



2012

# Breaking Down Education Barriers: Lessons from Immigrant Youth and Families in South King County



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## **Executive Summary**

As one of the largest immigrant rights organizations in Washington State, OneAmerica’s dedication to improving public education to promote equity for all students led to a partnership with the Road Map Project. The Road Map Project is a civic initiative aimed at driving major improvements in education results — cradle to college and career — in the low-income communities of South King County. The aim is to double the number of students in the region who are on track to graduate from college or earn a career credential by 2020. OneAmerica’s efforts within the Road Map Project are centered on closing the educational opportunity gap through increased integration of English language learner (ELL) student and family needs.

To meet this goal, OneAmerica gathered the educational experiences of 552 immigrant parents and students in seven South King County school districts (Auburn, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Renton, South Seattle, and Tukwila). Through focus group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and survey questionnaires, data was collected in four education-related areas: school communication, family and student engagement, academic advancement, and early warning indicators. The findings informed recommendations for policy changes at the state, district, and community levels.

### **Findings**

*School Communication:* Almost all parents who participated in this project spoke a primary language other than English and provided feedback on their experiences communicating with school staff and receiving translated information. Through survey data, it was evident that only 55 percent of parents received written materials from schools translated into their native language. Though Spanish is the most prevalent language among ELLs in South King County, Spanish-speaking families often experienced barriers to language access. Many parents who received translated information reported low levels of literacy, making written correspondence a problematic form of communication. Even parents who had high literacy skills indicated they are better able to understand their children’s academic experiences and needs when meeting in person, but phone calls and mailed letters appeared to be the most common form of correspondence. Parents attributed these limited in-person meetings to a lack of access to interpretation. Many parents reported they often rely on their children, other family members, or friends to interpret for them, which was confirmed by the finding that 72 percent of students reported interpreting for their parents and even other students and families.

*Family and Student Engagement:* A majority of immigrant parents who participated in the study expressed a desire to be more engaged and informed about their children’s academics stating, “We know how to educate our children but we are never asked.” It was clear traditional models of parent engagement, like Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), were not highly utilized due to the lack of cultural relevance. Parents favored seeking out teachers and interpreters when facing problems within schools. Most students (80%) expressed high comfort levels with their teachers, although a few students provided accounts of being ignored by teachers due to limited English proficiency. Both parents and students indicated a need for increased cultural competence among school staff, in school environments, and in standardized testing.

*Academic Advancement:* Although many student participants were born in the United States to immigrant parents, 73 percent of these U.S. born students were placed in an ELL program, typically early on in their schooling. Some students felt they were mistakenly placed in ELL and their English proficiency was not properly assessed. Roughly half of the students (47%) currently in an ELL program reported being in the program for more than two years, while at least 10 percent of students surveyed had been in an ELL for four years or more. This was problematic given that the longer students remained in an ELL program, the less likely they were to understand grade level and high school graduation requirements. It was also found that immigrant parents were more likely to understand their children's grade level and graduation requirements the longer they resided in the United States. Parents and students also provided feedback on various models of ELL instruction and were concerned with programs that required students to miss significant portions of core curriculum, particularly science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses. When asked about college planning, many parents and students indicated they were not equipped with adequate information to make informed decisions about post high school opportunities and sometimes were steered away from traditional four-year college pathways. For some, immigration status was a significant hindrance to college entry, particularly when seeking financial aid.

*Early Warning Indicators:* Two Road Map early warning indicators – discipline and course failure combined with attendance – were assessed for their relevance with ELL populations. Some immigrant students identified unfair and disproportionate discipline measures as contributing to their disengagement from school. Many parents also felt their children were sometimes falsely accused and more harshly disciplined than their non-immigrant peers; however, cultural differences and parents' reverence for the school system were barriers to intervening. Both students and parents indicated a lack of follow-up from schools regarding absences or drop-outs. Although a few students pointed to the pressure to assimilate as contributing to their disengagement from school, most immigrant students overall displayed a great deal of resilience and determination around their educational trajectory.

## **Recommendations**

*State Policies:* Provide funding and training for professional and effective education interpreters to minimize barriers for limited English proficient populations; Adopt the 2012 Quality Education Council's (QEC) recommendations and accountability system for ELL programs to increase funding and achievement, improve instruction, increase bilingual or dual language models, and decrease class sizes; Expand state-based financial aid opportunities to undocumented students.

*District Policies:* Increase access to translation and interpretation services; Expand family support services and staff capacity; Expand opportunities for credit retrieval, STEM coursework, and college readiness; Hire more bilingual and bicultural staff and ELL-endorsed teachers; Provide ongoing cultural competency trainings; Increase access to core curriculum for ELL students; Closely monitor ELL students when early warning indicators are triggered.

*Community Policies:* Expand current effective parent education programs and youth support services.

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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose**

In September 2011, OneAmerica partnered with the Road Map Project to meet the goal of closing the educational achievement gap in South King County through increased integration of English language learner (ELL) student and family needs. To inform the work and direction of the Road Map Project, OneAmerica commissioned this project documenting the educational experiences of ELL students and parents in South King County.

### **Background**

Launched by The Community Center for Education Results in 2010, the Road Map Project is a direct response to the growing opportunity gap in South King County. Using a collective action approach, the Road Map Project's civic initiative is aimed at driving major improvements in education results – cradle to college and career – in the low-income communities of South King County. The commitment is to double the number of students in the region who are on track to graduate from college or earn a career credential by 2020.

In December 2011, the Road Map Project issued a baseline report outlining the state of education in the seven Road Map school districts: Auburn, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Renton, (South) Seattle, and Tukwila. The report revealed the Road Map region is home to almost 20,000 ELL students who speak more than 160 different languages and comprise 17 percent of the region's students. Many of these ELL students are immigrants and refugees, and some are also first-generation Americans. The majority of King County's ELL students (69%) reside in South King County. The report also indicated that across districts, the number of ELLs is highest in kindergarten (37%) and then slowly declines with each grade level. Though most ELL students reach English language proficiency in three to five years, those who enter high school with low levels of English proficiency experience much greater challenges (Community Center for Education Results, 2011).

While the baseline report was helpful in determining demographic information and identifying the initial challenges facing ELLs, it also uncovered a strong need for more in-depth knowledge about the population and their experiences.

As one of the largest immigrant advocacy organizations in Washington State, OneAmerica has worked for the past 11 years to build power in immigrant communities. In addition to demonstrated success in community organizing and policy advocacy, OneAmerica also has a strong background in research and strategy development. In response to OneAmerica's membership base identifying education as a major concern, the organization made education policy improvements a top priority by expanding on the efforts of the Road Map Project. OneAmerica's work with the Road Map specifically focuses on increasing the success of ELLs in South King County through a number of avenues, including staffing the Road Map Project's ELL work group, gathering district baseline information, refining ELL indicators, advocating for changes in state ELL policies, convening ELL teachers, and engaging ELL youth and families.

## Goals and Methods

To meet the goals of the Road Map Project, OneAmerica conducted community-based research by gathering firsthand accounts of 552 parents and students’ interactions with ELL programs in South King County. This was done to identify major themes that defined their experiences and utilize this information to influence the strategies and direction of the Road Map Project.

The participants in this study represented diverse immigrant communities within each of the seven school districts in the Road Map region. Participants were recruited and selected through OneAmerica’s relationships in immigrant communities, including OneAmerica’s community base groups, youth groups, churches, community organizations, schools, food banks, cultural centers, and low-income housing complexes. All participation was voluntary and compensation was not provided.

To gather in-depth qualitative information while simultaneously gaining a broad understanding of immigrant experiences in the educational system, three methods were chosen for data collection.

*Focus Groups:* The focus group format was utilized to foster openness and collaborative feedback as well as to collect qualitative data regarding immigrant experiences in education. Four parent focus groups and four student focus groups were convened in various areas throughout South King County (see Figure 1 below). A total of 135 parents and 81 students participated in focus group discussions, which were conducted in English, Spanish, and Tigrinya as noted below. These languages were chosen based on the demographics of the group as well as the language capacity of the focus group facilitators. OneAmerica staff convened and facilitated the focus groups and were trained and provided with a focus group protocol to ensure consistent data collection (see Appendix A). An additional staff member was also present in each focus group discussion to record detailed notes and emerging themes around participants’ experiences.

**Figure 1 – Overview of Focus Group Participants**

Parent Focus Groups				Student Focus Groups			
Date	Language	Location	# of People	Date	Language	Location	# of People
12/3/11	English/Spanish	Kent	73	12/14/11	English/Spanish	S. Seattle	27
12/8/11	English/Spanish	Renton	9	1/26/12	English/Spanish	Burien	21
12/11/11	Tigrinya	S. Seattle	33	1/31/12	English/Spanish	Burien	13
5/14/12	English/Spanish	Auburn	20	4/28/12	English	Tukwila	20

*Interviews:* In order to collect in-depth qualitative data from participants not available to attend focus group discussions, open-ended interviews were conducted to gather information from both students and parents regarding their educational experiences. Interviews were conducted by OneAmerica staff and interns in the Policy and Organizing Departments who had experience working with immigrant populations and are bilingual. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, and Tigrinya using an interview schedule (see Appendix B). Detailed, handwritten notes were recorded by the interviewer based on participants’ responses. Interviews were administered primarily in person, though some were also conducted over the phone.



*Surveys:* Student and parent surveys (see Appendices C and D) were utilized to gain a broad baseline understanding of ELL experiences and collect concrete data to complement the open-ended focus group and interview formats. Surveys were either self-administered or conducted by a staff interviewer based on the comfort level, literacy, and language proficiency of the participant. While most surveys were administered in person, some were conducted over the phone. Surveys were translated into Spanish and Russian to increase accessibility. A total of 447 participants completed surveys, including many interviewees and focus group participants.

The findings of this report are organized around four themes: school communication, family and student engagement, academic advancement, and early warning indicators. The final section provides recommendations for change at the state, district and community levels based on participant input and findings. All tables, charts, graphs, and quotations by parents are found in red while student information is indicated in blue. Any information combining parent and student responses are in purple.

