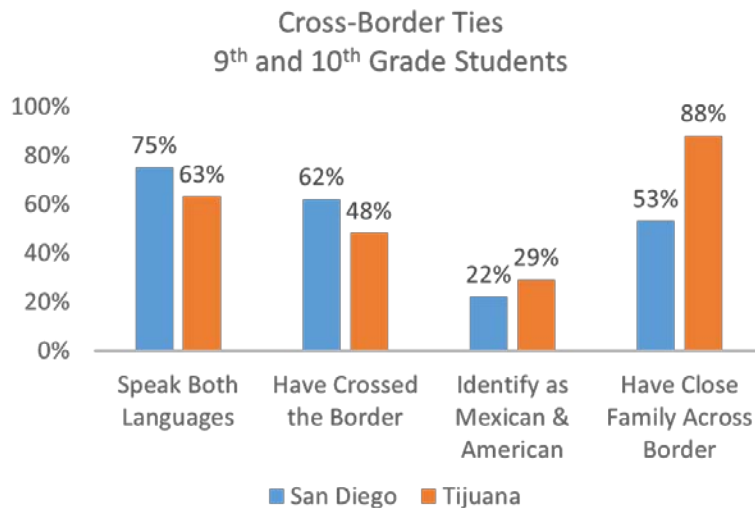


## The Students We Share: At the Border – San Diego & Tijuana

Because of intense migration, Southern California is home to the highest concentration of Mexican-born immigrants in the U.S., and Baja California is home to the highest concentration of U.S.-born youth in Mexico (Migration Policy Institute, INEGI). In addition, over 125,000 people cross the border in both directions between San Diego and Tijuana each day because their daily interactions unfold in both cities (SANDAG). These dynamics have created a sizeable cohort of binational<sup>1</sup> students in the San Diego-Tijuana metropolis whose education takes place on both sides of the border.

### **Cross-Border Ties**

The young people in the region see themselves as part of both countries, with a quarter of students identifying as both American and Mexican, regardless of actual country of birth. In large part, this can be attributed to the strong binational ties in the region. Well over half of students in the cross-border region reported speaking both English and Spanish, crossing the border frequently, and maintaining close contact with relatives on the opposite side of the border.



Our research found that 21% of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in San Diego have experience living and studying in Mexico and that 11% of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in Tijuana have experience living and studying in the U.S. As these students transition back and forth between school systems, they face challenges enrolling in school, switching language of instruction, and integrating into a new school environment.

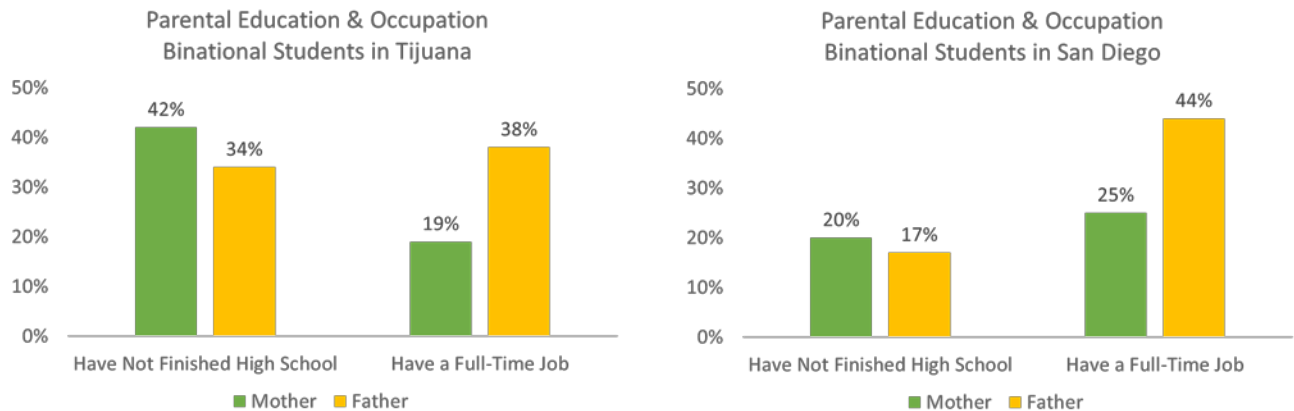
The cross-border cultural fluency of these young people make them a tremendous asset to the region in terms of human capital. In fact, over \$100 million in U.S.-Mexico trade passes through the San Diego-Tijuana border crossing each day (U.S. Census Bureau), and cross-border industry clusters in STEM and R&D intensive industries like aerospace and medical devices depend on a binational workforce and supply chains and production processes that span the border (USMEX).

