

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: May 4, 2015

Published in Print: May 6, 2015, as **Undocumented Students Strive to Adapt**

In U.S. Schools, Undocumented Youths Strive to Adjust

Some Schools Help Youths Get Foothold in Language, Culture

By **Corey Mitchell**

Washington



Kevin faced a traumatic journey to the United States in search of a better life.

The 19-year-old undocumented immigrant from El Salvador faced yet another set of challenges when he arrived in the United States last year and enrolled in school.

First came the laughs of classmates poking fun at his halting English. Then came the puzzled looks from teachers struggling to understand those same words.

But a new place in the same place has made all the difference for Kevin.

The teenager is one of 200 students enrolled in the first-year **International Academy for English-language learners** at the District of Columbia's Cardozo Education Campus, a school-within-a-school for students who arrived in the United States within the past 18 months.

The struggles and successes of Cardozo's recently arrived students and English-learners provide a peek into the experiences of the **surge of unaccompanied children and youths** who streamed across the U.S.-Mexico border and entered American classrooms last fall. The students, many with yearlong gaps in their formal education and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, represent a significant new challenge for schools. Many are still in legal limbo as they wait for immigration judges to decide whether they can stay or will be deported. Language barriers can complicate every step of the process.

"When I speak, I am scared," said Ruth, 17, a Salvadoran immigrant who is self-conscious about speaking English aloud.

"That's the problem we all have," added her classmate, 16-year-old Yeykin from Guatemala.

Because of their immigration status, *Education Week* is identifying students only by their first names.

Similar to what's taking place in many other districts, English-learners, many of them recent immigrants, are the fastest-growing student population at Cardozo.

The majority of the academy's students at Cardozo fled violence in Central American countries such as Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Most spoke little English when they arrived, if any at all. In some cases, Spanish is not even students' primary language: The academy also educates students from the Horn of Africa and several nations in Asia. The majority of students in the academy are boys, who made up the overwhelming majority of children who made the treacherous trip to the U.S. border last year.

"Many of them feel like they aren't going to succeed in school, like it's too big of an undertaking," said Margie McHugh, the director of the Migration Policy Institute's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy.

But the academy has helped ease Kevin's transition to the United States. He's on track to

graduate in 2016, his English has improved, and he serves as a translator for classmates who struggle with the language.

"All of us are a part of the community," Kevin said. "We are all equals."

Making a Connection

Cardozo's academy for newcomers is based on a model developed by the **Internationals Network of Public Schools**, a New York City-based nonprofit that focuses on serving immigrant students. The network has 19 schools in districts ranging from Oakland, Calif., to Alexandria, Va.

Close to half the students at Cardozo's academy are 18 or older so they face a tight timeline to learn the language and make up sizable schooling gaps. The students can remain in the public school system until age 21.

Each student belongs to a 25-member cohort that has all the same classes together and the same instructors. The approach allows students and teachers to get to know one another, build trust, and develop deeper relationships, school officials said.

While some English-language programs enforce English-only conversations, the students at the academy are encouraged to use their home language to discuss what they are learning. Those who struggle to speak and write English are paired with peers who have developed a better grasp of the language.

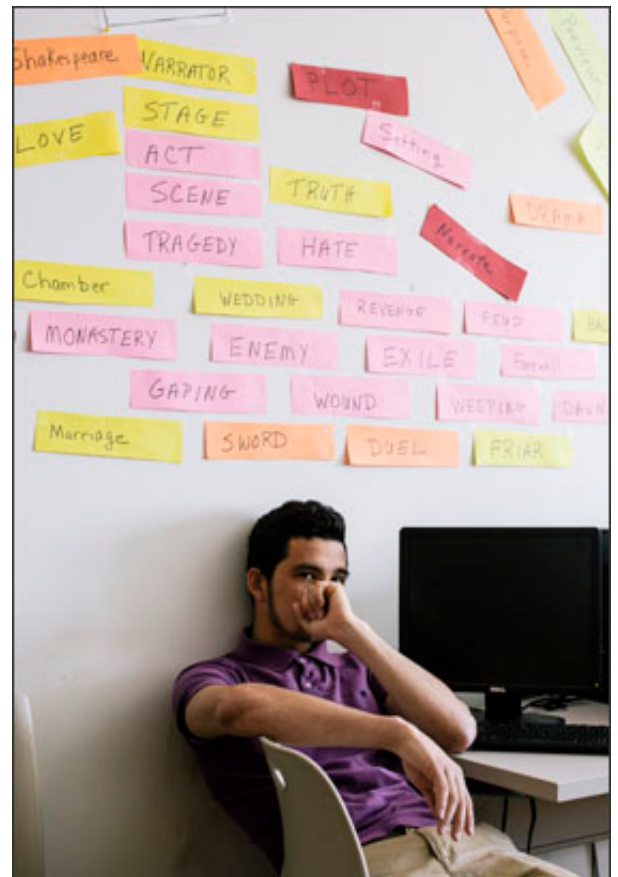
Many of the unaccompanied youths already are saddled with responsibilities and problems—adjusting to life in a new country, holding down jobs to help support themselves, to name a few—outside school that make learning inside school that much more of a challenge.