## Participant Overview

OneAmerica collected experiences from a total of 552 participants – 318 parents and 234 students – with roughly 75 participants in each of the targeted school districts. All participants were either immigrants or first generation Americans who had directly interacted with an ELL program in South King County. Participant numbers by school district are indicated in Figure 2 (below).

**Figure 2 - Participants by School District**

<b>School District</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Total Participants</b>
<i>Auburn</i>	43	17	<b>60</b>
<i>Federal Way</i>	67	8	<b>75</b>
<i>Highline</i>	37	38	<b>75</b>
<i>Kent</i>	64	23	<b>87</b>
<i>Renton</i>	34	22	<b>56</b>
<i>South Seattle</i>	58	41	<b>99</b>
<i>Tukwila</i>	15	85	<b>100</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>552</b>

To illustrate the participants' diversity, Figure 3 (next page) marks a map with each of the 41 reported countries of origin of both students and parents.

**Figure 3 - Countries of Birth**



Figure 4 (below) identifies the five most prevalent countries of birth among all participants. For parents, the most prevalent country of birth was Mexico (72%) while for students it was the United States (31%).

**Figure 4 - Top Five Countries of Birth**

<b>Country of Birth</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Total Participants</b>
<i>Mexico</i>	72%	9%	<b>45%</b>
<i>United States</i>	1%	31%	<b>14%</b>
<i>Eritrea</i>	5%	6%	<b>5%</b>
<i>Nepal</i>	0%	13%	<b>5%</b>
<i>Somalia</i>	3%	5%	<b>4%</b>

Participants spoke 44 various languages. Almost all participants reported a language other than English as the primary language spoken in the home. English was the primary or only language spoken by a very small minority (1% of parents and 3% of students). An additional 8 percent of parents and 19 percent of students reported speaking English as the second language in their home in addition to their native language. Figure 5 (next page) captures the top five primary languages spoken by participants.

**Figure 5 – Top Five Languages Spoken at Home**

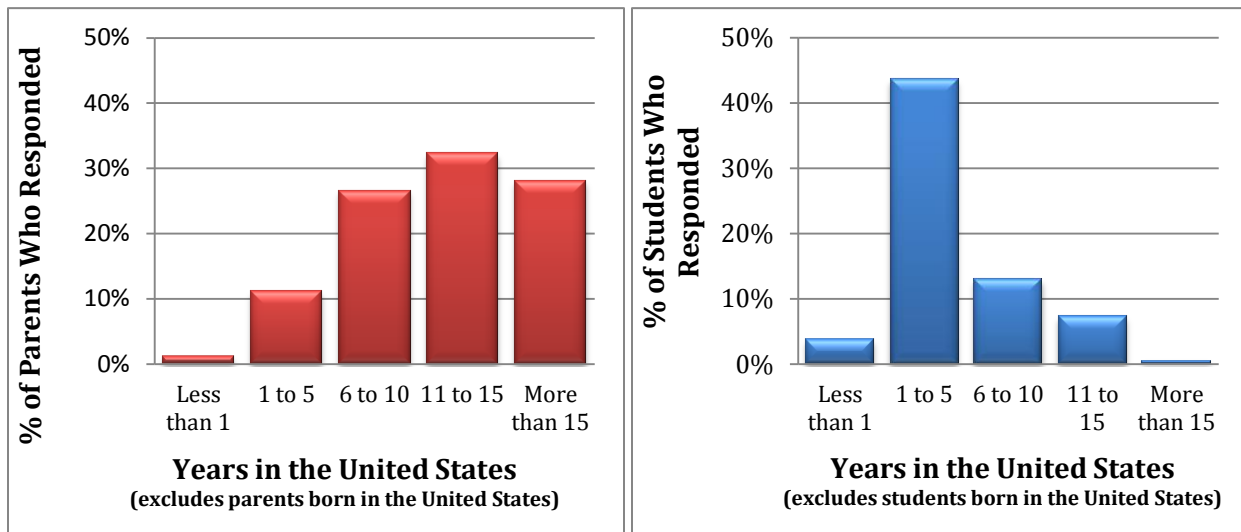
Home Language	Parents	Students	Total Participants
<i>Spanish</i>	80%	35%	<b>60%</b>
<i>Tigrinya</i>	5%	10%	<b>7%</b>
<i>Nepali</i>	0%	13%	<b>6%</b>
<i>Somali</i>	3%	6%	<b>5%</b>
<i>Arabic</i>	1%	4%	<b>2%</b>

The remaining languages reported by participants are listed in order of frequency as follows: Amharic, Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Ukrainian, Tagalog, Burmese, French, Turkish, Chin, Bengali, Korean, Mongolian, Zapotec, Karen, Oromo, Albanian, Cambodian, Cantonese, Creole, Dari, Dzongkha, Falam, Fulani, Hakha-Chin, Hindi, Indonesian, Khmer, Kiswahili, Kissi, Lao, Malayalam, Persian, Portuguese, Tedim, Thai, Wolof, and Zo.

According to the Road Map Project’s baseline report, the top five primary languages spoken in the Road Map Region are Spanish (41%), Vietnamese (11%), Somali (7%), Ukrainian (5%), and Russian (4%) with a total of 167 languages spoken in the region. Thus, the participant sample was not representative of the region with respect to primary languages other than Spanish and Somali.

The number of years participants resided in the United States ranged from less than one year to more than 15 years. On average, foreign-born parent participants lived in the United States for 13 years while foreign-born student participants had been in the United States for an average of 5 years (see Figure 6, below).

**Figure 6 - Length of Time in the United States**



## **Confidentiality**

OneAmerica informed participants that their answers would be kept anonymous and names or other revealing information would not be attached to comments or responses. Responses in this report have been altered as necessary to protect the identity of participants.

## **Limitations**

The selection of participants for this study was based on OneAmerica's relationships with immigrant communities as well as individuals' availability and willingness to participate. This partially explains why participants' demographics did not fully align with statistics of the Road Map Region. Additionally, this accounts for the disproportionate number of students and parents interviewed in some districts. Due to the lack of control around selection criteria, it is possible that selection bias skewed the data.

Although steps were taken to increase accessibility, some participants were not able to understand or accurately answer all questions due to limited English proficiency and literacy.

## **Disclaimer**

Participant comments and statements in this report represent the knowledge and opinions of the participants. Statements about school and district practices or policies were not checked for accuracy.

## Findings

### School Communication

Given that a language other than English was the primary language for almost all participants, overcoming language barriers in school communication was identified as an essential component of ELL success and integration. Considering this, participants were asked a variety of questions surrounding how schools communicate with them, including how they receive information from schools as well as their experiences with access to interpretation and translation services.

*"English is power in this country."*

- Parent Interview

#### Summary

- Only roughly half (55%) of parents received at least one type of translated written materials from schools; these parents also indicated that schools overestimated literacy in their native languages.
- Schools most often communicated with parents through phone calls and mailed letters. Most immigrant parents were better able to understand their child's academic experiences when meeting in person.
- Parents identified the lack of access to interpreters as a major barrier to communication and often had to rely on their children, family members, or friends to interpret for them. Spanish-speaking participants commonly reported trouble with access to interpretation and translation.
- 72% of students interpreted for their parents as well as other students and families. U.S. born students and those who had been in the United States between 1-5 years interpreted for their families most often.

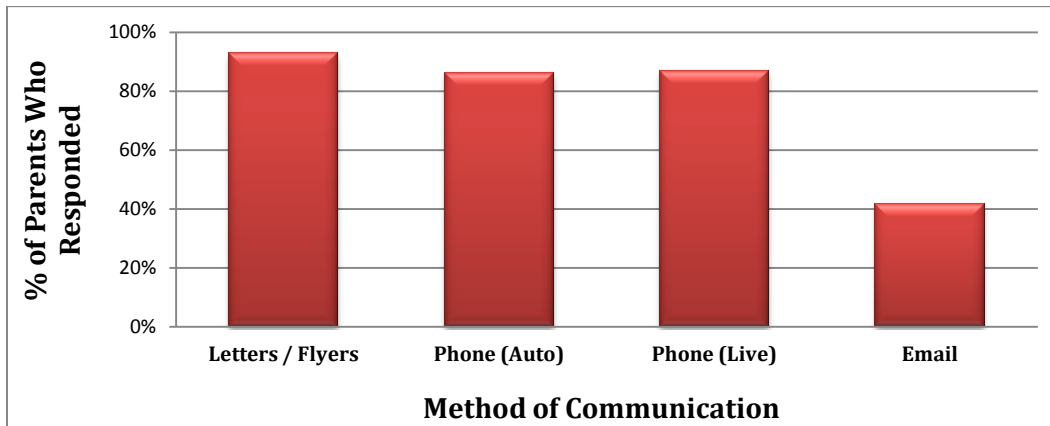
#### Information and Materials

Parents were surveyed about how they receive information or materials about their students' academic progress from the school. Parents reported schools typically use phone calls, both personal and automated, and letters to communicate with them (see Figure 7, next page). Many parents expressed frustration with these types of correspondences as they are not accustomed to communicating about their child through letters or phone calls and prefer more personalized contact to facilitate better understanding of both the language and context of their child's academic experiences.