Despite their importance to the binational economy, these students report relatively lower educational aspirations than their peers without migration experience. While the challenges that they face in San Diego and Tijuana vary greatly, in both cities they are at risk of failing to complete higher education and find high quality jobs.

<sup>1</sup> “Binational” refers to students with experience living and studying in both countries, regardless of citizenship

### **Socioeconomic Status**

In San Diego, students with experience living and studying in Mexico are relatively worse off than their peers in terms of socioeconomic status. In Tijuana, however, students with experience living and studying in the U.S. are relatively better off. Despite these differences, on both sides of the border this group of students has lower educational aspirations and expectations than students without binational experience.



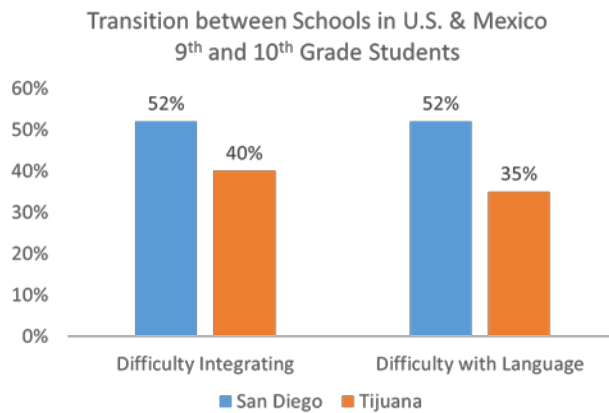
The families of these students often lack the social capital necessary for academic success and their young people need additional support from schools and teachers. Many parents did not complete high school themselves and 40% of students report that their parents cannot help them with their homework. Because parents have limited academic experience, they do not have sufficient information about how to help their children in seeking educational opportunities. As a result, 4 out of 5 young people report turning to other sources for advice.

Families face additional pressure because parents struggle on both sides of the border to find stable job opportunities. Furthermore, mixed-status families often become separated by the border. A third of students in San Diego and 20% of students in Tijuana report that one or both of their parents live on the opposite side of the border.

### **Students' Challenges**

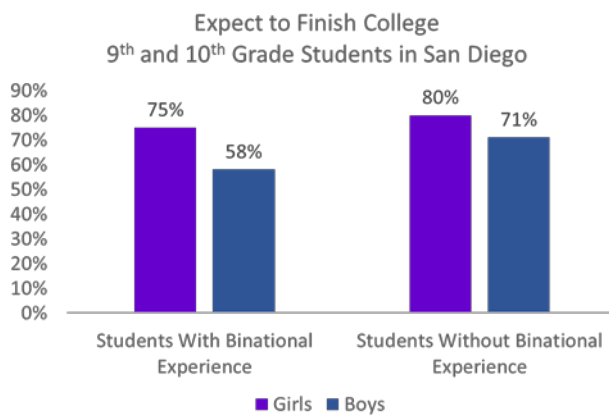
For students, migration back and forth across the border puts them at risk of falling through the cracks. These young people report difficulty with integration into classrooms on both sides of the border and varying levels of support from teachers. While many students speak both languages, they struggle with switching between classroom instruction in Spanish and English. In San Diego, 52% of students report challenges with integration and language. In Tijuana, 35% to 40% of students report facing these challenges.

Over time, difficult life circumstances and stress can have repercussions for mental health. A



simple depression screening tool (PHQ-2) showed that 35% of binational young people in San Diego and 29% of binational young people in Tijuana are at risk of depression. These rates are well above normal and are of great concern with regard to the overall well-being of these students. Furthermore, they are likely to put additional downward pressure on academic outcomes given substantial research showing a correlation between mental health and academic success.

### ***Educational Aspirations and Expectations***



In San Diego, binational students are less likely to expect to finish college than their peers and have less information about pursuing higher education. A third of these students take classes for English Language Learners, and the expectation of finishing college is even lower for this group. College completion rates for Latinos age 25 to 29 in California underscore the obstacles that this group faces; only 14% have completed a 4-year university, as compared to 49% of the rest of this age group (American Community Survey).

In Tijuana, students with experience living and studying in the U.S. are equally as likely as their peers to believe they will finish college. However, they place less importance on college and are less likely to believe that a university degree is a prerequisite for getting a good job. In addition, they report facing additional pressure from their parents to leave school and join the workforce. In interviews with students, many explained that this is because they are U.S. citizens and have access to jobs in the service industry in San Diego, which do not require a college degree. These jobs are well paid as compared to many professional jobs in Tijuana, creating a disincentive to continue studying.

