

VOICES FROM LA FRONTERA

Study of School Districts Along the United States/Mexico Border

WestEd

in collaboration with
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

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This report was developed for the School Boards Associations in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas by WestEd, a nonprofit research, development, and service agency that works with education and other communities to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults.

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PREFACE

In mid-2001, the School Boards Associations of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas jointly commissioned WestEd to study those school districts located within 100 miles of the United States/Mexico border, an area commonly referred to as La Frontera. The intent was to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of these districts so policymakers and other decisionmakers can develop responsive assistance efforts.

The information in this report is based on a review of related research, interviews with a representative sample of the region's superintendents to help identify the topics of a subsequent survey, and the responses from that survey. The survey was sent to the superintendent and school board president¹ in each of La Frontera's 283 districts. A total of 206 districts (73%) responded with a survey completed by the superintendent, the school board president, or both. These 206 districts collectively serve more than 1.1 million children.

In developing the parameters of the study, the School Boards Associations chose the 100-mile definition to allow for some comparison of those districts closest to the border (within 10 miles) with those located further away. Of those responding, 31 percent report being located within 10 miles of the border, 21 percent between 11 and 40 miles from the border, and 48 percent more than 41 miles away.

This report offers a broad sketch of what life is like for school districts in this unique region. A detailed portrait would necessitate more information than any single survey can yield. But in this sketch the general shape and features of La Frontera districts emerge: their strengths, the challenges they face, their similarities and differences – and some of the strategies they employ to better serve their students. While the study identifies some of the major issues facing many of these districts, it also raises many questions that beg for further exploration. As such, this effort presents an important step toward better understanding how to support La Frontera's districts and, through them, the schools and students of this border region.

A technical report of the study is also available, detailing complete survey findings. It can be found at <http://www.wested.org/lafrontera/techrpt>.

¹ While the survey was sent to school board presidents and district superintendents, response from board presidents was negligible (12%). That low response, coupled with concern about potential duplication, caused the authors to include only superintendent responses in the quantitative analysis of survey results for this particular report. A separate analysis of board presidents' responses was done and is included in the technical report.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank a number of people for contributions to the development of this report. Victor Rodriguez of Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), a sister organization in the network of Regional Educational Laboratories, partnered with us in the research process and shared his knowledge as well as his passion for the topic. We relied on Ed Sloat for his statistical analysis of the survey data and for spearheading development of the technical report. Special thanks to Joy Zimmerman, our editor, for her words, advice, and cooperative spirit. We are grateful to Christian Holden for the cover design and report layout and to Freddie Baer for the graphs and tables in this report. Thanks also to Allison Merrick for meticulously entering survey data and maintaining accuracy in the database. Finally, we would like to thank Priya Armstrong and Ann Wallgren for their administrative support.

The report that follows is based both on interviews with a representative sample of La Frontera superintendents and on survey responses from district administrators and governing school board presidents. We thank them for taking the time to answer our questions and for the candor of their responses.

SUMMARY

This study of school districts on the United States/Mexico border was funded by the School Boards Associations of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. The intent was to gain a deeper understanding of these districts so policymakers and other decisionmakers can develop targeted assistance efforts. WestEd reviewed relevant research, interviewed superintendents, and surveyed school board presidents and superintendents from the 283 districts located within 100 miles of the US/Mexico border. The 206 districts that responded collectively serve 1.1 million children.

La Frontera is a diverse and historically impoverished region with a growing population made up primarily of Latinos and whites. One unifying theme among its school districts is concern about inadequate funding related to virtually all aspects of education, e.g., school facilities, teacher recruitment and retention, and the provision of social services.

A majority of districts in the region, most particularly those within 10 miles of the border, face a shortage of qualified teachers. In recruiting teachers, "classroom management skills" is the attribute district leaders most commonly look for. District leaders most often identify the "rural nature of the community" as a challenge in recruiting quality teachers. Additional challenges to teacher recruitment and retention include non-competitive salaries and housing shortages. In response, districts are providing bonuses and stipends,

exploring alternative certification methods, and taking a "grow-your-own" approach, for example, offering incentives to students to return to the district as teachers.

A majority of La Frontera districts are also dealing with significant ebbs and flows in student enrollment and attendance, making it difficult for them to predict revenue stream and plan budgets, predict staffing needs, and maintain continuity in curriculum and instruction. As reasons for attendance/enrollment fluctuations, leaders cite local employment factors that affect family mobility and a perceived emphasis in local families on work and family over school. Students who live in Mexico but come to school in the US – *day-crossers* – pose a unique challenge for leaders whose districts are right on the border, requiring them to choose whether to enforce residency rules or be guided by their sense of obligation to educate all children in their binational communities.

In response to the needs of their students and families, and often in partnership with local agencies, La Frontera districts typically facilitate the delivery of a wide range of extracurricular services. Such services include general health and dental care, life and study skills, and classes for parents on the American educational system.

Drawing from the voices of district leaders and from research, several policy implications become clear. First, districts offering social services need additional support themselves. Second, methods for easing the border's teacher shortage need to be identified, as do creative ways to increase student attendance. Finally, an analysis of state and federal policies is needed, to identify conflicts among existing regulations and to explore potential resolutions. This analysis should pay special attention to the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, in order to fully understand both the opportunities and challenges it presents for La Frontera districts.

