

**From Translation to Participation:
A Survey of Parent Coordinators In New York City and
Their Ability to Assist Non-English Speaking Parents**

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Advocates for Children of New York
New York Immigration Coalition

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Part I: Background Information	5
A. Introduction	5
B. Recent Surveys Regarding Language Access	7
C. Introduction to Parent Coordinator Position	10
Part II: Survey of Parent Coordinators	12
A. Description of Survey and Methodology	12
B. Demographic Characteristics of NYC Parents of School-Aged Children and NYC Students in Public Schools	13
C. Survey Findings	16
1. Demographic Characteristics of Parent Coordinator Survey Respondents and LEP Parents at Their Schools	16
2. Provision of Language Services by Bilingual Parent Coordinators	21
3. Provision of Translated Documents by the School	22
4. Provision of Translated Documents by the Regional Office or Department of Education’s Central Office	23
5. Interpreters in the School	24
6. Participation in School Activities	25
Part III: Conclusion and Recommendations	27
Appendices	
Appendix A: Parent Coordinator Language Access Survey Instrument	

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parental involvement is indisputably a key factor in the success of a student's education. In the New York City ("NYC") school system, the largest school district in the nation, 43% of students come from homes where English is not the primary spoken language. This makes the issue of language access central to the policy and practice of engaging NYC parents in their children's education. Far too often, however, the efforts of limited English proficient parents ("LEP parents") to take part in their children's educational lives are thwarted by language and culture barriers at all levels of the school system. Not only is the denial of translation and interpretation for LEP parents out of compliance with numerous federal, state, and local laws, but the loss of involvement of hundreds of thousands of parents is enormous, and its negative effects long-lasting for the school system as a whole, and for these parents' children in particular.

The New York City Department of Education ("DOE") has vigorously stated its belief in the importance of parent involvement, and has demonstrated its commitment to increasing parental involvement by creating a new Parent Coordinator position that, as of September 2003, was staffed at every public school. This report examines the role of Parent Coordinators and their ability to serve the particular needs of LEP parents. The findings of this report are based on a survey of 111 Parent Coordinators at schools in all five boroughs and ten school regions. Our survey found that while Parent Coordinators who were bilingual (66% of those surveyed) were attempting to assist with language access issues for LEP parents, they were clearly ill-equipped to fulfill the needs of their non-English speaking parent constituency. Even those Parent Coordinators who were bilingual could not deal with the sheer number of LEP parents with children in the NYC school system, including those parents whose language was different from the second language spoken by the coordinator, and the volume of school-related information that required interpretation and translation. It is evident that the needs of LEP parents far exceed the capacity of Parent Coordinators, or any single staff person in the school at that. It is only with a coherent language access system that provides central resources for those serving parents at the frontlines that the children of non-English speaking parents have a fair chance at attaining educational success.

Survey Findings

Of the total 1,335 schools and programs run by the DOE, Parent Coordinators from 111 schools, or 8% of all New York City public schools and programs, were surveyed. These Parent Coordinators from schools across the five boroughs were asked about the provision of language services to LEP parents at their school, the languages spoken by LEP parents, and the participation of LEP parents in school-related activities.

The language needs of LEP parents far exceed the language abilities of Parent Coordinators.

- Although 66% of Parent Coordinators reported that they were bilingual, more than one native language was spoken by LEP parents in the vast majority of schools (74%).
- A total of 24 languages were identified as spoken by LEP parents, according to Parent Coordinators who were surveyed. The three top non-English languages spoken at the schools were: Spanish, spoken at 96% of schools in this survey, Chinese at 36% of schools, and Russian at 29% of schools.
- When asked to approximate the percentage of LEP parents at their school, nearly all (95.5%) of the 67 Parent Coordinators who responded reported that LEP parents comprised at least 10% of their parent constituency, and over 50% stated that it comprised over 30% of their parent constituency. Forty-three percent reported that LEP parents made up between 10% and 30%, 15% said that LEP parents made up between 30% and 50%, and 37% of Parent Coordinators said that over 50% of parents at the school had limited English proficiency.
- While 86% of bilingual Parent Coordinators reported that they provide written translation for LEP parents and 94% reported that they provide oral interpretation, 63% of these Parent Coordinators are at schools in which the number of languages spoken by LEP parents exceeded the language capabilities of the Parent Coordinator.

