

The Great Parent Engagement Gap: Report on School Translation and Interpretation for NYC Parents

INTRODUCTION



Nearly half of public school students speak a language other than English at home, and more than 180 languages are represented.ⁱ In New York City, parents have a right to translation and interpretation under federal law and the Department of Education's own regulations.ⁱⁱ Services are technically available through the DOE's Translation & Interpretation Unit, and schools have access to over-the-phone interpreters during business hours in 200 languages.ⁱⁱⁱ

This report presents data showing that despite these resources and almost a decade under the Chancellor's regulation, parents across the City **continue to face serious barriers getting translation and interpretation** from schools. While the situation has improved somewhat in recent years, community leaders and parents continue to report regular problems accessing services at schools as well as Family Welcome Centers, and Committees on Special Education.

Barriers reported by community leaders include:

- Inappropriate individuals are often called upon to translate
- Parents and schools face long wait times for interpreters and translated materials
- Parents who need services do not get them, even after asking
- Student-specific materials are not translated
- Parents are afraid to ask for translation for various reasons

This report outlines results of a survey initiative performed by the New York Immigration Coalition's (NYIC's) Education Collaborative. The Collaborative convenes grassroots immigrant organizations from across New York City's diverse communities, as well as legal and policy advocates to discuss issues impacting immigrant students and families and to work together to ensure immigrants have access to a quality education. The Collaborative has worked on language access issues for more than a decade and has conducted numerous monitoring projects related to translation and interpretation for public school parents. The Collaborative's advocacy led to formal New York City and Department of Education (DOE) regulations on language access.

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

To collect data on reported issues, members of the NYIC's Education Collaborative launched a survey initiative this spring to collect data from parents in all five boroughs, including individuals who speak Spanish, Chinese, additional languages from the nine covered by the DOE's regulations, as well as lower-incidence languages. This project follows the 2007 language access monitoring report "School Year Filled With Missed Communication: Despite Chancellor's Regulation, Immigrant Parents Still Face Language Barriers," which was jointly written with Advocates for Children of New York.^{iv}

This year's survey initiative is particularly timely given the additional demands placed on the DOE's translation and interpretation system through: the two new parent-teacher conferences instituted this school year, the 40 minutes of weekly parent engagement time set aside through the recent UFT contract, the new parent

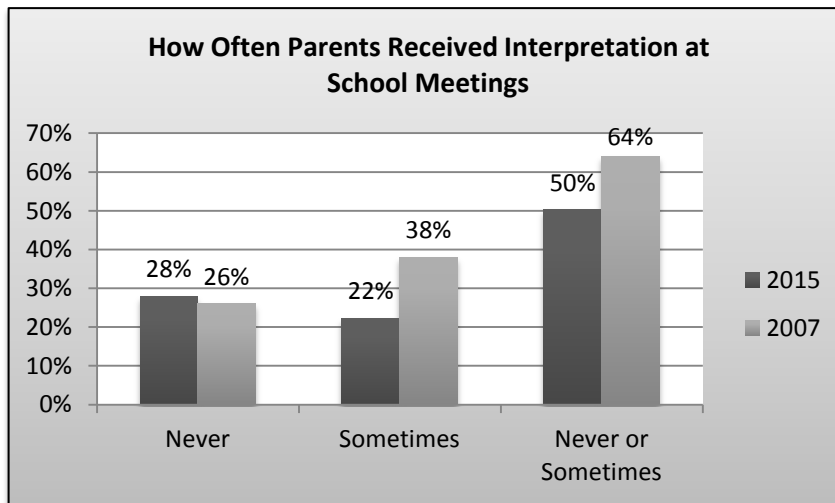
The Great Parent Engagement Gap, June 16, 2015

meeting requirement under state regulations for English Language Learners^v, and the pre-K expansion that began last year.

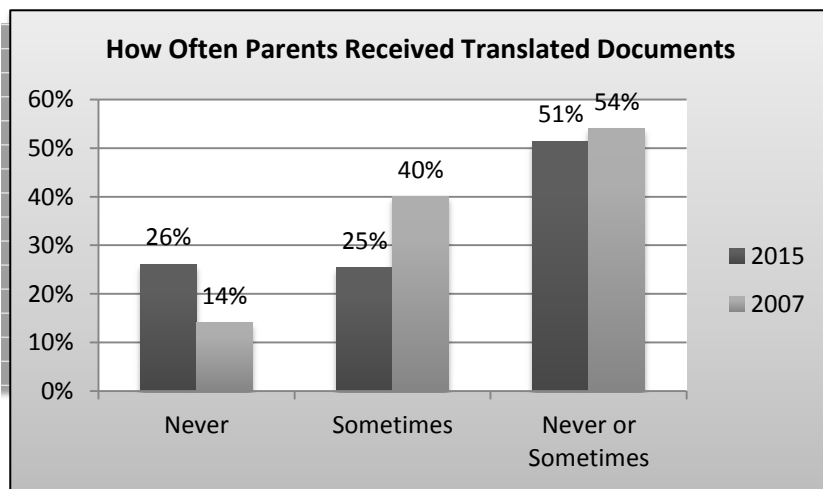
The Collaborative administered nearly 200 surveys of parents' experiences during this school year. 175 parents indicated that they did not feel comfortable speaking English at their child's school. Their responses are the subject of this report.