INTRODUCTION

As Texas poet, critic, and educator Norma Cantu¹ observes about the border region, “Es lo mismo y no lo es” – it is both the same and not the same, within itself and compared to any other area. So, too, are its school districts both similar and dissimilar – to each other and to those located elsewhere in the nation. As a group, La Frontera districts face the same challenges now confronting so many districts across the nation: tightening budgets, difficulty recruiting fully qualified teachers and those with certain credentials, and the demands of high-stakes accountability, which have been intensified by the recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*). Like their counterparts everywhere in the country, La Frontera districts must, of course, adhere to federal education laws and regulations, just as those districts within the same state operate under the same state funding and regulatory structure. La Frontera districts also share characteristics with districts elsewhere in the country based on whether they are urban, rural, or suburban. For example, an isolated agricultural district in New Mexico may have as much in common with a district in the hills of Kentucky (e.g., limited access to cultural resources, such as museums and science centers, for their students) as it does with an urban district elsewhere in the border region.

This study was designed to look at all US districts located within 100 miles of the US/ Mexico border, which stretches 1,951 miles across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Within this broad area, districts vary greatly in a number of ways. Some are large, urban districts; others serve suburban areas; the majority (59%) are rural. The smallest – Blue Elementary District in Arizona – has only 5 students. The largest – San Diego City Unified in California – has a student population of 143,969. Family living conditions vary widely both across and within La Frontera districts. In some places students and their families live in million dollar homes, while in others, they reside in makeshift housing developments characterized by poor quality drinking water and open sewers. Between these two extremes is a range that includes middle-class families in new suburban housing developments and poor working-class communities in which multiple families crowd into single-family dwellings.

Such differences notwithstanding, many La Frontera districts face some similar challenges. Virtually all identify insufficient funding as a major issue. Most serve relatively large numbers of students whose home language is Spanish and who are English language learners. Many are struggling to attract and retain well-qualified teachers. A majority of districts are dealing with significant fluctuations in student attendance and enrollment. And many have felt it necessary to guarantee some type of social service support for students and their families. Generally speaking, the key variable affecting the degree to which individual districts in La Frontera experience these and other issues is their relative proximity to the border. A secondary factor is the economic base of their respective communities.

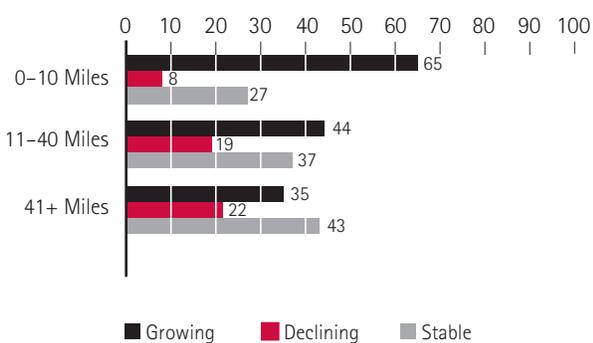
THE REGION AND ITS PEOPLE

A description of the demographic, social, and economic landscape of La Frontera is not easily drawn from ready-made sources. In most cases, the geographic focus of existing research is not congruent with the geographic area defined for this study. Thus, knowledge about the 100-mile-wide region running the length of the 1,951-mile US/Mexico border must be pieced together by searching – and in some cases extrapolating from – diverse demographic studies, ethnographic research, economic analyses, and other research studies. The challenge is compounded by the fact that each of these studies tends to take a slightly different focus, geographically and/or by issue. For example, a number of researchers have examined the growth and persistence of the *colonias* that exist to some degree in each of these four states, but little has been done to document less extreme forms of rural poverty or life among the middle class in these areas. And while it is possible to find good economic information about the border region in Texas, such information is not readily available for that area in the other three states. Similarly, ethnographers have documented educational practices at particular schools, but no one has tackled a comprehensive study of education on the border. Thus, this report does not paint a complete and detailed picture of life in La Frontera. What it does do, however, is present some basic contextual information to inform understanding of the key issues faced by school districts in this region.

A growing population.

During the 1990s, the population nationwide increased by 10 percent.² Yet during that same period, the population in the 24 border counties of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas – which account for a significant portion of La Frontera – grew by 22 percent.³ This growth was driven primarily by high birth rates among the Latino⁴ population and by continued immigration.⁵ Both research and survey data show that the population growth on the border continues.⁶ Of districts close to the border (0–10 miles), 65 percent report a growing population in their communities while only eight percent report a declining population. In contrast, of those districts located more than 40 miles from the border, just 35 percent report a growing community population and 22 percent say their population is declining.

FIGURE 1: Population Trend by Proximity to the Border



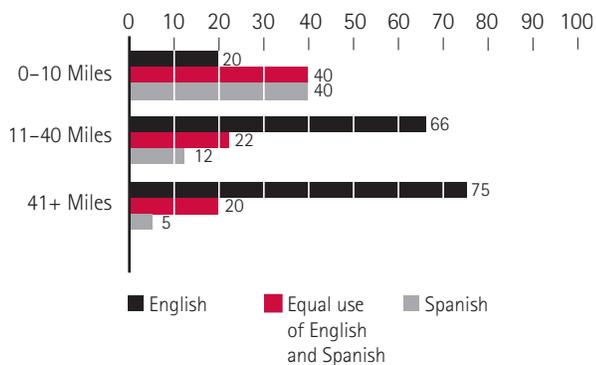
In many parts of La Frontera, infrastructure development has not kept pace with population. One extreme example is a housing shortage in some areas, which has contributed to the persistence of *colonias*. Most prevalent in rural Texas but also found in the other three border states, these improvised housing developments are home to hundreds of thousands of residents who struggle daily with substandard living conditions, including ramshackle dwellings, open sewers, and lack of sanitary water, all leading to a higher incidence of disease.⁷

