

**Change and Challenge in the Education System:
Latino Students in Somerville**



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Comment [DP1]: Again, this list of chapters indicates a focus on new immigrants. This is fine, but then you must make it clear in your introduction that you recognize that both groups have different problems, but that you are going to focus this paper on the LEPs.

Introduction

Conceptual Framework

Education has been long touted as one of the best ways to improve one's life and achieve future personal success. Theoretically, our society is structured in a way that a better education leads to a better job, more money, a better standard of living, and a brighter future for following generations. What happens when one community that already faces a number of challenges encounters immense barriers to the education that may set them forward? Latino students in the Somerville Public Schools system are dealing with an increasingly difficult education system that further complicates their K-12 careers. Recent changes in education policy, relating to school finance, bilingual education, and access to higher education, have severely impacted the education that a Latino student in Somerville receives.

The issues that Latino youth in Somerville face are as diverse as the Latino population itself. Understanding these issues, their causes, and their context is crucial to understanding Latino students in Somerville. It is also important to understand the environment in which these students are learning. As one of the most diverse school districts in the state of Massachusetts, Somerville Public Schools is dealing with a number of complex and difficult issues that many other school systems do not need to worry about. Education policy changes must be examined in the context of the demographics of both the city and the school district.

One of the characteristics that most affects the Latino population is the difference between Latinos with limited English proficiency, typically those who are relatively recent immigrants, and Latinos who speak English with no foreign accent

and have lived in the United States for a number of years. The divide between these two populations is significant and complicates the learning environment for the overall Latino population. In addition to the cultural difference of being a recent immigrant, the status of being undocumented creates new challenges for this population and makes the environment in which these students live in very different from those living without the fear or pressure that is inherent in undocumented households.

Bilingual education and ESL programs constitute the core policy issues at hand for those Latinos who speak limited English. Major changes in these fields have had an enormous impact on Latino students, often leaving schools and teachers without adequate resources or guidance to successfully implement these programs. ESL and bilingual classes comprise the most structured cultural and linguistic education that LEP students will receive and it is imperative for the future of these students that these programs work well.

Although it is an issue that affects all students and all school districts, school finance and funding is an even greater issue for SPS and its Latino students considering the demographics of the city. With limited resources and a demanding student body, SPS is forced to make budget cuts at times and in places that cannot be afforded. School and program budgets affect key educational aspects such as class size, curriculum material, and professional development opportunities.

Finally, an investigation of the K-12 school system is not complete without examining the opportunities for higher education. Unfortunately for Latino students, the barriers to higher education have only been increasing. Analyzing the

demographic characteristics of Somerville, the difference between recent Latino immigrants and better-established Latinos, the impact that bilingual education and ESL programs have had, the monetary constraints that SPS faces, and access to higher education will lead to a greater understanding of how Latino students in Somerville have been affected by changes and challenges in the education system.

Terms and Definitions

The world of policy and education is replete with terminology and acronyms. It is necessary to have a basic understanding of that terminology to make the reading easier to understand. Basic terms have been provided here:

- **ELL: English Language Learner**
This relatively new acronym has replaced ESL as the preferred term to describe students who are learning English for the first time. This term is also used to classify teachers and departments within schools. For example, Mrs. Smith is an ELL teacher.
- **ESL: English as a Second Language**
This is the traditional term used to describe students, classes, programs, and teachers that are involved with learning and teaching the English language.
- **SPS: Somerville Public Schools**
Somerville Public Schools is the public school system that serves the city of Somerville, MA.
- **LEP: Limited English Proficiency**
This term is used to describe students who are not considered to be fully proficient in English. A test is administered to determine who becomes classified as an LEP student.
- **K-12: Kindergarten-12th Grade**
This abbreviation is used to comprise primary and secondary schooling. The traditional education system in the United States provides that students attend school for 13 years before beginning post-secondary opportunities. This term is also used to classify school districts as ones that include all traditional 13 years.
- **MCAS: Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System**
The MCAS is the state administered standardized test that all students attending a Massachusetts public school (K-12) must pass in order to graduate. MCAS results are used for No Child Left Behind assessments. Students classified as LEP are also required to take and pass the exam.

- Question Two/Unz Initiative/English for the Children
This state ballot proposal effectively ended bilingual education in Massachusetts. It was on the November 2002 ballot and was voted on by the general public.

Methodology and Previous UB Reports

This research project will focus on how recent changes in education policy have affected Latino students in Somerville and the main challenges that Latino youth face in Somerville Public Schools. Research was primarily conducted through seven interviews with people intimately familiar with the city of Somerville, Latinos, youth, Somerville Public Schools, and K-12 education. While some narrators were more knowledgeable about certain aspects of the research issues, all had a working knowledge of all of these topics. The invaluable information that these narrators provided forms the core basis for the material of this report. Personal stories, a crucial part of oral histories, are better shared and understood through direct, in-person interviews and provide the more fact-based part of the report with an important human aspect. I hope to integrate these two areas in a way that presents the needed information while conceptualizing the experience of Latino youth in Somerville.

