

Education Collaborative

Document Prepared by *Internationals Network for Public Schools & The Education Collaborative*, Coordinated by the *New York Immigration Coalition*

ENSURING OPPORTUNITY FOR OUR CITY'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLs)

TEN ACTIONS FOR ELLS

Advocates for Children

Arab American Association of New York

Cabrini Immigrant Services

Chinese Progressive Association

Cidadão Global

Coalition for Asian American Children and Families

DRUM-Desis Rising Up and Moving

El Centro del Inmigrante

Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project

Haitian-Americans United for Progress

Internationals Network for Public Schools

Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House

MASA

Metropolitan Russian American Parents Association

MinKwon Center for Community Action

New York Immigration Coalition

La Unión

At least one in four students in our schools was not proficient in English upon entering the New York City school system, and currently there are nearly 160,000 ELLs in the City's public school system overall, or more than 14% of the total school population. 41% of New York City's students speak a language other than English at home.¹ As such, New York City's success in preparing students for college and careers will in large part be determined by its ability to meet the needs of English language learners (ELLs) and their immigrant parents.

Nearly half of the City's ELLs were born in another country, but ELLs may have been born in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico as well. The largest portion of ELL students born abroad are from the Dominican Republic (30.8%) and the remaining majority came from China (16%), Mexico (7%), Bangladesh (5%), Ecuador (5%), Haiti (5%) and Russian-speaking countries (2%).²

ELLs have enormous potential, and once they learn English well, they demonstrate this by outperforming their native English speaking peers. In addition, ELLs have unique language skills, a major advantage in today's global economy. Their accomplishments are particularly noteworthy given the tremendous challenges ELLs face in school—they must simultaneously master new content and a new language, and those born outside the US or in Puerto Rico must navigate a new culture too. About two-thirds of children who have not yet learned English are living in poverty. Parents of ELLs are also more likely to have had limited schooling and commonly lack knowledge of the US education system.³

While the Department of Education has taken some steps to support ELLs in recent years, more can be done to unlock ELLs' potential. With the de Blasio administration's arrival, the time could not be more ripe to address the fact that *despite their tremendous assets and sizable presence, ELLs have been left far behind*:

- **The four-year graduation rate for ELLs is a meager 35%**, which is only slightly more than half the graduation rate for *all* students (60%) and has dropped two years in a row.⁴
- **Proficiency scores on recent Grades 3 through 8 tests are a shockingly low 3% in English and 11% in Math**, which is a crisis for our ELLs in how we educate them and in how we evaluate their capacities.⁵ High standards for all students are essential to

¹ New York City Department of Education, *2010-2011 Demographics of New York City's English language learners*

² New York City Department of Education, *2013 Demographics of New York City's English language learners*

³ New York Immigration Coalition, *Getting it Right: Ensuring an Quality Education for English Language Learners in New York*, Nov. 2008

⁴ New York State Education Department, *2008 Cohort Graduation Rates Additional Slides*

⁵ New York State Education Department, *2013 Grades 3-8 English Language Arts and Mathematics Supplemental Slides*

ensuring all students are prepared for success after high school, and ELLs must have the appropriate supports to meet the more rigorous Common Core Learning Standards. They also should be evaluated in ways that more accurately assess their competencies; standardized exams tend to be a poor barometer of ELL student ability, and in the end serve to derail such students from not only fulfilling their potential but also demonstrating it.

- **Parents of ELLs face formidable barriers to engagement** with school administrators and teachers, particularly problematic given the positive link between parent engagement and student achievement. Translation and interpretation, although mandated, are routinely not available. When it is, interpretation is often provided by inappropriate individuals (like children) or people who are not impartial or lack the appropriate language competency, and documents are often not fully translated or contain inaccuracies.

- **The Department of Education's Office of English Language Learners has shrunk to 20 people** and needs increased capacity to provide the effective monitoring and support essential to ensuring the success of 160,000 students across all school levels and programs.

Ten Actions to Create Opportunity for English Language Learners and their Families:

1. Give Schools the Tools to Support ELLs

As a candidate, Mayor de Blasio highlighted the need for a system-wide program to bring ELLs' achievement up to the level of other students, and current ELL graduation rates and recent State test scores make plain the need for immediate action. Schools need to be given the resources required to help ELLs meet more rigorous Common Core Learning Standards and to boost ELL graduation rates, including:

- **Ensuring translation and interpretation for immigrant parents and guardians as mandated**, so that they can get critical information, understand their children's progress, and be true partners with schools in educating their children.
- **Providing academic support for ELLs**— during and/or outside the school day — in conjunction with the Common Core's arrival. This could encompass additional aides or teachers, materials, tutoring or other in-school or after-school support.
- **Improving teachers' capacity** to support ELLs by providing incentives for structured collaboration by all teachers who share responsibility for specific groups of ELLs in their classrooms and for building these teachers' capacity to implement Common Core/bilingual Common Core standards.
- **Ensuring that the full range of programs available to NYC's students are serving ELLs** through new bilingual or dual language programs or other research-based programmatic approaches in areas where ELLs lack sufficient access.
 - **Existing Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs** must ensure access for ELLs, and new CTE programs geared specifically for ELLs should be created within existing schools that serve large numbers of ELLs or in new CTE schools focused on serving ELLs.
 - **Young Adult Borough Centers and transfer schools**, critical options for students at risk of not graduating, need to be accessible to ELLs and serve ELLs adequately and in proportion to the eligible population through expanded capacity where needed.

