



# Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn since 1971

## Testimony to be delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education

### Re: COVID Impact on English Language Learners

February 28, 2022

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Good afternoon. My name is Rita Rodriguez-Engberg and I am the Director of the Immigrant Students' Rights Project at Advocates for Children of New York ("AFC"). For 50 years, Advocates for Children has worked to ensure a high-quality education for New York City students who face barriers to academic success, focusing on students from low-income backgrounds. The Immigrant Students' Rights Project advocates for better educational opportunities for English Language Learners ("ELLs") and immigrant families in New York City public schools.

Prior to the pandemic, the needs of ELLs and immigrant families went largely unmet. For decades, the roughly 140,000 ELLs in our city's public school system have consistently performed well below standards in reading and math, with only 9% of ELLs proficient in reading and 19% of ELLs proficient in math in 2019. In 2020, only 46% of the City's ELLs graduated high school in four years, and almost 1 in 4 ELLs dropped out of high school. Parents of ELLs often tell us that they feel excluded from their school communities and have difficulty communicating with school staff in their home language.

The pandemic has unfortunately only served to exacerbate the inequities that have long impacted ELLs and immigrant families. For example, ELLs have a right to receive English as a New Language ("ENL") instruction to help them develop their English language skills, but many ELLs did not receive this instruction during the pandemic. Although over 40% of DOE parents speak a language other than English at home and some have low or no literacy in their language, the DOE relied almost exclusively on web and email communications in English during the pandemic. The DOE's reliance on digital communication and delays in providing translated information resulted in families being left in the dark and unable to participate in their children's education.



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In 2021, AFC saw an increase in the number of newly arrived, older immigrant youth seeking to enroll in New York City schools for the first time. Unfortunately, there are few DOE schools able to provide the support these students need to be successful. The DOE's "ELL transfer schools" provide this supportive learning environment, but there are only five such schools, four of which are in Manhattan.

I am here today to urge the City to fund three proposals that advocates believe will have a positive impact on our ELLs and immigrant families.

First, to address the ELL achievement gap, we urge the City to invest \$12M for 120 schools with underperforming ELLs to hire an ELL Instructional Specialist. ELLs require targeted language and academic instruction to meet their unique needs, but too often we encounter long-term ELLs who have not received enough support and cannot read or write despite being in high school. The ELL Instructional Specialist, a pedagogue who reports to the school principal, would be responsible for ensuring that all ELLs, including ELLs with disabilities, at their school are receiving grade-level instruction in core subjects, developing age-appropriate literacy, receiving additional academic support where needed, and on track to pass to the next grade.

Second, to address the lack of supportive high school options for older, newly arrived immigrant youth, we urge the City to allocate \$2.05M to launch programs to support ELLs, ages 16–21, at existing non-ELL transfer schools in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. This funding would enable four schools in FY 23 to hire ENL teachers and bilingual social workers, offer culturally responsive wrap-around supports and services, and provide professional development so that all educators are prepared to support newcomer immigrant youth.

Finally, to ensure immigrant parents receive school-related information and can play a meaningful role in their children's education, the DOE needs to strengthen its efforts to communicate with immigrant families, taking into account families' varying levels of literacy and access to digital media. The City invested \$4 million this school year for immigrant family communications and outreach, but this funding will expire in June 2022 and will be limited in reach. The City should invest and baseline \$6 million in FY23 to establish a permanent, central system for immigrant family communications.

Congratulations to Chair Joseph and all the new Education Committee members; we look forward to working with you. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.