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Hey Shawnta! Why Do First-Gen Immigrant Students Score Higher Than Native-Born American Students on All Standardized Achievement Tests?



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by Shawnta S. Barnes [f](#) [X](#) [in](#) [✉](#)

Hey Shawnta!

Why do first-generation immigrant students score higher than native-born American students on all standardized achievement tests?

I have been asked a version of this question many times before, especially when I was an English as a New Language teacher serving multilingual students. Some teachers wondered why students whose first language was not English were outscoring and outperforming their peers, especially their Black peers.

I will be the first to note that many multilingual learners are born in the United States. Regardless of where students are born or whether they are first-generation immigrants, all students should be able to have similar achievement rates. There are numerous factors to consider.

Mindset

Families who choose America do so because they believe that America is the land of opportunity and they can grab a slice of that American pie. Education is one of the tools they must master so they can achieve their dreams of a better life. That internal drive to succeed can be stronger for immigrant families than for some American-born families. Yes, all children are entitled to free and public education in the U.S., but that does not mean that education is great in all public schools. Parents must have a mindset of any means necessary when it comes to academic achievement. If parents do not have that mindset, why would their kids?

More Supports

If students are immigrants and English is not their first language, they have an Individual Learning Plan (ILP). This is what it is called in Indiana; however, the name may differ in other states. This legally binding plan provides a teacher to support students in gaining academic language and proficiency in English. Some programs even help students develop their literacy in their native language in addition to English. These students have help from their classroom teacher and an English as a new language (ENL) teacher and/or ENL instructional assistant.

When other students are struggling, they do not necessarily get these supports unless they receive special education services. As a former ENL teacher and current supervisor of ENL student teachers, I often tell educators that many of the strategies we use to support English learners work for all students. Students should not have to receive special education services or language services to get the support they need to achieve.

No Investment in the Test

I will be the first to say that standardized tests are just one measure of student success. I want students to graduate from school and have productive lives – and standardized test proficiency is not the only measure educators use to determine if they are on the right path. So many teachers are telling kids the test doesn't matter, and school districts may not be sharing the results with families in a way that helps them understand or invest. When families and kids aren't invested, they may not take the test seriously, which could impact their performance.

Non-immigrant families must take education seriously and show their children that education is important. Teachers can try hard to invest students in education, but none of that matters if education is not seen as important at home.

Shawnta S. Barnes

Shawnta (Shawn-tay) S. Barnes, also known as Educator Barnes, is a married mother of identical twin boys. She navigates education from not only the educator's perspective but also the parent's perspective. She has been an educator for nearly two decades. Shawnta works with K-12 schools, universities, & education adjacent organizations through her education consulting business Blazing Brilliance. She is an adjunct college professor, supervises student teachers, Indy Kids Winning Editor-in-Chief, Brave Brothers Books Co-founder, & CEO, and Brazen Education Podcast host. She holds five education licenses: English/language arts 5-12, English to speakers of other languages P-12, library/media P-12, reading P-12, and school administration P-12, and she has held a job in every licensed area. Previously, she has served as a school administrator, English teacher, English learners teacher, literacy coach, and librarian. She won the 2019 Indiana Black Expo Excellence in Education Journalism Award. In 2023, she completed her doctorate in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education with a minor in Learning Sciences. She is an urban gardener in her spare time

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