prevented them from being able to help.

In light of these concerns, we wanted to investigate what schools were doing to combat them. Thus, our survey asked a series of questions about what schools were doing in the area of homework outreach to parents and how welcoming schools were perceived to be by immigrant parents (specifically, whether parents were typically greeted by name when they visited the school). The proportion of parents answering affirmatively to these questions is reported in Table 5.

The first thing to note in Table 5 is the overwhelming majority of parents indicating that teachers and staff in their child's school greet them by name when they visit the school. This finding suggests that Chicago schools in our sample communities are taking at least some steps to provide a welcoming environment.

When it comes to school programming in the area of homework, an overwhelming majority of parents in the study indicate that their schools assign homework that requires parent involvement (78-87%). However, only about half of respondents report that their school sends information to them about their child's homework. Fewer parents (36-43%) report that their school holds an event to inform parents about what children will be studying in their classes, and a very small proportion of parents (11-18%) say that their school has a

program to help parents help their children with homework. Based on responses to our survey, it appears that schools in the three Chicago communities included in this study are not very engaged in outreach activities regarding parent involvement in homework.

**Table 5: School Outreach to Parents, by Community**

	<b>Lower West Side</b>	<b>West Town</b>	<b>Chinatown</b>
Teachers/staff greet parents by name when they visit the school	0.93	0.91	0.92
Homework requiring parent participation	0.83	0.87	0.78
Send info to parents about homework	0.48	0.54	0.54
Program to help parents help children with homework	0.12	0.11	0.18
School event to describe to parents what children will be studying	0.43	0.36	0.37
School offers classes for adults (ESL)	0.67	0.45	0.20
Number of respondents	257	260	301

Finally, we also asked about whether schools offer classes for adults. As shown in the table below, there is little variation in parent responses across communities, with the exception of ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Lower West Side respondents are most likely (67%) to report that their schools offered such classes, while Chinatown parents are least likely (20%), and West Town parents fall in the middle (45%). One possible explanation for the high rates of ESL course offerings in Lower West Side schools is the presence of the Bilingual Parent Resource Center (BPRC) in this community. The BPRC, located in Perez Elementary School on South Throop, offers computer and ESL classes at Perez and several other schools. In addition, two Lower West Side schools (Perez and Cooper Elementary Dual Language Academy) have been offering adult education and literacy programs through funding from a Toyota Family Literacy grant.

### **Parent Reports about School Activities and their Own Involvement**

In addition to asking parents about school-initiated communication, we asked parents to report on activities and events that were offered by the school, and to indicate whether or not they attended these functions. Although interviewers asked about a pre-selected set of activities, parents were given the opportunity to volunteer additional, open-ended responses as well.

As Table 6 indicates, of the activities included in the survey, the parent-teacher conference is the most prevalent across all three Chicago communities, with over 85 percent of parents indicating that their school had at least one in the past year. Concerts/theatre productions are also popular across all three communities without much variation: 78-83 percent of parents report that their school offered these types of events (although only 55% of

Chinatown parents report attending concerts, as opposed to 75% of Lower West Side parents). Parents report that school orientations/back to school nights and fairs/open houses/club events were offered in all three communities at fairly high rates (77-86% and 71-87%, respectively), but the former were more common in Chinatown, while the latter were more common in Lower West Side.

In general, parents in Lower West Side report higher levels of community event offerings at their schools and consistently higher levels of attendance at these events. By contrast, Chinatown parents consistently report the lowest levels of attendance at any events offered at their schools.

**Table 6: School Activities Offered and Parent Attendance, by Community**

	Lower West Side		West Town		Chinatown	
	<i>Offered</i>	<i>Attended*</i>	<i>Offered</i>	<i>Attended*</i>	<i>Offered</i>	<i>Attended*</i>
Orientation/back to school night	0.77	0.69	0.73	0.58	0.86	0.58
Parent-teacher Conference	0.89	0.81	0.87	0.76	0.86	0.67
Concerts/theatre productions	0.78	0.75	0.83	0.66	0.80	0.55
Sporting events	0.73	0.40	0.66	0.33	0.60	0.20
Fairs, open houses, club sponsored events	0.87	0.82	0.80	0.70	0.71	0.53
Family events (e.g., father-son breakfast)	0.73	0.65	0.57	0.61	0.44	0.43
Drop in center/parent lounge	0.41	0.68	0.36	0.61	0.36	0.44
Other activities	0.37	0.61	0.25	0.57	0.43	0.43
Number of respondents	257	varies	260	varies	301	varies

\* Responses are conditional upon respondent's report that activity was offered.