*"It is hard sometimes to understand the information sent home from school, but my wife knows a little more English. We mostly communicate with the front office, and hardly ever see the teacher. At the moment the kids are good. But if problems come up, who knows, it could be hard."*

- Parent Interview

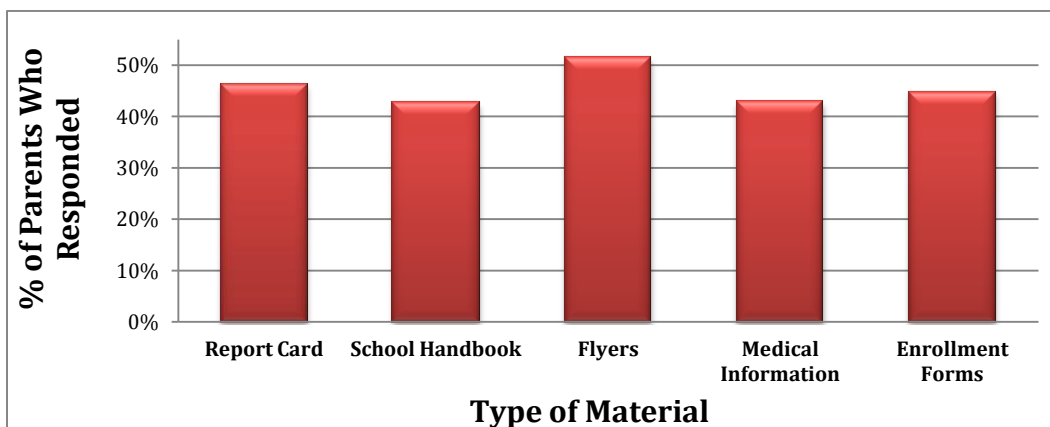
**Figure 7 - How Schools Communicate With Parents**



While only 13 percent of parents reported receiving communication via email, in focus group discussions parents specifically voiced frustration with email correspondence and online grading systems due to their low technological literacy. Parents reported communication via technology left them with insufficient information regarding their children’s progress and it was viewed as a barrier to educational involvement. This was due to parents’ lack of access to computers and the Internet as well unfamiliarity around how to utilize technology to access their child’s academic records.

Participants were also asked which written materials they received translated into their primary language. At most, 55 percent of participants reported receiving any translated information. Of all the items parents were surveyed about, flyers were most commonly translated (see Figure 8, below).

**Figure 8 - Materials Received by Parents in Their Primary Language**



*“My child goes to a school where 75% of the kids are Latino and still materials are not in Spanish and there are no interpreters or Spanish speaking staff that I am aware of.”*  
 - Parent Focus Group

Surprisingly, although 41 percent of ELL students in South King County are Spanish speakers, Spanish-speaking parents often reported problems with accessing translated materials – everything was ‘English only.’ Somali participants also

indicated limited access to materials translated in Somali, the third most common language among ELLs in South King County. Parent focus groups revealed that even when materials were translated, schools overestimated parents' literacy in their native languages, making written correspondence a generally ineffective way to communicate with immigrant parents.

Many students shared they were responsible for informing the school of their parents' need to have forms and other materials translated in their native language in order to have these documents provided to their families. Students expressed placing this burden on them limited their parents' accessibility as the students often refrained from making these requests.

### Language Access

When asked about verbal communication with school staff, many parent participants expressed they often had to rely on their children, family members, or friends to interpret for them at school conferences or other official meetings because a professional interpreter is not provided or made available. Some parents expressed that while they had more access to interpreters when their children were in preschool programs, this access slowly declined as their children progressed in the school system. Parents also reported frustration with the rigidity around who could serve as an interpreter. Specifically, many parents indicated not being able to utilize instructional assistants (IAs) or paraeducators as interpreters even if they spoke the same language of origin.

*"I can only talk to the teachers when there is an interpreter available. There are other people at the school who speak Spanish, but they are teachers' aides and are not allowed to interpret."*  
- Parent Focus Group

In the absence of accessible interpreters and translated informational materials, many students reported serving in intermediary roles across language barriers. 72 percent of student participants reported interpreting for their parents at some point during parent-teacher meetings and other school events. 31 percent of these students interpreted for their Spanish-speaking parents. The five most frequent languages that students interpreted are captured in Figure 9 (below).

**Figure 9 – Top Five Languages Interpreted by Students**

<b>Primary Language</b>	<b>Students Who Interpret</b>
<i>Spanish</i>	31%
<i>Nepali</i>	15%
<i>Tigrinya</i>	11%
<i>Somali</i>	7%
<i>Arabic</i>	5%

In addition to being relied on for interpretation with parents, some students also reported being called on to interpret between the schools and other students or parents. For some, this additional role was a challenge in their pursuit of academic success, particularly when interpretation requests resulted in missed class.

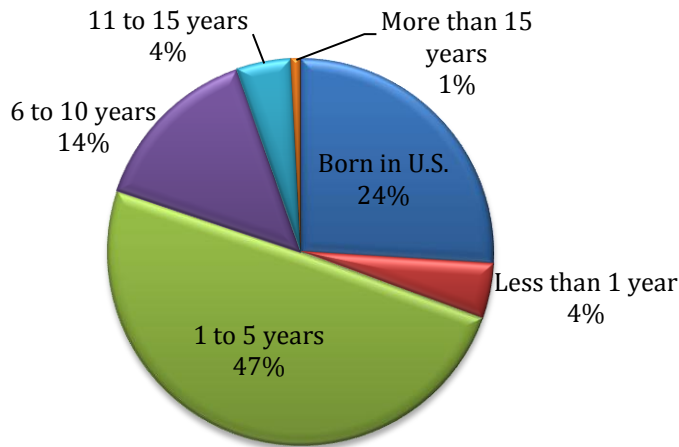
Utilizing children as interpreters created complicated family dynamics by making the child the powerbroker. Information was sometimes inaccurately or even purposefully misinterpreted, thus making it difficult for parents to be well-informed about their children’s education. In focus group discussions, some high school students reported their parents did not attend school meetings due to limited English proficiency, but encouraged their children to go in their place. Many parents stated they were not able to ‘monitor their children closely’ and be as involved as they would have liked to be due to the language barrier.

*“Me and my friend were pulled out of class to translate in Spanish for another student so we fell behind in our work.”*

- Student Focus Group

When considering which students most often served as interpreters for their parents, the data indicated students born in the United States and those who had been in the country between 1-5 years had the highest frequency of interpretation (see Figure 10, below).

**Figure 10 - Student Interpreters and Length of Time in the United States**



Students who had been in the United States less than a year or more than 6 years typically did not interpret for their parents as often. Seemingly, this is because those students who had been in the United States less than a year were also limited in their English proficiency while those who had resided in the U.S. more than 6 years were more likely to have parents who spoke English and, therefore, interpretation was not a high need.



## Family and Student Engagement

According to the Road Map Baseline Report (2011), the strong participation and engagement of a parent or guardian in a child's education is critical for student success. To further understand barriers to engagement for ELL families, participants were asked about their contact with schools, comfort level with school staff, and the school's level of cultural competency.

### Summary

- Parents reported a desire to become more engaged and informed about their children's academics; however, traditional models of parent engagement, like the PTA, were not highly utilized.
- Parents expressed frustration with the limited availability of school staff and favored communicating with teachers and interpreters when encountering a school-related problem.
- A majority of students (80%) expressed high comfort levels with teachers, yet a few students provided accounts of feeling ignored by teachers due to their limited English proficiency.
- Both parents and students indicated a need for increased cultural competence among school staff, in school environments, and in standardized testing. They identified the lack of cultural competence as the major barrier to families and students engaging with the school.

*"We need to be active as parents to make sure our kids get a good education, and support our teachers. We know how to educate our children but we are never asked."*

- Parent interview

### Parent Contact with Schools

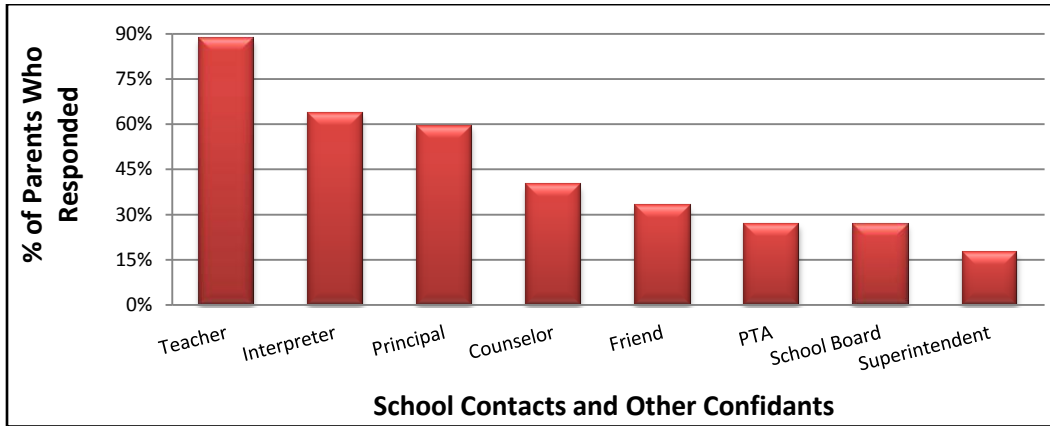
When asked about engagement with schools, parents indicated wanting more opportunities and access to participate in their children's education. Many parents felt they possess a great deal of strength and knowledge that can be utilized to support their child's education, but are often not asked to do so.

The numerous barriers immigrant parents faced when interacting with school staff and representatives clearly contributed to the levels of parent engagement. Parents were surveyed about their comfort levels with various school staff and representatives. Overall, survey results indicated that when initiating contact with school personnel regarding problems or concerns about their child's education, parents communicated most with teachers, interpreters, and principals (see Figure 11, next page).

*"Parents have to fight for their children. It is harder to fight when your child is in their first year at school and when you do not know English."*

- Parent Focus Group

**Figure 11 - Who Parents Communicate With Regarding Their Children**



Even with limited access to interpreters, many parents preferred consulting with an interpreter as opposed to other school staff. For immigrants, traditional models of parent engagement, like parent teacher associations (PTAs), were not highly utilized or available due to language barriers or lack of cultural relevance. One Somali parent reported he does not feel like he is a part of the PTA because he, “Never sees any Somali faces.”

Though most parents surveyed (70%) responded regarding their comfort level with teachers, interpreters, and principals, many parents failed to respond regarding their comfort level with counselors, the PTA, school boards, or superintendents. Given that immigrant parents had the most contact with teachers and interpreters, this explains the high rate of response in these categories compared to other school officials with whom parents had limited familiarity.