Parent Coordinators who are bilingual are unable to single-handedly provide interpretation to LEP parents.

- 82% of Parent Coordinators reported that they had used a bilingual staff person in the school as an interpreter.
- Among those in the school who were called upon were: teachers (in 36% of schools), guidance counselors (18%), other parents (15%), students (14%), security guards (6%), principals (5%), paraprofessionals (4%), secretaries (3%), social workers (3%), school aides (2%), as well as a speech therapist and custodian.

Lack of language access prevents parent with limited English proficiency from participating in school activities.

- When asked if LEP parents participate in school activities, 26 % of Parent Coordinators responded that LEP parents rarely or never participated in school activities, while 39% responded that LEP parents sometimes participated and 35% of Parent Coordinators responded that LEP parents always or often participated in school activities despite barriers of language that may exist.

- When Parent Coordinators were asked if they thought LEP parents *would* participate more in school activities if translation and interpretation services were available, however, nearly three-quarters (74%) responded affirmatively.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Though the majority of Parent Coordinators surveyed were bilingual, they clearly cannot fulfill the needs of their non-English speaking constituency, no matter how dedicated they are. Many Parent Coordinators had hundreds, if not thousands, of parents to serve and the majority of schools served more than one language other than English. Parent Coordinators are meant to be a resource for parents, but they would not be fulfilling the majority of their responsibilities as set forth in their job description if those that were qualified to do so spent their time doing interpretation and translation for LEP parents. Those with the available skills are clearly trying to fill a need, but this survey makes clear that it cannot be done by one person at a school without centralized resources and support. Parent Coordinators are the front line for parental outreach and assistance. As such, they need the support and tools to reach out to their parent constituency in order to serve the parents at their school effectively. To achieve this goal, and to help assure that children are academically succeeding, the NYC DOE needs to implement a comprehensive language access service.

Create and Implement A Comprehensive Language Translation and Interpretation Program in New York City

New York City, the largest school district in the nation, and with the greatest concentration of English Language Learners in New York State, must create a comprehensive language translation and interpretation program to serve limited English proficient parents. Such a program would provide that:

- a) All notices and materials going to parents must be provided in the native language of parents with limited English proficiency. The Department of Education should create a centralized translation unit providing translations in the major languages, with referrals for outside translation for those languages spoken by smaller segments of limited English proficient families. Each school must post signs informing parents of their rights to language assistance. Schools must collect information on the language assistance needs of their parents and the principal must be held accountable for meeting those needs. Parent Coordinators and school personnel must be provided effective access to these resources.
- b) An Interpretation Unit offering oral interpretation services must be established. This central unit would arrange for interpretation at all Department of Education citywide meetings (i.e., meetings that are open to all city residents, such as hearings, etc.), as well as all school meetings (i.e., parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, workshops, school fairs, etc.). The Department of Education should also develop a telephone-based system to provide translated messages to parents with limited English proficiency. The phone service would alert limited English

proficient parents of citywide information, such as elections for community school district personnel.

- c) Each school must post translated signs in key areas informing parents of their rights to language assistance. Schools must collect information on the language assistance needs of their parents. Principals must be held accountable for meeting those needs.
- d) The Department of Education's website should be made accessible for parents with limited English proficiency through translation of key components into major languages. An evaluation should be conducted of its utilization and effectiveness as a mechanism for improving language access.