In addition to personal interviews, previous Urban Borderlands reports also provided a significant source of information to this report. While no previous student or group of students had specifically researched the topic of education policy changes and their effects on Latinos in Somerville, there were a number of reports that covered related topics such as youth programs and organizations and ESL students. These reports provided invaluable background information and helped me conceptualize my work. The diversity of past reports helps show the complexities of

the issues facing the Latino youth population and how purported solutions, as well as attempts to better understand the situation, must be multi-faceted in nature.

I looked to Marisa Romo's *Cambridge Youth Organizations: Where do Latino Youth fit it?* [sic] for a discussion on how after-school youth programs address the needs of the Latino population. While my research did not specifically involve youth programs, many of the issues that these programs deal with are similar to the ones that educators face in the context of Latino students. Youth organizations serve an important role in the education of Latino youth and it was interesting contrasting their objectives and challenges with the policy issues on which I focused.

Since my research was specifically about Somerville Public Schools, Avantika Taneja's *Coming of Age in Somerville: Youth Programs and the Negotiation of Space for Latino Teens* was very useful in helping me understand broader youth issues for Latinos in Somerville. This report highlights the uniqueness and diversity of the city and how that can be both a source of strength and challenge for residents. This report discussed a number of issues that are affecting Latino youth and how that then affects the greater population. As a source of background context, *Coming of Age in Somerville* was a truly useful and pertinent resource.

As highlighted in this report, ESL programs are one of the main issues facing Latino students in Somerville. As a result, *English Language Acquisition: The Opportunities & Experiences of Somerville's Latino Community* by Lerone Lessner proved vital to a better understanding of how youth and adults learn English in Somerville. As this report was only about ESL, it focused on other programs and populations that were not of interest to my research. Nevertheless, it is important to

have a general background of how the immigrant population fares in the Somerville ESL environment in order to understand the situation of Latino youth in the city school system.

ANTH 183 Urban Borderlands

The origin of this report can be traced back to Professor Deborah Pacini-Hernandez's Urban Borderlands class in the Anthropology Department at Tufts University. This public anthropology class represents an attempt to connect college students with the communities in which they live and provide meaningful research that is of use both to the learning experience of the student researchers and the lives of the greater population. The Urban Borderlands students aim to be active participants in the community by learning from and contributing to local institutions. This specific class is fortunate enough to build upon the experience of previous UB students and the work and connections that they have created. Although we did not collaborate with one specific community organization, each student found and developed unique partnerships. This research allowed me to develop relationships with a number of community members who are interested in many of the same issues and topics as me. A dialogue between the university community and the local community at-large contributes towards the goals of both groups.

Personal Background and Perspective

As a half-Hispanic student who migrated to the United States with limited English ability, my personal ideas and opinions will undoubtedly make themselves present in this report. This part of my background is a large part of my personal

identity and, I believe, impacts nearly everything that I do. My research interest in the Latino immigrant community comes from my personal background as a (partly) Latino immigrant. I am originally from Nicaragua and migrated here with my family five years after I was born. My life as an immigrant is somewhat different though, than the story of most immigrants in this country. While my mom is a traditional mestizo of mixed indigenous and Spanish descent, my dad was born in New York and traces his family roots back to England. This background, combined with the fact that I was educated in the United States public school system with “typical American” kids but raised by a Nicaraguan mom that cooked only Nicaraguan food has shaped my life and my interests in a very complicated way. My personal background has created a complex backdrop from which I conduct this research. My ability to relate, in a way, my past experiences with what I learned during this project makes this semester’s journey that much more personal and meaningful.

Another part of my background that may have influenced this research is my previous experience with ESL programs in my own public schools. Through youth mentoring and high school research, I have been closely involved with ESL programs in the past. While those experiences were not as in-depth as this project was, the knowledge I gained in the past has certainly shaped the way I approached this oral history project. When I decided to research education policies and the resulting effects on the Latino student population, I knew that I would not be starting from nothing but instead be building on the knowledge that I had established for myself. This knowledge was extremely useful in providing a foundation for this semester’s work on Latinos in Somerville.

My prior experience with oral histories has also shaped the manner in which I approached and conducted this project. As a student who has previously conducted an oral history project, the skills that I learned well and poorly have tended to stay with me. As in most cases, it is difficult to change habits that have already been established. While Raleigh Yow's *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* was certainly helpful in developing my skills as an interviewer, I felt that, for better or for worse, I carried my past experience as an interviewer with me throughout the project. In many cases, though, I felt that this was an advantage as I had already experienced many of the difficult situations that interviews face. As a result, I was able to focus on my research material earlier on in the semester.

My subject position and background have helped shape the way I conducted the research and the conclusions that I reached. While I try to be impartial where it is necessary, I cannot hide the fact that many of my personal attitudes have become part of this report. As a strong believer in the power of education and as a self-described "pro-immigrant" student, I was somewhat partial to hearing narratives that coincided with my points of view. At the same time, I was not opposed to hear other sides of the argument and, in fact, often looked for different opinions.

The background knowledge that I brought to this research project meant that I was starting with a general base of information from which to base my argument and research. This may have caused me to be less open to changing the framework of my research at the early stages when the project was still being designed.

What Makes Somerville Unique?

