



PHOTO: OLGA LOPEZ

## The Every Student Succeeds Act and IMMIGRANT PARENT PERSPECTIVES

The onset of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) presents a pivotal time in this nation's history to support the quality education of students on their way to learning English. With the replacement of No Child Left Behind, states across the country have unprecedented flexibility in devising accountability systems. It is vital that language and cultural diversity are championed as assets within such systems.

A critical component to ESSA planning, as required by the legislation, is to convene and consult with diverse stakeholders to inform each state's accountability plan. The Illinois State Board of Education, in response, conducted various listening tours across the state over 2016-17. In an important partnership with the Chicago Public Schools' Office of Language and Cultural Education, the Latino Policy Forum consulted with immigrant parents across all the networks of the district with the goal of providing information about ESSA, while collecting crucial feedback. In a live polling format with more than 300 leaders from Bilingual Parent Advisory Councils, the Forum developed and administered a survey where parents texted their answers "live" during the presentation. The purpose of these consultative sessions was to develop this brief of immigrant parent perspectives to present to the Illinois State Board of Education, the Illinois Governor's Office, P-20 Council, and other pertinent advisory bodies to inform and strengthen the state's accountability system as it pertains to English Learners.

## BACKGROUND

According to Illinois Census data, close to one-in-four public school children speak a language other than English in their homes. The number who identify as English Learners—close to one-in-ten students—has grown an astonishing 83% over the last 15 years. The vast majority of English Learners are Spanish speaking (78%). Most English Learners are enrolled in preschool through third grade and reside in 85 out of the 102 counties in Illinois. Within Chicago Public Schools, 17% of students identify as active English Learners with an additional 17% as former English Learners (i.e. having exited services). This is to say that 34% of Chicago’s current enrollment is students who either were or are English Learners.

It is part of Illinois state code that any district offering bilingual programming must also have a Bilingual Parent Advisory Council to serve as an advisory body. Chicago Public Schools goes above and beyond the state requirement and organizes school-level Bilingual Parent Advisory Councils. Many immigrant parents are highly engaged in their child’s education and these councils, conducted bilingually, present an opportunity for them to learn about current education issues. Most parents indicated that the ESSA-focused sessions conducted by the

Latino Policy Forum were their first exposure to the new federal law and provided a critical opportunity to provide their respective feedback. The sessions were largely conducted in Spanish with translations provided in English and Mandarin.

While for more than a decade Illinois has been accustomed to a school accountability agenda that evaluated schools based solely on reading and math scores, Chicago public schools over the past years have taken on a much more comprehensive approach to evaluate their schools. The Chicago Public School Quality Rating Policy is the district’s unique policy for measuring school performance. Going beyond the criteria of reading and math scores, this system considers a wide range of indicators inclusive of student academic growth, school culture and climate, closing of achievement gaps between subgroups, attendance, graduation rate, and growth in English language proficiency. As Illinois considers a more comprehensive accountability system of its own, the distinctive perspective of immigrant parents who have experience with an evaluation system inclusive of multiple variables is invaluable.

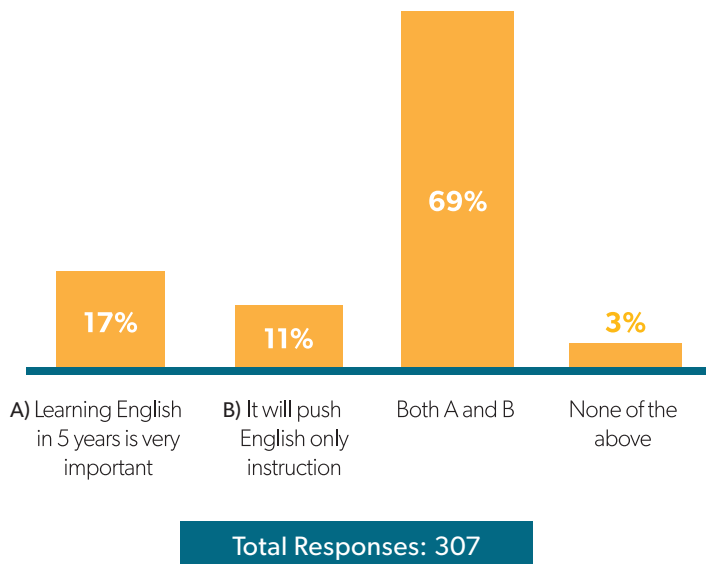
## SESSION FINDINGS

### I. EXPERIENCE WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY SCORES WITHIN ACCOUNTABILITY

A critical new element of ESSA is that measures for English language proficiency for English Learners is incorporated into the system by which all schools and districts are held accountable. English Learner advocates in Illinois express both opportunities and challenges with this bold new move. On the one hand, the inclusion of English language proficiency within accountability heightens its importance and will motivate educators to pay attention to it. On the other hand, this could push districts to drive English-only instruction, a move contradictory to strong academic achievement over the long-term.