PART I: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A. Introduction

“Parents would feel more connected, just to give them the option. Participation is a lot to ask of people when you don’t make it accessible to them.”
- Brooklyn high school Parent Coordinator

Parental involvement is indisputably a key factor in the success of a student’s education. In the New York City school system, the largest school district in the nation, 43% of students come from homes where English is not the primary spoken language.¹ This makes the issue of language access central to the policies and practice of engaging New York City parents in their children’s education. Far too often, however, the efforts of limited English proficient parents (“LEP parents”) to take part in their children’s educational lives are thwarted by language and culture barriers at all levels of the school system. The loss of involvement of hundreds of thousands of parents is immense and its negative effects long lasting for the school system as a whole, and for these parents’ children in particular.

As demonstrated in numerous reports and surveys, including most recently Advocates for Children of New York and the New York Immigration Coalition’s February 2004 report, *Denied at the Door: Language Barriers Block Parents from School Involvement*², there is a dire lack of translation and interpretation services for LEP

¹ The New York City Department of Education Home Language Identification Survey (HLIS) Form is administered to the parent for each student in the public school system at the time of enrollment. This figure is based on the most recent data available.

² Advocates for Children of New York and the New York Immigration Coalition, “Denied at the Door: Language Barriers Block Immigrant Parents from School Involvement,” February 19, 2004. Findings of this report were based upon a survey of 970 students and parents, 86% of which attended schools in New York City or had children who were NYC public school students. The survey found that the New York City school system has systemically failed to provide translation and interpretation services to parents who require these services.

parents. The denial of languages services to LEP parents is in clear violation federal, state, and local mandates.

Numerous studies clearly demonstrate the benefits to children of parent involvement in school. Nearly half the parents in the New York City school system confront fundamental barriers to communication in school. Due to a lack of such an essential service as translation of documents and oral interpretation for LEP parents, their children are at a serious disadvantage, and therefore more likely to be at academic risk.

The New York City Department of Education (“DOE”) has vigorously stated its belief in the importance of parent involvement, and has demonstrated its commitment to increasing parental involvement by creating a new Parent Coordinator position that as of September 2003 was staffed at every public school.³ The Parent Coordinator, according to the DOE, is meant to be the primary point person at the school who parents can easily access with their concerns, as well as the staff person who reaches out to the broad range of parents in the community. The 2003-2004 school year is the first for which Parent Coordinators were hired and placed in every school in New York City.

This report examines the role of Parent Coordinators and their ability to serve the particular needs of LEP parents. Out of the total 1,335 schools and programs run by the DOE, Parent Coordinators from 111 schools, or 8% of all New York City public schools and programs, were surveyed. These Parent Coordinators, who are at schools across the five boroughs, were asked about the provision of language services to LEP parents at their school, the languages spoken by LEP parents, and the participation of LEP parents in school-related activities. While it was clear from anecdotal information from the field that Parent Coordinators were attempting to assist with language access issues for non-

³ <http://nycenet.edu/Parents/ParentTopTen/TopTen10.htm>. Last viewed April 28, 2004.

English speaking parents, the survey sought to quantify the services and find out if there were gaps or issues in this service provision.

B. Recent Surveys Regarding Language Access

Unequal access to the New York City school system for immigrant parents due to language differences is not a new issue. A number of reports and surveys have been conducted in the past few years that document the severity of the lack of translation and interpretation services.⁴

Most recently, on April 27, 2004, New York City Council Member David Yassky (D-Brooklyn) released the results of a survey conducted by his office to determine whether Parent Coordinators at Brooklyn public schools with significant Asian and Latino student populations were bilingual. Out of 15 schools that had Asian student populations ranging from 30% to 72%, 11 (73%) had Parent Coordinators who did not speak an Asian language. Four Parent Coordinators were bilingual in a dialect of Chinese. Out of 18 schools that had Latino student populations which ranged from 35% to 99%, 10 had Parent Coordinators (56%) did not speak Spanish. Yassky's study concluded that Parent Coordinators at Brooklyn public schools lacked the language skills to inform and engage non-English speaking families. It is unknown how many Parent Coordinators in schools with significant numbers of non-English speaking families are bilingual on a citywide basis. What is clear from the results of our study (see Section 2 in Survey Findings) is that even in schools where the Parent Coordinators are bilingual, one person, no matter how committed cannot begin to fill the need.