The city of Somerville, and its accompanying school district, has been continuing to experience dramatic demographic changes in its population. Latinos have established themselves as a permanent population in the city with relatively high, steady numbers. The official numbers don't even take into account the reportedly large undocumented Latino population. The high proportion of Latinos in Somerville, including English-speaking and LEP and documented and undocumented, makes the city stand out among neighboring towns such as Medford, Cambridge, and Arlington. This characteristic helps define many decisions and their effects within the city and creates unique challenges and opportunities to Somerville Public Schools.

There are, in fact, two issues that Somerville Public Schools faces in the context of its diverse demographics: the large proportion of minority (in this case, the term 'minority' refers to more than ethnic/racial minorities but also includes linguistic minorities) students, and the proportion of minority students in relation to the rest of the state. The first is an issue that forces the school district to recognize the sizeable Latino population as a distinct yet integrated part of the student body, while the second creates a difficult situation for the district when dealing with applying guidelines handed down from the state.

The population of Somerville Public Schools reflects the high proportion of Latino residents. The Massachusetts Department of Education reports that Hispanic students make up 30.4% of the SPS student body compared to 12.9% of the state student population. The large disparity in proportion of Latino students between the state and the local district means that curriculum models and teaching tools passed

down from the state do not reflect Somerville’s population. According to some of my narrators like Sarah Davila and Cira Espinosa, Latino students have unique needs that are often not addressed in many aspects of traditional K-12 education including .

When the Department of Education drafts guidelines and models, they are looking to serve the average state school district. Somerville Public Schools is anything but average. The high degree of diversity found in Somerville means that the school system must find a relatively standard way, because of budget and logistical constraints, to teach all of these different types of students. In addition to the astounding diversity in Somerville, the city has an unusually high number of students with limited English proficiency. Steve Cohen attests that this means that any educational model that is passed down to school districts from the state education agency doesn’t work well with Somerville’s demographics. The idea of “one size fits all” certainly doesn’t work in the field of education and the experience of Somerville Public Schools proves that.

Somerville - Enrollment/Indicators

Selected Populations (2005-06)		
Title	% of District	% of State
First Language not English	48.4	14.3
Limited English Proficient	17.2	5.3
Low-income	60.3	28.2
Special Education	23.6	16.5

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

A manifestation of the high proportion of Latino students and residents in Somerville occurred in analyzing voting patterns from the Question Two referendum. It is important that Question Two was not a vote by state legislators on Beacon Hill

but a popular vote by the citizens of Massachusetts. This allowed for comparison of the voting record on the initiative between areas of different demographics. Director of the SPS English Language Learner Program Sarah Davila noted that Somerville, as well as most urban areas, voted overwhelmingly against Question Two and in favor of maintaining the status quo of bilingual education. She also commented on the characteristics of Somerville and other urban areas that make these school districts so unique from rural and traditional suburban districts. For example, the guidelines that the Massachusetts Department of Education provided public school districts to help the transition from bilingual education to sheltered content instruction are designed for “average” school districts with low numbers of students with limited English proficiency. As can be seen in the chart above, LEP students make up only 5.3% of the Massachusetts student population while they consist of 17.2% of the Somerville student body. These models don’t work well in places like Somerville where the student English language learner population is much higher.

Somerville’s large class sizes also make educating non-English speaking Latinos more difficult. Teaching a language is very staff intensive process. Class sizes must be small for students to effectively learn a foreign language. This is often not the case in Somerville schools, and the students are feeling the effects. While larger than ideal classes are not unique to SPS, it is an added challenge that Somerville’s educators must face in addition to the multitude of other factors.

The high population of ELL students, in and of itself, makes SPS unique. Patricia Davenport, a teacher at SHS said that in 1998, one in six students at Somerville High School were ELL students and that currently, about half of the

student body has a language other than English spoken at home. These staggering numbers represent a daunting challenge for the school system. Even with this high number of ELL students, the number of faculty and staff assigned to support this population has been decreasing as a result of budget cuts and the repeal of bilingual education. Teachers have bigger class sizes and less outside support.

Bilingual Education and ESL Programs

The most apparent issues that LEP Latino students are facing involve changes in the bilingual education and the ESL/ELL programs. The Question Two ballot initiative effectively ended the practice of bilingual education in Massachusetts's public schools and replaced it with what is known as sheltered content instruction. Whereas the old system allowed core content instruction in areas such as mathematics and science to be taught in a student's native language, the new teaching method requires teaching to be in English no matter what the level of a student's English proficiency. While the new policy does allow for parents to sign a waiver allowing their children to be taught in their native language, it is not a highly publicized practice and has not drawn much attention to date. In addition, because of the lower number of qualified teachers, there would not be enough staff to cover classes if a significant number of parents signed waivers. While the national debate over the merits of bilingual education continues to develop, Massachusetts's voters have made a resounding decision that this system is not for them.