One important insight from the data reported in Table 6 is the importance of taking into account actual opportunities for involvement when measuring levels of parent involvement. Because not all schools offer every type of activity, looking simply at the proportion of parents who say they participate is misleading. While not all parents participate when given the opportunity (as the data in Table 6 clearly show), for at least some activities it is certainly the case that by not providing these opportunities, many schools in Chicago are discouraging parent involvement.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, most research on parent involvement fails to consider this issue. Consequently, the lower levels of

<sup>4</sup> Obviously parent reports of the availability of school activities and events are subject to error. For this reason, we also surveyed school principals to both verify this information and to solicit additional information about parent outreach and involvement as well as other school-related matters.



involvement among minority and immigrant parents typically cited in the literature are only accurate if the distribution of opportunity across schools attended by children of these parents versus those attended by children of non-minority and non-immigrant parents is the same.

The present study not only sheds new empirical light on the extent to which involvement among minority and immigrant parents varies by ethnic origin, but also provides significant leverage with regard to understanding the source of potential variation. Table 6a reports parent and guardian responses to the same set of questions from Table 6; however, it reports them by respondents' ethnic origin rather than community of residence.

**Table 6a: School Activities Offered and Parent Attendance, by Ethnic Origin**

	<b>Mexican</b>		<b>Puerto Rican</b>		<b>Other Hispanic</b>		<b>Chinese</b>	
	<i>Offer</i>	<i>Attend*</i>	<i>Offer</i>	<i>Attend*</i>	<i>Offer</i>	<i>Attend*</i>	<i>Offer</i>	<i>Attend*</i>
Orientation/back to school night	0.77	0.66	0.70	0.59	0.75	0.63	0.86	0.59
Parent-teacher Conference	0.89	0.79	0.86	0.75	0.80	0.84	0.85	0.67
Concerts/theatre productions	0.81	0.70	0.82	0.70	0.88	0.71	0.79	0.54
Sporting events	0.72	0.35	0.65	0.46	0.65	0.29	0.60	0.19
Fairs, open houses, club sponsored events	0.84	0.76	0.86	0.77	0.78	0.71	0.70	0.52
Family events (e.g., father-son breakfast)	0.70	0.63	0.48	0.63	0.58	0.61	0.42	0.43
Drop in center/parent lounge	0.40	0.67	0.38	0.50	0.38	0.73	0.35	0.44
Other activities	0.34	0.58	0.24	0.65	0.18	0.57	0.43	0.43
Number of respondents	386	varies	94	varies	44	varies	282	varies

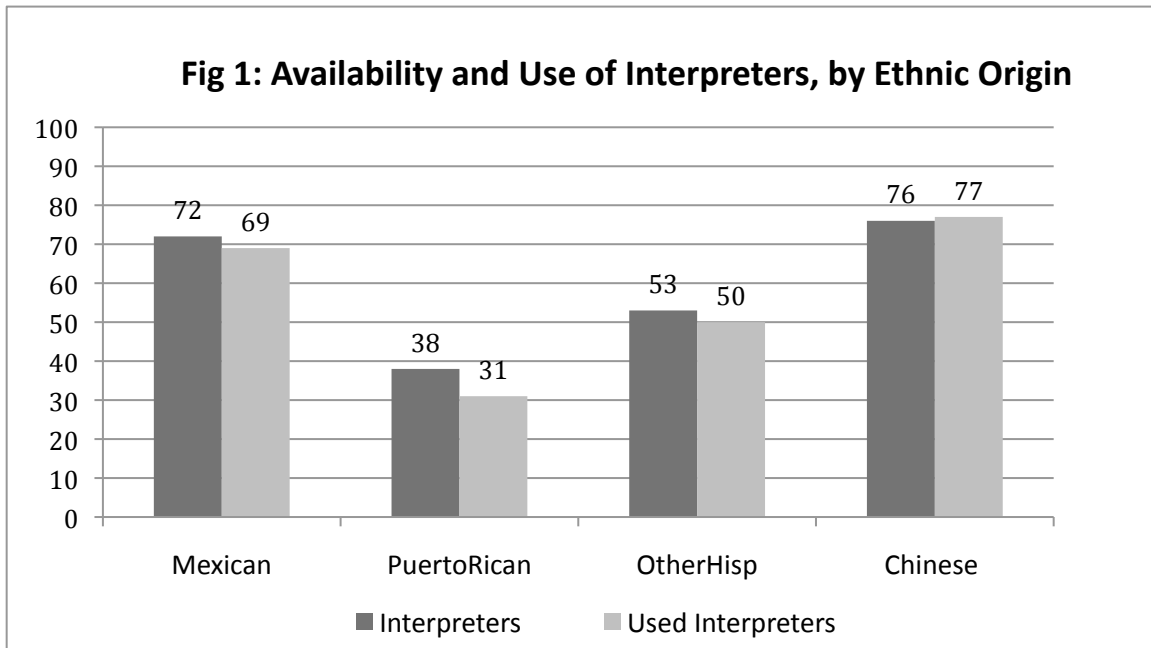
\* Responses are conditional upon respondent's report that activity was offered.