A bicultural community. Given the influx of immigrants from south of the border, it is perhaps not surprising that La Frontera is primarily bicultural and bilingual, its population largely Latino or white. For example, in Texas border counties, 77 percent of the students are Latino and 19 percent are white, compared to 23 percent and 60 percent, respectively, in the rest of the state.⁸ In each of the four border states, Latinos account for at least 32 percent of the population.⁹ That said, a great deal of variability exists within any population categorized as Latino. Among the differences is whether one is US-born or an immigrant and, if an immigrant, permanency of residence, immigration status, and length of time in the US. Other variables include socioeconomic status, academic background, and, for students, the English language skills and education profiles of their parents.¹⁰

Those Latino students who are, themselves, immigrants bring a range of education experiences. Some have had very limited exposure to formal schooling before arriving in the US while others are ahead of their US-born peers in some academic areas.¹¹ This variability notwithstanding, the demographics of immigrant Latino youth as a whole are sobering: they are seven times more likely to drop out than their native-born peers.¹² Furthermore, 39 percent of Latino youth live in poverty, more than twice the rate of white children, and many Latino parents have limited educational backgrounds.¹³ Disaggregated data for La Frontera are not available, but what data exist suggest that, generally speaking, Latino youth in La Frontera fare similarly to their peers nationwide.

Across La Frontera communities there appears to be an even split between English and Spanish as the primary language, but a closer look reveals significant differences between communities closest to the border and those further away. Of those districts located more than 40 miles from the border, 75 percent report English as the primary language in their communities, with only five percent identifying Spanish as the primary language. In comparison, only 20 percent of districts located within 10 miles of the border report English as the primary language; these communities are either predominantly Spanish-speaking (40%) or equally Spanish- and English-speaking (40%). The degree to which English is or is not spoken within a community has implications for English language learners (ELLs), as suggested in the comment of one California superintendent: "English is not needed to function in [our] community; there are few English models." As

FIGURE 2: Primary Language of the Community by Proximity to the Border



detailed later in this report, lack of English skills within the community also affects parental involvement in their children's education, as well as families' access to social services. When asked about their district's three most pressing issues, 20 percent of superintendents expressed concern for their ELL students; among other issues specific to this population, superintendents worry about the efficacy of language programs, standardized

testing requirements, and the shortage of qualified English-as-a-Second-Language and bilingual teachers.

An economically disadvantaged area. Forty-six percent of responding districts (from all four states with varying proximities to the border) report agriculture as the primary economic base of their community. An agricultural economy suggests rural communities with seasonal or temporary employment for migrant workers and corresponding complications for school districts. Among these complications are fluctuating school enrollment and issues related to poverty, which will be detailed later in this report. Other types of employment reported in La Frontera are retail (14%), industry (13%), public sector (e.g., military, border patrol, schools) (10%), tourism (8%), oil and gas (4%), and other (7%).

Historically, the border region has been economically disadvantaged. La Frontera is home to pockets of notable wealth, such as certain areas of San Diego, California, but taken as a whole, its unemployment rates still hover in the teens, and per capita income is among the lowest in the nation.¹⁴ According to a study by the US/Mexico Border Counties Coalition, the 24 counties directly adjacent to the border, taken as a group, rank among the poorest 10 percent of US counties in per capita income (under \$14,000).¹⁵ Residents of La Frontera tend to be young, immigrant, and poorly educated.¹⁶ The only available data for the border region specifically are from Texas, which accounts for about 56 percent of the border. There, 32 percent of La Frontera adults have less than a 9th grade education, and only 13 percent have completed college.¹⁷ Almost half of the children live below the poverty level.¹⁸ One superintendent says that 75 percent of the students in his district are economically disadvantaged, and 27 superintendents identify poverty-related conditions as a major issue.

PERVASIVE FUNDING CONCERNS

The most common concern among La Frontera districts is insufficient funding. The survey included no questions or prompts about financial issues, yet asked to identify their district's three most pressing issues, 61 percent of the respondents cited funding. The frustration many district leaders feel about this matter is exemplified in one superintendent's lament about "mandates from the state that need to be met regardless of a district's financial status" and in another's comment that "there are excessive demands with no funding for programs and services."

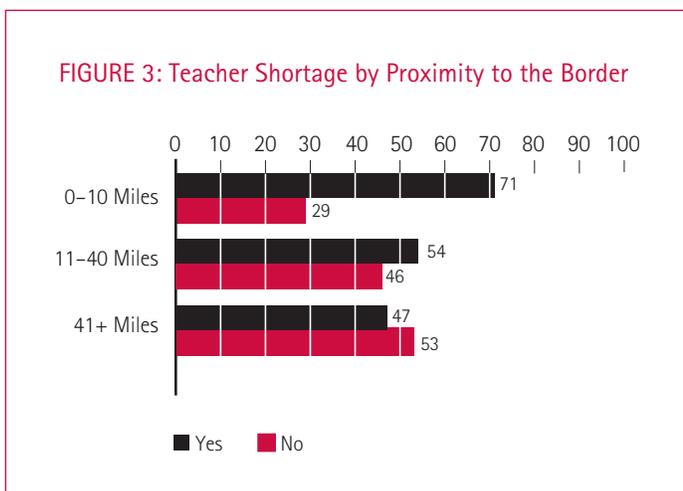
The recent economic downturn and state budget cuts throughout these four states provide reason enough for districts to worry about funding. But in some districts concern is heightened by a state accountability system that ties funding to improved student performance. One superintendent expresses apprehension about the connection between funding and performance because, he says, "we have improved the last two years but have reached a ceiling."¹⁹ Depending on the structure of a state's education accountability system, the situation can be further complicated for districts with large numbers of ELLs. One California superintendent explained that in his district, there were so many ELLs who received waivers to skip the state assessment that only two schools ended up with enough test-takers to even be eligible for that state's rewards system.