Given that Chicago immigrant parents are accustomed to growth in English language proficiency being included in their school ratings system, we asked them about their experience with it.

#### QUESTION: What is your opinion of including progress in English language development as a part of school accountability ratings?

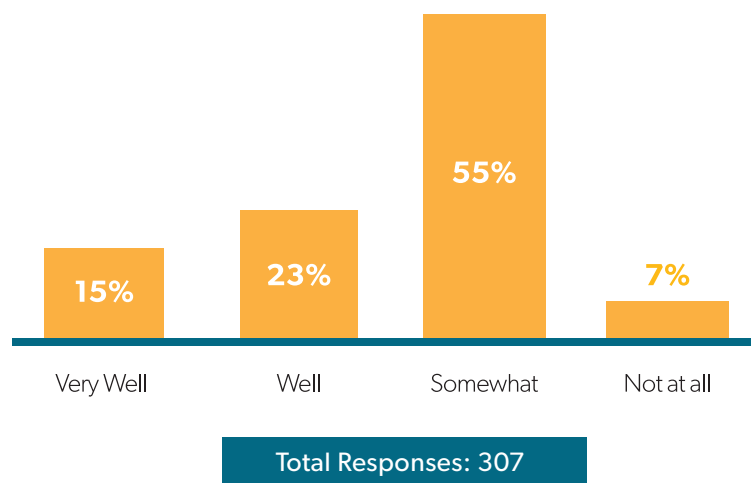


Parents demonstrated a strong mixed reaction to the inclusion of this variable, with 69% answering both “a” and “b.” On the one hand, parents feel it critical to learn the English language within five years. On the other hand, they are concerned with how this may push an English-only agenda within the classroom—a method that can suppress content knowledge gains over the long-term.<sup>1</sup>

Parents of English Learners are also provided with an ACCESS score report that explains how their child is progressing across the four domains of English language development: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The assessment is administered in English by trained and certified educators once per school year during the months of January and February. The parents receive the report through their child’s school the following August or September.

<sup>1</sup> Collier, Virginia P. and Wayne P. Thomas (2004) The Astounding Effectiveness of Dual Language Education for All.” NABE Journal of Research and Practice, 2: 1-20  
 Valentino, R. and S.F. Reardon (2014) “Effectiveness of four instructional programs designed to serve English language learners: Variation by ethnicity and initial English proficiency,” Center for Educational Policy Analysis: Stanford University Graduate School of Education. Accessed July 26, 2016: [https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Valentino\\_Reardon\\_EL%20Programs\\_14\\_0319.pdf](https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Valentino_Reardon_EL%20Programs_14_0319.pdf)  
 Umansky, I. and S.F. Reardon (2014) “Reclassification Patterns Among Latino English Learner Students in Bilingual, Dual Immersion, and English Immersion Classrooms,” American Educational Research Journal, pp.1-34

**QUESTION: How well do you understand your child's ACCESS score?**



More than half of participants, 55%, claimed they understood the ACCESS score report on their child's English language development as "somewhat." Only 38% understood it as "very well" or "well." There persists a need for future clarity on how to read and understand the reports, as this is a primary reason their child is in a language assistance program. To make effective decisions

about their child's education, they need to understand this metric. Given that the Forum polled an already engaged group of parents within the Bilingual Advisory Councils, their expressed lack of understanding, 62% of respondents, should be noted by both education leaders and policymakers as they move forward with ESSA implementation.