These data reveal a very similar pattern as those presented in Table 6 with regard to the opportunities for participation. Respondents of every ethnic-origin group cite parent-teacher conferences, concerts/theatre productions, and fairs/open houses/club events as the most commonly offered activities at their schools, with somewhat lower rates for orientations and sporting events. All four ethnic groups report that parent lounges are relatively uncommon. There are some noteworthy differences across groups as well. For example, Mexican respondents are most likely to report that their school offers family and

sports events, whereas Chinese parents are most likely to report orientations and other activities,<sup>5</sup> but also least likely to report open houses.

This variation across ethnic origin group is even more striking with regard to actual attendance, where Chinese parents in particular report participating at lower rates than other parents. For example, the Chinese are significantly less likely to attend concerts and open houses than parents of all three other groups, less likely to attend family events than Puerto Rican and Mexicans, and less likely to visit a parent lounge than Mexican and other Hispanic parents. In addition, Puerto Rican respondents are significantly more likely to attend sporting events, compared to Mexican or Chinese respondents.

Given potential language barriers faced by immigrant parents, we asked respondents whether their child's school usually had an interpreter at the school events they attended and if so, whether they typically relied on these interpreters. These data are reported in Figure 1.



Parent respondents across all ethnic groups report that they used interpreters at roughly the same rates that these interpreters were made available to them.<sup>6</sup> Mexican and Chinese

<sup>5</sup> Some of the other activities identified by these parents include: field trips, after school programs, literature nights, fine art events, assemblies, and various classes for parents.

<sup>6</sup> That the percentage of Chinese parents who indicate using interpreters is larger than the percentage reporting interpreters were typically available suggests reliance on interpreters other than those provided by the school or Chicago Public Schools. This pattern is consistent with research on Chinese and other Asian immigrants, which finds that children and other family members frequently serve as 'language brokers' for parents (Bajaj 2008).

parents report higher availability and use of interpreters than do other Hispanics and Puerto Ricans, who have the lowest rates overall.

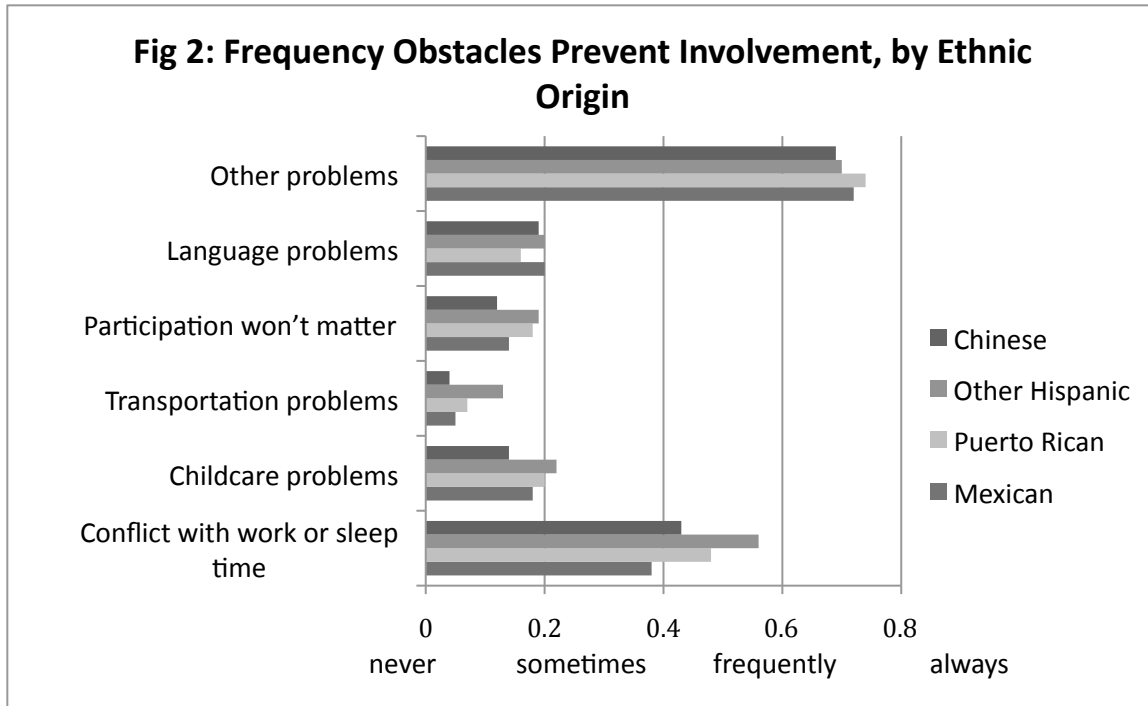
In conjunction with data presented in earlier sections of this report, these responses suggest important differences across groups with regard to English language proficiency. In particular, compared to Mexicans and Chinese in this study, Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics are more likely to be U.S.-born and more likely to speak English at home (see Table 2). In addition, these data suggest that schools are relatively responsive to the language needs of parents and families in their communities, despite the absence of formal policies mandating the use of interpreters or a central CPS unit strictly devoted to translation and interpretation such as exist in New York City.<sup>7</sup> While Chicago respondents report lower rates of interpreter availability than do New York City parents, the same percentage (68%) of parents in both cities report actual usage of interpreters.

