

**New York City Council Hearing DOE's Restructured School Support System
Testimony by Max Ahmed, New York Immigration Coalition
October 1st, 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 Max Ahmed, and I'm the Senior Education Advocacy Associate 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 students and engage immigrant parents through the newly restructured school support system.

The NYIC appreciates the Translation & Interpretation Unit's new parent brochure that was recently distributed to all schools. The brochure has helped immigrant parents understand the language services available at schools and how to leave feedback on the services received. 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.

We're here today because DOE has significantly restructured how New York City's schools are supported for the first time in over a decade, yet translation and interpretation support for schools is yet to be included. 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 Education Collaborative's Build the Bridge campaign has worked hard to ensure that parents have access to quality translation and interpretation to help them be meaning fully engaged. 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.

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.

While 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:

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>

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

- **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;
- **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;
- **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 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.

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.

The NYC's Education Collaborative is calling for the new school support system 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 person in each Borough Field Support Center who is accountable for doing four very important things:

1. **Distinguishing** which schools need support on translation and interpretation.
2. **Identifying successes and gaps** to help schools recognize what's working and where they need help. They need to get input from schools about translated documents and interpreters provided through the DOE's central office.
3. **Supporting** schools.
4. **Ensuring** that parents get quality services.

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.