Newcomer Schools Raise Old Questions

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Body

The special ***school*** for immigrants proposed last week by ***Schools*** Chancellor Ramon C. Cortines joins a growing field of "***newcomer***" ***schools*** in states like California, Texas and Illinois.

For educators and civil rights officials, the ***schools*** ***raise*** ***questions*** that have long dogged special programs: Do they truly help children or risk harm by isolating them from the mainstream?

These are not only pedagogic ***questions***, but also legal ones. The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, concerned about segregation, has investigated immigrant programs. In an investigation of a California ***school*** that has served as a benchmark for cities setting up other immigrant ***schools***, the department gave voice to an informal guiding principle: The ***schools*** should aim to be transitional; students should probably not stay beyond a year.

But in his plan for New York's ***Newcomers*** ***School***, which would open in September in Long Island City, Queens, Mr. Cortines proposes allowing the students to remain for up to four years. The 1,000 high ***school*** students, who would attend voluntarily, would have the option of graduating from there. That could be a problem.

In 1990, Federal investigators said a so-called ***newcomer*** elementary ***school*** in Sacramento, Calif., would violate civil rights segregation laws if it kept children for more than a year without transferring them to regular ***schools***. Norma V. Cantu, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights for the United States Department of Education, said in an interview that there were no hard and fast rules, and that each program would be evaluated on its own merits.

Still, most ***schools*** take the one-year cap as a requirement -- and a healthy one. Some principals said that to keep children longer than a year would deprive them of opportunities to take courses offered by mainstream high ***schools*** or to mix with native English speakers.

But New York already has two small transitional programs for immigrants in Manhattan and the Bronx, called Liberty high ***schools***, in which students transfer to regular ***schools*** after six months or a year. Mr. Cortines said he was determined not to accept a one-year limit.

"I agree that they should be transitional, but I don't believe that you can put an arbitrary time on it," Mr. Cortines said. Sending a student to a regular ***school*** before he or she is ready "would be to send them to the ranks of the dropouts," he said. He said he would appeal any Federal decision to impose a one-year limit and called the Sacramento ruling "a pronouncement from Washington, and they really don't understand the changing demography of who the immigrant population is in America."

The Cortines ***school*** would be generally more ambitious than the other ***newcomer schools***, including those in San Francisco, whose ***school*** system Mr. Cortines headed before he came to New York. Most other such programs offer a mix of classes in English and classes in a student's native language, depending on their staff and their stand in a long-running national debate about which type of instruction is better.

Mr. Cortines proposes to offer, in addition to English language instruction, bilingual education in all major subjects -- math, science and social studies -- in as many as 10 languages. He did, however, acknowledge in an interview that it would be difficult to find, say, a Bengali-speaking science teacher, and that he might have to scale back his ambitions.

In the 1990 Sacramento case, Federal investigators wrote that the Office of Civil Rights had "serious reservations regarding the location of the district ***newcomer*** program at a separate ***school*** site."

Although there is increasing interest in ***newcomer schools***, they are largely uncharted territory. Experts say there are no studies to document whether immigrant children perform better in separate ***schools*** or in classes for speakers of limited English in mainstream ***schools***.

But anecdotes suggest that many children have good experiences at the ***schools***, which help them overcome traumatic experiences or educational deficits they might have suffered in refugee camps or rural villages in their native countries. Parents appreciate the counseling that many ***schools*** provide to help with jobs, health care and naturalization, a prominent feature of the New York plan. And education officials say the ***schools*** are efficient because they bring together students who speak the same language, allowing districts to justify hiring teachers who speak that language.

People familiar with the ***schools*** say success depends on whether the ***schools*** get enough resources to be comparable to mainstream ***schools***, on how quickly and accurately they evaluate the students, and on how much support children get when they move into mainstream ***schools***.

There are only a handful of ***newcomer schools***, most of them in California, but their numbers are increasing. Most occupy separate buildings; a few are inside regular ***schools***. Fort Worth, with large numbers of Vietnamese and Latin Americans, started a ***school*** in 1993 for grades 6 through 12.

Last summer, when thousands of Haitian refugees were arriving in the Miami area, the Dade County ***School*** Board voted to create ***newcomer schools*** in the event that an influx of immigrants forced the ***school*** system to absorb more than 100 children a day.

Immigrant advocacy groups wrote Ms. Cantu's office complaining that the Dade County plan would unfairly segregate children into substandard ***schools***.

Proposals are on the table in Providence, R.I., and Chicago, where officials said that they, like Mr. Cortines, were hoping not to restrict their students to one year.

In New York, where the ***Newcomers School*** would ease extreme overcrowding in two Queens high ***schools***, there is support for Mr. Cortines's idea. Most of the 25,000 children added each year to the city's public ***schools*** are immigrants. But there are concerns about aspects of the Chancellor's proposal, which requires Board of Education approval.

"Having a whole ***school*** that is only for limited-English-proficient students does have the potential for denying the students certain opportunities that are available in other ***schools***, as well as the chance to mix with native English speakers," said Luis Reyes, a ***school*** board member. "The other concern that I have is that the program be a full bilingual program. We have to do more as a ***school*** system to attract bilingual teachers."

Peter D. Roos, co-director of Multicultural Education Training and Advocacy in San Francisco, said that a ***school*** on the grand scale that Mr. Cortines is proposing might actually draw bilingual teachers and other resources away from regular high ***schools***, shortchanging students at those ***schools***.

But others champion New York's plan as is. They say more time in the ***school*** would give students the long-term bilingual education they might not get in regular high ***schools***, where there might not be teachers who speak their languages. Proponents say the diversity of New York's immigrant population means that one ethnic group would not feel isolated or disadvantaged; the situation would not be akin to Dade County's proposed ***school***, which would, in effect, have been all Haitian.

"It doesn't make sense to talk about segregation when you have so many different languages spoken," said Margie McHugh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition. "And if you've got two ***schools*** that are oversubscribed by 70 percent, where else are these children going to be? They'd be in overcrowded classes in makeshift tents on the high ***school*** lawn."

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