Apart from the lack of English language proficiency, other barriers are also likely to prevent parents and guardians from being involved in their children's schools (Moles 1993; Floyd 1998; Zhou & Logan 2003). To gauge how much influence such obstacles might have on school involvement among immigrant parents in our study, we asked respondents about the frequency with which five often cited problems prevent them from being involved in their children's schools. Responses by parent ethnic origin are reported in Figure 2.

As shown in Figure 2, the most frequently cited obstacle to participation is conflict with work or sleep time, where the mean response is "frequently" for all groups except Mexican respondents, whose mean response is "sometimes." Mean responses for all other obstacles fall somewhere between "sometimes" and "never" suggesting that for the most part, parents do not see these as obstacles that frequently hinder their participation in school activities and events. This is not to say that obstacles do not get in the way of involvement, as responses to "other problems" indicate. Indeed, among each ethnic origin group, mean response to "other problems" is between "frequently" and "always." The most frequently cited "other" obstacles include respondents' own health problems, the need to care for other family members with health problems, lack of timely or complete information about school events, pregnancy and/or caring for other small children, conflict with their own class or study time, and other scheduling conflicts.

---

<sup>7</sup> In June 2006, New York City adopted Chancellor's Regulation A-663, which established procedures for ensuring that limited English speaking parents get access to translation and interpretation services in the public schools. In 2007, the New York Department of Education established the Translation and Interpretation Unit to provide language access and support to schools and to train parent coordinators and other staff on language access issues (NYC Department of Education 2009).