Engaging Immigrant Families and Youth

2. Help Immigrant Families and Youth Navigate the School System

- As part of its increased focus on parents, the Department of Education (DOE) should help immigrant parents overcome additional barriers beyond access to translation and interpretation. These barriers may include lack of knowledge of the US school system and

curriculum, understanding of progress and transitions throughout the grades, and how to use appropriate school channels and venues to advocate for their children.

- The DOE must better support immigrant parents with critical transitions such as enrollment and helping middle school parents understand their high school choices. For example, while the high school handbook is translated, it is not easy for any parent to navigate and is only available online.
- Community organizations, school partners with expertise working with ELLs and parents should be consulted in order to design an approach that ensures equity for immigrant students and ELLs in making high school selections.
- The City should also expand outreach to immigrant families regarding the programs they can choose for their children, including transitional bilingual, dual language and English as a Second Language options.
- The DOE should expand efforts to help immigrant youth develop leadership skills and to engage them in the ongoing process of improving our schools.

3. Make Immigrant Families Integral to Pre-K Expansion

- Provide programs that serve immigrant families' unique needs and which build on and develop students' home language skills and knowledge.
- Outreach to immigrant parents, particularly strategies that leverage informed, deep-rooted community groups, is essential to ensuring that immigrant parents are aware of pre-K opportunities for their young children.
- Access for parents with limited formal education and who lack access to computers must be ensured.

Shaping the School System

4. Ensure that the School Accountability System is Fair for High-ELL Population Schools

- An increasingly punitive accountability system for schools, principals, and teachers creates disincentives for schools to embrace the opportunity to serve ELLs and other struggling students.
- Accountability systems must be fair to schools with high ELL populations and other students who need additional supports to reach their potential.

5. Subject to Accountability, Continue to Provide Schools Serving ELLs Well with Autonomy in Key Areas

- Research out of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development indicates that autonomy and a collaborative work environment foster the creativity and innovation schools need to solve complex problems and meet the needs of their distinct student populations.
- Within accountability provisions, city, state and federal guidelines, and as appropriate, schools should have or retain autonomy over:
 - Budgeting
 - Scheduling
 - Hiring of staff
 - Professional development with respect to ELLs
 - How they are supported organizationally by the Department of Education in their work with all students, including ELLs, whether that is through networks or geographical districts
 - Purchasing ability for lower-cost native language materials to create access to a broader range of options for students.

6. Expand Teacher Hiring from Our Diverse Communities

- Our teachers need to reflect our communities and have the appropriate language and cultural competencies to support our students and families. Efforts to train more teachers with expertise in ELL education should expand focus on hiring and developing staff from New York’s immigrant communities.

Supporting Students, Including the Most Vulnerable

7. Increase Support for Students with Interrupted Formal Education

- More than 15,000 of New York City’s students are Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). They come from a home where a language other than English is spoken and have had less schooling than their peers. Some may be pre-literate in their first language. Consequently, SIFE students need extra support to catch up.
- Additional resources should accompany SIFE students automatically. A specific weight for SIFE status – on top of the ELL weight – should be created and used to provide the extra supports they need.

8. Create a Supportive Environment that Addresses the Whole Child’s Needs

- Expand access to informed guidance counselors and create safe spaces for learning and growth that embrace students’ and their families’ cultural backgrounds and languages.

Addressing Assessment

9. Address Barriers from Assessment Here in New York City

- Ensure that standardized test results for ELLs are not used in high-stakes decisions within the City’s control, such as the school selection process.
- Work with CUNY to address barriers to ELL admission at four-year colleges.

10. Advocate for New York City’s Immigrant Students and Families

- Standardized tests are, by their nature, language-dependent and make it harder for ELLs to show what they’ve learned. These tests are not full measures of what ELLs know and can do. Encourage New York State to more broadly use and give greater weight to assessments that allow ELLs to demonstrate college and career readiness in a more appropriate way, such as through performance-based assessments.
- Support New York State’s Federal No Child Left Behind waiver application to exempt newly arrived ELLs from participating in the ELA assessments for two years and to create Spanish Language Arts assessments. Advocate for New York State to develop Native Language Arts assessments in additional languages.