The relative adequacy of a district's funding influences its capacity in all areas of operation: from ability to offer attractive teacher salaries and high quality professional development to implementation of smaller class sizes and provision of supplemental programming, such as after-school activities. In fact, facilities are identified as one of the most pressing issues after funding, with districts lacking adequate financial resources either to upgrade existing facilities or to build new ones to keep up with population growth (26%). Funding also affects a district's ability to provide social services to students and families, a function that increasing numbers of districts are taking on in order to help ensure students' readiness to learn.

Funding is an umbrella issue that either influences or is influenced by each of the topics addressed in the subsequent three sections: the struggle to attract and retain high quality teachers; significant fluctuations in student enrollment and attendance; and the need of students and their families for social services.

TEACHER SHORTAGE AT THE BORDER

Reflecting a national trend, many La Frontera districts (56%) find it difficult to recruit and retain enough qualified teachers. The shortage is most acute near the border: 71 percent of the districts within 10 miles of Mexico report teacher shortages compared to 47 percent of those located more than 40 miles from the border. According to respondents, La Frontera districts feel these shortages most strongly in the same academic or skill areas that districts across the country find hard to fill: special education (76%), math (72%), science (57%), and bilingual (43%) or English as a Second Language (ESL) (36%). Their difficulty in attracting and keeping the teachers they need seems primarily related to quality-of-life and salary issues.



District leaders most often identify “rural nature of the community” (69%) as a challenge in recruiting quality teachers. Quality-of-life issues are by no means unique to rural communities by the border; most rural areas across the nation lack easy access to the entertainment and cultural opportunities found in more urban areas. For teachers with working spouses, rural communities are also likely to offer a narrower mix of job

Classroom Management: A High Priority

When asked to indicate the most important teacher attributes to consider in recruiting, respondents could select multiple answers. “Classroom management skills” (78%) was the most common answer, followed by “ability to teach multiple subjects” (63%), “teaching experience” (54%), and “cultural sensitivity” (53%). It is evident why district leaders would seek experienced, culturally sensitive staff who can teach multiple subjects. Less clear is why “classroom management skills” would be considered such an important teacher attribute. Because the survey did not specify what is meant by classroom management skills, it is impossible to know what respondents might have been thinking about in choosing this attribute. Were they considering time management issues related to teachers needing to cover more ground because of new academic standards? Were they thinking about student engagement issues related to curriculum, cultural mismatches, or language barriers? It is also impossible to know whether districts outside of La Frontera would put the same or a different emphasis on this particular attribute, however it is defined. In short, this particular finding raises more questions than answers.

opportunities than is available in cities. On the other hand, rural areas can hold a different kind of appeal. Common perceptions about country or small town living is that it offers a lower cost of living, a close-knit and supportive community, lower crime rates, and a more leisurely pace of life. Fifty-two percent of La Frontera districts report capitalizing on such characteristics – “selling quality of life” – in their recruitment efforts.

La Frontera districts also see noncompetitive salaries (50%) and housing shortages (42%) as influencing teacher decisions about joining or staying in their district. One superintendent notes that “to help recruit and retain the best teachers, we need rewards for teachers and incentive pay for those who teach in high-poverty areas.” Despite funding shortfalls, some districts manage to offer signing bonuses, enhanced benefits, reimbursable moving expenses, or even subsidized housing. One California district offers a \$7,500 stipend to anyone willing to earn a math credential and commit to teaching in the district for three years. One Texas district provides \$2,500 stipends for teachers in the high-need areas of math, science, special education, and bilingual education. Another La Frontera district, in New Mexico, provides tuition loans.

Additional recruiting methods used by La Frontera districts include exploring alternative certification (54%),²⁰ giving priority to hiring local applicants (41%), and offering incentives for students to return to the district as teachers, i.e., “grow-your-own” (18%). Examples provided by districts in open-ended questions and interviews of elements in a “grow-your-own” program include providing instructional aides with tuition and books, giving aides pay increases for advanced study, and, in one Texas district, encouraging high school students to return to the district by offering a starting salary equivalent to a third-year teacher once they are credentialed.

Respondents were also asked what changes to teacher credentialing and licensing requirements would address the teacher shortage in their districts. Most recommend easing the reciprocity of teaching licensing across states (61%), followed by easing the requirements from other professions (52%) and from other countries (19%).

Mismatch Between Students and Teachers?

The survey asked districts about the degree to which their teachers matched the student population, according to language, culture, and ethnicity. Survey responses reveal that teacher and student demographics closely match in only 31 percent of responding districts. Forty percent report having a “somewhat close match,” and 28 percent report that the match is “not close at all.” Districts within 10 miles of the border have the highest rate of very close matching (41%). In comparison, districts that are more than 40 miles from the border report only a 26 percent match. Some implications of having a marked difference between teacher and student backgrounds are evident in superintendent comments about the issue, among them:

- Some of our Anglo teachers experience “culture shock” and leave as soon as they get another job.
- [There is a] lack of empathy for economically disadvantaged students [and for] language issues.
- The biggest issue is being able to communicate with the parents. Students are most successful when parents are involved in their education. Our parents always try hard, but we always need interpreters.

FLUCTUATIONS IN STUDENT ENROLLMENT AND ATTENDANCE

A majority of La Frontera districts (56%) must deal with significant ebbs and flows in student enrollment and attendance, both within the same school year and from year to year. Nearly 70 percent of these districts note that, as a result, it is difficult to predict revenue stream and plan school budgets, as well as to predict staff positions. Fifty-nine percent say that having large numbers of students come and go disrupts the educational process, making it more difficult for teachers to maintain continuity in curriculum and instruction.

