



# The Challenges of Change

Learning from the Child Care and Early Education  
Experiences of Immigrant Families

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## PART I. Study Overview and Policy Context

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One of every five young children in the United States lives in an immigrant family. The immigrant population is comprised of diverse national, linguistic, and cultural groups. In recent years, more states and local communities have been impacted by the arrival of diverse groups of immigrant families. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) designed the Breaking Down Barriers study to identify the barriers that impede immigrant families from accessing high-quality child care and early education programs and to identify solutions for how these problems may be remedied. As part of this work, CLASP conducted site visits in communities across the United States to better understand, at the local level, the child care and early education experiences of immigrant families. This section provides background on CLASP's study, as well as on the immigration policies and the child care and early education policies and funding sources that shape immigrant families' access to child care and early education.



# 1. Study Overview

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## Purpose and Underlying Principles

The Breaking Down Barriers study was designed to determine whether and how children of immigrants have access to high-quality child care and early education programs. Central to this study is the research that CLASP conducted for this report. Specifically, CLASP sought to explore three main questions:

1. What do we know about the participation of young children of immigrants in child care and early education settings (including Head Start, child care, preschool, and pre-kindergarten)?
2. What are some of the barriers and challenges immigrant families face in accessing child care and early education?
3. What can policymakers and advocates at the local, state, and federal levels do to improve access to high-quality child care and early education for young children in immigrant families?

The study was guided by a few basic principles about the experiences of states and local communities. Most importantly, we recognize that there are many different state, local, and family contexts. Some states and local communities have had large immigrant populations for generations, while others have only recently experienced growing immigrant populations. Communities have varying degrees of experience and resources to acclimate and integrate immigrant families. Furthermore, there are many different immigrant groups (such as Latino, Asian-Pacific, and African). Within these groups, families have come to this country for a variety of reasons and from many different countries of origin. As in all populations, individual family preferences for the child care and early education experiences of their young children vary within immigrant groups. Family preferences may be influenced by culture; they are also constrained by cost, language, and other barriers to access. Therefore, we recognize that there

are no “one size fits all” solutions to improving access to high-quality child care and early education for young children of immigrants.

Secondly, CLASP believes that effective child care and early education programs are those that support the comprehensive development of children starting at birth and lasting at least until the age of school entry. Therefore, this study was designed to examine the experiences of



immigrant families with young children ages birth to six. While this report includes a particular focus on state pre-kindergarten policies, CLASP believes that pre-kindergarten is one important part of a larger child care and early education system. State and local policies, programs, and efforts regarding the care of infants and toddlers are equally important and must also be effective for immigrant families.

Finally, because young children learn from their surroundings at *all* times, early education occurs in multiple settings and has many names—including child care, Head Start, preschool, and pre-kindergarten. Parents choose the most appropriate setting for their children based on a variety of factors, such as quality, affordability,

preference for a particular provider or setting, and the need for part- or full-day care. This study was designed to identify a range of strategies to promote high quality for immigrant families in *all* settings.

## Methodology

**Site visits.** CLASP conducted site visits in communities across the country to learn first hand about the challenges and barriers that immigrant families face in accessing child care and early education. We sought the perspectives of immigrant leaders and direct service providers, child care and early education providers in all settings (including schools, child care centers, and family child care homes), state and local policymakers, and immigrant parents. CLASP conducted more than 100 interviews with nearly 150 individuals and organizations (see Appendix 1 for a complete list of the individuals and organizations interviewed). The starting point of each interview was a set of key questions designed to identify barriers to participation by immigrant families and to capture strategies for effectively engaging immigrant families in early education initiatives (see Appendix 2 for a list of these key questions). Each of these discussions informed the content of this report. Information that is attributed to particular individuals and organizations was verified by them prior to publication.

## Immigrant- and Refugee-serving Organizations

Immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations exist in many communities—particularly those with long histories of receiving immigrants—to assist newcomers with a wide range of issues, including immigration and citizenship, access to benefits, domestic violence, housing, job training, learning English, health care, and youth and senior programs. They include a diverse set of direct service providers and go by many names, including refugee resettlement agencies and mutual assistance associations. Generally, immigrant-serving organizations serve a particular ethnic or cultural group, while refugee resettlement agencies tend to be multi-ethnic. Some mutual assistance associations provide services specific to a refugee group (e.g., Cambodian Association of America). Some mainstream agencies, such as Catholic Charities, include immigrant-focused programs among their array of services.

