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## ***Public Discourse on Immigration:***

English Language Acquisition and Children of Immigrants

January 2009

### **Overview**

In the summer and fall of 2008, The Opportunity Agenda commissioned a report to examine media coverage and public perceptions of two important and related issues in the immigration debate, English-language acquisition and the children of immigrants. The goal of the media analyses is to determine the framing and coverage of the issues, the sources and quotes that are used, editorial and op-ed positions taken, regional differences, and challenges and opportunities in coverage. The goal of the opinion research is to assess public understanding and perceptions; to identify supportive, persuadable, and opposing audiences; and to determine areas including support and opposition that are especially high or low.

This report provides additional context to immigration supporters' understanding of the public discourse and the strategies needed to lay the foundation for positive policies. This includes findings on coverage and public opinion of English-language instruction for immigrants and perceptions about children of immigrants, as well as openings for and barriers to building support, including relevant audiences; preliminary messaging recommendations; and preliminary communications outreach recommendations.

### **English-Language Acquisition:**

#### **Media Content Analysis Findings**

1. The media links the issue of language acquisition to one segment of the immigrant community: Spanish-speaking immigrants.
2. Two competing frames emerge: (1) today's immigrants do not want to learn English (that is, do not want to integrate) and therefore must be compelled to do so; and (2) today's immigrants want to learn English, and their school-age children quickly become proficient (and integrated into United States society).
3. Implicit in the negative frame is the idea that the role of government is as enforcer of rules rather than provider of services. None of the articles that mention learning English as a requirement of citizenship, for example, talk about how such learning will be accomplished. The implication is that immigrants will have to figure that out for themselves (tapping into the "personal responsibility" frame).
4. Advocates have a low profile: few are quoted in news articles, and there were no opinion pieces by advocates in our sample. Immigrants were also rarely quoted.
5. Readers are not getting a clear picture of where the responsibility for providing ELL (English Language Learning) programs resides. A reader who wished to engage with the issue would not know what to demand from whom.

6. Articles about lawsuits that call for translation services as a remedy are a double-edged sword because they highlight the needs of immigrant communities, but reinforce the negative frame that immigrants do not want to learn English.

7. Although few in number, the feature articles that describe actual language acquisition programs are upbeat, informative, and engaging.

### **Public Opinion Analysis Findings**

1. Most Americans support the concept of ELL programs.

2. A plurality support increased funding for ELL programs, and that support increases to a majority after people hear arguments pro and con.

3. Most Americans think immigrants are motivated to learn English.

4. The two strongest arguments against increased funding are based on personal responsibility and competition for resources.

5. The two strongest arguments in favor of increased funding are community-based, reflecting the benefit of such programs to the common good, and future-oriented, regarding our country's ability to retain and grow a workforce.

6. The views of African Americans generally mirror the views of the public as a whole, while Asian Americans and Latinos are more supportive than the public as a whole of increased ELL funding.

7. The most persuasive messengers on this issue are teachers and immigrants who have learned English.

### **Recommendations**

We recommend that advocates and their allies:

1. Use the term "English Language Learning" instead of ESL or ESOL.

The term English Language Learning reassures audiences that English is being prioritized as part of the integration process.

2. Emphasize how English Language Learning promotes the common good by strengthening communities and our economy, as well as promoting children's success and contribution.

3. Discuss the need for increased "*investment*" in the *opportunity* to learn English, to counter concerns about fiscal priorities and personal responsibility.

4. Pitch upbeat feature stories about government-supported ELL programs that work.

The publication of positive feature stories will go a long way toward challenging negative stereotypes and demonstrating how ELL programs promote the common good. Identifying teachers and immigrants who have learned English and pitching them to reporters as quotable sources can build on the public's trust in those messengers.

5. Build relationships with Latino, Asian American, and other journalists of color.

It is noteworthy that a majority of the articles in our sample about immigrant integration were authored by journalists with Hispanic or Asian surnames. Reaching out and pitching to Latino, Asian American, and other reporters of color should be a high priority.

6. Generate and place more opinion pieces.

The fact that very few opinion pieces were picked up by our scan suggests either that not many are being submitted or that op-ed editors are choosing not to publish them. By soliciting and placing strong opinion pieces and commentary, advocates can alter public perceptions. High priority should be assigned to op-eds by local officials who support ELL programs and oppose English-as-the-official-language laws; commentary by demographers and researchers that challenges stereotypes based on recent research; and op-eds by teachers and school administrators showcasing successful programs.

7. Reconsider messages around language rights litigation.

Language rights litigation is an important weapon for the enforcement of human rights. Focusing communications solely on the remedy of more translation services, however, may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing the negative frame. Advocates may want to consider incorporating the message of a successful transition to community integration.

## **Children of Immigrants:**

### **Media Content Analysis Findings**

1. The media frames for the children of immigrants convey a sense of alarm tempered by compassion, evidence of integration, and assertions that the country needs their talents.
2. Articles on population trends showing significant increases in numbers create a sense of alarm and feed into the fear that "foreign" children are placing unacceptable burdens on finite social services.
3. But alarm is tempered by the compassion one would expect from a society that cherishes children, at least in its rhetoric. The idea that immigrant children should not be blamed for the "sins" of their parents was repeated and reinforced in widespread coverage of the DREAM Act debate.
4. Feature stories about the integration of children of immigrants into mainstream society challenge the frame of "otherness" that characterizes much of the coverage of undocumented adults (that is, their parents).
5. Individual stories included in coverage of the DREAM Act debate effectively conveyed the idea that children of immigrants have much to offer the country.

### **Public Opinion Analysis Findings**

1. Public opinion research into American attitudes toward children of immigrants is sparse and narrowly focused, and with one limited exception none of the relevant published surveys tested arguments or messages. Findings are therefore tentative and limited.
2. Residents of states with a long history of Hispanic immigration appear to be more accepting than residents of states with a more recent history.
3. A large majority nationwide is aware of automatic citizenship for children born in the U.S. A smaller majority opposes changing the Constitution to deny citizenship to U.S.-born children of "illegal immigrants."
4. A poll taken at the time of the DREAM Act debate suggests that a majority of the public feared that passage would encourage more illegal immigration.

## **Recommendations**

We recommend that advocates:

1. Frame communications on the children of immigrants in terms of compassion and support for *all* children and their importance to the future of our nation.
2. Conduct additional public opinion research to gauge the degree of fear and alarm concerning population trends, and to test messages and arguments for inclusion and integration, both pro and con.
3. Concentrate on media markets in areas of the country that have recently experienced increases in immigration. Positive stories and op-eds that communicate a value-based message of integration and inclusion should be proactively pitched to reporters and editors in those media markets.
4. Actively publicize new studies that demonstrate that immigrant children are being successfully integrated into American society, and that their future contributions to the U.S. will provide significant economic, social, and cultural benefits to the country as a whole.
5. Beware of demonizing immigrant parents and contrasting “innocent” children with the “sins” of their adult family members.
6. Continue promoting the voices and accomplishments of immigrant students on all media platforms. These stories, however, should be framed and pitched in terms of how integration initiatives allowed those students to reach their full potential and contribution.

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