The survey included an open-ended question asking what successful strategies districts have used to stabilize enrollment and attendance. Twenty percent of the 107 districts responding say they have instituted rewards and incentives programs for increased or perfect attendance. Another 18 percent have opted, instead, to work closely with courts, police, and/or truant and attendance officers. Some combine the two approaches.

Approximately a third of the districts (32%) are attempting to keep students in school by engaging them more successfully. These districts report trying to improve or enrich their curriculum with the addition of such high-interest or supportive activities as science programs, language development support, after-school programming, and technology offerings. (It is also worth noting that 80 percent of all La Frontera districts offer study skills classes, and 74 percent offer life skills classes.) Other strategies for dealing with this difficult issue include participating in federally-funded migrant programs²¹ and working closely with local housing developers and city planning managers in an attempt to better predict student population and enrollment.

Using Technology to Engage Students

One New Mexico district directly adjacent to the border is combating rural isolation and attempting to better engage its students and community with technology. The district encompasses 2,300 square miles, with one elementary, one middle, and one high school located on the same 40-acre campus complex. The closest public library is 80 miles away and state universities are equally distant. In considering these limitations, the superintendent says, "It's not a border issue, it's our proximity to the world."

To bring the rest of the world closer to its students, seven years ago the district began acquiring technology. Today it has 150 computers, each with Internet access. In addition to creating Internet-driven coursework for its students, the district uses distance learning technology to offer community members coursework from the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque.

Alluding to the district's geographic isolation, the superintendent says, "It was out of self-defense to our location in the state that we have done all of this."

Lack of steady employment keeps families on the move.

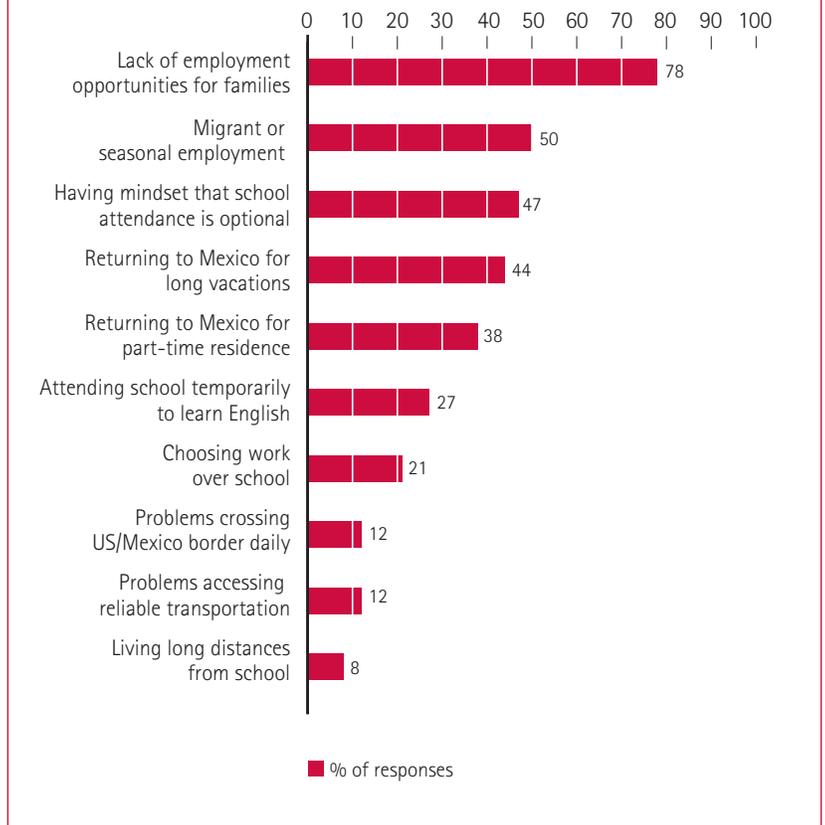
A clear majority (78%) of those districts experiencing significant enrollment and attendance fluctuations identify employment factors as the reason. More specifically, half of responding districts identify migrant and seasonal employment as a cause. In addition to other challenges they face, children in migrant families²² are often called upon to work to help support their family or to care for younger siblings while their parents work. Schools' attempts to provide students with remedial or make-up classes during the summer are destined to be of limited success for the same economic reasons. One California superintendent notes that "students have to work in the fields early in life, and school is not a priority. That happens a lot. There comes a time when we need students in summer to complete work they missed during the year and parents will say the students have to work."

In pre-survey interviews, a number of superintendents indicated their belief that some parents in their districts seem to think school attendance is voluntary rather than compulsory. Survey answers reveal that 47 percent of respondents also see this as a factor in school attendance: "the mindset that school attendance is optional and not mandatory."

The limited scope of the survey question does not allow for clarification of who respondents believe to have this mindset. Nor could we verify whether this perception is accurate. If this mindset does exist, plausible explanations could be cultural (a population that places a high premium on family life), economic (the financial necessity of having multiple family members work), or both.

While not specified in the survey answer choice, those superintendents who mentioned

FIGURE 4: Reasons for Attendance/Enrollment Fluctuations



mindset in the preliminary interviews appeared to associate it with Latino students and families. Some of them noted, for example, that for many Latinos, family and work take priority over school or other considerations: "Traditional families do not feel that students should go to college, but that they should go to work instead," said one. Another stated that for many migrant families, "it's a cultural issue – success is having a job, not school."

