

The Schumer-Graham Immigration Plan and Implications for
Education-Related Initiatives at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

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The Schumer-Graham Immigration Plan: Implications for Immigrant Rights and Gates Foundation Immigrant Rights Initiatives

PROBLEM

Our immigration system is in bad shape.¹ Legal immigrants face a process maze filled with criteria that take years to meet, a huge line of "competitors" vying for admission, and the frustration of knowing that millions of illegal immigrants are getting into the United States ahead of them, even if those undocumented workers are caught between the fear of discovery and deportation and exploitation or even abuse by unscrupulous traffickers, employers, and landlords — who operate with impunity, knowing that their victims will rarely report them. Meanwhile, American citizens are angry about the idea of illegal immigrants accessing rights and benefits meant only for citizens — including free education through high school and often-free social services, not to mention the sobering implications for national security.

CONTEXT

Research done by the Council on Economic Advisors² maintains that immigration actually benefits Americans, because immigrants:

- Contribute to productivity growth and technological advancement.
- Become entrepreneurs at high rates.
- Have lower crime rates than native Americans.
- Slightly improve the solvency of pay-as-you-go programs such as Social Security and Medicare.
- Have children who learn English and generally become assimilated into American society.

In spite of these benefits, the presence of millions of undocumented workers is a contentious issue, and a solution to the problem seemed elusive until the Schumer-Graham Immigration Plan gained momentum through a groundswell of support from citizens, legislators, and the President himself. Last year, U.S. Senators Charles Schumer and Lindsay Graham met with President Barack Obama to discuss their proposed framework for action on the immigration problem. According to the senators, while Americans overwhelmingly oppose illegal immigration, they support legal immigration.³ This is

¹ Schumer, Charles E., Sen., and Sen. Lindsay O. Graham. "The right way to mend immigration." *The Washington Post*. March 19, 2010.

² Council on Economic Advisors. "Immigration's Economic Impact." June 20, 2007.

³ *Ibid.*

encouraging; because if issues of law enforcement, national security, and fairness are thoroughly addressed in any proposed solution, it is likely to be successful. As such, the Schumer and Graham plan has four pillars:

- Require citizens and non-citizen workers alike to have biometric Social Security cards to help keep illegal workers from getting jobs.
- Fulfill and strengthen border security and interior enforcement commitments.
- Creating a process for admitting temporary workers.
- Implement a tough but fair path to legalization for those here illegally.⁴

Ending illegal immigration will also require an effective "legal worker" verification system that will hold employers accountable for verifying the identity and status of all prospective employees. E-Verify is a new technological tool for this purpose that has earned high marks from employers, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the GAO.⁵ Initial concerns about possible privacy violations have been addressed through the creation of a E-Verify privacy branch with safeguards that limit both data collection and the people who can access the data.

But ending illegal immigration is only one part of the reform needed. The other part is the need to develop a better legal immigration system, as this is essential to American's future economic prosperity.⁶ And it is the educational part of that plan that is particularly important to understand in light of the Gates Foundation's numerous educational initiatives and grants.

Specifically, the Schumer and Graham plan would "... award green cards to immigrants who earn a Ph.D. or master's degree in science, technology, engineering or math from a U.S. university" so that the U.S. would continue to benefit, hopefully, from the education it had provided them.⁷ But it also addresses those at the other end of the educational spectrum by proposing a system of "circular migration" that would allow lower-skilled foreign nationals to fill positions here in the U.S. First, employers would need to show that they were unsuccessful in recruiting Americans for the positions that they want foreign workers to fill. Second, the federal government would increase the numbers of lower-skilled immigrants

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "E-Verify Gets High Marks from Employers in Customer Satisfaction Survey." Web. 25 Jan. 2011.

⁶ Council of Economic Advisors. "Immigration's Economic Impact." June 20, 2007.

⁷ Schumer and Graham.

allowed in when the economy is growing, but decrease them in a recession. And third, non-citizens who have succeeded as workers here and contributed to their communities over many years would have the opportunity to earn a green card. According to a study by the U.S. Department on Labor⁸, unemployment rates for foreign-born workers are very low: in 2006, they ranged from 3.5 percent for those with a high school diploma to just 2.3 percent for those with a college degree. For those with less education, the unemployment rate was 5.1 percent. Therefore, not only do foreign-born workers contribute significantly to our GDP; but the more education they have, the more they contribute.

CONCLUSION

The Schumer-Graham Immigration Plan promises to fix our broken immigration system through a four-pillar process that would benefit both Americans and immigrants by requiring a biometric Social Security card for employment (thus increasing employer accountability and eliminating employee fraud), following through on border security and immigration enforcement commitments, creating a process for admitting and tracking temporary workers, and giving illegal immigrants a "tough but fair" path to legal immigration.

Currently, Gates Foundation educational initiatives and grants focus on providing a wide variety of educational and acculturation services to legal immigrants. Given the prospect of the passage of the Schumer-Graham Immigration Plan, it would be worthwhile to begin discussion of ways in which the Gates Foundation could adapt and add to its current educational initiatives so as to address the needs of two groups: (1) illegal immigrants who will choose the demanding path to legal immigration, and (2) temporary workers who may benefit from English language classes and other types of training in order to succeed in our society and contribute more effectively.

⁸ U.S. Department of Labor (Bureau of Labor Statistics). "Foreign-Born Proportion of U.S. Workers by Education Level, 2006."