While a consensus on the best way for LEP students to learn English does not exist, a number of Somerville educators are ardent supporters of the bilingual

education system. Many also feel that the system is often misrepresented and presented in a negative manner. Sarah Davila explained though that the goal of transitional bilingual education was not to prevent students from learning English but to teach English while not falling behind in core areas by offering some of the course material in a student's native language. This method works especially well in situations where teachers and schools are facing students with a wide range of English skill level, as some students are conversationally fluent while others hardly know any English. To Davila, bilingual education makes perfect sense for Somerville Public Schools considering its unique demographics and high level of LEP students from different backgrounds.

Criticism of sheltered content instruction has already begun in Somerville, as many educators have not seen the new system as a viable way for students to learn English and succeed academically in school. Speaking from personal experience, Aru Manrique lauded the environment that bilingual education created for him while in ESL classes. He didn't start learning English until his family moved to the United States from Venezuela when he was in the early years of elementary school. Noting his "good experience" with his primary school bilingual education experience in Florida, he talked about how he was able to continue progressing academically by taking core subject classes in Spanish while learning English in his ESL classes. Entering an immersion program, like the recently adopted sheltered content instruction model, requires a basic command of the English language, says Manrique, or the students are just being set up for failure. A bilingual education program, on the

other hand, provides a transition from Spanish to English in a more supportive, less intense setting.

In order to better understand the current implications of the policy change brought onto SPS by Question Two, it is important to examine the recent history of the bilingual education and ESL

programs in Somerville. The major turning point came in 2003, the year that Question Two began to be implemented in the schools. Before that time, according to SHS ESL teacher Marjorie Kirstein, the ESL and



bilingual education program employed 25 teachers at Somerville High School, more than any department at that time. Beginning in 2003, though, the program underwent major changes and was completely restructured. Immediately after the Question Two reforms, the number of teachers dedicated to LEP education was cut to five. Since then, the program has re-developed and grown to a more substantial level but it is clear that the program will never be the same, as Question Two completely changed the way that SHS looked at English language education and the bilingual education program.

One of the issues that classroom teachers face with the removal of bilingual education is the increased pressure and responsibilities that educators must undertake. Before, ESL teachers could really focus on teaching English, as they knew that their students would be receiving and understanding important academic skills and

knowledge in their core subject classes. With the reduction of native language instruction at Somerville High, ESL teachers must now teach about the MCAS, writing skills, problem solving skills, and other basic knowledge in addition to working strictly on English proficiency. When LEP students come to their ELL class, they bring questions from their history class taught in English in addition to questions about the English grammar homework from ELL class. This creates a situation where the ELL teachers are overburdened with material and find it difficult to advance to new material because the students are always catching up compared to their peers.

Another factor that complicates the changing face of LEP student instruction is age. The commonly accepted principle that young children learn foreign languages better than others and that language learning ability generally declines with age means that two different policies might be in order for a school district involved in K-12 education. The experience of Sidia Escobar personifies the situation as she participated in the Somerville ESL program from third to fifth grade. After only three of years of bilingual education and English language instruction, Escobar had mastered enough English to begin being successful in “mainstream” classes that taught material in English. Her language skills developed quickly not only because she was young but also because she received very personal, directed attention as an elementary school student in the ESL program. In high school, on the other hand, class sizes are larger, even for ESL classes. Small class size is imperative to teaching and learning another language well. Class sizes have also increased district-wide as a result of recent budget cuts to the ELL (English Language Learner) program in

Somerville related to the implementation of question two. Escobar says that she can't imagine learning English in the conditions that current ELL students face.

The changes that Somerville Public Schools and its bilingual education and ELL programs are facing have created a new set of challenges for Latino students.

School Finance and Funding

Compounding the issues that Somerville Public Schools and its Latino students face is the challenge of school finance. While there are constant calls for increased public school funding and widespread awareness of shortfalls in money that hinder school systems, the unique situation of Somerville makes the district even more vulnerable than most in times of budget decreases. With a student body that includes many LEP and low-income students, SPS is often strapped for cash. There is no doubt that ELL education is expensive and the result is that these programs are often slated for budget cuts in the midst of policy changes and a continuing influx of immigrants. Somerville's relatively low tax base and recent budget cuts have had a disproportional impact on the Latino student body.

According to financial data from Somerville Public Schools (see Appendix), ELL expenditures decreased from \$4.2 million in FY 2002 to \$1.8 million in FY 2006. The most significant decrease occurred between 2003 and 2004 when spending on Bilingual Education dropped from \$4.4 million to \$2 million. This decrease comes at a time when the overall spending for SPS dropped \$5.5 million from 2002 to 2006. Just as total ELL spending makes up a significant portion of the overall budget, the decrease in ELL spending over the noted time span accounts for a large part of the

drop in total SPS spending. As the data suggests, there has been severe budget cuts to the ELL programs in recent years in addition to a decrease in overall district spending.

Steve Cohen describes how school funding is an especially important issue for Somerville because of the unusually high number of LEP students that it must educate. It costs much more to educate a student who is not English-proficient than it does to educate an English-speaking student. Somerville Public School's high educational costs combined with the fact that it's a low-income district create many challenges for the school system and puts Latino youth at an even greater disadvantage. Cohen talked about how many people criticize simply "throwing money at a problem," but he says that, in many cases, money is at the base of many issues and an increase in funding would help solve a number of problems.

