

OPINION



More than 400 citizens from 82 different countries, including Meiselle Fesalvo, from the Philippines, and Sandra Castanon, of Mexico, take part in a special Natural Ceremony at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago on Jan. 31. **ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Immigrants with green cards face hiring discrimination

By A. Nicole Kreisberg

Carlos, 33, remembers the 2016 election like it was yesterday.

That was the night he got his long-awaited green card. Before then, he had been working under the table at odd jobs — or worse, for employers who withheld his wages — while living in the country without legal permission. With his green card in hand, he could finally work lawfully in the U.S.

He submitted an application to a job at a local public servant's office. He had majored in political science at a U.S. college, and working in politics was his American Dream. Yet he was turned down for the job.

He didn't know why. Carlos finally had what he needed to work, a college degree and his green card, but the door was slammed shut anyway. Carlos isn't alone.

Across the United States, Latinos who were born abroad, even if they have legal papers, the right to work and college degrees, aren't hired at the same rate as Latinos born in the U.S. And even though many policy advocates assume that giving more individuals the legal right to work via green cards is the best way for them to get jobs, my research suggests that the *right* to work is not enough unless employers treat workers equally too.

News outlets as early as 1916 have been talking about “the American Dream,” as an editorial in the Chicago Daily Tribune shows — supporting the belief that economic success is attainable for everyone who works hard. But Latinos have long argued that their American Dream is not possible because employers discriminate against them based on where they are born.

Unfortunately, that's extremely difficult to prove. Employers can argue that they turn down foreign-born candidates based on individual failures such as less experience, no college degree or a lack of fluency in English.

So in 2019, I came up with a plan to find out what would happen if companies were faced with two equally educated, equally trained Latinos applying for a job: one born in the U.S. and one born abroad. This is a real-life academic experiment called a correspondence audit study. I sent out resumes online to 1,364 job postings in eight of the country's largest metropolitan areas, including Chicago. The resumes — representing fictitious Latino male college graduates — were identical in every way except for whether they were born on American soil.

I was shocked to see just how often

employers discriminated against the foreign-born candidates. Employers called back the foreign-born candidates for a job interview nearly half as often as native-born candidates — even when foreign-born candidates signaled that they had green cards and legal documentation. That's like native Chicagoans' chances of a call-back being cut in half just because they were born in one neighborhood over another.

For the last decade, I've seen firsthand the damage caused by this kind of illegal hiring discrimination. Immigrants make vital contributions to the U.S. economy — in what they purchase, where they live and how they work. In both high- and low-skilled jobs, immigrants fill important labor shortages, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When people are able to put themselves through college, get a degree and still find themselves shut out of a job simply due to where they were born, the entire economy suffers. So do all of our civil rights.

The social spending bill promoted by President Joe Biden advocates for administering more unused green cards under the premise that giving more people work rights will get more people working. While I agree that more people should get green cards,

my research shows that rights to work are not enough to grant access to work — especially if employers disregard that fundamental civil right. In addition, lawmakers must better prevent employers from breaking discrimination law.

Currently, the only way employers are punished for breaking discrimination law is if workers themselves file a complaint after the fact. But these complaints are notoriously hard to prove, especially given that employers can retaliate against potential hires and they have far more power and resources. Instead, federal and state offices should help employers prevent discrimination in the first place, such as by requiring employers to collect transparent, publicly available data on the hiring process.

No one should be discriminated against simply based on where they were born. We must protect our communities, in Chicago and nationally, from this insidious civil rights violation.

After all, people can't work hard toward their American Dream without first having an opportunity to work.

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School choice puts power back in hands of parents

By Paul Vallas

Across America, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the public education system's weaknesses by revealing how ill-equipped it was to deal with such a crisis.

Here in Chicago, we witnessed public schools' failure to make adjustments to reopen safely and restore quality in-person instruction. Traditional public schools — burdened by centralized bureaucracy, state and federal mandates, and collective bargaining agreements — simply aren't designed to adapt or innovate in real time, even when an emergency arises.

Outright interference from Chicago Teachers Union leadership hasn't exactly been helpful either. CTU leaders' dogged insistence on prioritizing union members' interests at all costs — even at the expense of what's best for students — is wrong-headed. As it stands today, the only way to defy attempts by CTU and its political allies to limit parental control is to flee the system by fleeing the city. Enrollment declines at Chicago Public Schools reflect that.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reports that traditional public school enrollment fell by 1.4 million students nationwide last year while public charter school enrollment increased by 240,000, or 7%. Some of that decline in enrollment can be attributed to



Students depart Oriole Park School on Jan. 25 in Chicago. Oriole Park is one of the many public schools in Chicago. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

home schooling, learning “pods” and other outgrowths of the pandemic.

However, the addition of nearly a quarter million new charter school students in a single school year — accompanied by increased enrollment in parochial schools — cannot be overlooked. This trend shows that parents are undeniably interested in alternatives to government-run schools educating their children. In response to public demands for more school choice, 20 states enacted new or expanded existing school option programs last year.

As a bright spot, Illinois extended the sunset on its Invest in Kids tax credit scholarship program by one year, but not

without a fight. Still, the norm in Illinois is for elected officials — whose campaigns are funded by teachers unions — to limit and even reduce parental choice by capping the number of charter schools authorized to operate, micromanaging charter school enrollment and voting to diminish or terminate the state's scholarship program.

School choice exists in Chicago. For people with money. But most parents cannot afford to pay private school tuition. Many of those who do are scraping by, not without sacrifice. More than three-fourths of CPS' 330,000 students come from low-income families. If your child doesn't win a seat in the charter school

lottery or receive a scholarship to a private school, there is no alternative to your zoned CPS school. Moving to a nearby school district is rarely an option considering the average home price in neighboring, better-performing suburban districts. Economically disadvantaged parents and guardians are then subject to de facto education “redlining,” with the quality of a child's school determined by his or her ZIP code. Families that want a different or better option but cannot afford one are out of luck.

Chicago's mayor can and should move to fully implement a better system that empowers parents with choice while City Hall's fifth floor still controls the school board. The window of opportunity exists but will soon shut for good.

Here's how to do it. The mayor can direct the school board to use the annual surplus from the city's tax increment financing program to provide tuition support for families whose children attend or wish to attend private schools. These revenues could provide tuition support for all of the families that have applied for existing Invest in Kids scholarships. This can be legally accomplished by requiring CPS schools to apply their share of the annual TIF windfall to the Chicago Teachers Pension Fund, freeing up an equal dollar amount of the city's annual pension contribution to finance the tuition assistance program.

Longer term, the city can invite state-recognized parochial and private schools to become “contract schools” in which the district contributes to or covers tuition for students who attend. Public school districts have a long history of contracting out for private educational services. There is precedent.

The Supreme Court's landmark 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* grants the right to equitable educational opportunity. It is a right guaranteed by the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. Those in power in Chicago have chosen to interpret this right as a mandate that all public financing of education be allocated exclusively to “public” or government-run schools. This year, in *Carson v. Makin*, the Supreme Court will make a decision that could have an enormous impact by challenging that interpretation.

I predict the decision will result in the explicit endorsement of a reconstituted system in which parents get to direct the per-pupil public dollars to the school (or education model) of their choosing. Until then, it is my sincere hope to make the ground fertile for change and choice.

It's past time to put the power where it rightly belongs: in the hands of parents.

Paul Vallas served as budget director for the city of Chicago and as the CEO of Chicago Public Schools.