Communities were chosen based on a variety of criteria, including historical trends in immigration and the type of public pre-kindergarten program available in the state. CLASP visited traditional immigrant gateways, communities in states with well-established immigrant populations, and new or emerging destinations for immigrants (see Tables 1 and 2). We sought to include communities with immigrant populations from diverse countries and ethnic backgrounds.

TABLE 1. COMMUNITIES CLASP VISITED, BY HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION AND TYPE OF PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

	Targeted Pre-kindergarten	Universally Available Pre-kindergarten <sup>1</sup>
<b>Traditional Destinations for Immigrants</b>	Long Beach, California San Jose, California	Miami, Florida New York, New York
<b>New or Emerging Destinations for Immigrants</b>	Northwest Arkansas Boulder, Colorado Montgomery County, Maryland	Atlanta, Georgia Tulsa, Oklahoma

From October 2005 to April 2006, CLASP visited the following communities (see Table 3 for demographic data on immigrant families in these communities):

- **Northwest Arkansas (cities of Bentonville, Fayetteville, Rogers, and Springdale).** The Northwest Arkansas corridor is experiencing rapid economic growth, fueled primarily by the poultry industry, as well as by the presence of Wal-Mart corporate headquarters

<sup>1</sup> Pre-kindergarten programs that are “universally available” are open to all four-year olds, regardless of other eligibility criteria. Enrollment in universal pre-kindergarten programs is voluntary.

and the company's many vendors. The economic boom has attracted both immigrant and native workers to the area.

The immigrant population in Arkansas grew by nearly 200 percent between 1990 and 2000 and by an additional 40 percent between 2000 and 2005. In Northwest Arkansas, the major immigrant group is from Mexico. Other immigrant groups are from Central and South America and from Southeast Asia (including Hmong and Vietnamese). Northwest Arkansas also is home to the largest Marshallese population outside the Marshall Islands—estimated between 2,000 and 6,000. Because the Marshall Islands are a U.S. Territory, Marshall Islanders are permitted to enter the States without a passport and are entitled to work legally. However, they face linguistic and cultural barriers to accessing services, similar to those faced by immigrant groups. The Marshallese also are not entitled to receive public benefits, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid.

CLASP interviewees in Northwest Arkansas included public and private child care and early education providers in center-based child care and public school settings; Head Start centers; a child care resource and referral agency; immigrant direct legal service providers; and community liaisons from Latino and Marshallese populations.

- San Jose and Gilroy, California.** San Jose, in Santa Clara County, is a traditional gateway for diverse immigrant populations, primarily from Latin America and Asia. Mexican and Vietnamese immigrants comprise the largest groups. Growth in the high-tech industry has attracted many immigrant professionals, primarily from China and India. The area has also been an area of resettlement for refugees from Southeast Asia. Many recent, low-income immigrants—primarily Mexican—live and work in the nearby agricultural area of Gilroy.

TABLE 2. IMMIGRANT POPULATION IN SELECTED STATES

	Immigrant Population, 2005	Immigrant Population as Percent of Total Population, 2005	Growth in Immigrant Population, 2000-2005
Arkansas	101,169	3.7%	40.6%
California	9.6 million	27.2%	5.8%
Colorado	460,294	10.1%	25.3%
Florida	3.2 million	18.5%	22.0%
Georgia	795,419	9.0%	38.8%
Maryland	641,373	11.7%	3.6%
New York	4.0 million	21.4%	4.7%
Oklahoma	155,880	4.5%	23.4%

Source: Migration Policy Institute

TABLE 3. LOCAL PROFILES OF SITE VISIT COMMUNITIES

	Percent of Children Under Age Eight Who Are Children of Immigrants	Percent of Children of Immigrants Under Age Eight			
		Parent in U.S. For Less Than 10 Years	Mixed-Status Nuclear Family <sup>2</sup>	At Least One Parent is Limited English Proficient	Linguistically Isolated Household <sup>3</sup>
<b>Young Children of Immigrants in:<sup>1</sup></b>					
<b>Northwest Arkansas</b>	15%	50%	66%	73%	44%
<b>Santa Clara County, California</b>	57%	40%	59%	59%	31%
<b>Boulder and Longmont, Colorado</b>	20%	55%	61%	51%	29%
<b>Miami-Dade County, Florida</b>	67%	39%	57%	55%	29%
<b>DeKalb and Gwinnett Counties, Georgia</b>	25%	54%	61%	54%	31%
<b>Tulsa, Oklahoma</b>	9%	62%	64%	70%	39%

Calculated from Census 2000 5 percent microdata (IPUMS) by Donald J. Hernandez, University at Albany, SUNY

See Appendix 4 for more detailed local profiles of the site visit communities.