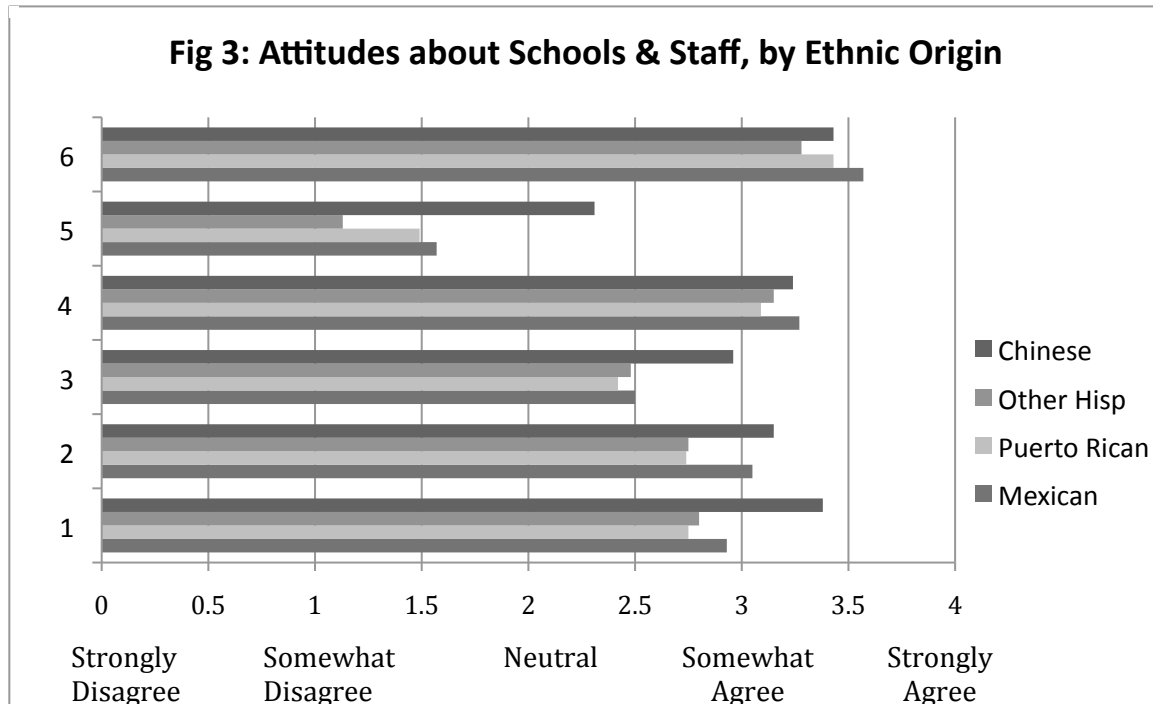


Beyond the question of whether these specific barriers pose serious limitations on immigrant parent involvement, our study also sought to investigate more systematically immigrant parent attitudes toward their schools and school staff. In particular, we were interested in how knowledgeable these parents feel their child’s teachers are about community and cultural issues important to them and how they perceive teachers’ responsiveness to their problems and concerns. We also asked parents and guardians about whether they feel their school encourages communication with the principal and whether teachers make them feel welcome. Figure 3 displays parent/guardian responses to the following set of statements:

1. My school encourages communication with the principal
2. Teachers in my school really try to understand parents’ problems & concerns
3. Teachers know about issues and concerns in my community
4. Teachers show positive interest in my child’s culture
5. Overcoming cultural barriers between teachers and parents is difficult
6. Teachers make me feel welcome

Overall, responses tend to be quite favorable. For example, regardless of ethnic origin group, most parents in our study agree that teachers show positive interest in their child’s culture and make them feel welcome. In addition, most parents (with the notable exception of Chinese respondents) disagree that overcoming cultural barriers between teachers and parents is difficult. In general, however, Chinese and Mexican parents indicate slightly stronger agreement than Puerto Rican parents do on several other categories:

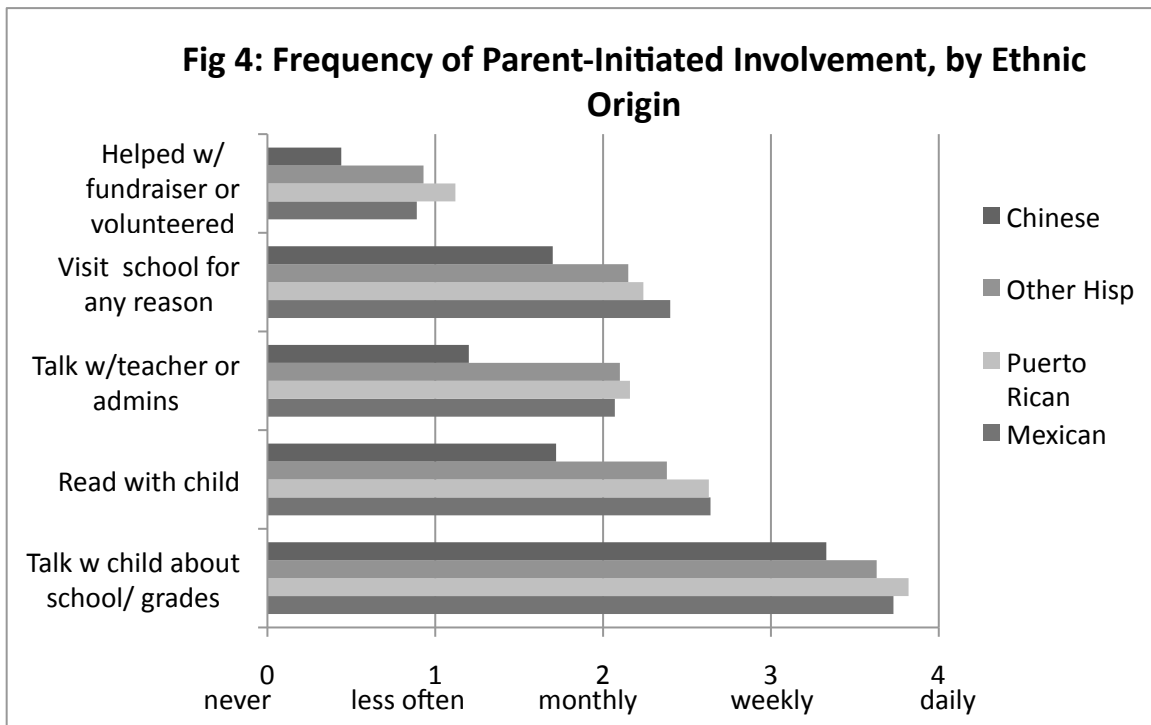
communication with principals, the extent to which teachers know about issues in the community, and teachers' attempts to understand parents' problems.