Many parents identified time constraints and limited availability of school staff as another barrier to communicating with the school about their children’s education. Parents with young children reported attending parent-teacher conferences to get information about their children, but aside from this, did not meet with teachers. Both language access as well as availability of the appropriate staff members contributed to this lack of school accessibility. In focus group discussions, some parents expressed that even when they did attend meetings or conferences, they felt they did not have a voice or were “invisible,” which caused them to disengage from further meetings. Parents suggested having regular set times to meet with teachers and IA’s to gain more understanding about their children’s progress in the classroom as well as an orientation at the beginning of the year so they “can understand the educational system and how schools function.” They also suggested having a liaison in each school who could be a resource for parents to “advocate for issues, tell them who to talk to, where to get help and speak up within the school instead of waiting for the school staff to take it on and figure it out.”

*“The counselors are really busy, even though there’s a new one now. They aren’t reliable, it’s hard to get in to see them and they often only speak English.”*

- Parent Interview

*“The teachers and staff end up overpowering families so we can’t speak up and then what happens is outside of our control.”*

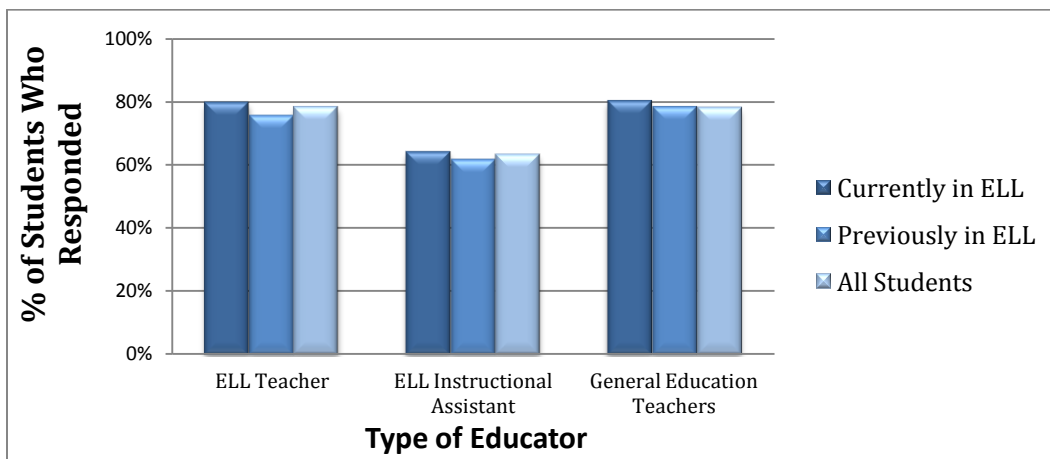
- Parent Focus Group

**Student Comfort Level with School Staff and Faculty**

In order to gain insight into how ELL students experienced their classrooms, information was gathered regarding students’ comfort level with school staff. Survey results indicated most students (about 80%) felt comfortable with both their ELL teachers and general education teachers. However, their comfort level with ELL instructional assistants was slightly lower (see Figure 12, below). When students were asked what they liked about their ELL program, they frequently named their teachers while identifying ways their teachers helped them to understand the curriculum and learn English.

*“My teacher helps me understand the tests and homework better. She will help me during lunch whenever I miss out on something too.”*  
 - Student Interview

**Figure 12 - Students' Comfort Level with Teachers**



Although a majority of student participants reported positive experiences with their teachers, a few students expressed the opposite. One ELL student who was placed in a mainstream classroom indicated that he is ‘lost in his classes’ and often feels ignored by the teacher due his lack of English proficiency. Another student reported that her counselor attempted to intervene when she was failing a class. However, her teacher did not follow up or offer help or alternatives to failing the class. The student reported feeling afraid to talk to the teacher. Several other students disclosed they felt schools and teachers do not put as much energy into helping them get out of ELL classes as they do getting them in.

*“The teacher doesn’t pay attention to me because I don’t speak English, and so I don’t know who to go to when there is a problem in school.”*  
 - Student Interview

**Cultural Competency**

Increased cultural competency was identified as an essential factor towards improving educational outcomes for immigrant students and closing the achievement gap (Washington State Achievement Gap Studies, 2008). Cultural competency is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals that enable them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross et al., 1989). Student and parent participants overwhelmingly reported the lack of cultural competency among school

*“I don’t like visiting the school. I don’t feel a connection. We are new to this country. Schools need to do a better job reaching out and saying this is your school.”*  
 -Parent Focus Group

staff, in school environments, and in standardized testing as a major concern and barrier to their engagement with schools.

Many parents indicated the lack of cross-cultural understanding by school staff contributed to the challenges they encountered when attempting to access the education system. Some parents reported feeling discriminated against or treated differently when interacting with staff. Parents, particularly mothers with U.S. born spouses, said their partners were treated with more respect when interacting with the schools than they were. One mother explained she usually sends her American husband to the school for conferences or issues regarding their child because he receives better responses than she does and they treat her like she is “less smart.”

*“I always feel out of place and like [the teachers/parents] don’t accept me like other Americans.”*

- Parent Interview

Many parents felt the lack of cultural competency among staff directly impacted their children’s schooling. In interviews, some parents revealed their children were only placed in ELL because school staff assumed they were not English proficient, particularly when parents indicated more than one language is spoken in the home. One student reported exiting the ELL program in 5th grade but, upon entering middle school, school staff assumed he needed ELL because he spoke a second language and was placed back in the program unnecessarily. One parent recalled a field trip where her child did not understand a concept and the teacher attempted to explain it to him in broken, poor Spanish instead of English. The parent felt the teacher’s actions made her son seem incompetent even though English was not a barrier. Parents expressed the importance for schools and staff to understand that being bilingual does not equate with limited English proficiency and to recognize the differences between the two.

*“My daughter is not in ELL, but they tried to put her in it because her last name is Hispanic. Our family speaks English but they call and send info in Spanish.”*

- Parent Interview

Parents identified the lack of diversity among school staff as another pertinent cultural competency issue. Latino and Somali parents in particular were frustrated with the lack of bilingual or bicultural teachers representing the ethnicities of their children. Parents reported that teachers often lack understanding of their children’s life experiences or cultural backgrounds because the teachers are not immigrants themselves and do not take the time to educate themselves about their students’ histories. Parents often said, “Teachers don’t understand our kids.”

*“It’s because schools are typically all about white culture. [The staff] might do some cultural training or read about a culture, but do they really get it? They need someone in there who actually gets it.”*

- Parent Focus Group

In addition to staff capacity, students and parents expressed a need for increased cultural competency in the school environment. Many parents reported they did not feel comfortable on school grounds and also did not feel represented in the school environment. Some students critiqued the school system and environment as being too rigid and not fitting with their cultural norms and values, often making them feel like they had to assimilate in order to succeed. In addition, some parents reported their children losing their native language due to pressure to only speak English in school. Parents attributed rifts between them and their children to this lack of language retention.

Beyond cultural competency, both parents and students provided accounts of discrimination which contributed to unwelcoming and sometimes even hostile environments. Many Somali parents expressed their children’s culture is not understood and they are often teased without intervention from staff. Students

shared that they are sometimes ridiculed by other American students that “point fingers and say they’re dumb because they don’t speak English well.”

In addition to cultural differences, participants often attributed the negative environments they encountered to racial discrimination. In focus group discussions, many parents expressed they feel children of color are treated differently and are often even disciplined more harshly compared to white students. Along the lines of racial discrimination, many parents alluded to an uneven power dynamic within the school system that sometimes left parents feeling disempowered or invisible. One parent expressed that she has to be careful about what she says because she is an outsider, the school, “can make her disappear.”

*“My daughter was in a veil and another kid called her a terrorist and the teacher did not do anything.”*

- Parent Focus Group

Though parents appreciated when schools attempted to make the environment more inclusive and embracing of diversity through multicultural events, they often felt these celebrations did not capture the nuances of various cultures. One parent shared that her children were asked to perform a cultural dance, but the school dictated the type of dance – one that was stereotypical of their culture and not authentic to their traditions.

Many parent and student participants also reported the standardized tests used by schools as being culturally biased and not accurately reflecting students’ knowledge or comprehension. Some students felt they failed the Washington English Language Proficiency Assessment (WELPA) and were placed in ELL simply due to a lack of familiarity with American cultural phrases rather than limited English proficiency. Many of these students reported losing points on details such as the different uses of ‘which,’ highlighting that tests often failed to accurately measure English proficiency and instead assessed grammar and language technicalities.

Participants were also concerned ELL students were sometimes wrongly classified as special needs due to cultural differences and were mistakenly placed in special education classes. One parent shared she felt pressure to get a psychological evaluation for her child even though she was confident he just needed to learn English; school staff failed to understand or believe her. Parents asserted a need to reform these tests as well as train staff to not over test students or wrongly classify them as special needs due to cultural differences or limited English.

## Academic Advancement

Academic indicators are one of the central focuses of the Road Map Project and have been utilized as a strategy for closing the achievement gap for low-income populations. The current limited understanding of indicators specific to ELL students makes it difficult to address the unique set of issues surrounding ELLs' academic trajectories. To gain a more in-depth understanding of indicators that reflect ELL student success, participants were asked about their academic experiences including the length of time in an ELL program, ELL program structure, access to core curriculum, pathways to graduation, and college access.

*"The majority of the students are intelligent enough, but they don't go (to college) because they lack support or think they aren't smart enough. Two of my daughters were told 'you're not prepared,' but they went."*

- Parent Interview

### Summary

- 73 percent of U.S. born students were placed in an ELL program at some point during their schooling. Roughly half of the students (47%) currently in an ELL program had been in the program for more than two years. At least 10 percent of those currently in ELL failed to exit after four years.
- The longer students remained in ELL programs, the less they understood grade level and high school graduation requirements. Immigrant parents' knowledge of grade level and graduation requirements increased the longer they resided in the United States. Still, only half of parent participants were familiar with these requirements.
- Parents and students were concerned with ELL program models that required students to miss significant portions of core curriculum, particularly science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses.
- Parents and students indicated they were not equipped with adequate information to make informed decisions about post-high school opportunities and faced multiple barriers to higher education including immigration status. Students reported they were often steered away from traditional four-year college pathways.

