



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be Delivered to the New York City Council Immigration Committee

Re: Oversight: How Does NYC Support Immigrant Parents of Children Ages 0-5 years

April 24, 2018

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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss how New York City supports immigrant parents of children under five. My name is Betty Baez Melo, and I am an attorney and Project Director of the Early Childhood Education Project at Advocates for Children of New York. For more than 45 years, Advocates for Children has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds. Every year, we help thousands of families navigate the education system, starting from the time children are born.

We appreciate that the City is providing tens of thousands of children access to early childhood education programs, such as Pre-K, 3-K, and EarlyLearn. Research shows that participating in high-quality early childhood education programs is particularly beneficial for Dual Language Learners. The DOE has taken some positive steps to make Pre-K more inclusive to immigrant families, including by opening 33 new Dual Language Pre-K programs next year and offering phone interpretation services to all Pre-K and 3-K programs to allow staff to communicate with parents who speak a language other than English.

However, despite these efforts, immigrant families face barriers to accessing early childhood education. Depending on the funding source, certain programs inquire about children's immigration status, and parents can become worried and confused as they try to determine which programs their children qualify for based on their immigration status. Once enrolled, not all programs provide children and their parents adequate support in their language. The City should invest in additional Dual Language programs, as well as professional development for all 3-K, Pre-K, and EarlyLearn staff so that they can support Dual Language Learners and build strategies and supports for engaging families.

Through our casework, we have become very concerned about the barriers that immigrant families face in accessing preschool special education evaluations. For example, last year, we assisted the mother of a Pre-K student, whom we will call Ahmet. After Ahmet's teacher expressed concerns about his development in November, his mother requested that the DOE evaluate him for preschool special



education services. The DOE responded by sending a list of approved evaluation agencies for the parent to contact.

Ahmet's mother began calling agencies in December. However, because the parent speaks Turkish and English, the evaluation agencies she called turned her away, stating that they could not conduct evaluations for children who speak languages other than English. The evaluation packet did not offer the parent any instructions for securing evaluations if agencies refused. Ahmet's mother asked the Pre-K program, as well as an agency focused on helping families of young children with disabilities, but they also did not know how to get evaluations for the child. The parent then reached out to the DOE. However, instead of arranging evaluations for the child, DOE staff told her that she should find a friend to serve as an interpreter for the evaluations. Besides the fact that the DOE has a legal obligation to provide interpretation and that a friend is unlikely to be a qualified interpreter, this parent did not have a bilingual friend who could accompany her to multiple evaluation appointments.

Finally, the parent reached out to AFC. After we intervened, the DOE began evaluations in mid-February with an interpreter, but needed additional time to complete the evaluations. Due to these delays, Ahmet did not receive special education services until May, essentially going the entire school year without the services he needed because his parent was an immigrant whose native language was a language other than English.

Ahmet's parent experienced these challenges even though she also speaks some English. Immigrant parents who speak only a language other than English face additional barriers. The DOE's preschool special education evaluation packet is available only in English, and the evaluation agencies families must call do not have access to a phone interpretation service. The DOE must address these challenges and ensure that they provide timely evaluations and services for preschoolers regardless of their families' home languages.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.