⁴ Advocates for Children and the New York Immigration Coalition, "Playing by the Rules When the System Doesn't: Immigrant Families and Summer School in New York," August 25, 2000; Advocates for Children, 2001; New York City Board of Education, 2001; Mia Lipsit, "Newcomers Left Behind: Immigrant Parents Lack of Equal Access to New York City's Schools," Center of New York City Affairs, Milano Graduate School of Management and Urban Policy, New School University, August 2003.

Another recent and more comprehensive report, released in February 2004 by Advocates for Children and the New York Immigration Coalition, *Denied at the Door: Language Barriers Block Parents from School Involvement*⁵, surveyed 970 parents and students in all ten school regions of New York City, ten school districts in Westchester County, and two school districts in Long Island. Eight hundred and thirty-two surveys, or 86%, came from parents or high school students in New York City. Three-quarters of parents and students taking the survey reported that they themselves or their parents do not speak English, or speak English at minimal levels. Seventy-four percent of parents did not read English or read at minimum levels.

Our findings from the entire survey group were that nearly one-half (47%) of survey respondents reported that the parent “never” or “rarely” receives written information from the school, school district, or Department of Education translated into their native language. Only 12% of the surveys reported that the parent always receives such translations. Oral interpretation services at schools were even scarcer. The majority (56%) of survey respondents reported that the parent “never” or “rarely” receives oral interpretation of school-related information in the native language. Once again, only 12% of surveys reported that the parent “always” receives interpretation services.

While a majority of parents had attempted to contact their child’s school— 56% by phone and 63% in person— language differences often thwarted their efforts to be involved in their child’s education. Sixty percent of parents who tried to reach the school said English was the only language used to speak to them.

⁵ Advocates for Children and the New York Immigration Coalition, February 19, 2004.

When asked if the student's school has ever asked the parent to sign documents asking for their consent that are not in the parent's native language and the parent did not understand what s/he was signing, one quarter (26%) of survey respondents reported that the parent has indeed had to.

When asked if the parent actively participates in school activities, 43% of surveys reported that the parent does. When asked if the parent *would* actively participate if language services were available, however, 76% of surveys reported that the parent would. Approximately half (47%) of the parents and students surveyed felt that their families have been harmed by the lack of language services at school.

The demand for language services for limited English proficient parents of public school students is, of course, not confined to New York City. Recently, the Family Partnerships Project of the Seattle Public School District collaborated with the Bilingual Education Department, the Refugee and Immigrant Parent Advocacy Network (RIPAN), and Family Partnerships Project schools, to study the practices and perspectives of bilingual parents regarding parent involvement in education in Seattle public schools. Since January 2003, 850 bilingual parents and bilingual community members working with parents were surveyed and invited to cultural group discussions. Among the study's findings was that most participants expressed the need for schools to have a consistent school-home communication system that includes regularly translated materials, and interpreters for parent-teacher conferences and other family meetings.⁶

⁶ Simmons, Adie, "Family Partnerships Bilingual Family Involvement Study Summary," Family Partnerships Project of Seattle Public Schools, in collaboration with Seattle Public Schools' Bilingual Education Department, the Refugee and Immigrant Parent Advocacy Network (RIPAN), and Family Partnerships Project Schools, received April 29, 2004.

C. Introduction to Parent Coordinator Position

Nearly one year ago, in the Summer of 2003, the Department of Education introduced the Parent Coordinator school-based position as a new approach to increasing parent involvement, an objective which is one of the top priorities of the DOE's *Children First* reforms. Each school would receive one Parent Coordinator, whose main job is to be a bridge for parents, connecting them to their child's school and the education system in general. Parent Coordinators are meant to be the open and outreaching arms of the school, readily available to address parents' concerns about their child's education, whether by drawing from knowledge gained at their trainings or directing them to the relevant administrative office.⁷

According to the Department of Education, Parent Coordinators' primary objective is to "create a welcoming environment in the school for all parents."⁸ In the New York City school system, 43% of students come from homes where English is not the primary spoken language.⁹ The question of whether or not Parent Coordinators, or any one staff person for that matter, are capable of properly serving this population of limited English proficient parents must be seriously addressed. Many schools have students that number in the thousands, and based on home language data, nearly half of the parents may not be English proficient.