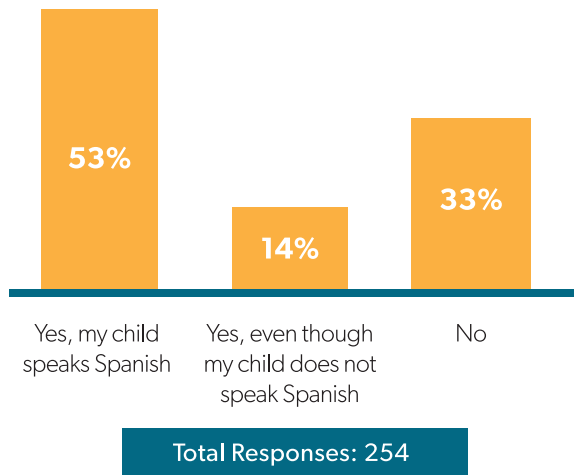
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## II. OFFERING LITERACY EXAMS IN THE SPANISH LANGUAGE

ESSA also stipulates that states must explore offering content assessments in the native language, when 30% or more of English Learners share the same home language. In Illinois 78% of English Learners are Spanish speakers, thus this is the only language that

would qualify for the creation of a Spanish literacy assessment. While the great majority of English Learners in Chicago Public Schools speak Spanish, there persists tremendous linguistic diversity, with more than 130 languages and dialects.

**QUESTION: Should literacy exams be made available in the Spanish language?**



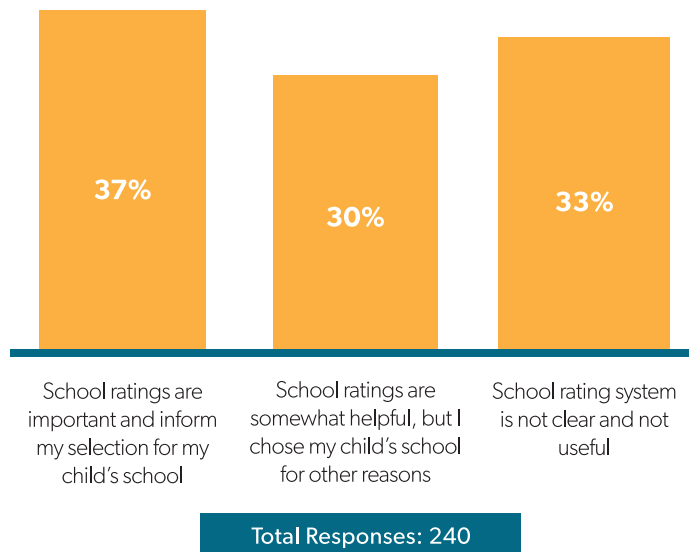
While the great majority of parents who attended these sessions are Spanish speaking, participants were divided on this issue. A majority of parents, 67%, are in favor of Spanish language assessments: more than half of Spanish speaking parents, 53%, and another 14% supported the issue, even though they were not Spanish speaking. A little more than one-third of parents, however, were not in agreement with Spanish language content assessments.

**II. OPINIONS OF SUMMATIVE SCHOOL QUALITY RATING SYSTEMS**

Given that parents of Chicago public school students have a multi-year history of receiving summative school rankings derived from their

comprehensive School Quality Rating Policy, a question was posed to explore how this influenced their own school choice.

**QUESTION: Are school quality ratings helpful for determining the school of choice for your child?**



This question proved to be one of the most contentious for participants and revealed very diverse perspectives. Parents were almost evenly divided into thirds on this issue. Many contended that ratings were helpful for informing school choice. Others felt like important aspects of bilingual programming, in particular, were not valued or counted within evaluation systems and, as a result, unfairly punitive. It is important to note,

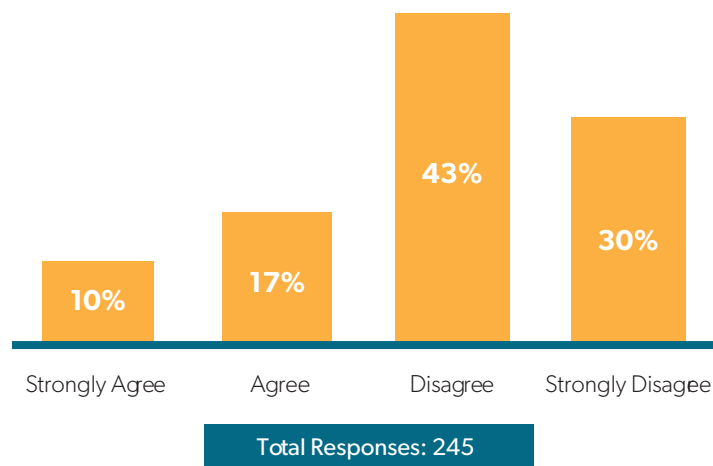
63% of parents choose their child's school for reasons other than the summative rankings.

