

**New York City Council Hearing on English Language Learners
Testimony by Kim Sykes, New York Immigration Coalition
February 25th, 2015**

Good afternoon, and thank you to the members of the Council for convening this hearing and to Chairman Dromm for his continued leadership for immigrant communities.

My name is Kim Sykes, and I'm the Senior Manager of Education Advocacy at the New York Immigration Coalition. We are an umbrella policy and advocacy organization with nearly 200 members from New York State, and we aim to achieve a fairer and more just society that values the contributions of immigrants and extends opportunity to all. As part of this work, we convene an Education Collaborative of grassroots immigrant organizations, policy and legal organizations and practitioners. Together we fight to increase English language learners' (ELLs') and immigrant students' access to a quality education and to expand opportunity for their parents to be engaged.

Thank you for this opportunity to share perspective on positive steps and opportunities to better support ELLs and engage their parents. We strongly support Resolution 388 and thank City Council and the Education Committee under Chairman Dromm's leadership for advocating for this critical change for ELLs.

As Council knows, graduation rates and proficiency levels for ELLs lag incredibly far behind their English-speaking peers. My colleagues will outline some of the positive steps that the DOE has taken to address this situation. The NYC appreciates the Department of ELLs and Student Support's partnership through our joint College Guide for Immigrant Parents. Together we've helped immigrant parents understand what their children need to do to graduate from high school and to prepare for college - a real need in the community. We also appreciate the Translation & Interpretation Unit's real concern for the barriers immigrant parents face and the opportunity to work with them to address these issues.

However, we're all here today because more needs to be done for ELLs. My fellow Collaborative members will offer student-centered recommendations that the NYC supports.

My testimony will focus on engaging ELL parents by ensuring language access. Research has shown that one of the major factors predicting student achievement is the extent to which a student's family is able to participate and become involved in their child's education.¹ We applaud Chancellor Fariña for her welcome and wise focus on parent engagement.

The NYC's Education Collaborative recently announced our Build the Bridge campaign to ensure that parents have access to quality translation and interpretation. Nearly half² of public school students – almost half a million families – speak a language other than English at home. According to the DOE³, more than 180 languages are spoken by our school families. Translation and interpretation are essential preconditions for ELL parent engagement, and also for including immigrant parents more who have English proficient children in our schools.

¹ See National Education Association research available at: <http://www.nea.org/tools/17360.htm>.

² 42% of public schools students speak a language other than English at home.

³ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/RulesPolicies/languagepolicy.htm>

RIGHTS

Parents have a right to translation and interpretation under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And according to the DOE's own regulation – Chancellor's Regulation A-663⁴ – these services should at least be available in the top 9 languages as defined by the DOE, which now includes Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish and Urdu. Our Education Collaborative fought for this regulation and won it with Council's leadership in 2006.

BARRIERS

While parents have a right to translation and interpretation and services are technically available, lack of quality translation and interpretation remains a very serious problem for immigrant parents across the school system. Key barriers for parents accessing services at schools reported by the community include:

- **Non-impartial or inappropriate individuals are often called upon to translate.** This includes students translating about their own academic performance, fellow parents translating about situations viewed as private family matters by the impacted parents, and school staff who haven't been properly trained being drafted even though they aren't able to translate technical terms related to ELLs or students with disabilities;
- **Parents and schools face long wait times** for interpretation and translated materials. Parents are discouraged by messages from the school regarding how long and difficult it is for them to get services for parents. Parents lose income from waiting after they've taken time off work and face difficulties with childcare;
- **Parents who need services do not get them.** This happens even though parents have requested services. In addition, parents receive translated documents, but they aren't in the appropriate language. Parents are also asked if services are needed but are not asked in a language that they can understand. Many parents also do not know that they have a right to translation and interpretation;
- **Parents are afraid to ask for services due to the school climate or misperceptions.** Many schools are unaware of cultural gaps that need to be bridged to connect parents with services. Parents can feel unwelcome in schools and perceive, based on body language, tone, etc., that they should not ask for services even though they know services are available. Parents may have concerns that asking for services will make the family subject of unwanted attention, negatively impact their children's grades or mark the student and/or family as a problem or burden on the school;
- **Often, student-specific materials are not translated.** This includes report cards and Individualized Education Programs, which are rarely translated;
- **Translation quality is poor.** Sometimes services are provided but are so literal or technical that the parent cannot understand.

SOLUTION

Many schools want to provide quality translation and interpretation services to parents, but they need support to understand how the translation system works, to know best practices, and to solve problems. And, we need to ensure that ultimately schools are getting the support they need and are doing their part to provide quality services to parents.

The additional funding for over-the-phone translation and interpretation services and outreach included in the preliminary budget is a positive step, but much more needs to be done.

Right now we have a singular opportunity to fix a key problem. Currently there are just 2 people at the Department of Education with the job of seeing how schools are doing with translation and interpretation, helping schools that need it, and ensuring improvements. There are more than 1700 schools for these 2 people to cover.

⁴ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/Translation/ChancellorRegulation/Language%20Access%20Policy>

However, the DOE is in the process of setting up a new school support structure for the next school year. They're expanding superintendent offices and charging them with supporting schools and assessing how the principal is doing leading the school. They're also creating new Borough Field Support Centers to actually provide schools with the support they need.

The NYC's Education Collaborative is calling for this new structure to also include staff who are focused on overcoming language barriers parents are facing. Instead of 2 people for 1700 schools, at a minimum there should be a point person in each superintendent office who is accountable for doing four very important things:

1. **Distinguishing** which schools need support on translation and interpretation.
2. **Identifying successes and gaps** in both schools' practices and in materials and translators that schools pass along to parents from the DOE's central office.
3. **Supporting** schools.
4. **Ensuring** that parents get quality services.

There's something very real on the line in getting translation and interpretation right. So many of our immigrant families come to America because they want their children to have a good education. Not surprisingly, parents want to know how it's going and they want to talk about it with their children's schools.

The DOE needs to act now to bridge the gaps in the system because schools need support on translation and interpretation and immigrant parents need change.

Thank you.