### Parent-Initiated Involvement

In contrast to resource explanations, an alternative line of reasoning put forth in the literature to explain lower rates of immigrant and minority parent involvement in schools focuses on the unique perspectives of these populations and argues that culturally-specific values and experiences may mean that the forms of these parents' school involvement look different from those emphasized by schools or by their Anglo or U.S. born counterparts (Lawson 2003; Jackson & Remillard 2005). For example, Louie's (2004) study of Chinese immigrant parents found that parents were less involved in formal school activities and more involved in arranging for extracurricular activities, such as supplemental tutoring and researching admissions criteria of different universities. On the other hand, some studies find that Latino parents tend to conceptualize their role as one of nurturing, teaching values, and instilling good behavior (Chavkin & Gonzalez 1995). Lopez (2001) finds that these parents take an active, but non-traditional, role in their children's education by giving advice or "consejos," but feel they are encroaching on the school's territory when asked to take on responsibilities like supervising homework, which may be viewed primarily as part of the school's domain (Daniel-White 2002; Tinkler 2002).

Figure 4 reports mean frequencies for a set of activities that are largely ‘parent-initiated’ and more likely to tap into the non-traditional behaviors cited in previous studies. As these data reveal, regardless of ethnic origin, parents report talking with their child about school work and grades more frequently than any other activity. Puerto Rican, Mexican and other Hispanic parents and guardians in our survey report doing this almost daily, while Chinese parents and guardians on average talk to their children somewhat less frequently (but at least once a week). In fact, Chinese parents report less frequent involvement across nearly all of these activities. In some instances they lag considerably behind other groups. For instance, whereas parents and guardians from each of the Latino ethnic origin groups report reading with their child between weekly and monthly, Chinese respondents on average report reading with their child less than once a month. Chinese parents also report talking with teachers and administrators and visiting school less than once a month, while respondents from all three Latino groups report at least monthly communication and visits. When it comes to volunteering/helping with school fundraisers, parent involvement drops among all ethnic groups, with Latino parents reporting less than once a month involvement and Chinese parents reporting that they volunteer almost never.<sup>8</sup>