### Length of Time in ELL Program

Interviews and focus group data indicated that the amount of time students spent in an ELL classroom was of concern and impacted students' potential for academic success. For those students who had exited an ELL program (former ELLs), only 6 percent reported exiting in less than a year, 19 percent were in ELL for at least 2 years, and 43 percent were unsure of how long it took them to exit the program (see Figure 13, next page). Among the students interviewed who were currently in an ELL program, 47 percent had been in the program for more than 2 years, while another 41 percent reported being in their second year of the program.

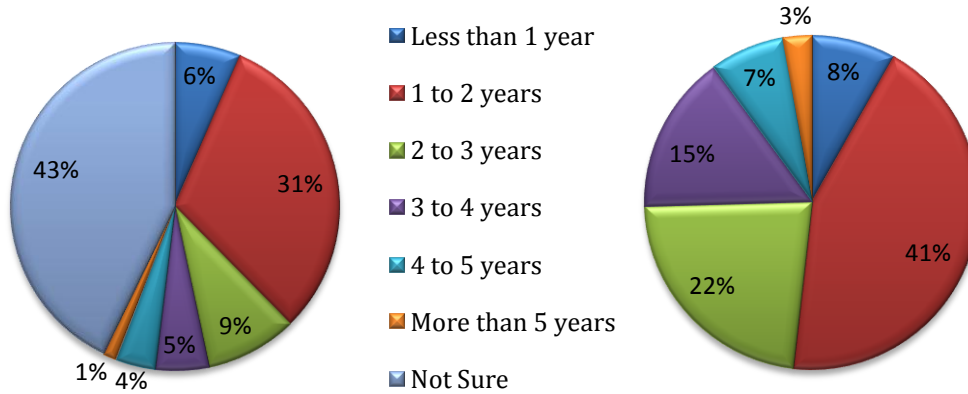
*"In my response I said that my children were previously in ELL, but now that I ask them I am told that it's been two years and they are still in the program."*

- Parent Focus Group

**Figure 13 - Reported Length of Time in ELL Programs**

**Former ELL Students**

**Current ELL Students**



According to the data, of the 62 U.S. born student participants surveyed, the majority (73%) were placed in an ELL program at some point during their schooling. Typically, this occurred during their early years in the education system. Students were classified as ELL either based on legitimate limited English proficiency, or misperceptions of English fluency potentially based on being bilingual (see the section on cultural competency, pages 14-15). Support for the latter comes from student accounts of being placed in an ELL classroom for only a matter of weeks before being pulled out to attend mainstream classes. One U.S. born student reported he was only in ELL for two weeks when he was in the second grade, reflecting the likelihood that he was mistakenly classified as ELL. Parents also often stated they believed their children were placed in ELL programs because of the ethnic origins of their last name or because the language of origin was spoken at home and school staff assumed English skills were compromised as a result.

**ELL Program Structures**

To gain insight into student and parent experiences with various models of ELL instruction, questions surrounding ELL classroom and curriculum structure were asked.

Washington State’s Transitional Bilingual Instruction Program (TBIP) aims to educate ELLs in a program that provides instruction in both English and the student’s primary language. When it is not possible to provide instruction in the student’s primary language, the law requires the use of an alternative system of instruction to develop students’ English skills (Deussen & Greenberg-Motamedi, 2008). The 2011 Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) report to the Legislature indicated only 14 percent of Washington State’s ELL students received bilingual language instruction in the 2010-11 school year. The remaining

*“I think [the ELL program] is good because my daughter says she doesn’t understand a lot of the words [in her regular classes], but it concerns me when she goes to ELL she misses more classes and falls behind. In reality, it hurts me she doesn’t see and learn what everyone else does.”*

- Parent Interview

majority of ELL students were educated using English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs with instruction provided only in English.

According to the OSPI report, Sheltered Instruction (SI), also known as content-based ESL, was the most widely-used ELL teaching approach in Washington State, particularly in middle and high schools. The model most often consisted of classes made up exclusively of ELL students and academic subjects, such as social studies and science, are taught using English as the primary language of instruction.

*“Current generations are losing their native language. They need to learn their mother tongue as well as English.”*

- Parent Interview

Several students voiced frustration with this SI model of ELL instruction and indicated it makes them feel isolated from other students. One student reported being in an ELL class made her feel like she is “not normal like other kids.” Parents also expressed concerns around ELL classes singling out their children or making them feel bad because they had to be removed from their regular classes.

*“The kids are learning the same thing, the same spelling and vocabulary words, they aren’t challenged or encouraged to master their English skills or move into other classrooms.”*

- Parent Interview

Other students and parents preferred this SI model of instruction and reported it helped them develop language at a faster rate and they felt more comfortable practicing English. Still, these students and parents reported missing important subjects or content area classes and often expressed a need for more emphasis on native language retention. A few students and parents indicated that their children were placed in dual language programs and generally provided very positive feedback on these programs.

Many participants expressed concern around the nature of the ELL curriculum, stating that students with quite varying levels of English proficiency, from beginning to advanced, were placed in the same class. This often resulted in an environment and curriculum below students’ grade level, hindering their academic advancement, or the exact opposite, an environment too advanced with curriculum students struggled to understand.

Parents and students also often complained their classes were overcrowded and lacked individualized attention to help them become English proficient. They reported high teacher-to-student ratios and not enough instructional assistants to help all the students in the class. A parent who served as a volunteer was outraged that his child’s class had 27 students in it with only one teacher. He explained many of the immigrant students struggled with pronunciation, spelling, and reading as well as with grammar and writing. Due to the lack of individualized attention he witnessed students, “losing interest, falling through the cracks, barely getting by, and still being pushed into the next grade.”

*“When I was in it (ELL), it was a very small room. They took me out in 4<sup>th</sup> grade because there was no more room and if I would’ve stayed it would’ve been too cramped.”*

- Student Focus Group

### **Access to Core Curriculum**

Many parents expressed concern around their students’ academics and lack of access to core curriculum as a result of being placed in an ELL program. Parents perceived the curriculum their children were exposed to as remaining the same each year, which prevented students from progressing academically. Parents also



stated their children missed out on ‘regular’ classes, such as science and math, to attend ELL class.

For high school graduates in Washington State, proficiency in the STEM fields is a crucial component of college and career readiness (Community Center for Education Results, 2011). Parents and students voiced concerns that enrollment in ELL programs, particularly SI programs, limited ELL students’ ability to succeed in STEM courses. Because ELL curriculum focused on English language reading, writing, and grammar, ELL students often missed traditional science classes for English instruction. One parent who noticed a drop in her 5th grade child’s science grade stated, “When he goes into ELL he’s not learning anything substantial.”

*“I need better English (skills), but I also need more (of a) regular English, history, and science foundation.”*

-Student Interview

Students entering ELL programs in middle and high school reported even when they did have access to STEM courses, their limited English proficiency was a barrier to understanding and progressing in these classes. Many parents expressed that although their students struggled with English comprehension, they were often quite advanced in math and science in their native countries; yet schools failed to recognize this and placed ELL students in introductory STEM classes.

*“Math is really hard for me. I think mainly because of the English and when I have to switch my language to Spanish.”*

- Student Interview

### **Pathway to Graduation**

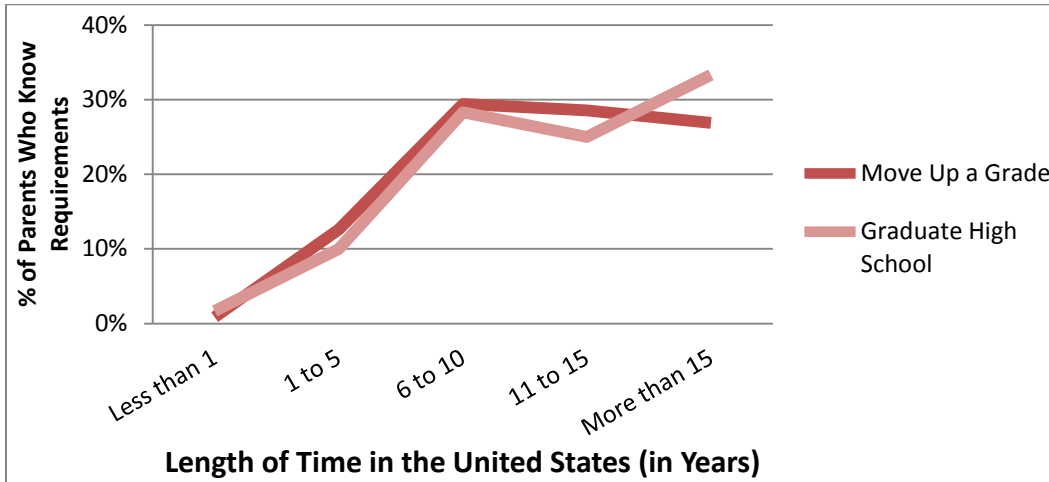
Understanding the school system and credit requirements were critical to students’ academic progress. Parent and student participants were surveyed about their knowledge of grade level and graduation requirements. Of the parent sample, only half were aware of the courses their children needed to move to the next grade and only 35 percent of parents reported knowing the high school graduation requirements. On the other hand, 69 percent of students were aware of the requirements to move to the next grade while two-thirds of the students reported knowing the high school graduation requirements.

*“Juniors and seniors really get the shaft because the requirements are strict but hard to put together sometimes - it really becomes your responsibility to make sure you’re covering all of your credits.”*

- Student Focus Group

As seen in Figure 14 (next page), for parents, their understanding of grade level and graduation requirements increased the longer they resided in the United States.