It is a commonly held belief that school ratings drive decision-making about school choice. Data from immigrant parents, however, demonstrates a conflicting trend in that they are choosing schools with entirely different motives and ratings do not provide the information they seek.

#### IV. PREPARATION OF TEACHERS TO EDUCATE STUDENTS FROM DIVERSE LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

ESSA offers an opportunity to use Title II funding for specific educator training regarding the knowledge and skills to best serve English Learners. A question was provided to hear how well immigrant parents thought educators were trained to serve their children.

**RESPONSE TO THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT: My child's teachers are well-prepared to educate students from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.**



Parents overwhelmingly feel that teachers are not well-prepared to teach children of diverse language and cultural backgrounds, with 73% indicating "strongly disagree" or "disagree." A little more than one-quarter of participants feel teachers are well-prepared in this regard.

Given ESSA's focus on accountability on ELs at the school-level, there could be policy implications for building the capacity of Illinois teachers to work more effectively with these students. If parents are not confident that teachers are equipped to meet the needs of their children, Title II and III funding streams could be leveraged to address this issue.



“ There is a phenomenal need for bilingual teachers or teachers who are culturally diverse and from the city who can connect with our students. With the budget crisis Illinois is in we’re seeing bilingual programs get cut and fewer bilingual teachers as the students’ academics suffer because there’s no one who can relate to them in their schools. ”

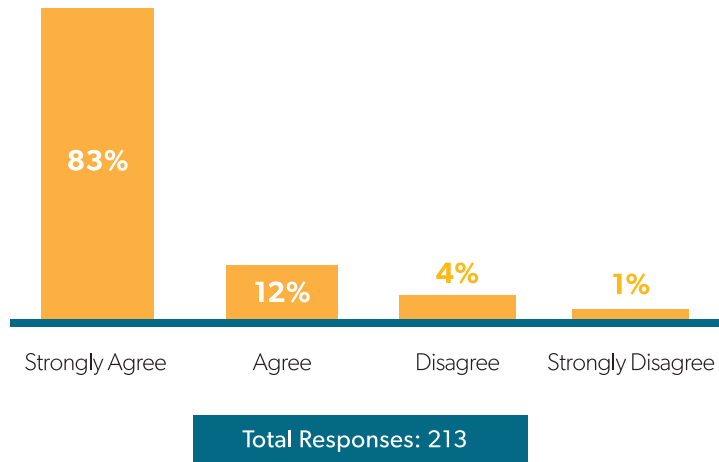
**Elideth Hernandez**, who has four children in Chicago Public Schools, is a parent leader and attended two of the Forum’s ESSA parent meetings in order to help other parents understand the federal legislation.

## V. HOW ESSA CAN BETTER UTILIZE BILINGUAL PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS

As mentioned earlier, it is part of Illinois state code that any district offering bilingual programming must also have a Bilingual Parent Advisory Council to serve as an advisory body. Chicago Public Schools presents a more sophisticated scenario by also organizing school-level Bilingual Parent Advisory Councils. The councils serve as key venues to organize immigrant parents and to communicate about various school issues in linguistically and culturally relevant ways.

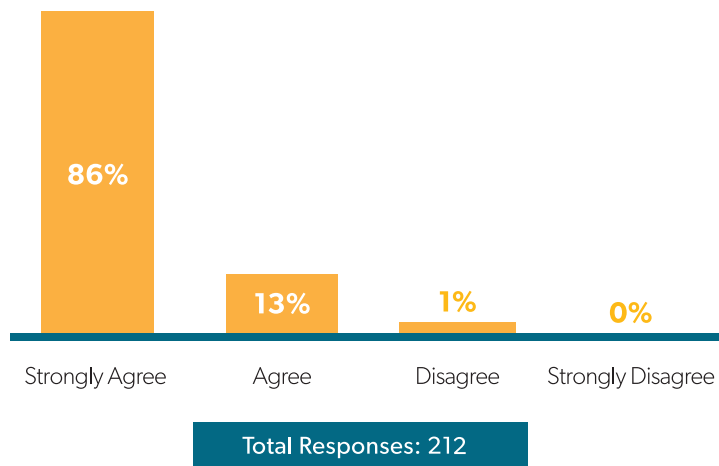
During a 2016 summer leadership training that the Forum conducted with a smaller cadre of council leaders, two recommendations were made about how ESSA could better utilize Bilingual Parent Advisory Councils. These recommendations were then presented to parents for feedback. Currently Bilingual Advisory Councils include parents with children in K-12. Chicago Public Schools, however, includes parents of preschoolers.