❖ **Half of parents are missing critical information because it's not translated or because they don't have an interpreter.**

- While this is an improvement from 2007, it is still slightly versus results in 2007.



- *N* in a language that the parent could understand. There was incredibly little improvement in this outcome since 2007, and there was a substantial increase in the number of parents who never received translated documents.



The Great Parent Engagement Gap, June 16, 2015

❖ **Parents are relying on children to interpret on a large scale despite the DOE’s own regulations prohibiting this practice in most settings, putting parents and their children in very inappropriate and uncomfortable positions. The Language Line is also severely under-used.**

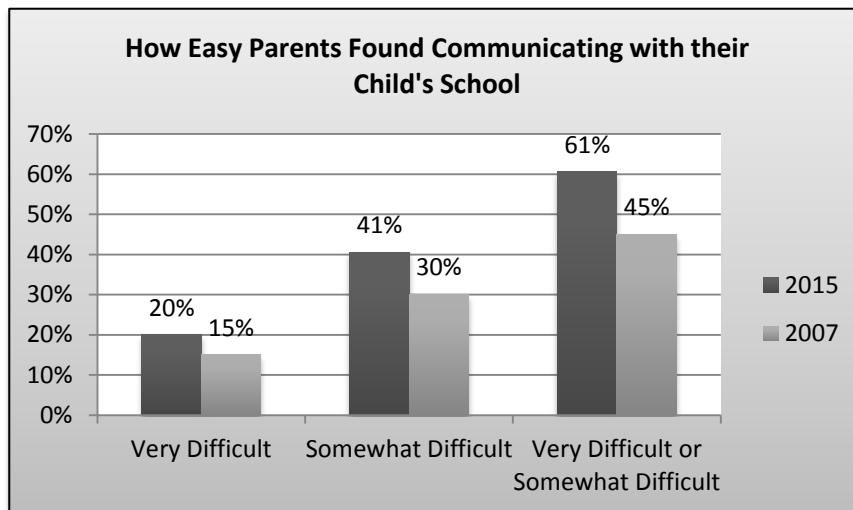
- for them at school. The DOE’s own regulations prohibit students or other children from providing language access services in any discussion regarding student achievement or conduct. This critical issue was also highlighted in our 2007 report.
- this school year, despite the fact that Language Line is available to every school during business hours.

❖ **Almost a decade after the Chancellor codified parental language access rights and formed a special unit, a large percentage of parents still don’t know that they can get translation and interpretation.**

- Nearly a third (30%) of all parents surveyed didn’t know that schools are supposed to offer translation and interpretation services in their language, despite the Chancellor’s 2006 Regulation A-663 that codified parental language access rights and created a special Translation and Interpretation (T&I) Unit within the DOE.

❖ **Lack of access to translation and interpretation greatly impedes parents’ ability to be engaged in their children’s education.**

- , an increase since 2007 when 45% responded this way.
- From 175 survey responses, , highlighting the enormous engagement gap between parents and schools that occurs without quality language access.
- Parents this year also noted that sometimes even when translation and interpretation is provided, it is of poor quality.



Parents Who Did Regularly Receive Services

The number of parents who always or almost always received translation did increase since 2007 (from 29% to 43%), but c from 14% in 2007. There was also an increase in parents who always or almost always received interpretation since 2007 (from 21% to 38%), but again - a mere 12%.

The Great Parent Engagement Gap, June 16, 2015

School Climate & the Importance of Cultural Competency

There were positive results from the survey regarding school climate. More than three out of five parents noted that they were treated in a welcoming manner when they asked their school for language access services. While improvement is still needed for 27% of the parents who responded that they were not treated in a welcoming manner, this indicates movement in a productive direction.

Reflecting the importance of creating a welcoming environment for these parents, the survey showed that over a third (37)% of participants feel somewhat or very uncomfortable requesting T&I services. These findings underscore how critical it is that schools also have an understanding of and training on parents' cultural backgrounds and frames of reference. It's important that schools can anticipate parents' needs, and ensure that parents understand that requests for services do not negatively impact their children or mark the family as troublemakers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results outlined in this report clearly show a systemic issue with translation and interpretation. In order to address these widespread barriers, there must be a comprehensive, aggressive response by the DOE.

We recommend that the DOE take the following actions:

1) Designate a Language Access Coordinator in Each Superintendent Office.