**Figure 14 – Parents’ Knowledge of Grade Level and Graduation Requirements Compared to Years in United States**

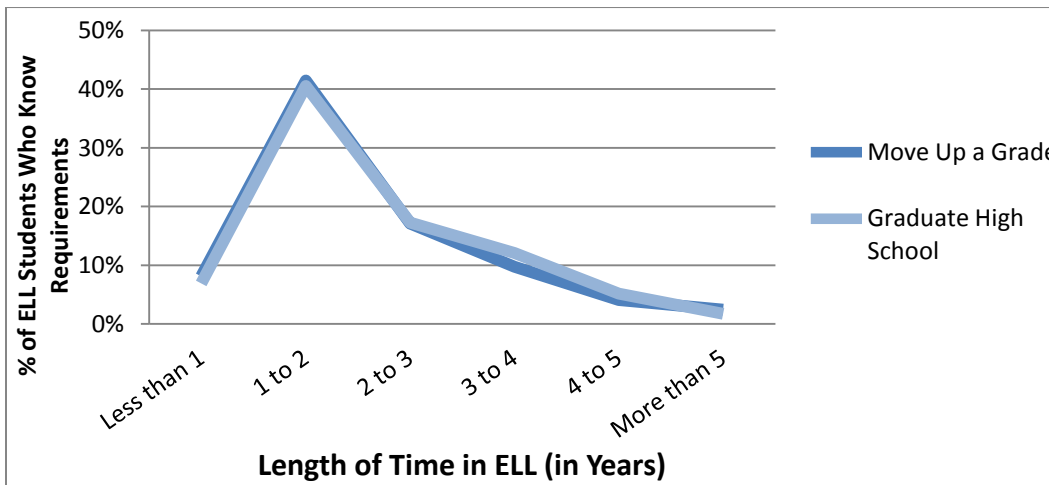


For the student sample, data indicated the more time students spent in an ELL program, the less likely they were to understand grade level and graduation requirements (see Figure 15, below). Students who had been in ELL for less than a year had little knowledge of the requirements, likely a result of being newcomers to the country and the school system. While understanding of these requirements peaked for students who had been in ELL for only one to two years, still over 55 percent of students in this group lacked this knowledge. Results indicated that as students lingered in ELL programs, their knowledge of these requirements decreased, suggesting long-term ELLs were more disengaged from school.

*“The counselor just gives us our classes and doesn't tell us what we need. There are requirements to graduate high school but there are different requirements to get into college and they need to tell us that.”*

- Student Interview

**Figure 15 – ELL Students’ Knowledge of Grade Level and Graduation Requirements Compared to Years in ELL**



## College Access

College access and readiness was a major theme discussed with parents and students. Many students reported they are often not advised about the right path to take after high school and are pushed more towards the Job Corps, community colleges, or vocational schools as opposed to four-year colleges and universities.

When asked about college access, parent participants stated they would like more education and guidance around what areas of study will give their children the best career opportunities and future job placement. Many parents also shared that they were unaware of the process of preparing and getting their children into college.

Many older entering ELL students experienced trouble transferring credits from their country of origin to their current school. As a result, the majority of high school ELL students were not on track to apply for or enter college due to credit deficiency. One student specifically mentioned that it was almost impossible for older ELL students to enter college due to being credit deficient upon entry and the graduation and college admissions credits being misaligned.

An additional area of concern that emerged related to college access was immigration documentation status. Many parents were concerned their children would not have access to college due to their lack of legal permanent resident status. Although undocumented students are legally permitted to apply and be accepted to all public and many private universities in Washington State, access to student financial aid was significantly restricted. This held true for both students who were undocumented as well as students with undocumented parents. Students were required to provide their parents' social security numbers in the federal financial aid application in order to qualify for aid, which presented a significant barrier to college funding if their parents were undocumented. As a result of restricted funding sources, college was not accessible to many immigrant students and they also lacked alternative options to enter the workforce or pursue other post-graduation opportunities.

*"I am undocumented so even though my dream is to go to college, I can't get any financial aid because of my status. I have straight A's and have earned all college level AP credits but I have given up because I feel like there are no opportunities for me."*

- Student Interview

*"You can do everything right to prepare your child for college and then they ask for the social security number when applying for something like the FASFA."*

- Parent Interview

## Early Warning Indicators

The Road Map Project identified key early warning indicators that predict students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. The two major early warning indicators included absences combined with course failure and suspensions or expulsions. The Road Map Baseline Report (2011) revealed that 32 percent of students in the South King County region triggered the first early warning indicator of having 6 or more absences and failing at least one course in 9th grade. Another 12 percent of students triggered the second early warning predictor of having a suspension or expulsion by 9th grade. Early warning indicators specific to ELL populations were further examined in this report.

### Summary

- Some immigrant students identified unfair and disproportionate discipline measures as contributing to their disengagement from school and early drop-out.
- Although many immigrant parents had high reverence for the school system, they also felt their children were sometimes falsely accused and more harshly disciplined than their non-immigrant peers.
- Students and parents indicated a lack of follow-up from schools when students dropped out or had absences.
- Although a few ELL students reported the pressure to assimilate as contributing to their disengagement; overall, most immigrant students displayed a great deal of resilience and determination around their educational outlook and trajectory.

*"We feel very frustrated when our kids are suspended or reprimanded. We don't know what recourse to take and often we find out too late about what is going on."*

- Parent Focus Group

### Discipline

In interviews and focus group discussions, many participants reported immigrants and ELL students were unfairly targeted or disciplined, which triggered the first early warning indicator and resulted in interrupted pathways to high school graduation. Many immigrant parents said teachers, administrators, and other school staff interpreted their children's actions as disruptive, and felt they are disciplined more harshly compared to their non-immigrant peers.

Many students also reported incidents of being falsely accused of stealing or acting out and attributed this to prejudice based on their ethnicity, race, or ELL status. Students, particularly those of East African descent, noted their parents taught them to listen and to obey their teachers and to not challenge the system, resulting in the acceptance of these accusations rather than contesting them.

This experience was confirmed by feedback from parents, indicating they have high reverence for the education system and sometimes over trust the judgment of teachers and administration. One Somali parent shared that due to her trust in the

*"We were walking to school with our hands in our pockets when a principal drove by and saw us. She told us to go to her office. When we went to her office, she told us to empty our backpacks. We didn't have anything but she never apologized."*

- Student Focus Group

teachers and principals, she did not believe her child was being unfairly punished until her son had been disciplined so many times that she went to the school and realized he was being falsely accused. Other parents also indicated they were hesitant to intervene because they felt schools ultimately had student's best interests at heart and they did not feel comfortable challenging the school's authority. They often resisted getting involved with disciplinary measures towards their children because they were both uninformed their child was in trouble and were also unfamiliar with the systems, rules, and policies. This lack of intervention from the parents often left ELL students vulnerable to increased discipline measures.

*"It's important for my son to be accepted or he will drop out. He feels different because of race, culture, and language."*

- Parent Focus Group

### **Attendance and Course Failure**

Attendance was another issue raised by many parents and students. In connection to discipline, ELL parents in focus group discussions expressed they did not understand why their children were suspended or sent home when there was a problem in school. Being absent from school as a result of a suspension often meant their children would fall behind in classes and further disengage from school.

Students and parents also indicated a lack of follow up when students missed school days. One older ELL student shared that after missing many days of school, he dropped out of high school and there was no follow-up on behalf of the school about why he stopped attending. He mentioned that if the school had contacted him or his parents, he may have considered re-entering, but he was not aware if that would have been an option or not. Another parent reported that when her child was skipping classes, the school failed to call her and inform her of his absences so she could more closely monitor his attendance.

*"I didn't graduate. I dropped out two years ago. It was hard for me and I didn't get much help. I asked. There was no help."*

- Student Interview

In some cases, lack of attendance or drop-out was attributed to students not feeling accepted or represented in their school settings. Students shared that sometimes they felt in order to be academically successful, they had to assimilate and reject parts of their immigrant identity, causing them to disengage from school.

It is important to note that although some students triggered early warning signals, most ELL students displayed a great deal of resilience and determination about their education, even if they had disengaged from school in the past. A former ELL student expressed that although he had thought about dropping out at one point or another, he continued to persevere in school. Often it was this perseverance that prevented ELL students from dropping out when they were failing courses, as opposed to intervention from the school or staff.

*"I thought about dropping out of school at a point in my life that I had bad grades and didn't think I was going to make it. But I stuck with it and now I'm good."*

- Student Interview

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of participants' experiences and feedback, the following policies are recommended to improve the state of ELL education for immigrant youth and families.

### **State Policies**

*Increased Language Access:* Based on a large number of parents reporting communication barriers and the need for increased high quality interpretation, the Legislature should pass an Educational Language Access bill to provide training and funding for education interpreters in all school districts. This will ensure interpreters are professional and effective and will minimize some of the barriers for parents with limited English proficiency (Office of Education Ombudsmen, 2008).

*TBIP Funding and Accountability:* When asked about recommendations to improve ELL classes, a number of parents and students indicated the need for ELL classes to be smaller (a lower student-to-teacher ratio) and better funded. Considering this, the Legislature should adopt the 2012 recommendations given by the Quality Education Council (QEC) on how to improve the TBIP funding formula to increase achievement, improve instruction, expand bilingual or dual language models, decrease class sizes, and ensure all students, including ELLs, have access to high-quality education in public schools.

In addition to increasing funding, the Legislature should adopt the QEC accountability system, which includes increasing oversight, requiring ELL teacher certification, and providing more professional development opportunities to teachers and staff. Specifically this entails three parts: a) creating a new statute to hold districts accountable for making progress on measurable outcomes; b) requiring all newly hired TBIP staff to hold bilingual/ELL endorsements by 2017-18; and c) providing future investments for additional instructional time or professional development of certificated and classified staff specifically related to English language acquisition (QEC, 2012).

