I CAME HERE TO LEARN

The Achievements and Experiences of Massachusetts Students Whose First Language Is Not English

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction and Background

I Came Here to Learn offers new insights from both qualitative and quantitative research about a group of students who represent the fastest-growing segment of the United States public school population—youth whose First Language is Not English (FLNE).

FLNE is an umbrella term that includes English Learners (ELs), youth who have reached English proficiency, and other non-native English speakers who have never been enrolled in a formal EL program. (See Figure 1). Decades after legislation and policy first gave EL youth full access to the United States educational system, research is still finding that, on average, FLNE students lag behind their native English-speaking peers in academic performance and persistence to graduation. Lower achievement and lower graduation rates than the national average persist despite evidence that FLNE students display high levels of optimism and motivation for academic advancement.

In recent years, Massachusetts has increased its high school graduation rate from just below 80 percent to 86 percent. Despite these large gains, challenges remain. Students whose first language is not English (FLNE) account for 30 percent of all young people who leave school without a diploma in the state and comprise more than one in five students in the state.

FLNE youth are demographically diverse—varying in their home language, language abilities, immigration circumstances, parental characteristics, and socioeconomic status, among other factors related to academic success. For example, FLNE could be used to describe both a native Spanish-speaking student who is English proficient and doing relatively well academically, and a native Spanish-speaking student who is non-English proficient and struggling academically. Educational approaches do not always reflect this diversity. Whether constrained by the law or limited by strained resources and capacity, schools and districts nationwide, with some exceptions, tend to provide limited educational options for FLNE youth.

While Massachusetts has worked to improve educational outcomes for EL students, the challenges that these young people and their families face go beyond academic English acquisition and require a more comprehensive approach that reaches beyond the education system. Therefore, a deeper understanding of both the diversity within this population and of young people’s lived experience will help schools, districts, and the state provide the most appropriate and effective programs and policies to support them in reaching high school graduation and beyond.
The Center for Promise undertook the research described in *I Came Here to Learn* in the context of the GradNation State Activation Initiative, a three-year collaboration between America’s Promise Alliance and Pearson. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) is a grantee in this national effort to increase high school graduation rates by encouraging statewide innovation and collaboration, sharing knowledge to accelerate adoption of proven strategies, and developing successful models all states can replicate.

The Center for Promise takes the perspective that all young people have the potential for school and life success. This potential can be realized when the needs and strengths of a young person are aligned with the assets in a community. The role of schools, families, and the broader community and society is to ensure this alignment occurs—providing assets for all youth, removing barriers to experiencing those assets, and helping young people navigate and negotiate access to those assets; that is, that all young people grow and develop within a supportive youth system. Drawing from this youth systems framework, the authors examine the experiences of young people in Massachusetts whose first language is not English.

The findings in *I Came Here to Learn* point Massachusetts and other states toward new ways of supporting stronger graduation outcomes for FLNE students.

This executive summary highlights the research approaches, key findings, conclusions, and implications from *I Came Here to Learn*. The full report offers the reader a deeper understanding of the Massachusetts policy context, the methodology for the two research approaches, and a literature review that places the findings in context. The full report also includes additional quotes from young people that illustrate findings related to family, school, and how students are navigating competing priorities.

### Research Questions and Method

The study described in this report used a mixed-methods approach to answering the research questions. That is, the Center for Promise used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a fuller picture of the lives of FLNE students than could be gained from using only one method.

Through statistical analyses of statewide student-level data for more than 13,000 FLNE students, as well as group interviews with 24 Latinx young people in five cities throughout Massachusetts, the authors hoped to begin to answer these three questions:

- What distinct groups within the FLNE student population exist, as defined by clusters of characteristics (e.g. grades, age, and EL status)?
- Are some groups more likely to graduate high school than others?
- From the perspective of Latinx young people, what are the experiences and factors that contribute to their school persistence or choice to leave?

Questions one and two framed the quantitative analyses (Latent Class Analysis and multilevel logistic regression), through which the authors sought to better understand what enables and constrains academic performance among FLNE students in Massachusetts, including whether there are differing levels of academic performance among distinct groups (classes) of FLNE students and what variables are associated with variation in academic performance. Through the quantitative analyses,
the authors were interested in whether unique groups of FLNE young people could be distinguished by combinations of common variables (e.g., grades, age, EL status) and, subsequently, whether some groups were more likely to graduate high school than others.