There are just two people in charge of supporting and monitoring 1,700 New York City schools on translation and interpretation and their Unit has no formal authority over whether schools are meeting parents' language access needs. To address this fundamental problem and increase support and accountability, the DOE must designate Language Access Coordinators (LACs) at the District level. These LACs should be responsible for:

- Ensuring that schools having difficulty meeting their language access obligations develop a quality plan to meet parents' needs and implement it effectively;
- Connect schools that need support with the Translation & Interpretation Unit (T&I Unit) for additional training on available resources (over-the-phone interpretation through Language Line, in-person interpretation, translation vendors and the Unit's own translation services) as well as best practices and help trouble-shooting;
- Confirm that every school has a trained Language Access Coordinator at all times (currently only half of schools have a trained Language Access Coordinator) to guide each school in connecting parents with services;
- Report to the Superintendent and T&I Unit on schools' progress in providing translation and interpretation to ensure that parents are receiving quality services;
- Prepare the Superintendent's office itself to deliver on its own language access obligations.

2) Link Schools Directly with Over-the-Phone Interpreters and Offer Expanded Hours Regularly.

The DOE must make over-the-phone interpretation easier for schools to access by giving them a direct link to interpreters and making over-the-phone interpretation available outside of business hours on a regular basis.

- Currently, the vast majority of schools have had to be connected to Language Line's interpreters through the T&I Unit's very limited number of operators available during regular business hours (and extended during parent-teacher conferences).
- The Unit is exploring opportunities to make these changes, as well as collect feedback on quality, and this should be a priority for the DOE.

The Great Parent Engagement Gap, June 16, 2015

3) Expand the T&I Unit's Capacity to Provide Translated Documents for Schools.

In order to help schools provide timely, quality translated documents to parents, the DOE should conduct a thorough assessment of the T&I Unit's capacity to meet current and anticipated demand from schools and also provide financial support to do so.

- Schools can engage the T&I Unit to translate school-specific documents for their parents. Many schools are unaware of this resource and may be using inferior quality alternatives. Turn-around times have also been an issue.

The Collaborative agrees with Chancellor Fariña's approach in focusing on family engagement as a critical ingredient for students' success, and we hope that this report provides helpful input in achieving her family engagement goals. The Collaborative also wants to recognize that the DOE's Translation & Interpretation Unit has shown true concern for providing parents with quality services and an open approach to working with the community consistent with Chancellor Fariña's vision of strong ties with families and communities.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The Collaborative administered 196 surveys, and 175 (89%) responded and required translation and interpretation to engage with their children's school. Communities in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island were surveyed. Respondents were selected randomly outside of schools in communities following May parent-teacher conferences, outside neighborhood centers, and at community events where the NYC's Education Collaborative member groups work.

Surveys were conducted by parent and community leaders from:

- Arab American Association of NY
- El Centro del Inmigrante
- Chinese Progressive Association
- Ciudadã Global
- DRUM- Desis Rising Up and Moving
- Haitian Americans United for Progress
- MASA
- Metropolitan Russian American Parents Association
- New York Immigration Coalition
- Sapna NYC

The majority of translation-and-interpretation-needing parents were speakers of Spanish, Mandarin, Bengali, Haitian Creole, Arabic, Russian, and Portuguese and a small percentage of parents spoke Cantonese, Hebrew, or Ukrainian.

The survey project was coordinated by the New York Immigration Coalition. This brief was prepared by the New York Immigration Coalition on behalf of the NYC's Education Collaborative.

This project benefitted immensely from review and suggestions by many colleagues within the NYC's Education Collaborative. We also acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Abja Midha and Christian Villenas from Advocates for Children of New York. Special thanks to Eunhye Kwon, the NYC's Education Advocacy Fellow, for her support.

For further information, please contact the New York Immigration Coalition:

Kim Sykes, Senior Manager of Education Advocacy, ksykes@nyic.org; 212.672.2227 ext 232

Max Ahmed, Senior Education Advocacy Associate, mahmed@nyic.org; 212.627.2227 ext 244

The Great Parent Engagement Gap, June 16, 2015

ⁱ Department of English Language Learners and Student Support. (Spring 2015). Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/ELL/default.htm>.

ⁱⁱ New York City Department of Education. Chancellor's Regulation A-663. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/Translation/ChancellorRegulation/Language%20Access%20Policy>.

ⁱⁱⁱ New York City Department of Education Translation & Interpretation Unit. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/Translation/default.htm>.

^{iv} Advocates for Children of New York and the New York Immigration Coalition. (June 2007). Available at: http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/tracker?utm_campaign=pdf&utm_medium=pdf&utm_source=internal&utm_content=sites/default/files/library/missed_communications_2007.pdf and at www.nycic.org

^v New York State Education Department. Commissioner's Regulations Part 154. Retrieved from New York State Education Department Office of Counsel <http://www.counsel.nysed.gov/common/counsel/files/rulesandregs/TERMS%20154-1%20%26%20154-2.pdf>