San Diego and Tijuana are at the center of an educational crisis that California and Mexico share. If policymakers allow migration to derail the educational trajectories of these young people, it will be to the detriment of the economic competitiveness of both countries. It will also have lasting implications for their families and for the social fabric of the communities where they live.

## Limitations of Existing Policies

Currently, there are more programs in California schools to support the integration of immigrant students into the classroom than there are across Mexico. Conversely, California operates no programs to support students leaving its classrooms once they arrive in Mexico, while Mexico uses its embassies and consulates to offer broad support to these young people in the U.S. Learning from current efforts on both sides of the border is a good starting point for identifying binational policy solutions.

Broadly speaking, Mexican-origin youth in California get assistance at school gaining English literacy, but programs to help them develop or maintain literacy in Spanish are limited. As a result, they do not develop the language abilities needed to participate in the cross-border economy and they struggle with language if they end up in classrooms in Mexico. Furthermore, programs for English Language Learners do not place equal emphasis on being college-ready. With the recent passage of Proposition 58, there is a new opportunity to fund programs to increase bilingual language instruction.



In Mexico, the first challenge that students face when arriving from the U.S. is enrolling in schools. Changes to laws have reduced paperwork – like translated transcripts and birth certificates – that previously acted as a barrier to enrollment. However, not all schools in all places are aware of these changes. And enrolling in public high school is still very difficult for students in cities like Tijuana where the school system is at maximum capacity and where entrance into schools requires taking an exam (in Spanish) that is only offered once or twice a year. Once students enroll, they are often lost in crowded classrooms where teachers have received no training to support them in improving Spanish literacy or getting up to speed with new curriculum and teaching approaches.

## Policy Recommendations

A failure to enact comprehensive policies to support the education of binational youth will have long-lasting implications for the social fabric and economic competitiveness of communities on both sides of the border. At a minimum, the children of migrant families should have equal access to schooling and realistic pathways to higher education in both countries. Achieving this requires enacting and fully resourcing policies to:

- Empower parents to navigate school systems in both countries
- Help students build and maintain literacy in both English and Spanish
- Train teachers to support the integration of binational youth in the classroom
- Ensure that educational institutions in both countries provide easy access to enrollment

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Binational collaboration should aim to make transitions from one side of the border to the other as seamless as possible for students. In addition, the intensity of migration at the border creates the need for special Cross-Border Education Hubs that enable innovation in education and workforce development policies at the local level.

California and Mexico can work together to identify the schools on both sides of the border with large numbers of migrant students. Efforts to train teachers to support integration of binational youth and to offer bilingual instruction can be targeted to serve those schools. In places like San Diego and Tijuana, where there is a high concentration of young people with experience studying on both sides of the border, direct relationships between school systems can be developed. Furthermore, efforts can be tailored to local conditions to offer students culturally appropriate mental health services, ethnic studies courses, mentorship programs, workforce development training and other assistance. Additional mechanisms must be developed to ensure that parents of these children - even in regions without large concentrations of migrants - have sufficient information to navigate school systems in both countries and be effective advocates for students.

For young people moving back and forth between Mexico and the U.S., school should be a place of refuge from the pressures of migration. Binational collaboration to implement policies in both countries to support these young people in charting a successful pathway to adulthood will pay dividends for decades to come.

### **The Students We Share Research Collaboration**

Research findings presented in this report are based on qualitative and quantitative data from a representative sample of 6,500 9th and 10th graders in 66 schools and 197 classrooms in the San Diego Unified School District, the Sweetwater Union High School District, and across the municipality of Tijuana. Surveys on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders in these districts are in process now. This research was carried out by the Mexican Migration Field Research Program (MMFRP) at UC San Diego, a unique, three-course offering for students seeking hands-on field research experience focused on international migration. The program was created by Dr. Wayne Cornelius in 2004 and is based at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies (USMEX).



Since academic year 2015-2016, MMFRP has collaborated with the UCLA Civil Rights Project, the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), and the Faculty of Economics & International Relations (FEYRI) at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC) in Tijuana. All organizations worked together with USMEX as equal partners on the teaching component of MMFRP, as well as the research design, survey development, data collection and outreach to school districts. This

work was made possible by the generous support of the UC Mexico Initiative, the UC San Diego Latin American Studies Program and the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies (CCIS).