*Financial Aid for Undocumented Students:* Drawing from student reports of undocumented status being a barrier to college access, the Legislature should expand resident student eligibility for purposes of the state need grant program to undocumented students (Redden, 2007). A bill of this nature, House Bill 1706, was introduced in the 2010 legislative session but failed to pass.

### **District Policies**

The following recommendations at the school district level are made based on feedback received from participants regarding communication, barriers to engagement, cultural competency, and academic advancement.

*Translation/Interpretation:* Based on findings around communication barriers for ELL families, districts should translate all important documents into the top five languages in the district as well as provide interpretation services at all interactions with limited English proficient families. This should be supported by additional funding from the state for districts to carry this out

*Family Support:* Immigrant parents indicated often not feeling included or engaged in the school system. To address this, districts should hire one full-time employee at each school solely dedicated

to parent engagement for limited English proficient families. To increase communication between immigrant parents and school staff, schools should establish specific times and opportunities for immigrant families to meet with teachers and administrators.

*Credit Retrieval:* Drawing from findings that some ELL students are credit deficient and struggle with college access, districts should pass a school board resolution allowing students to obtain credits for proficiency in their native language. Given that foreign language credit is not a requirement for high school graduation in Washington State but is a requirement for all 4-year colleges, this would be a significant step towards improving college access. Implementing a system for older ELL students to transfer credits or be placed in core classes based on knowledge of subjects in their home language should also be considered and implemented by districts.

*Teaching Force:* To address feedback from parents about the lack of cultural competency or diversity in the teaching force, districts should increase hiring of bilingual or bicultural staff as well as mandate ongoing cultural competency trainings for all district faculty and staff. Districts should also establish clear protocols and training around placement and classification of ELL students. This should go hand in hand with the funded state mandate to include an ELL endorsement in general teacher training. In addition, expanding current district partnerships with teaching colleges (i.e. Kent, Highline, and Tukwila partnerships with Heritage University) to increase the number of ELL-endorsed teachers who are employed by districts is recommended (Kent School District, 2012).

*Curriculum:* Many parents and students provided insight to their experiences in an ELL classroom and the following actions are recommended to improve ELL instruction: increase access to STEM and other core courses for ELL students, hire trained bilingual instructional assistants to act as liaisons in mainstream classes, and increase dual language programs.

*Early Warning:* To help ELL students who are at risk of drop out, districts should utilize early warning data to help ELL students get back on track and graduate from high school. Districts should have a clear protocol for parent follow-up subsequent to student absences or discipline measures. Districts should also consider reforming discipline policies to keep students engaged in school and providing additional supports to high-risk students.

## **Community Policies**

*Parent Education:* Many parents requested wanting to be more knowledgeable about their children's academics and the educational structure. There are a number of community based organizations (CBOs) currently providing trainings to immigrant parents with positive results. CBOs should continue expanding on their capacity to provide information to parents around how to navigate the school system and district policies/procedures as well as grade/graduation requirements.

*Youth Support:* Many youth provided positive accounts of CBOs that have helped them stay engaged in school and pursue college. When asked about what educational supports they received, students often mentioned organizations such as the Urban League, College Bound, and Rainier Scholars. CBOs should continue the excellent supportive services they are providing to ELL students as well as gain additional capacity to provide after-school tutoring, homework help and interventions when ELL students drop out of school.

# Appendix A

## Focus Group Protocol and Discussion Questions

### English Language Learner Programs Focus Group Guide

#### I. Purpose

As part of the Road Map Project, OneAmerica is conducting baseline research on English Language Learner (ELL) policies, programs, models, resources, and outcomes for each of the seven targeted school districts in South King County: Auburn, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Renton, South Seattle, and Tukwila. This research will assist in identifying issues in ELL programs with the goal of developing policies and strategies to ensure the future success of ELLs. These focus groups will give us critical information and data on the experiences of parents and students with ELL programs.

#### II. Materials to Bring

- a. This Focus Group Guide
- b. The appropriate survey forms and discussion questions
- c. Pens
- d. Note pad or lap top for note-taking
- e. OneAmerica business cards

#### III. Focus Group Format

- a. **Confirm** that each participant in the focus group is/was an ELL student or has a child who is/was in ELL **and** is currently enrolled in one of the 7 districts.
- b. **Surveys.** Please hand out the surveys and pens as participants arrive. Instruct them to fill out the forms and let you know if they have any questions.
- c. **Getting Started.**
  - i. **Introduction.** Thank everyone for their attendance. Tell them about the purpose of the Focus Group in terms they will understand. Reassure them all answers will be anonymous and we've only asked for their contact information in case we have further questions. Remind them they don't have to answer any question they are uncomfortable with.
  - ii. **Surveys.** Ask if there were any questions about the surveys or if anyone needs assistance filling out their form. It is important for the information on this form to be as complete and accurate as possible. If necessary, walk them through any questions they don't understand.
- d. **Discussion.** Lead a discussion about the participants' experiences with the ELL programs at the public schools. Use the appropriate discussion questions document as a guide.



**e. Conclusion.**

- i. **Circling Back.** If participants weren't sure whether they or their children are/were in an ELL program but, based on discussion, have discovered they are/were, please remind them to change the answer on their survey form.
- ii. **Thanks.** Please make sure to thank participants for their time and input and encourage them to contact OneAmerica if they have any questions about these focus groups.

#### **IV. Taking Notes**

- a. If possible, use an audio recorder for each discussion group.
- b. **Details, details, details!** Make a note of each speaker's name so we can associate their remarks with the appropriate school district. Include as much detail as possible. Use the audio record to fill in any gaps.

#### **V. Guiding the Discussion - Parents**

We wish to engage the parents on the following major themes and ideas. Some suggested prompts have been included. Please use your discretion to tailor the prompts and focus the discussion around these themes and ideas based on members of your focus group. It is critical to take extensive, detailed notes on the discussion (see item IV on the Focus Group Guide).

**a. School Communication**

**MAIN QUESTION: How does your child's school communicate with you (i.e. letters, phone calls, interpreters, teachers, etc.) and can you discuss how much of the information you understand?**

*Context: We have asked some basic questions about how the schools communicate with the parents on the survey, but below are a few ideas to expand on this theme and get a discussion started. Not only is it important to understand how schools are providing information (if at all), but also to what extent the parents understand it.*

Follow up Qs:

- i. Does your child's school have an interpreter, teacher, or other staff member who speaks your native language?
  1. Are they available on the phone?
  2. Are they available in person at school-related meetings?
  3. Has your child ever had to translate for you?
- ii. Has the school ever convened information sessions for groups of parents who all speak the same native language?
- iii. If information is sent home in English, do you understand it? Do you find someone to translate it for you?
- iv. Who do you interact with most at your child's school?
- v. Do you feel like you are able to fully participate in your child's education?

**b. ELL Program Experience**

**MAIN QUESTION: Please share what you know about your child's experience in school and how do you think the ELL program impacts their success?**

*Context: We are trying to grasp what immigrant parents know about their child's ELL program, if anything at all. How do they perceive the program and its effect on their child's success in school?*

Follow up Qs:

- i. How did you find out your child was placed in the ELL program?
  1. Did the school tell you? Was this in English or your native language?
  2. Did you find out from your child?
- ii. What do you think of your child's ELL program?
  1. What do/did you like about it?
  2. What don't/didn't you like about it?
  3. What do you think would make it even better?
- iii. Have you ever asked for your child to be removed from ELL classes? Why? What happened?
- iv. If your child is no longer in ELL, either because they completed the program or you asked to have them removed, how are they doing now?

**c. Students at Risk**

**MAIN QUESTION: How do you think your child has struggled with succeeding in school? What have the barriers been in terms of support, language, college readiness, discipline, available resources, etc.?**

*Context: We know immigrant students and ELLs face more difficulties when it comes to succeeding at schools. Difficulties include language barriers, available resources, etc. We are trying to understand the parents' perspective of their children's struggles.*

Follow up Qs:

- i. Do you think your child is on-track/prepared to graduate high school? What about continuing on to college?
  1. If so, what kinds of things helped your child be successful?
  2. If not, what does your child need to get on-track?
- ii. We have heard immigrant children face harsher discipline than their classmates in some schools. Some students even end up in juvenile detention or prison as a result of the school's actions. The United States Department of Education has just released a report also indicating this is a problem.
  1. What do you think about this?
  2. Has your child ever been suspended or expelled? Why? What happened?
  3. Has the school ever called the police on your child?
- iii. Do you think your child is at risk of dropping out of school? Why?

**d. Ideas for Improvements**

**MAIN QUESTION: Considering that changes to ELL polices are being made, based on your experiences, what would you suggest to lawmakers to improve ELL education and your child’s success in school (i.e. likelihood of attending college, grades, academic engagement)?**

*Context: Right now, the state of Washington is changing ELL education programs in school districts. Politicians are changing the definition of “basic education” and trying to determine what rights students have, what kind of training teachers need, and how much should be spent on education programs. Many organizations, including OneAmerica, want to make sure all children do well in school, graduate, and go on to college. This means we need to let the politicians know what changes will improve the education system to help all children succeed and we need your ideas.*

Follow up Qs:

- i. Teachers
  - 1. What do you like about your child’s teacher(s)?
  - 2. What things can the teachers do to better help your children?
  - 3. What type of training do you think is important for teachers to have?
- ii. Schools
  - 1. What do you like about your child’s school?
  - 2. What things can the schools do better to help you and your children?
- iii. What do you as a parent need to better help your children with school?
- iv. Do you have anything else about your child’s school or their ELL program you would like to share with us?

**VI. Guiding the Discussion – Students**

We wish to engage the students on the following major themes and ideas. Some suggested prompts have been included. Please use your discretion to tailor the prompts and focus the discussion around these themes and ideas based on members of your focus group. It is critical to take extensive, detailed notes on the discussion (see item IV on the Focus Group Guide).