Forty-four percent of respondents believe that "returning to Mexico for long vacations" and 38 percent that "returning to Mexico for part-time residence" are factors in attendance and enrollment changes. One superintendent from a district close to the border notes that on "Mondays and Fridays [students] return to Mexico for extended weekends." These two reasons reinforce the perception that some families view school as "optional" and give higher priority to visiting family in Mexico than to attending school.

Thirty percent of districts cite some form of increased communication with parents as a successful strategy for countering the idea that school is somehow optional. Implicit here, too, is the perception that Latino families place a higher priority on family and work than on school. Five respondents specifically state that they impress upon parents the importance of daily attendance, while another five mention home visits. Other strategies include communication with families through phone calls, home-school liaisons, and "parent training" courses. Six districts also mention the use of Spanish in some way, from hiring a bilingual attendance officer to providing more materials in Spanish. Research studies support such parental outreach activities as a means of bolstering student attendance and participation.²³

Day-crossers pose unique challenge. Further complicating attendance issues in those districts closest to the border is the fact that some students live in Mexico but cross into the US daily to attend school.²⁴ One superintendent notes that up to 40 percent of his elementary school students and 15 percent of his high school students may be day-crossers. While it is illegal for schools to deny students an education based on immigration status, it is also illegal for students to attend school in the United States without first providing a valid address for the district in question.²⁵

Across the 12 percent of La Frontera districts that report having students who cross the border daily, some district officials view it as their job to educate all those who come to their door while others choose to enforce the residency regulations. As one district leader noted in an interview, "I don't know the role for the district – should it be policing for illegal students? Our district takes all students who show up." Enforcement can be costly: one superintendent says he needs 16 hours of staff time per week just to track residency issues. Another superintendent initially tackled enforcement by taking his teachers to the local border crossing in the morning and asking them to identify students as they crossed into the country; he then issued a deadline for those students to establish a valid local

address or be expelled. District staff in that district now do random residency checks by going to a student's alleged residence in the morning to see if the student is actually there.

While some superintendents are reluctant to enforce the residency requirement because of the financial burdens of policing students and/or the additional paperwork and workload, some may also wish to avoid the loss of funds that could accompany a drop in student population. One superintendent mentioned a "scandal" in the past in which one district sent buses over the border to get students from Mexico in order to bolster enrollment. But for some there is clearly a sense of obligation to educate all children, especially in those communities that straddle the border. One superintendent lamented the loss of Mexican students after the September 11 security crackdown. He noted that "these are kids who are doing well in school most of the time; these are not the troublemakers. They want to be in school. It's heartbreaking [but] we have people in the community saying those kids shouldn't be educated in the US."

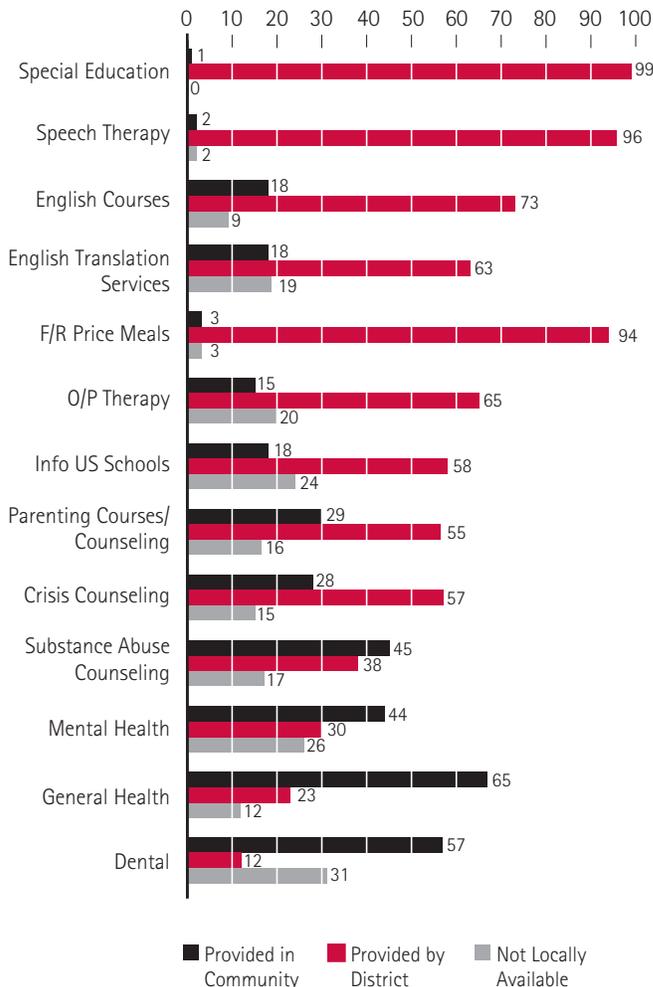
FAMILY AND STUDENT NEEDS

School districts across the US are required to offer certain support services to students who need them, such as special education, speech therapy, and free or reduced price meals. Most La Frontera districts offer all of the above (99%, 96%, and 94%, respectively). But a number of these border districts manage to provide many more services than are required and/or funded by the federal government. Operating on the premise that students cannot learn if they are not physically and mentally healthy,²⁶ they have assumed the responsibility of offering a range of support to help ensure students' readiness to learn.²⁷ In this effort, many also recognize the value of meeting family needs as well.

Health care and other social services are often hard to come by for those living in isolated rural communities. Sometimes the services simply do not exist locally. In La Frontera, 12 percent of the districts responding to this survey say there are no general health care services available in their community; in some districts, the nearest hospital or health clinic is 80 miles away. Thirty-one percent do not have dental services²⁸ available locally, and 26 percent have no mental health screening or services.