Access to Higher Education

Increased access to higher education has been the focus of a number of national non-profit groups aimed at empowering Latinos. As one of the most prized institutions of the United States, the higher education system has been seen as one of the best tools for empowerment. It opens many doors and creates a number of opportunities. Latinos, though, face a number of barriers to higher education that create new challenges for the population. Somerville's Latinos have been greatly affected by the movement to increase access and there is still much to be done to ensure that all students have a fair chance of making it to college.

The in-state tuition bill has been the most prominent effort to increase access to higher education for Latinos. This bill would have allowed undocumented students who have attended Massachusetts's public schools for at least three years to pay in-state tuition at a Massachusetts public university like UMass Boston. Although this bill may have less of an impact on the current day-to-day life of most recent immigrants, the long-term impact of this bill on the immigrant community is still very significant. Aru Manrique cited this bill as one of the best opportunities for Latino advancement in recent years. The opportunity did not come to fruition though, as the current situation of students having to pay out of state tuition even if they have lived in state for a number of years will remain the same after the Massachusetts state legislature did not support the in-state tuition bill. This means that even for the students who succeed with the new educational model of English-only instruction, more barriers to receiving a good education will be kept up instead of being torn down.

Cira Espinosa of Concilio Hispano says that the attitude of Latinos towards higher education must change in order to make high school a more important experience. She says that many Latino immigrant students are seeing it from this perspective: "If I can't go to college in the future, why should I work hard now?" Creating easier access to higher education in turn creates a powerful incentive for students to succeed in high school.

Other challenges to Latino students

Although the uniqueness of Somerville, the bilingual education and ESL/ELL programs, school finance, and access to higher education comprise the major issues facing Latino students in Somerville Public Schools, there are other challenges to this population that also have important and significant impacts. The feelings and emotions of many of my narrators during the interviews underscore the complexity of the situation and breadth of challenges that Latino students face. The frustration of missed opportunities was often felt while discussing these issues. Nevertheless, everybody I spoke with was always forward thinking and more than prepared to rise to the occasion. When faced with so many with so many challenges, though, it is difficult to do.

The Impact of Being an Immigrant

While not completely apparent at first, the Latino population in the United States is not a homogenous group that works, lives, and thinks together. In terms of this research project, the main distinction that separates Latinos is whether or not they are recent immigrants and have limited English ability. There is, in fact, a large divide between these two groups, especially on the K-12 level in SPS. These two groups have different needs, challenges, goals, and lifestyles and it is important to recognize this fact in order to better serve the Latino population as a whole.

Recent immigrants face a host of different issues such as cultural assimilation and understanding and English language acquisition. Even within the immigrant population, the ELL student body is an incredible diverse population in terms of country of origin, native language, academic background, English ability, class,

educational background, and ethnicity. For these Latinos, many immediate needs of the family sometimes overshadow longer-term objectives such as a post-secondary education or job. With many students working jobs after school in order to help support themselves and their families, little time is left for schoolwork, not to mention college planning. The large number of requirements, including passing the MCAS exam, is even more daunting for this population as emphasis on learning English is overshadowed by other tasks. In many cases, the system has become so complicated to navigate and students are forced to juggle so many different responsibilities that students struggle to succeed in school. Multiple teachers recounted to me how their students always seem to be overworked and overburdened and simply don't have the energy or time left to focus on academics.

Somerville - Enrollment/Indicators

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (2005-06)	
Race	% of District
African American	14.6
Asian	7.7
Hispanic	30.4
Native American	0.3
White	45.4
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	1.5

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

It is detrimental to both groups for others to classify all Latinos into one category of students. Not all Latinos are from Central America. Not all Latinos have difficulty speaking English. Not all Latinos are entering the workforce directly after

high school. This is not to say that Latinos do not share similarities but instead to point out that this group is more diverse and complex than may first meet the eye.

This divide has caused another layer of challenges for the Latino community in SPS. Just as the overall Latino community is sometimes fragmented in the United States, the community of LEP and recent LEP students has experienced some divisions as well. Patricia Davenport said that a number of current ELL students have talked openly about how they feel left out not only by the general student body at Somerville High School but also by the Latino population who had once been ELL students. Davenport described the stigma that exists against students who can't speak English well, and the social and cultural challenges that they encounter. Instead of the Latino population coming together, the only community that accepts LEP students is that of recent immigrants who have trouble with English themselves. Once students have mastered English well enough and have lived here long enough to not be considered immigrants but "Americans," they no longer wish to associate themselves with the newer arrivals. Sidia Escobar, a student at SHS, describes the situation that non-English speakers face: "I feel that as a Latino student, you're coming in from another country, [and] as an ESL student, you have to adjust to a new place, especially if you're not able to speak English when you're trying to communicate with other people. It's kind of hard. And how do you get your voice heard if you're not able to speak English?" As a result of the general social stigma against non-English speakers, many Latino students who speak English without an accent quickly move to associate themselves with the majority population of English speakers. This division within the Latino community further complicates the situation for both

groups of students by creating a sense of competition and stratification instead of cooperative achievement.