Most schools are "not equipped and entirely overwhelmed and unable to deal with the social-emotional problems," said Carolyn Satin-Bajaj, an assistant professor in the department of education

leadership, management and policy at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J. "Students need to feel safe and comfortable before learning can take place."

At Cardozo, nearly all the academy's teachers are certified in their content areas, as well as in teaching English as a second language. The academy also has two bilingual counselors.

To connect with her students, Associate Principal Megan Sands memorized all their names during the first week of classes last fall. Students with common first names—like José—earn nicknames from Ms. Sands and her staff.



William, 17, from Honduras, listens to instructions during English class at the International Academy at Cardozo Education Campus in the District of Columbia last month. The 200-student school is designed to help recently arrived immigrant youths learn English and graduate from high school.
—Greg Kahn for Education Week



The students often return the favor. Many call the academy's dean of students, Antonio Carter, "Grande Chocolate," for "Big Chocolate."

Mr. Carter, who has learned some Spanish, is a constant presence in the hallways, coaxing students to class, defusing flare-ups, and offering counsel. When Ms. Sands is out of the building for a day or two, she said students send her text messages to check on her welfare.

"There's a lot of relationship building before we even get to the academics," said Ms. Sands, a veteran teacher of English-learners. "It's been harder than we anticipated, but the rewards have been great, too."

Student Surge Continues

Last summer's influx of unaccompanied minors isn't a one-time phenomenon.

An estimated 39,000 immigrant children will enter the United States as unaccompanied minors this federal fiscal year, according to [a recent analysis from the Migration Policy Institute](#), a Washington-based research group.

The extrapolation is based on detention figures from U.S. Customs and Border Protection for the first five months of the fiscal year that began Oct. 1. The number would represent a significant decrease from the 68,000 apprehended in fiscal 2014.

The report focuses almost exclusively on migration enforcement and protection policies, but has ramifications for K-12 districts that will likely see the upcoming wave of unaccompanied minors.

Many of the children and youths coming from Central America likely will relocate to districts where established immigrant communities already exist. Federal data show that California, Florida, New York, and Texas have attracted the largest number of unaccompanied minors.

The influx could further tax the resources of school systems welcoming new students who have entered the United States illegally, many of them English-language learners.

At Cardozo, Mary Ball teaches English/language arts to English-learners, with lessons ranging from haiku structure to the works of William Shakespeare.

Ms. Ball's experience at the academy harkens her back to 1987, her first year in the District of Columbia schools, when young refugees fleeing the devastating civil war in El Salvador flooded the city's classrooms.

"When I read their journal entries, I realize this is where they feel safe and comfortable," Ms. Ball said.

While school districts can estimate how many newcomer students they will absorb, many don't know the full scope of the resources they need until the students arrive at their doorsteps. In many districts, students who came to the United States in last summer's surge continued to trickle in, months after the school year began.

Under federal law, all children, regardless of their immigration status, have the right to enroll in public schools. Federal funding dedicates additional money for schools that enroll students who are English-language learners.

Building Bridges

But some districts and schools have struggled to adhere to federal law. After receiving

complaints related to enrollment policies across the country, the U.S. Department of Education reiterated last spring that schools can not turn away students.

The New York State Board of Regents **approved an emergency order in December** to ensure students are able to enroll in public schools regardless of their immigration status after an investigation last fall found evidence that some districts refused to enroll undocumented youths and unaccompanied minors if they didn't show documents proving guardianship or residency in the state.

New York's new policy prohibits schools from asking about immigration status.

In New York City, schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña issued a memo last fall encouraging principals to connect children in their schools with mental-, medical- and dental-health services either available in schools or nearby school health clinics.

"Some [districts] have taken it in stride, but others had a very difficult time. There's no universal experience here," said Ms. McHugh of the Migration Policy Institute.

Leonol Popol, a bilingual counselor at Cardozo's academy, can relate to his students better than most. A native of Guatemala, he came to the United States at age 25, spending seven years as an undocumented immigrant. "I am this bridge from where they're coming from and who they could become," Mr. Popol said. "Sometimes, it's about selling hope."

Mr. Popol started building relationships with students last season when he coached the varsity boys soccer team. His counseling office is rarely empty.

"It goes way beyond having someone who speaks the language," said Ms. Satin-Bajaj of Seton Hall University. "Schools that succeed with these students focus on the basic rights that all kids deserve."

Before Cardozo, Ms. Ball taught at the District of Columbia's Woodrow Wilson High School, where the children of diplomats were often sprinkled among the more traditional English-learners, she said.

The environment is different at Cardozo. At the start of the school year, Ms. Ball had students who struggled to spell their own names. Now, as the school year winds down, sticky notes lining the wall inside her classroom share stories of hopes and dreams, spelled out in English that has steadily progressed.

"I wish to have my family together."

"I wish to finish my studies."

"I wish I finish high school."

Coverage of school climate and student behavior and engagement is supported in part by grants from the Atlantic Philanthropies, the NoVo Foundation, the Raikes Foundation, and the California Endowment. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.

RELATED BLOG



[Visit this blog.](#)

