

Executive Summary

Immigrant students often face tougher challenges than others in achieving good education outcomes and they have diverse needs.

Net migration to OECD countries has tripled since 1960. Today, immigrant students comprise 10 to 20% of the student population in many OECD countries. Some countries have long histories of immigration; others have experienced an unprecedented increase in the last decade. Immigration is a local phenomenon, and there are large variations in the geographic distribution of immigrant students; however, teaching immigrant students is becoming an important part of the reality facing teachers every day.

With some exceptions, immigrant students, on average, have weaker education outcomes at all levels of education. They often have more restricted access to quality education; are less likely to participate in pre-primary education; more prone to drop out before completing upper secondary; more apt to have lower academic scores; and more likely to attend schools with peers from less advantaged backgrounds. But immigrant students are not homogeneous. In all of the review countries, there were immigrants representing close to or more than a hundred languages. Students who speak a language at home other than the language of instruction face different problems from those who do not. In some countries, older immigrant students arriving at a later stage in their education do not have the same experience as younger immigrants. In other countries, second-generation immigrant students, though born in the country, still face particular challenges; and there may be a performance gap between them and native students.

Performance gaps between immigrant and native students are largely explained by language barriers and socio-economic differences.

The differences in language spoken at home and socio-economic background account for a large part of the performance gap between native and immigrant students. This indicates that immigrant students would benefit from language-centric policies and policies targeting more broadly less socio-economically advantaged students. However, even after accounting for these two factors, significant performance gaps still remain. This highlights the need for targeted support measures for immigrant students as part of a larger equity scheme. Other factors associated with better educational performance for immigrant students include: participation in early childhood education and care, early home reading activities, more hours for learning language at school, educational resources at home, a more advantaged school average socio-economic composition, and school accountability measures.

Migrant education policy involves complex interactions of discrete policy tools that need to be well-co-ordinated.

Governments typically use eight tools to steer migrant education policy at the national, regional and/or local level:

- 1) setting explicit policy goals for immigrant students within broader education policy goals;
- 2) setting regulations and legislation;
- 3) designing effective funding strategies;
- 4) establishing standards, qualifications and qualifications framework;
- 5) establishing curricula, guidelines and pedagogy;
- 6) building capacity (especially training and teacher support);
- 7) raising awareness, communication and dissemination;
- 8) monitoring, research, evaluation and feedback.

Effective alignment of these discrete steering tools is required for maximum effect of migrant education policy. For effective implementation, it is essential to recognise “heterogeneity” among immigrant students; take a holistic approach and shared responsibility at all levels and among all key stakeholders; and find the right balance between universal measures for all students and targeted measures for immigrant students.

School capacity needs strengthening in language teaching, diversity training for teachers and school leaders, and school-home co-operation.

Dealing with diversity is a longstanding challenge for some early childhood education and care institutions and schools and is relatively new for others. School leaders and teachers often do not feel qualified or sufficiently supported to teach students with multi-cultural, bilingual and diverse learning needs. In order to close the achievement gap, institutional changes must be made at the school level, including changes in language teaching, school leadership, teaching methodologies and school-home co-operation.

Proficiency in the language of instruction is a major tool and precondition for learning. It is essential that school practice is guided by an explicit coherent language policy that is informed by research and adapted to the different levels of the education system. Teachers and school leaders need to establish a positive school and classroom climate that treats diversity as a resource rather than an obstacle for successful teaching and learning. With a whole-school approach, support for immigrant students should be provided not only in specialised courses but in an integrated way across the curriculum and throughout all-school and after-school activities. Schools should develop new ways of communicating and collaborating so as to better engage immigrant parents and communities in school activities. Parental and community involvement can influence students in the classroom as well as students’ learning environments at home.

System level policies need to manage concentration within schools and localities, funding strategies, and monitoring and evaluation.

Immigrant students may experience different educational opportunities depending on where they live and which school they attend. Policies at all levels of the education system need to ensure that the same quantity and quality of language and other targeted support is consistently offered to immigrant students. Review countries have made significant efforts to improve system management, and it appears that these have some beneficial effects. Challenges include managing variations and concentration; effective funding strategies; and monitoring and evaluation. Progress will be beneficial for native students as well.

It is crucial to ensure more consistent provision of educational support and manage the opportunities and challenges that arise in particular areas or schools with large concentrations of immigrant students. This requires strong political leadership; accountability; sharing good practices among municipalities, schools and teachers; and providing sufficient information about the education system and schools among immigrant parents. Funding could be one means to manage inequities by targeting discrete areas, schools or student groups – or in combination – after careful consideration of educational priorities. Monitoring and evaluation could help improve school performance by permitting timely tracking of student outcomes, identifying those who need help, and designing appropriate interventions.