**a. School Environment**

**MAIN QUESTION: What is the environment of your school like in terms of your comfort level, safety, cultural relevance, openness of teachers and opportunities for student involvement?**

*Context: We have asked some basic questions about how comfortable the students feel at their school, but below are a few ideas to expand on this theme and get a discussion started.*

Follow up Qs:

- i. Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other reason? What happened?

- ii. Do your teachers understand your background and culture?
  - 1. If yes, which teachers and what do they do differently to help you?
  - 2. If no, what could they do differently to help you?
- iii. Have you ever been bullied? What happened?
- iv. If you have a problem at school, who do you go to? Problems could include bullies, needing help with homework, or just needing someone to talk to.
- v. Does your school have a student group or club for students who speak the same languages as you or who come from the same country or background?

**b. ELL Program Experience**

**MAIN QUESTION: Why/how did you get placed in an ELL classroom and what are the ways it has or has not helped you succeed in school?**

*Context: We want to know how much the students know about their ELL program, what they think of it, and how it can contribute to their success as a student.*

Follow up Qs:

- i. Do you know why you are/were in an ELL program?
- ii. Do you/Did you get pulled out of your regular classes for the ELL program?
  - 1. If yes, what do you think about this?
  - 2. If no, how are/were you taught English by the school?
- iii. What do you think about the ELL program?
  - 1. What do/did you like about it?
  - 2. What don't/didn't you like about it?
  - 3. What do you think would make it even better?
- iv. Have you or your parents ever asked for you to be removed from ELL classes? Why? What happened?

**c. Students at Risk**

**MAIN QUESTION: What are some of the academic barriers or struggles you have experienced in school?**

*Context: We know immigrant students and ELLs face more difficulties when it comes to succeeding at schools. Difficulties include language barriers, available resources, etc. We are trying to understand the students' struggles.*

Follow up Qs:

- i. How are you doing in school?
  - 1. Do you understand your homework?
  - 2. What kinds of resources are available to help you with your schoolwork?
- ii. Do you think you are on-track/prepared to graduate high school? What about continuing on to college?
  - 1. If so, what kinds of things helped you be successful?

2. If not, what do you need to get on-track?
- iii. We have heard immigrant children face harsher discipline than their classmates in some schools. Some students even end up in juvenile detention or prison as a result of the schools' actions. The United States Department of Education has just released a report also indicating this is a problem.
  1. What do you think about this?
  2. Have you ever been suspended or expelled? Why? What happened?
  3. Has the school ever called the police on you?
- iv. Have you ever thought about dropping out of school? Why?

**d. Ideas for Improvements**

**MAIN QUESTION: Considering that changes to ELL polices are being made, based on your experiences, what would you suggest to lawmakers to improve ELL education and your success as a student (i.e. likelihood of attending college, grades, academic engagement)?**

*Context: Right now, the state of Washington is changing ELL education programs in school districts. Politicians are changing the definition of "basic education" and trying to determine what rights students have, what kind of training teachers need, and how much should be spent on education programs. Many organizations, including OneAmerica, want to make sure all children do well in school, graduate, and go on to college. This means we need to let the politicians know what changes will improve the education system to help all children succeed and we need your ideas.*

Follow up Qs:

- i. Teachers
  1. What do you like about your teacher(s)?
  2. What things can the teachers do to better help you?
- ii. Schools
  1. What do you like about your school?
  2. What things can the schools do better to help you?
- iii. Do you have anything else about your school or your ELL program you would like to share with us?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **Parent Interview Questions**

1. Does your child's school have an interpreter, teacher, or other staff member who speaks your native language?
  - a. Are they available on the phone?
  - b. Are they available in person at school-related meetings?
  - c. Has your child ever had to translate for you?
2. Has the school ever convened information sessions for groups of parents who all speak the same native language?
3. If school information is sent home in English, do you understand it? Do you find someone to translate it for you?
4. Who do you interact with most at your child's school?
5. Do you feel like you are able to fully participate in your child's education?
6. How did you find out your child was placed in the ELL program? Did the school tell you? Was this in English or your native language? Did you find out from your child?
7. What do you think of your child's ELL program?
  - a. What do/did you like about it?
  - b. What don't/didn't you like about it?
  - c. What do you think would make it better?
8. Have you ever asked for your child to be removed from ELL classes? Why? What happened?
9. If your child is no longer in ELL, either because they completed the program or you asked to have them removed. How are they doing now?
10. Do you think your child is on-track/prepared to graduate high school? What about continuing on to college?
  - a. If so, what kinds of things helped your child be successful?
  - b. If not, what does your child need to get on-track?
11. We have heard immigrant children face harsher discipline than their classmates in some schools. Some students even end up in juvenile detention or prison as a result of the schools actions.
  - a. What do you think about this?
  - b. Has your child ever been suspended or expelled? Why? What happened?
  - c. Has the school ever called the police on your child?
12. Do you think your child is at risk of dropping out of school? Why?
13. What do you like about your child's teacher(s)?
14. What things can the teachers do to better help your children?

15. What type of training do you think is important for teachers to have?
16. What do you like about your child's school?
17. What things can the schools do better to help you and your children?
18. What do you as a parent need to better help your children with school?

### **Student Interview Questions**

1. Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other reason? What happened?
2. Do your teachers understand your background and culture?
  - a. If yes, which teachers and what do they do differently to help you?
  - b. If no, what could they do differently to help you?
3. Have you ever been bullied? What happened?
4. If you have a problem at school, who do you go to? Problems could include bullies, needing help with homework, or just needing someone to talk to.
5. Does your school have a student group or club for students who speak the same languages as you or who come from the same country or background?
6. Do you know why you are/were in an ELL program?
7. Do you/Did you get pulled out of your regular classes for the ELL program?
  - a. If yes, what do you think about this?
  - b. If no, how are/were you taught English by the school?
8. What do you think about the ELL program?
  - a. What do/did you like about it?
  - b. What don't/didn't you like about it?
  - c. What do you think would make it even better?
9. Have you or your parents ever asked for you to be removed from ELL classes? Why? What happened?
10. How are you doing in school?
  - a. Do you understand your homework?
  - b. What kinds of resources are available to help you with your schoolwork?
11. Do you think you are on-track/prepared to graduate high school? What about continuing on to college?
  - a. If so, what kinds of things helped you be successful?
  - b. If not, what do you need to get on-track?

12. We have heard immigrant children face harsher discipline than their classmates in some schools. Some students even end up in juvenile detention or prison as a result of the schools actions.
  - a. What do you think about this?
  - b. Have you ever been suspended or expelled? Why? What happened?
  - c. Has the school ever called the police on you?
13. Have you ever thought about dropping out of school? Why?
14. What do you like about your teacher(s)?
15. What things can the teachers do to better help you?
16. What do you like about your school?
17. What things can the schools do better to help you?
18. Do you have anything else about your school or your ELL program you would like to share with us?



## Appendix C Parent Survey

The information you provide us below will help us make sure your voice is heard as the State of Washington continues to reform and improve its basic education programs, including English Language Learner (ELL) programs. All of your answers will remain anonymous; we ask for your contact information in case we have some follow-up questions to your survey.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Language(s) Spoken at Home: \_\_\_\_\_

# of Years in U.S.: \_\_\_\_\_ City of Residence: \_\_\_\_\_ # of School-Age Children: \_\_\_\_\_

Schools your children attend: \_\_\_\_\_ School District: \_\_\_\_\_

Are any of your children currently in an ELL program? (check one):  Yes  No  Not Sure

If yes, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_

Were any of your children previously in an ELL program? (check one):  Yes  No  Not Sure

If yes, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

1. How does the school provide information to you? Please check all that apply.

	Yes	No
Letters/Flyers		
Phone - automated/robot voice		
Phone - live person		
E-mail		
Other (please specify)		

2. What types of information do you receive from the school in your primary (home) language? Please check all that apply.

	Yes	No
Report card		
School handbook		
Flyers about school events		
Medical information		
Enrollment information and forms		
Other (please specify)		

3. Who do you speak with when you have a problem with your child and/or the school (including disciplinary problems such as attendance, suspension, or expulsion)? Please check all that apply.

	Yes	No
Teacher		
Principal		
Superintendent		
School Board		
Parent Teacher Association (PTA)		
School counselor		
Interpreter or other school staff who speaks my language		
Friend		
Other person (please specify)		

4. Please check yes or no to the following statements:

	Yes	No
I know what courses and tests my child/ren must take in order to move up to the next grade.		
I know what courses and tests my child/ren must take in order to graduate from high school.		

**Thank you for completing this survey!**  
**Feel free to contact OneAmerica at (206) 723-2203 if you have any questions.**

## Appendix D Student Survey

The information you provide us below will help us make sure your voice is heard as the State of Washington continues to reform and improve its basic education programs, including English Language Learner (ELL) programs. All of your answers will remain anonymous; we ask for your contact information in case we have some follow-up questions to your survey.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Country of Birth:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Language(s) Spoken at Home:** \_\_\_\_\_

**# of Years in U.S.:** \_\_\_\_\_ **City of Residence:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Grade:** \_\_\_\_\_

**School:** \_\_\_\_\_ **School District:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Are you currently in an ELL program? (check one):**       **Yes**       **No**       **Not Sure**

**If yes, for how long?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Were you previously in an ELL program? (check one):**       **Yes**       **No**       **Not Sure**

\_\_\_\_\_ **If yes, for how long?**

**Notes:**

1. Please check yes or no to the following statements:

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
I translate for my parents and/or teachers at school events and/or during school meetings (either currently or in the past).		
I feel/felt supported by my ESL teacher and feel comfortable asking him/her questions.		
I feel/felt supported by my ESL instructional assistant and feel comfortable asking him/her questions.		
I feel supported by my general education (math, social studies, science) teachers and feel comfortable asking them questions.		

2. Please check yes or no to the following statements:

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
I know what courses and tests I must take in order to move up to the next grade.		
I know what courses and tests I must take in order to graduate from high school.		

**Thank you for completing this survey!**  
**Feel free to contact OneAmerica at (206) 723-2203 if you have any questions.**

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