Lack of health-related services would be a problem in any community, but the problem is aggravated when local living standards are so poor as to compromise residents' physical health. Such is the case in many areas of La Frontera closest to the border, where cramped and unsanitary living conditions contribute to rates of hepatitis A, tuberculosis, measles, mumps, and rubella that are significantly higher than the national average.²⁹ The most obvious example of an unhealthy physical environment for children and families are the

FIGURE 5: Social Services Provided by La Frontera Districts



colonias, but similar harmful living conditions exist, if less extremely, elsewhere in La Frontera.

In La Frontera, mental health issues are also a factor. According to the US Surgeon General (1999), nearly 21% of American children between the ages of nine and 17 suffered from a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder. In the border region, with its large proportion of immigrant families, this age group may be even more susceptible to mental health problems. Numerous studies support the idea that many immigrant students have specialized mental health needs related to high stress, alienation, cultural barriers, and questions of self-identity.³⁰ Yet 26 percent of survey respondents report that no mental health screening or services are available in their community, either through the schools or through any other public or private endeavor. Concern about the need for such services is evident in interview and written response comments, such as: “[We have a]

high percentage of students with emotional issues,” “Counseling [is a] great need among students,” and “[We need] crisis counseling services ... our community has suffered several crises that directly affect our students.”

Even when health care services do exist in a community, they may still be out of reach to those who have no insurance and not enough money to pay out of pocket – a common problem in the border region.³¹ Similarly, even some affordable public services may effectively be unavailable to those with limited English skills or those who are wary of seeking help from public agencies because their immigration status is questionable.

In contrast to many other public institutions, schools are often viewed as benevolent and accessible places to seek help or information. This is in part because of the general trust that parents have in school staff, as well as because of schools' accessibility and convenience.³² In addition, schools are legally restrained from asking for immigration documentation.³³ Therefore, when schools provide social services, they are often able to serve families who need such services but might otherwise not seek them.

Given their own financial constraints, districts are generally hard-pressed to provide services on their own. Instead, they tend to team with universities and other public agencies. To address health care, for example, a district may provide the space while a partner agency funds the actual services provided through the health clinic or wellness center.

The majority of La Frontera districts provide four to 10 different social services for students and, in some cases, their families.³⁴ Among them are: general health care (23%), dental care (12%), mental health screening and services (30%), substance abuse counseling (38%), and crisis counseling (57%).

District leaders have also recognized that limited language skills, substance abuse, lack of information about US schools, and other factors can prevent parents from actively supporting their children's schooling. As one superintendent voiced, districts are realizing that "home issues brought to school disrupt learning; if the district can affect the home, we have a better chance of reaching students."

Because many La Frontera families are non-English speakers, the majority of districts offer English language courses (73%) and English translation services (63%). An Arizona

Supporting Students and Families with Anytime School

In California, one La Frontera superintendent oversees what he calls "anytime schools." These district schools host a variety of after-school, weekend, and summer activities sponsored by a school, the district, or local community groups. Not only do district schools have 21st Century grant programs, but they also have Healthy Start and "every program that the federal or state government has ever dreamed about — and they're all working," according to the superintendent.

Schools also share their facilities with the Police Athletic League and the city recreational department, both of which sponsor after-school activities on school grounds. In addition, schools work with the probation department, police department, and parents to "keep kids who aren't in trouble out of trouble." The superintendent says the district enjoys tremendous parental support, thanks to an active outreach program, parenting classes, and a pupil service and attendance counselor who does home visits.

superintendent said, “Parents don’t speak English, so it is difficult for them to get services they need.” One district has hired bilingual wellness and outreach coordinators to help counter language barriers. Over a third of districts (38%) provide substance abuse counseling to students and/or families because “it’s a critical issue” and “many families or relatives are drug dependent.” A majority of districts (58%) also offer classes designed to inform immigrant parents about the nature of schooling in the United States, hoping to encourage informed decision-making and involvement. In what exemplifies a comprehensive approach to student and family support, one La Frontera district reports pooling resources from 90 agencies to create a one-stop shop for services. There, families can get help with employment and social security issues, receive health- and child-care services, and even get driving instruction. The stated goal of this collaborative effort is to “help families become more independent.”

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study has yielded a broad overview of the challenges facing school districts along the US/Mexico border and of the priorities of these districts. Drawing from their voices and from the research, this section highlights related policy implications. It also notes some areas worthy of further study.

Districts offering social services need support themselves. Recognizing the connection between student health, school attendance, and readiness to learn, many La Frontera districts are providing or would like to provide a range of social service support for students and their families. Similar efforts have been underway in districts and schools throughout the United States for many years, and there is a substantial body of literature documenting practices, models, and successes. It would be helpful to explore this research and distill and disseminate those learnings – including possible models such as full-service schools – that would be most applicable to La Frontera districts.

Identifying methods for easing the teacher shortage. Given the shortage of qualified teachers, state licensing policies should be revisited to explore possible revisions that would allow more teachers into the profession while maintaining reasonable standards. For example, there might be value in creating greater reciprocity for teaching credentials, both state-to-state and with Mexico. Similarly, it might be worth exploring the possibility of creating reciprocity for teacher retirement plans. Other policies and practices warranting further exploration include alternative certification for mid-career professions and more formal “grow-your-own” teacher programs. For retention purposes, attention should focus on support for beginning teachers (e.g., induction programs) and for more experienced teachers throughout their teaching careers (e.g., job-embedded development opportunities and teacher leadership training).