Question three framed the qualitative inquiry, through which the authors sought to learn more about the lived experiences of older Latinx FLNE young people by speaking directly with them. The qualitative methods were designed to offer insights into the lived experience of Latinx FLNE youth, specifically what motivated them to interrupt their education and leave school before graduation or to persist to a diploma or credential. Given that there are 123 reported native languages in Massachusetts, the authors limited the qualitative aspect of the research study to a single language, Spanish—as it is the language by far most commonly spoken among students (54 percent) followed by Portuguese (7 percent). The authors conducted group interviews with young people identified by school staff as particularly at risk for leaving school. The young people were older (age 18-25), spoke Spanish as a first language, and had either left or considered leaving school.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results offer a story that challenges the traditional narrative about FLNE youth in the United States. For instance, the research team found that:

• **There are highs and lows.** Some FLNE groups graduate at rates on par or even substantially higher than their native English-speaking peers. Others lag far behind. (Please see the full report for the full Quantitative Results and Qualitative Findings.)

• **The journey is complicated.** All young people are navigating a complex, multi-layered ecology in their daily lives. Qualitative analyses revealed how young people whose first language is not English navigate these day-to-day experiences. For example, among Latinx FLNE youth who took part in the group interviews:
  • Language proficiency is often a barrier, rather than a bridge, to connection to supportive adults and resources.
  • Families may provide essential emotional support, but for those who have immigrated to the U.S. without one or both parents, this support is weakened, therefore creating stress for the young person.
  • Competing priorities, such as the need to work or care for family members, combined with lack of support and resources, often deter students from staying on the path to graduation.

• **They came here to learn.** All the young people with whom the authors spoke expressed motivation to better themselves and were seeking supports that would enable them to reach their full potential, in school and in life.

Understanding the complexity of young people’s experiences, including the factors that appear to drive differences in academic performance for FLNE students, can aid policymakers and practitioners in designing, implementing, and dedicating resources to interventions and supports to help all FLNE students graduate.

For a detailed discussion of these insights and more, see the Findings sections of the full report.
Implications

The Center for Promise research team went straight to the source and asked FLNE young people what improvements they would make to programs, policies, and practices to help other students learn English and persist in school through graduation. Presented here are six implications for policy and practice, based on their responses and experiences.

Create more opportunities for connection.

Youth described how connection with peers and adults is important for battling prejudice and fostering a sense of community in school. Peer-to-peer collaboration has been linked to increased school engagement and performance. Schools are uniquely positioned in the lives of FLNE youth to provide opportunities for connection to adults and peers within the walls of the school building and in the broader community. This might include opportunities for young people to assume leadership roles and to serve their communities.

“Debería desarrollar programas o proyectos, para desarrollar la comunicación entre todos los estudiantes. Estar todos unidos y no vernos diferentes uno hacia otro, porque esa es el gran problema de acá, eso es lo único. De ahí, lo demás pienso que está bien todo.”
–Mateo

“They should develop programs or projects to develop communication among all the students. To be all united and not see each other different from one another, because that’s the biggest problem here, that’s the only thing. From there, I think everything’s good.”
–Mateo

Continue to increase opportunities for teacher training and sharing of promising practices.

Many of the youth the authors spoke with expressed a desire for shared language with teachers. Highly effective educators, who are trained to serve EL students, are critically important to the state’s efforts to increase academic performance for all EL and FLNE youth and can help provide them with the supports necessary to reach graduation. Continuing to provide educators with increased opportunities to learn from one another, share promising practices, and receive input from the youth they serve will help educators to better meet the diverse needs of the FLNE student population.

“I think like if some teachers that are teaching in high school, they’ll speak Spanish, it will help a lot if they speak both English and Spanish.”
–Sandra

ii Students were encouraged to respond in either English or Spanish, depending on their preference. Responses in Spanish have been translated into English; responses in English are presented only in the original language.
Engage young people in the design of educational programs that serve FLNE students.

Young people have unique expertise and insight into the educational experiences that will lead to their academic success. Empowering youth and including their feedback in conversations about their educational experience can help educators structure more student-centered curriculum and programs for FLNE youth. When asked, young people expressed their desire for more bilingual staff, increased opportunities for employment assistance, and greater opportunities to interact with their native English-speaking peers.

"Diría yo que la mejor regla sería que nos hablaran pues, un tiempito español para pues mientras nos acostumbramos, aprendemos lo básico y ya después puro inglés. Pues, esa es una de las reglas que está aquí, que me gusta esa regla."  

I’d say that the best rule would be to talk to us in Spanish for some time so we get used to it and we learn the basics, and then just English. That’s one of the rules we have here and I like that rule. —Julio

Provide more flexible programs for older youth.