Role of Families

Families have always played a significant role in Latino society, often holding life together when there are so many obstacles to address. The relationship between the family, parenting, and education is one that must be addressed in order to find solutions to many of the challenges facing Latinos. Although increased parental involvement is a goal of every educator, the role of the family takes on an increased significance in the situation of Latinos where family ties are already strong and students may be struggling more because of the complex group of issues they face. Sarah Davila spoke about the importance of the family and parents in education and believes very strongly in making a concerted effort to involve more parents in the overall education process. Especially in the context of immigrant families, parents must play a leading role in the education of their children. She has led efforts to bring parents into the classroom and educate them on how they can better prepare their children for academic success. With students being away from home for so long in school and at work, parental involvement in education is crucial. Teachers realize the power that parents bring to the table and that it means more when it comes from Mom or Dad rather than a teacher. Families must play a central role in helping Latino students overcome the challenges they face.

MCAS

Although the MCAS has been mentioned in previous sections of this report, it is important to look specifically at this exam because of the way it has changed

teaching styles and the focus of teaching for Latino students. This standardized test developed by the Massachusetts Department of Education has become a source of anxiety, frustration, and large amounts of spending because of its graduation requirement and its significance in the context of “No Child Left Behind.” Every student graduating a Massachusetts public school must pass the MCAS, regardless of English proficiency. Educators at Somerville High explained how dire the situation becomes when a student with no English background arrives in Somerville after ninth grade: the focus on educating the student shifts from learning English to passing the MCAS exam. While some may argue that students will learn English while studying for the exam, the teachers I spoke with argue that students with zero English proficiency need at least some pure instruction about the English language before being expected to learn indirectly. Because of the pressures on the student and the school to pass the MCAS though, attempts to teach English well are cast aside in favor of selective instruction that will help the student succeed on the exam.

GRADE LEVEL 10 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Student Group	Students Included		% of Students at Each Performance Level			
	#	%	A	P	NI	F
LEP/FLEP	48	100	4	17	38	42
Low Income	195	100	8	41	33	18
African American/Black	72	100	3	38	42	18
Asian or Pacific Islander	31	100	23	42	19	16
Hispanic	81	100	7	36	36	21
Native American	0	0	-	-	-	-
White	164	100	12	51	29	8

GRADE LEVEL 10 - MATHEMATICS

Student Group	Students Included		% of Students at Each Performance Level			
	#	%	A	P	NI	F
LEP/FLEP	46	100	15	17	35	33
Low Income	188	100	21	29	32	18
African American/Black	70	100	9	20	44	27
Asian or Pacific Islander	31	100	48	23	19	10
Hispanic	79	100	20	25	27	28
Native American	0	0	-	-	-	-
White	160	100	32	32	26	11

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

As noted by the data above, LEP students have the highest rate of failure (F) of listed demographic groups for the 2006 10th grade Math and English MCAS exams. These results are especially significant because they are at the 10th grade level, leaving students few opportunities to pass the exam and meet that graduation requirement. Hispanic students also have relatively high rates of MCAS failure, according to this data set. The burden that the MCAS exam places on students and teachers is high and requires additional resources to be used in raising the passing rates.

Once again, Somerville's demographics are an important part of understanding the MCAS impact. Steve Cohen says that the MCAS disproportionately affects poorer districts like Somerville. With less staff and faculty available, educators must focus less on their subject material and more on the MCAS exam. As a result of the wide level of academic skill and knowledge in their classrooms, teachers are essentially forced to teach to the test. Throwing the MCAS

exam into the equation only makes teaching LEP students that more difficult. Instead of focusing on the core subject matter or on teaching English, teachers are spending more and more time on teaching about the MCAS.

Illiteracy

Another major difference between recent immigrants and Latinos who have been living in the United States is that of illiteracy. While this does not affect all recent immigrants, many of my narrators pointed out that there is a significant population of Latino LEP students in SPS that are illiterate in their native language. It is difficult enough to attempt to learn a foreign language in a pressured environment while still keeping up with the traditional academic coursework. Being illiterate in one's native language means that a student has little on which to base his English knowledge. Patricia Davenport shared the story of a student who was having a lot of trouble learning the names of the months in English. She decided to go over the months in Spanish and discovered that the student didn't know that either. The student had worked all of his life in the fields of El Salvador with a very limited formal education background. The student never had to learn the names of the months in his own language. These students require even more attention and help than the other ELL students. This is another example of one of the biggest challenges faced by Somerville Public Schools when trying to educate its LEP population: these students come from such varied backgrounds that it is impossible to develop a successful standard way of educating these students. Illiteracy gets tied back to many of the bigger issues such as Question Two and budget cuts and makes the situation that more complex and challenging.

A New Culture

Adapting to a new culture is a necessity of life for recent immigrants. While it is easier for some than for others, balancing the culture change with schoolwork, a job, learning English and more is very difficult. In Somerville, as opposed to other similar cities, recent immigrants are forced to drop many of their cultural signatures and become more “American,” according to Cira Espinosa. She believes that the standardization to U.S. norms has gone too far and has served to further alienate the Latino immigrant population. This has impacted the Latino student population by creating the added social pressure to be “more American.”