Identifying creative ways to increase student attendance. Many La Frontera districts experience high fluctuation in student attendance and enrollment. Among the causes are such factors as job availability for parents and local economic conditions. Nonetheless, districts can do much to make schools more attractive to students and their families. They can do this by adopting practices that make students and families feel welcome (e.g., making sure language is not a barrier, doing more outreach to parents, offering extracurricular activities and support services). Equally important, they can continue to make the curriculum as engaging and relevant as possible.

Analysis of state and federal policies. A multitude of state and federal policies influence all aspects of education at La Frontera. At times, these policies conflict with one another, putting additional stress on school districts unsure how to uphold the spirit of different laws and regulations. To untangle these myriad state and federal requirements, a state-by-state analysis is necessary to map what is required and what resources – fiscal and technical – are available in each state to help districts address the requirements. It would also be useful for professional organizations like state school boards associations to identify conflicts among existing regulations and explore potential resolutions in preparation for discussions with state and federal policymakers.

Examining implications of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001.* The NCLB, which was adopted after completion of the La Frontera survey, further complicates the policy picture for these districts, because it incorporates additional and more stringent requirements in such significant areas as teacher quality and student assessment and accountability. This landmark legislation needs to be thoroughly analyzed state by state to fully understand its potential impact on La Frontera districts in terms of both the opportunities and the challenges it presents.

Much of the work to be done in supporting La Frontera districts is best carried out at the state or regional level. But, it is important to remember that a number of La Frontera districts have been successful in addressing some of the challenges described in this study. All districts should be encouraged to share their knowledge – both their successes and their failures. They should be supported in doing so through the creation of such regionwide forums as online communities, a newsletter, or topic-specific conferences. Another obvious means for districts to exchange and further develop relevant knowledge is their greater participation in the four-state School Boards Associations network, which sponsors the annual “Celebrating Educational Opportunities for Hispanic Students” conference.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cantu (1993).

² US/Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

³ US/Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

⁴ For the purpose of this study, a Latino/Hispanic person is one whose family and home background includes native speakers of Spanish. Their ancestors might have immigrated to the United States from Mexico or the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Latinos (a) may be of any race, (b) may or may not be limited-English proficient, and (c) may or may not be American born.

⁵ US Census (2000).

⁶ Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (June 2001); E. Garcia (2001); US Department of Education (1998).

⁷ Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (June 2001).

⁸ The other ethnic groups in the border region include 4% African American and 1% other; the non-border region has 14% African American and 3% other (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 1998).

⁹ Arizona (32%), California (32%), New Mexico (42%), Texas (32%). (US Census 2001).

¹⁰ G.N. Garcia (2001); DeLeon & Holman (1998).

¹¹ Lucas, Henze, & Donato (1997).

¹² G.N. Garcia (2001).

¹³ G.N. Garcia (2001); US Department of Education (1998).

¹⁴ Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (2001); US/Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

¹⁵ US/Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

¹⁶ US/Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

¹⁷ Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (2001).

¹⁸ Henneberger (2000).

¹⁹ To protect the identity of respondents, the male pronoun is used in all references to or quotes from superintendents.

²⁰ "Alternative certification" includes teacher preparation programs for those who may already have a bachelor's degree and are interested in pursuing a teaching career.

²¹ The federal government provides funding to state educational agencies to be used for supplemental education and support services for migrant children. Students are eligible for funding if they have moved during the last 36 months because they or members of their family were trying to obtain temporary or seasonal employment in agricultural, dairy, fishing, or logging activities. The law states that migrant education services are a priority for those students, ages three through 21, whose education has been interrupted during the current school year and who are failing, or are most at risk of failing, to meet state content and performance standards.

²² Migrant students, by the nature of the work of their families, often attend more than one school each year, sometimes live in camps and temporary residences without phones, and have limited family resources (Interstate Migrant Education Council, 2001).

²³ Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2000); California Tomorrow (1997); Romo & Falbo (1996).

²⁴ Many students crossing the border to attend school are American citizens, allowing them to legally pass through the border daily; in one area of New Mexico, an "overwhelming majority" are citizens (Heinz Bennett & Bennett, 1997).

²⁵ According to the 1982 Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe*, districts are required to educate all students with a valid local residence, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.

²⁶ The connection between student health and student achievement has been confirmed by a number of research studies, including Peth-Pierce (2000) and Yee (2001). Dr. Yee, in his research into the relationship between absenteeism and achievement, has found that "healthy children attend school more regularly; they are not distracted by constant pain, physical discomfort, depression, hunger or anxiety; they come to school regularly and ready to learn" (pp. 13 in California Assembly 2002).

²⁷ Friedrich, M.J. (1999); Kaplan, Brindis, Phibbs, Melinkovich, Naylor, & Ahlstrand (1999); Boyd, Crowson, & Gresson (1997); George Washington University (1997); Dryfoos (1994).

²⁸ The Select Committee on California Children's School Readiness and Health (2002) found that an estimated 51 million school hours are lost each year because of dental-related illness.

²⁹ *borderlines* (May 1998), p.1. "On the US side of the border, the rate of hepatitis A...occurs at a rate three times the national average...In 1995, the rate of reported TB cases in the four US border states was 13.3/100,000 compared to a rate of 8.7 elsewhere in the country...The rate for measles on the US side, for example, is 50 cases per 100,000 people versus a US national average of 11. And the morbidity for mumps in the region has been documented as high as 41/100,000 (the national average is only 2/100,000). Occurrence of rubella is between six and ten times the national average."

³⁰ US Surgeon General (2001); Kao (2000); Padilla & Duran (1995).

³¹ *borderlines* (May 1998).

³² Consumers Union (2000).

³³ According to the 1982 Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe*, districts are required to educate all students with a valid local residence, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.

³⁴ Data from La Frontera survey, aggregating number of services provided by each district.

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