Older youth spoke about the need to earn money to take care of family and how this was often in conflict with their desire to attain a high school diploma. Providing flexibility to help these young people balance their family responsibilities and course load could lead to increased graduation rates. Superintendents and principals have accomplished this by creating flexible schedules (on a student-by-student basis), offering programs, such as internship programs, that prepare young people for the workforce, and providing opportunities for blended learning.

"Si. Yo hablé con la profesora... si podía dejar entrar... por lo menos a las nueve de la mañana para yo descansar un poco más. Pero el detalle era que la primera clase que yo tenía era necesaria para la graduación. Entonces no me la podía cambiar."  

I talked to the teacher... to see if they could let me come in... at least 9 a.m. so I could rest a little bit more. But, I had to take the class in the first period because it was necessary for graduation. So, they couldn’t change it for me. —Ana

Provide more comprehensive student supports.

Young people come to school with multiple needs. Recognizing this, schools can serve as hubs of resources and connection that extend beyond academics, providing supports based on the needs of their student populations. Full-service community schools, as well as nonprofit organizations, such as Beacon Centers in New York City, offer models for how schools can create partnerships to provide these supports.

"Si mi papá está operado, mi mamá no trabaja, solo yo trabajo. Entonces me tocó que dejar la escuela por eso... mi profesora me dio la tarjeta del bus gratis... pero incluso yo sentía que no era suficiente, porque tenía que llevar dinero a la casa."  

If my dad had surgery, my mom does not work, I only work. So, I had to leave school because of that... My teacher gave me a free bus pass. but I even felt it was not enough, because I had to bring money home. —Ana
Support the student by supporting the family.

Schools should continue to mine research and best practices to better engage and support families. One strategy might include incorporating family engagement technologies, such as Kinvolved, creating Family Centers,\textsuperscript{10} conducting home visits, and deliberately recruiting family and community members to be involved in the daily life of the school. Districts can support these efforts by allocating resources to a school counselor, social worker, or family engagement specialist who can serve as the link between home and school. In addition, offering opportunities for family members to learn English specifically at their child’s school could lead to an increase in the parents’ level of comfort with their child’s educational environment.

“I think if the government could create, at least, programs to study for a certain period of time in the afternoons for older people, I feel like that’d be like an extra support that they’d be giving us, Latino youth as well as parents.”

—Daniel

“Pienso de que si el gobierno creara, por lo menos programas, para estudiar de un cierto tiempo por las tardes, para gente mayor, siento que eso sería como una ayuda extra, que nos estuviesen dando a nosotros los latinos, tanto como los hijos y padres de familia.”
Conclusion

The authors of this report took two approaches to understanding FLNE students’ school experiences. The first approach revealed that FLNE students are not a homogenous group. Considering constellations of variables including eligibility for free/reduced price lunch, length of time in school, age, and EL status, the authors found that distinct classes of FLNE students exist in Massachusetts. Further, the authors found that membership in specific groups can predict with high certainty a student’s probability of graduating from high school within four or five years, in comparison to other groups. These findings suggest that a variety of factors compound one another in ways that are associated with academic performance and persistence. Knowledge of these factors can lead to stronger interventions that include specific pedagogical approaches and robust student supports.

The second approach took an in-depth look at the lived experiences of Latinx students who seemed to have similar characteristics to two distinct classes identified in the quantitative analysis: Low-Income, Spanish Speaking Massachusetts Newcomers, and the Differentiated Learners Who Speak Spanish. While the prevailing narrative across the U.S. and in Massachusetts is that Latinx FLNE students are lower performing than their English-speaking peers, the authors’ analyses revealed the numerous and complex barriers that FLNE Latinx youth might encounter throughout their school and home lives that contribute to or hinder their academic performance and persistence. Young people also revealed supports and approaches that led them to feel accepted and supported—both academically and personally.

Ultimately, the approaches and findings in this report shed light on the diversity within the FLNE population, while challenging the prevailing narrative about Latinx FLNE student performance. While this report is an important first step, more research needs to be conducted in order to further understand the different groups of FLNE students that exist and the lived experiences of young people who speak languages other than Spanish. Given that FLNE students make up roughly one-fifth of the student population in Massachusetts, more work that seeks to understand the experiences of FLNE students is necessary to provide the most appropriate and effective support through graduation and beyond.
Endnotes
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References


The Center for Promise is the applied research institute for America’s Promise Alliance, housed at the Boston University School of Education and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

America’s Promise Alliance is the nation’s largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. We bring together more than 400 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation’s attention on young people’s lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, our signature campaign, mobilizes Americans to increase the nation’s high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. In the past 12 years, an additional 2 million young people have graduated from high school.

Suggested Citation


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