This “Americanization” has been negative not only by forcing to Latinos to abandon parts of their Hispanic heritage but also by creating two identities for Latinos. Espinosa says that many Latinos are caught in between two worlds: they are neither American enough to be American nor Latino enough to be Latino. It is often a zero-sum game where you are one or the other and, as much as you may try to gain acceptance into both communities, being an American Latino is impossible. When students are forced into one of these two categories, learning English takes on an entirely separate meaning. This is one of the societal issues with which Latino students must grapple and with which many people are relatively unfamiliar. An enormous pressure is created on Latino students that could possibly set them back even further.

Conclusion

Latino students are continuing to face a number of challenges in the education system that hinders their ability to succeed in school. The complex situation has created a difficult environment for Latino students and recent changes in education policy have greatly affected Latinos by further complicating the situation for all involved. For Somerville Public Schools, there is still much to be decided: Will the district be able to secure more funds and increase the ELL budget? Will there be less focus on the MCAS and more on teaching students skills that they need in life? How will immigration continue to impact the district? The answers to these difficult questions lie in an uncertain future that will be shaped by many of the individuals that I spoke with for this report. Much is left to be done if Somerville wants to ensure that Latino students receive the education that they deserve.

While awareness of these issues continues to rise, signaling a greater voice for Latinos and positive change in the future, there are many obstacles that continue to impede progress. While there is great possibility and opportunity for an improved situation, the environment for Latino and LEP students can worsen. More money and more teachers are needed at the school and system level and a new focus on meeting the needs of all students is needed at the state and national level. It is unclear at this point what direction SPS, the state, and the nation will take but there is hope that a permanent improvement in the education system for these students is in the future.

Continued development of this research would be very useful, as this report has only begun to address the deeper issues affecting Latino students in Somerville. The district and its population are changing rapidly as efforts to adapt to the changing

landscape are explored and adapted. On a national level, the merits of standardized testing and bilingual education continue to be debated amongst rising tension in this country over the issue of immigration. All of the challenges that have been discussed in this report have created a unique, complex mix that is sure to develop in the years to come. Further research may involve understanding one specific issue, such as illiteracy in the native language, and how it relates to Latinos in the education system overall. Even though a number of topics were covered, there are more that were left untouched. Both the pro-immigrant and pro-Latino movements, for example, are gaining state and national momentum and there is no telling what effects these movements will have on the education system down the road.

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Appendix

Narrator Biographies

Sarah Davila is the Director of the Somerville Public Schools English Language Learner Programs and Services. She has worked in the Somerville school system for fifteen years and moved into her current position two years ago. Her current role has her supervising the ELL teachers and making sure they have what they need to teach this unique population. She is also deeply involved in placing students in the ELL program and in a specific level of English. Davila has always been involved in the fields of education and community organizing and she has reached her current job after a myriad of different roles including the director of the parent information center and the multicultural curriculum director. Although Davila is not a Latina herself, she was worked primarily with Latino populations her entire career and speaks fluent Spanish.

Aru Manrique is the first Director of Multicultural Affairs for the City of Somerville. He was working with CAAS, the Community Action Agency of Somerville, when he was approached by Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone to fill this new position. Manrique is originally from Venezuela but received his early primary schooling in Florida. As a student, he was enrolled in both an ESL program and a bilingual education program. His direct experience with ESL programs as a student in Florida and later in Somerville (he attended Somerville High School) gives him a valuable perspective of somebody who has gone through the school system as a student of limited English proficiency. Before coming to the Mayor's Office, Manrique was the Latino youth coordinator at CAAS where he worked directly with Latino students on a variety of issues. He has also worked as a tenant advocate in the Somerville area. He has experience as a student in a bilingual education program, as an adult working with youth in a community organization and as a city administrator observing with the public education system.

Steve Cohen is a professor in the American Studies and Education Departments at Tufts University. He has been at Tufts for eleven years serving in the same general role as a professor and lecturer. Before that, he was a high school social studies teacher in and around the Boston area for twenty years. In addition to his thirty years in the field of education, he has brought his three children through Massachusetts's public schools including the Cambridge school system. Cohen's most recent direct involvement with the state education system came in 2003 as he testified as an expert in the school finance case *Hancock v. Driscoll*. He argued for the plaintiffs that schools that are located in lower-income areas are not able to satisfy the constitutional requirement to provide their students with an education that successfully prepares

them for life after high school. Cohen interviewed social studies teachers at rich districts like Brookline and poor districts like Lowell and compared how they taught their material. He found great discrepancies between the two situations and presented his findings in the trial.

Patricia Davenport has been an ELL teacher at Somerville High School since 1987. Although her official title and the department in which she worked in have changed, her job role has always remained the same: teaching English to SHS students whose first language is not English. She also taught English to adults in Italy for ten years at a private educational institute. In 1999, she was one of a few teachers in the Somerville Public Schools system to be awarded a Fulbright Educational Grant that facilitated an exchange with Brazilian teachers. Davenport spent one full academic year living and teaching in Brazil and she said that this experience has helped her tremendously as an ELL teacher in the very diverse Somerville High School.