- 1 This table is based on families with children from birth to age eight. Limitations in the data prohibited us from restricting this data to families with children under age six. Demographic data on families with children under age eight and those with children under age six do not differ significantly.
- 2 A “mixed-status nuclear family” has at least one sibling or parent who is a U.S. citizen and at least one who is not.
- 3 “Linguistically isolated” indicates that no one over age 13 in the household speaks English exclusively or very well.

Santa Clara County has the third largest percentage of immigrants of any county in California. There are many nonprofits in and around San Jose serving particular racial and ethnic groups. Also, the county government has created the Immigrant Relations and Integration Services program—part of the Office of Human Relations and Refugee Services within the Social Services Agency—to address the needs of immigrants and refugees and to foster a multicultural community.

CLASP interviewees in San Jose included public and private child care and early education providers in center-based child care, public schools, and family child care homes; Head Start providers; a group of Mexican immigrant mothers in a family literacy program; immigrant organizations serving Mexican and Asian immigrant communities, including Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Cambodian immigrants; child care resource and referral agencies; and county officials.



- **Boulder and Longmont, Colorado.** The immigrant population in Colorado grew by 166 percent between 1990 and 2000 and by an additional 25 percent between 2000 and 2005.<sup>2</sup> Boulder has a growing immigrant population, with the largest group coming from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Neighboring city Longmont's immigrant population is both more recent and more working class than Boulder's.

CLASP interviewees in Boulder and Longmont included early intervention specialists, child care and early education providers in center-based child care and Head Start settings, city Health and Human Services officials, and immigrant service providers.

- **Miami-Dade and Broward Counties, Florida.** Miami-Dade County and adjacent Broward County are traditional gateways for immigrants from many different countries, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America. More than half of the population of Miami-Dade County is foreign born, and some areas of Miami are more than 70 percent immigrant. Seventy-one percent of Miami-Dade County residents speak a language other than English in the home.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of Miami-Dade residents are of Latino origin. Miami-Dade County has the largest Haitian community in the country, while Broward County has the third largest. Immigrant populations in South Florida may be atypical for the U.S. Some recent immigrants, particularly from South America, have greater economic means than immigrants to other parts of the country do.

CLASP interviewees in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties included early intervention specialists; representatives of the county Early Learning Coalitions; an association of Latina family child care providers; immigrant legal and direct service providers; child care and early education providers in community-based child care centers, schools, and family child care settings; Head Start, Early Head Start, and Even Start programs; and a group of Haitian immigrant mothers.

- **Atlanta, Georgia (DeKalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett Counties).** The foreign-born population in Georgia grew by 247 percent from 1990 to 2000 and by an additional 39 percent between 2000 and 2005.<sup>4</sup> The largest immigrant group is from Mexico; additional immigrant groups include Indians, Vietnamese, and Koreans. In addition to having a growing immigrant population, the metropolitan Atlanta area is also home to approximately 45,000 refugees, from a diverse set of countries, including Afghanistan, Bosnia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Liberia, Russia, Somalia, and Sudan.

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2 Migration Policy Institute, *2005 American Community Survey and Census Data on the Foreign Born by State*.

3 U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, *Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations*.

4 Migration Policy Institute, *2005 American Community Survey and Census Data on the Foreign Born by State*.

CLASP interviewees in the Atlanta area included child care and early education providers in community-based child care and public schools; Head Start providers; immigrant organizations serving Latino immigrants; an Asian multi-service agency serving primarily Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese immigrants; refugee resettlement agencies and service providers serving refugees from across the world; groups of Latina immigrant mothers; representatives of several public schools; a child care resource and referral agency; and the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning.

