



Improving Child Care Access for Immigrant Families

The New Massachusetts

Immigrant families in Massachusetts are the fastest growing segment of our state’s population.¹ Children of immigrant families, the majority of whom are citizens, are less likely than children in native born families to have participated in preschool. At age three, this difference is minimal (42.7% vs. 46.3%), but by age four, the gap has widened (66% vs. 74%).² The missed opportunities have the potential to compromise kindergarten success. This data makes it evident that, in order to fulfill the mission of making high quality early education available to all children in the state, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) will need to develop and enforce policies that address the unique needs of immigrant families.



Unique needs of immigrant families include:

- Communication – both verbal and written in the home language
- Understanding and acceptance of differing values

Multiple factors likely contribute to the lower participation of immigrant families in early education and care programs, including demographics, language, culture, and immigration status and citizenship.³ Moreover, the diversity of national origin of immigrant children compounds the complexities (see Table 1).⁴

This paper offers both guiding principles and recommendations to improve child care access for immigrant families.

Guiding Principles and Recommendations

In May 2007, we convened a roundtable that brought together over 70 participants from a wide spectrum of leaders concerned about immigrant children and families. We asked them to “Imagine a Massachusetts where all children can succeed.”

From these discussions, three guiding principles emerged:

1. **Provide families with choices:** In the current child care system, there is little or no choice in provider, particularly for families with vouchers.⁵ This discourages families who may desire programs where their language is spoken, that have a reputation for cross-cultural competence, or that are situated in familiar locations from enrolling their children. Therefore:
 - All providers that accept state funds for child care should be required to participate in cultural sensitivity trainings at a minimum of two hours per year from an approved list of trainers.

TABLE 1

National Origin of Immigrant Children in Massachusetts

25%	Europe	6.9%	Central America
22%	Caribbean	4.9%	Africa
10.9%	East Asia	3.4%	Former Soviet Union
9.2%	Indonesia		
8.5%	South America	1.5%	Mexico

Culturally competent care requires that:

- Adults in children's lives respect each other
- Adults work to understand each other's perspectives
- Adults understand that values may differ
- Adults work together toward blending differing values⁶

2. **Ease access to information:** Families must be able to gain information about the various programs that exist from sources and networks that they trust in their own communities. Regardless of their immigration status, many new Massachusetts residents may fear retribution from the state or any organization (such as a Resource and Referral Agency) viewed as working as an agent of the state. Therefore:

- Documents that are required for eligibility for state subsidies should be translated; families in Massachusetts are routinely signing documents that are not in a language they can understand.
- Families should have access to a central list of available interpreters.
- All subsidy administrators throughout the state must be better educated regarding acceptable forms of identity and status documentation.

3. **Engage community-based organizations:**

"The strength of the receiving community is a factor in the success of immigrant families."⁷ EEC partnerships with these organizations must be created as an essential element to serve immigrant children well. Therefore:

- EEC contractors (including all Resource and Referral Agencies) must be well connected to community-based resources. This might include, for example, written agreements with community-based organizations, such as the multiple religious, civic, and service groups with high levels of contact with immigrant families.

Summary

Massachusetts has the opportunity to enhance its economic future by focusing increased efforts on providers and the children they serve. Given the increased prevalence of immigrant families in our state, EEC must be more responsive to both the needs of these families and the workforce that serves them.

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2 Matthews, H., & Ewen, D. (2006). *Reaching all children? Understanding early care and education participation among immigrant families*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

3 Hernandez, D.J., Denton, N.A., & Macartney, S. *Early education programs; Differential access among young children in newcomer and native families* (Unpublished manuscript).

4 U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

5 Washington, V., Marshall, N., Robinson, C., Modigliani, K., & Rosa, M. (2006, February 14). *Keeping the promise: A study of the Massachusetts child care voucher system: Executive summary*. Boston: The Bessie Tartt Wilson Children's Foundation.

6 Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2003). *Multicultural issues in child care*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfair Publishing Company.

7 Uriarte, M. (2007). *Towards responsive policies for immigrant integration in Mass*. Boston: Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, University of Massachusetts Boston.