With appropriate supports and access to central resources, the Parent Coordinator's full-time position dedicated to involving parents indeed has tremendous potential to raise parents' participation. Currently, however, there exists no coherent plan to support Parent Coordinators in their efforts to serve LEP parents. There is no list of

⁷ <http://nycenet.edu/Parents/ParentTopTen/TopTen10.htm>. Last viewed April 28, 2004.

⁸ <http://nycenet.edu/Parents/ParentTopTen/TopTen10.htm>. Last viewed April 28, 2004.

⁹ New York City Department of Education Home Language Identification Survey Form (HLIS).

the language abilities of Parent Coordinators in the system to ascertain how many can assist non-English speaking parents, and Parent Coordinators have no centralized resource to assist them in providing interpretation and translation services. Furthermore, when parents at a school speak more than one language (ie. some might speak Spanish and others Chinese), even if the Parent Coordinator is bilingual, it is impossible for that staff person to serve both language groups. Similarly, for bilingual Parent Coordinators in the many schools where student enrollment reaches into the thousands, their ability to serve all those who need assistance becomes impossible.

This report recognizes the importance of Parent Coordinators as the entry point for parents who have school-aged children. The findings of this report are based on a survey of 111 Parent Coordinators regarding the language needs of LEP parents at their school, participation of LEP parents, and the provision of language services.

PART II: SURVEY OF PARENT COORDINATORS

A. Description of Survey and Methodology

The survey instrument used for this report questioned Parent Coordinators about the languages spoken by LEP parents at their school, their ability to personally provide written translations and oral interpretations to parents, the provision of such services by the school, Region and the central office of the Department of Education, alternative resources for language services, and LEP parents' participation in school activities. The survey instrument is found in Appendix A.

The survey was administered from February through April 2004 by seven community-based organizations that are members of the Equity Monitoring Project for Immigrant and Refugee Education ("EMPIRE"), a civic participation project that aims to increase the engagement of immigrant parents in their children's education and of immigrants and refugees more broadly in education reform issues. The EMPIRE members who helped conduct the survey are: Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Comprehensive Development, Inc., Latin American Integration Center, Make the Road by Walking, Metropolitan Russian American Parents Association, South Asian Youth Action, and the YWCA/Flushing Branch. In addition, Advocates for Children conducted Parent Coordinator surveys over the phone and at trainings.

The EMPIRE project weaves together the legal, advocacy, research, and training skills of Advocates for Children; the policy analysis, advocacy coordination, and training skills of the New York Immigration Coalition; and the energy and frontline experience of eight community groups that are working with parents, children, and other concerned members of New York's immigrant communities to assist them in better understanding

how the school system works and actively engage them in efforts to make it better. Each of the EMPIRE member groups has concluded that one of the most urgent issues confronting their constituents is also the most fundamental—parents’ inability to communicate with the teachers and staff at their children’s schools because of language barriers.

**B. Demographic Characteristics of NYC Parents of School-Aged Children
and NYC Students in Public Schools**

The Home Language Identification Survey Form (HLIS), which is administered to every parent who has a child in the New York City Department of Education school system, is the only means of quantitatively tracking the language group of parents. Data recently gathered from the HLIS indicates that 43% of students come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken.¹⁰ Parents who speak one of the seven most prevalent languages comprise 37% of all parents with children in New York City public schools.

Top Languages Spoken by Parents

Language	Count	Percent
English	619,129	57.03%
Spanish	296,002	27.27%
Chinese	49,158	4.53%
Russian	19,058	1.76%
Bengali	12,123	1.12%
Haitian Creole	9,357	0.86%
Urdu	8,896	0.82%
Korean	8,853	0.82%

Source: New York City Department of Education Home Language Identification Survey Form (HLIS).