- **Tulsa and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.** The immigrant population in Oklahoma increased by over 100 percent between 1990 and 2000 and by an additional 23 percent between 2000 and 2005.<sup>5</sup> Immigrants in the state are concentrated primarily in and around Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Mexicans are the largest immigrant group; additional groups include immigrants from Vietnam, China, and Central and South America. There is also a Russian-speaking community of immigrants from several former Soviet Union countries.

CLASP interviewees in Tulsa included a child care resource and referral agency; child care and early education providers in schools and community-based settings; early intervention specialists; Tulsa Community College; a family child care provider; Head Start, Early Head Start, and Even Start; immigrant and refugee direct service providers; and staff of the YWCA multicultural center representing Latino, Vietnamese, and former Soviet Union immigrant populations. In Oklahoma City, CLASP interviewees included state education and human service agencies, the Head Start State Collaboration Office, and a child care resource and referral agency. Also, focus groups of Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant parents were conducted in both Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

In addition to the above communities, CLASP met with a smaller sampling of direct service providers, community organizations, and school administrators in Long Beach, California; Montgomery County, Maryland; and New York City.

**Grants to community organizations.** In order to ensure the presence of immigrant families' perspectives and to encourage local collaboration among child care and early education providers and advocates and immigrant-serving organizations and advocates, CLASP provided small grants to five community-based organizations in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, New York, and Oklahoma (see Appendix 3 for a list of these organizations and a description of their grant activities). These organizations worked individually to design qualitative information-collecting processes, gathering information from families through focus groups in native languages, translated parent surveys, and one-on-one interviews. Many also brought child care and early education providers, advocates, and policymakers together with immigrant service providers,

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5 Migration Policy Institute, *2005 American Community Survey and Census Data on the Foreign Born by State*.



advocates, and policymakers. Some of the grantees held statewide meetings to share information and key findings across the early childhood and immigrant service communities.

**Analysis of national data.** In addition to information collected on site visits, CLASP used national data sets to obtain demographic information on children of immigrants and information about their participation in preschool. These data sets included the Urban Institute’s 2002 National Survey of America’s Families, the U.S. American Community Survey, and special analysis of the U.S. Census conducted by Donald J. Hernandez at the State University of New York (SUNY) University at Albany.<sup>6</sup>

**Review of state policies.** CLASP reviewed state policies and standards from the states we visited—including pre-kindergarten policies, child care licensing and certification standards, and early learning guidelines—for language related to immigrant eligibility and for attention to the needs of children of immigrants and English Language Learners.

**Literature review.** CLASP reviewed the available research concerning immigrant families, their demographic characteristics, and their participation in child care and early education. This resulted in the January 2006 publication of *Reaching All Children? Understanding Early Care and Education Participation Among Immigrant Families*.<sup>7</sup> In addition, CLASP reviewed more broadly related research on topics such as children of immigrants, immigrants’ access to public

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6 Additional analysis of Census data on children of immigrants for the United States and individual states can be accessed at <http://www.albany.edu/csda/children/>.

7 Matthews and Ewen, *Reaching All Children?*

benefits, immigrants' experiences with K-12 education, English Language Learners, and a variety of topics related to early education. This report and its accompanying bibliography draw from much of this research.

## Disclaimers

This report is based primarily on qualitative data gathered through personal interviews, which provided rich information and deepened our understanding of the barriers that immigrant families face in accessing child care and early education. However, this information should be considered illustrative only. The information presented in this report is not meant to be representative of all communities, of all immigrants, or of all child care and early education providers. Information gathered from parents was obtained in most cases through limited surveys or focus groups and, therefore, also is not representative of all parents. The site visit communities are not necessarily representative of the larger states in which they reside or of the country at large. While many common barriers were found among the diverse sites, we recognize that every community is unique in respect to its policies and resources. Therefore, in order to be effective, strategies may need to be tailored to local circumstances. Finally, the political and demographic landscapes in local communities change with time. The information collected for this report represents a specific period of time during which site visits were conducted. During the study period, several states introduced, debated, or enacted legislation affecting immigrants; and the federal government also took up the issue of immigration reform. Those debates, and resulting policies, may have impacted the barriers identified in this report.

Because CLASP did not conduct any formal evaluations of programs, this report does not recommend particular programs as high quality or responsive to the needs of immigrant families. Where possible, this report does highlight particular strategies that individual states, localities, and programs have used to promote participation or improve the quality of services for immigrant families.