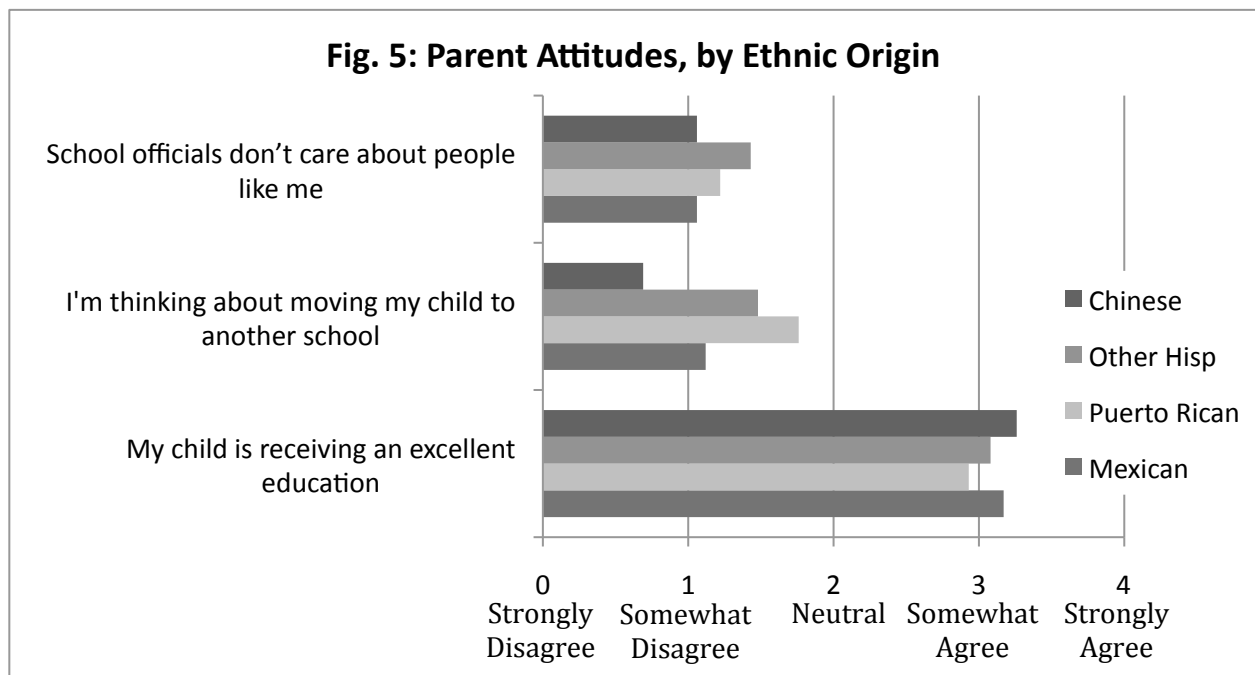


<sup>8</sup> We also asked parents whether their child had received tutoring outside of regular school class hours during the last year. Although there was no difference in rates of tutoring across Chinese, Mexican or Puerto Rican respondents (49-50% of parents responded affirmatively), a slightly lower percentage of other Hispanic parents (42%) said their child had been tutored in the past year.

## Parent Satisfaction with Schools and Staff

While the focus of this study is on understanding immigrant parent involvement in schools, our survey instrument included a set of more general questions about parents' and guardians' more general impressions of their schools. In particular, we asked parents to respond to statements regarding the overall educational quality of the school and whether they were thinking about moving their child to another school. Responses to these two statements are reported in the first two sets of bars in Figure 5.

As these data indicate, overall, parents and guardians in this study are quite satisfied with the quality of their children's schools. Mean responses to the first statement are "somewhat agree" across each ethnic origin group, with Chinese and Mexican respondents registering slightly stronger support for the educational quality of their schools. Though there is more variation across groups for the statement about changing schools, for the most part parents and guardians do not appear to be thinking about changing schools.



Finally, we asked parents and guardians to respond to a third statement regarding their feelings about school officials, specifically, the extent to which they believe school officials don't care about people like them. As Figure 5 shows, on average parents and guardians disagree somewhat with the statement, suggesting that by and large, they feel that school officials care about them and are responsive to their needs and interests.

## Summary and Conclusions

Over the past two decades, research on parent involvement in schooling has increased considerably. As the number of studies on the topic has grown, so too has the body of evidence demonstrating the link between parent involvement and a wide range of schooling outcomes. Importantly, studies suggest that the effects of involvement hold irrespective of parents' economic background or race/ethnicity (Jeynes 2003; Mau 1997; Shaver and Walls 1998). On the other hand, the relatively small body of work systematically documenting racial, ethnic, and nativity differences in school involvement tends to find that participation is lower for these parents than for Anglo and U.S. born parents (Moles 1993; Floyd 1998). Explanations for these differences focus largely on individual and structural factors that pose as barriers to participation. In particular, studies cite language difficulties, mixed legal status, and poverty as key obstacles to immigrant parent involvement in school.

The *Immigrants and Schools* study represents perhaps the most systematic effort to date to document not only the ways in which immigrant parents are engaged and involved in their children's education and schooling, but also parents' perceptions about what their schools are doing to support and foster their participation. Taken together, the data reported here indicate that parents perceive their schools are being relatively active with regard to providing both opportunities for parent involvement and a culture that supports their participation. However, parents also identify areas where schools need to do more, where teachers and principals could be more supportive and engaged, and where district resources (e.g., interpretation and translation services) are lacking. As this report documents, on a number of different indicators, parent perceptions about what their schools are doing vary considerably across community and/or respondents' ethnic origin.

When it comes to immigrant parent involvement, the data also reveal areas of both convergence and divergence. For example, the overall pattern of involvement across the different types of activities included in the survey is remarkably similar across parents' ethnic origin and community of residence. Similarly, responses to questions about the frequency with which various obstacles (problems with childcare, conflicts with work) limit parent involvement in school activities reflect the same general pattern across ethnic origin groups. But there are also a number of areas where clear differences across ethnic origin groups emerge. For example, Chinese parents show significantly lower rates of interaction with teachers, administrators and their own children than do other groups, and they also have the lowest levels of involvement in school activities.

