

Effective Strategies for Educating Immigrant Girls

Addressing Critical Equity Issues

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Immigrant girls face a myriad of challenges in public schools. In addition to learning a second language, if they are not proficient in English, immigrant girls need to learn how to function in a society and culture that is different from their home country. Schools need to provide these students with the tools to achieve academic success and to promote positive self-esteem.

Immigrant girls often find that family, community, school, and peer expectations are markedly different for them than for girls of Anglo, middle-class culture.

Family expectations for many Latinas is to stay relatively close to home during and after high school. This tradition often conflicts with the prevailing trend in middle class culture for successful students to go away for college. Many Latinas also find themselves torn between loyalty to family and community (cooperation and sharing) and a system that focuses on individuality and competition. Latinas often carry additional responsibilities of caring for younger siblings, older relatives, caretaking of their homes for working or absent parents, and serving as translators and advocates for their families. In addition Latinas face other challenges related to the intersection of ethnicity and gender. Many Latinas are influenced by family and societal expectations, often based on stereotypes of

Latinas as submissive, underachievers and caretakers. When these stereotypes are internalized, girls may experience lower self-esteem which can hinder their motivation and engagement in school and cause them to doubt their chances for academic and career success (National Women's Law Center & Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2009).

Asian immigrant girls also face a variety of challenges. Research on Southeast and South Asian Immigrant communities suggest that adults view the upholding of traditional gender norms to be central to the maintenance of their ethnic identities. Many Asian immigrant girls experience significant restrictions on their time and independence, as many immigrant parents fear the forces of assimilation (Lee, 1996). Similarly to Latinas, Asian immigrant girls often have household obligations that affect the amount of attention they can devote to their school work or extracurricular activities. This reflects a gender expectation that may hinder girls' pursuit of education (National Education Association, 2005). In some Asian immigrant communities girls are encouraged to marry while they are teenagers. This practice of early marriage has been shown to have a negative impact on educational persistence. Early research on Hmong refugee students, for example,

demonstrated that early marriage and motherhood within the Hmong community led to high drop-out rates among girls (National Education Association, 2005). Schools can facilitate positive learning experiences for immigrant girls by increasing their feelings of attachment through appropriate language proficiency programs; providing access to high standard culturally responsive curriculum; and offering a welcoming environment for students of diverse language and cultural backgrounds. In addition special programs can and should be established to promote academic and social success. Effective immigrant girl-focused programs help them to reclaim *both* their cultural traditions and develop a cultural and community identity.

This goal is accomplished by enabling girls to “walk in multiple worlds.” Building girls’ self confidence and sense of connection helps them to negotiate the tensions that may arise between schools’ and American society’s cultural values and their own (MS. Foundation for Women, 2011). Reaching out to girls’ families is also another way of increasing knowledge and awareness of both family and school cultures and further facilitates dialogue and expanding possibilities of different ways to negotiate multiple perspectives (Ginorio, A. & Huston, M. 2001). Finally, mentoring programs in schools that emphasize positive adult role models from the culture of immigrant girls have also proven to be very successful.

PROMISING PRACTICES

- **Mi Carrera Program:** This program offers young women in middle and high school a distinctive set of integrated services that is designed to address a student’s self esteem and motivation.
- **Girls Getting Ahead in Leadership (GGAL):** This is a program that provides opportunities for 10th – 12th grade immigrant and refugee girls to improve their academics, prepare for college, and build strong leadership skills.
- **The Youth Leadership Program (YLP):** The program is specifically tailored to the needs of Asian American high school girls. Recognizing that Asian American girls have specific cultural and developmental needs, the YLP curriculum focuses on building identity, encouraging self-confidence, and developing leadership skills. The YLP also emphasizes the importance of teambuilding, and in the process, girls in the program serve as positive role models for each other, creating a supportive network of peers.
- **KGA Leadership Development Model:** This leadership development programs build the capacity of Southeast Asian high school girls to understand how their physical, emotional, and mental well-being is influenced by political, social, cultural, and economic factors. The program fosters the development of positive self-image, feminist principles and supportive female alliances, as each member graduates from and moves into the next program they

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receive advanced leadership and community organizing skills so that they are equipped with the necessary tools and skills to identify and impact positive change in their communities.

- **Hermanitas:** A youth mentoring program with high-risk Latina junior high school girls. Hermanitas has provided positive role modeling, education, and personal development to over 105 young women. Hermanitas spans the school year and includes monthly group educational programs, service projects, community networking events, as well as attendance at the annual LA RAZA youth conference.

PUBLICATIONS

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