Marjorie Kirstein has been at Somerville High School since 1998 teaching mainly as an ELL teacher but also working with traditional, core classes. Her main teaching certification is in ESL teaching as she trained for that in 1980 in Puerto Rico. She has taught ESL/ELL at three different school districts and with a variety of English language levels. She has also taught English at the adult level through a variety of community organizations. Kirstein is a strong advocate of bilingual education and was very involved with the community movement against “question two.” She has worked primarily with Latino students throughout her 20+ years as an ESL/ELL teacher and has lived previously in the Caribbean and South America.

Sidia Escobar is an eighteen-year-old senior at Somerville High School. Originally from El Salvador, she migrated to the United States right before her third grade year in school and has been in the U.S. for nine years. Not knowing any English before arriving, she was in three years of ESL and bilingual education classes from 3rd to 5th grade. Having lived in Somerville her whole time in the U.S., she was in the ESL program at the East Somerville Community School. She is in a number of clubs at SHS and also does volunteer work related to the in-state tuition bill. Escobar has become very involved in the Somerville community and in the immigrant rights movement.

Cira Espinosa currently works with health and youth issues in Somerville as a staff member of Concilio Hispano, a non-profit organization that works with Latinos. After graduating from college, Cira began as a community health worker before transitioning to being a youth worker. She has held the position of both Health and Youth Program Manager at Concilio Hispano. She has lived and worked in Boston all of her life and has worked at Concilio Hispano for five years. It is also important to note that Cira is Latina herself and went through many of the issues that will be discussed in the interview as a secondary school student. She is very passionate about working with Latino youth and draws much insight and strength from her personal experiences.

Somerville Public Schools Budget Trends

ORGANIZATION	FY 2002 TOTALS	FY 2003 TOTALS	FY2004 TOTALS	FY2005 TOTALS	FY2006 TOTALS
School Committee	83,900	83,900	62,675	65,100	65,100
School Administration	1,431,188	1,468,258	1,853,376	1,952,858	1,780,662
SHS Principal's Office	1,077,230	1,105,622	1,120,456	1,225,156	1,231,418
SHS Business Department	679,253	641,834	374,150	Vocational Education	Vocational Education
SHS English Department	1,009,662	1,065,427	1,236,829	1,220,084	1,305,063
SHS Foreign Language Department	694,306	720,674	511,401	484,738	495,425
SHS Math Department	992,785	1,027,133	895,318	879,176	936,937
SHS Science Department	921,849	961,294	841,505	875,632	870,871
SHS Social Studies Department	786,410	812,885	689,502	687,726	696,593
Vocational Education Program	1,937,873	2,009,399	1,282,178	1,614,777	1,608,214
Brown Elementary School	891,748	933,618	909,481	898,301	854,589
Capuano Center (Formerly Edgerly)	449,212	503,348	428,112	477,885	367,307
Cummings Elementary School	679,748	652,479	627,003	620,400	577,117
East Somerville Community School	1,501,400	1,626,992	1,589,713	1,646,841	1,687,555
Healey Elementary School	1,462,082	1,578,344	1,711,957	1,769,634	1,940,912
Kennedy Elementary School	1,258,928	1,328,488	1,378,093	1,508,076	1,505,179
Lincoln Park Community School	1,328,099	1,314,138	1,180,054	1,284,691	1,312,812
Powderhouse Community School	863,398	800,077	693,754	CLOSED	CLOSED
West Somerville Neighborhood School	1,175,438	1,221,745	1,171,000	1,334,539	1,274,610
Winter Hill Community School	1,644,043	1,550,631	1,390,879	1,460,504	1,464,086
Art Program	797,983	838,016	780,764	777,417	820,924
Athletics Program	407,039	412,431	373,565	378,640	381,934
Curriculum & Instruction	349,456	425,454	575,901	636,240	696,358
Early Childhood Program	30,000	30,000	5,000	38,656	0
English Language Learners (Bilingual)	4,193,681	4,441,718	1,982,437	1,835,822	1,797,732
Facilities	3,392,371	3,618,322	3,179,309	675,000	950,000
Food Services	251,457	242,050	259,284	259,284	267,063
Guidance Services	1,342,962	1,263,663	1,136,193	1,162,135	1,218,332
Health Education	416,297	384,029	317,060	255,847	264,156
Library Services	870,289	878,792	571,491	541,490	487,520
Music Program	707,775	735,965	564,945	573,167	589,102
Personnel & Activities	1,864,277	1,863,706	1,461,806	1,274,316	1,916,361
Physical Education Program	764,760	796,033	736,457	737,903	712,924
Reading Program	559,498	752,959	3,950	261,118	129,735
SCALE / Community Schools	450,125	250,625	254,786	264,174	266,741
Special Needs Program	10,544,937	10,460,693	11,597,889	11,404,375	11,637,449
Full Circle, Next Wave	914,865	1,089,508	906,486	941,407	1,003,280
Student Services	484,956	665,561	625,299	736,892	719,827
Technology Services	1,288,720	1,444,189	919,942	1,239,999	1,175,112
TOTAL	50,500,000	52,000,000	46,200,000	44,000,000	45,000,000

Source: Somerville Public Schools