It is important to note the relationships depicted in the tables and figures of this report do not control for other factors that are associated with parent attitudes and behaviors. As the initial tables of this report reveal, there are striking differences in the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the immigrant groups included in this study. Thus, while this report is meant to provide a description of how different types of immigrant parents perceive and interact with their schools, caution should be exercised when interpreting



these data. Subsequent analyses will include a full set of control variables and more sophisticated statistical tests. In addition, the book length manuscript, which is presently in progress, provides significantly more detail about the communities, groups, and schools as well as the methodology employed to both describe and explain immigrant parent involvement in education and schooling in the New York and Chicago communities included in this study.

By shedding new light on how contextual factors, schooling arrangements, and individual-level characteristics affect immigrant parent involvement in schools, the *Immigrants and Schools* study offers insights about how to build more effective schools, improve the educational prospects of immigrant children, and increase understanding about the relationship between immigrant parents and their schools.

## Works Cited

- Bajaj, Ruchika. 2008. "Recording Voices: Stories of Asian Pacific American Youth as Language Brokers in New York City." Policy Brief, September. New York City: Coalition for Asian American Children and Families.
- Brudney, J.L. 1984. "Local Coproduction of Services and the Analysis of Municipal Productivity." Urban Affairs Quarterly 19 (4): 465-84.
- Chavkin, N.F. and D.L. Gonzalez. 1995. Forging partnerships between Mexican American parents and the schools. West Virginia: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. 4 pages. ED388489.
- Cotton, Kathleen. 1995. Effective School Practice: A Revised Synthesis: A 1995 Update. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL).  
<http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/esp/esp95.html>
- Daniel-White, Kimberly. 2002. "Reassessing Parent Involvement: Involving Language Minority Parents in School Work at Home." Working Papers in Educational Linguistics 18(1): 29-49.
- Floyd, L. 1998. "Joining hands: A parental involvement program." Urban Education 33 (1): 123-135.
- Hallinger, P. and J.F. Murphy. 1986. "The Social Context of Effective Schools." American Journal of Education 94 (May): 328-55.
- Jackson, Kara and Janine T. Remillard. 2005. "Rethinking Parent Involvement: African American Mothers Construct their Roles in the Mathematics Education of their Children." School Community Journal 15: 51-73.
- Lawson, Michael A. 2003. "School-family Relations in Context: Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Parent Involvement." Urban Education 38: 77-133.
- Lopez, G.R. 2001. "The Value of Hard Work: Lessons on Parent Involvement from an Immigrant Household." Harvard Educational Review 71: 416-37.
- Louie, V.S. 2004. Compelled to Exile: Immigration, Education and Opportunity among Chinese Americans. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "Growing Up Ethnic in Transnational Worlds: Identities among Second-Generation Chinese and Dominicans." Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power 13: 363-94.
- Moles, O.C. 1993. "Collaboration between schools and disadvantaged parents: obstacles and openings." In N.F. Chavkin (Ed.), Families and schools in a pluralistic society. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Planty, M., Hussar, W., Snyder, T., Provasnik, S., Kena, G., Dinkes, R., Kewal Ramani, A., and Kemp, J. 2008. The Condition of Education 2008 (NCES 2008-031). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008031.pdf>
- NYC Department of Education. 2009. Regulation of the Chancellor, Number A-66. Avail at: <http://docs.nycenet.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-151/A-663.pdf>
- Purkey, S.C. and M.S. Smith. 1983. "Effective Schools: A Review." The Elementary School Journal 83 (4): 427-54.
- Rosenstone, Steven and John Mark Hansen. 1993. Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America. NY: MacMillian Publishing Company.

- Schneider, Mark, Paul Teske and Melissa Marschall. 2000. Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Scribner, J.D., M.D. Young, A. Pedroza. 1999. "Building Collaborative Relationships with Parents." In P. Reyes, J.D. Scribner, and A. Paredes (eds). Lessons from High Performing Hispanic Schools: Creating Learning Communities (pp. 36-60). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Singh, K, P.G. Bickley, P.I Trivette, T.Z Keith, P.B. Keither and E. Anderson. 1995. "The Effects of Four Components of Parental Involvement on Eighth Grade Student Achievement." School Psychology Review 24 (2): 299-317.
- Singer, Audrey. 2004. The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Tinkler, B. 2002. A Review of Literature on Hispanic/Latino Parent Involvement in K-12 Education. ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.
- Verba, Sidney, Key Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zhou, M. and J.R. Logan. 2003. "Increasing Diversity and Persistent Segregation: Challenges of Educating Minority and Immigrant Children in Urban America." Pp. 177- 94 in Stephen J. Caldas and Carl L. Bankston III (eds.), The End of Desegregation? NY: Nova Science Publishers Inc.