**QUESTION: Should it be a statewide requisite that Bilingual Parent Councils include parents of preschool children?**



Parents soundly believe, 83%, that Councils should be inclusive of parents of preschoolers. They feel that preschool is a critical time when parents are new to the system and open to being engaged through the Council’s programming.

**QUESTION: Should Illinois have a state-level advisory body of immigrant parents to directly inform the Illinois State Board of Education about issues that pertain to English Learners?**



Parents sharply contend, 86%, that the Illinois State Board of Education develop an advisory body of immigrant parents to help shape their English Learner policies.

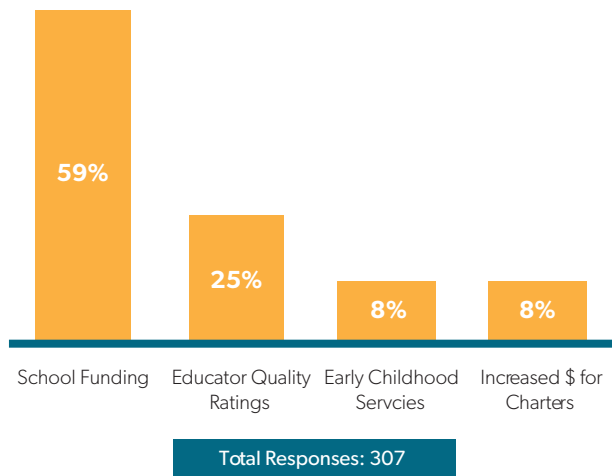


## VI. OTHER ASPECTS OF ESSA TO EXPLORE IN THE FUTURE

The Forum’s ESSA presentation was largely focused on issues pertaining to students learning English. Given the wide array of topics covered by the legislation, the Forum also wanted to know what topics interested parents for future sessions: school

funding equity, teacher evaluation ratings, early childhood funding and services, and increased funding for school charters. Largely, school funding was of utmost concern for parents.

### QUESTION: Which area concerns you the most?



School funding issues are at the forefront of parent concerns earning 59% of the parent votes. In a far second, with 25%, was interest in educator quality ratings. Information about early childhood services and charters were of low concern receiving 8% each.



“ My daughter is in the 7th grade and is in the gifted and talented program at her school. She believes that being bilingual helps her to excel in life and in other academic categories. This is a time in our country where we need to be cultivating multilingualism and celebrating different cultures. Parents can start at home by teaching their children about their family heritage and how to respect others’ cultures. Our kids need to learn that we’re starting a new era of tolerance and where our children’s education is a priority in Illinois. We need a state budget and fair funding with more qualified teachers in our schools so we don’t need more police in our streets. ”

**Maria Isabel Santos**

## CONCLUSION

The Illinois State Board of Education has made it a key priority to engage with diverse stakeholders as they form the new accountability plan under ESSA. Through an innovative partnership with the Chicago Public Schools' Office of Language and Cultural Education and the Latino Policy Forum, parent sessions regarding ESSA were provided throughout the district. The use of live polling provided an important first step to garner immigrant parent perspectives on the new law. Critical findings indicate a myriad of outcomes:

- **mixed feelings about the inclusion of an English language proficiency indicator;**
- **increased need for training teachers on how to work with children of diverse language and cultural backgrounds;**
- **diverse or no consensus perspectives on school summative ratings;**
- **voiced preference for Spanish language content assessments;**
- **and key ideas for actively engaging Bilingual Parent Advisory Councils at the state level.**

It is the hope that leaders in critical positions of power—the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Governor's Office, P-20 Council, and others—will play close attention to how immigrant parents want their children to be considered within the law.

### ABOUT PODER

PODER is a series of periodic briefs that offers Latino-specific policy analysis to developments in housing, immigration, education, and other sectors, offering recommendations to promote equity and access for the Latino community and, in turn, enhancing opportunity for our society as a whole.

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