¹⁰ New York City Department of Education Home Language Identification Survey Form (HLIS).

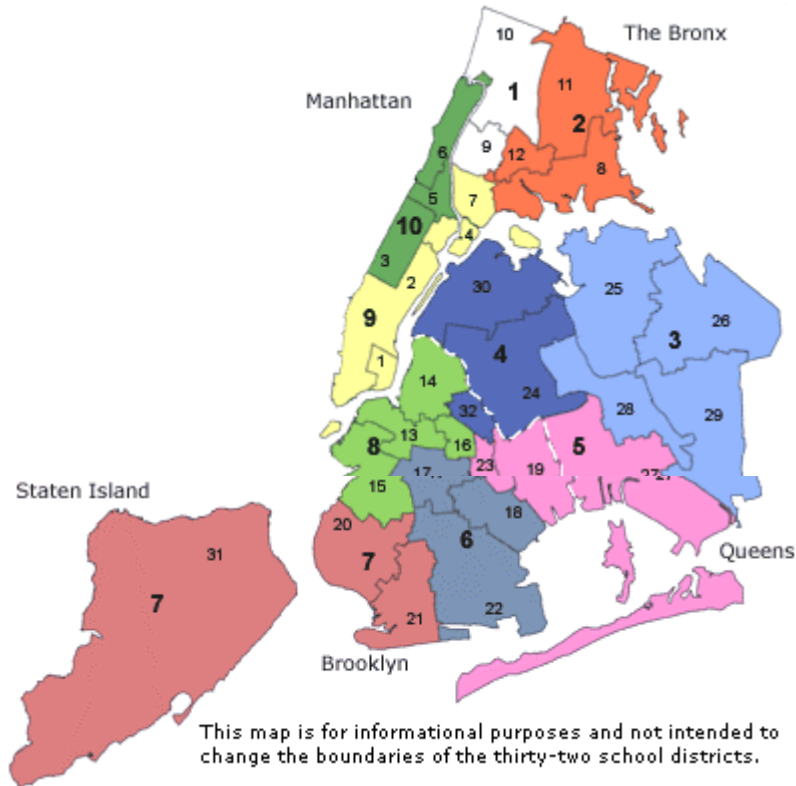
While this figure indicates most directly the need for translation and interpretation services for a sizeable population of parents, the number of English Language Learner (ELL) students throughout the city also make obvious the demand for language services. For the 2003-2004 school year, 13.4% (145,084 out of 1,081,604) of students in the New York City Department of Education school system are reported to be English Language Learners.¹¹ In the ten New York City Regions, the percentage of ELLs ranges from 6.9% in Region 6 to 19.8% in Region 4. The most recent information on the languages spoken by ELL students by the DOE is for the 2001-2002 school year. The seven most spoken languages, starting with most prevalent, are Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Urdu, Bengali, Haitian, and Arabic.

**% ELL Enrollment by Region
for the 2002-2003 School Year**

Region	Percentage
1	19.7%
2	10.5%
3	9.9%
4	19.8%
5	8.3%
6	6.9%
7	11.3%
8	8.4%
9	12.4%
10	19.2%

Source: New York City Department of Education, 2002-2003 Annual School Reports

¹¹ New York City Department of Education Region and School Statistical Summaries, 2003-2004.



Source: <http://nycenet.edu/OurSchools/default.htm>

Immigrants and their children make up a large and growing percentage of New York City’s population. In 2000, approximately 39% (2,871,032) of New York City’s population was born outside the United States.¹² Data from 2002 and 2003 indicate that 56% (1,060,000 out of 1,890,000) of people under the age of 18 in New York City are children of immigrants.¹³ Much of the immigrant student population entering the NYC school system does not speak English. Approximately 48% of New York City’s population over the age of five speaks a language other than English at home, and approximately half of the population that speaks another language at home does not

¹² New York City Department of Planning, Population Division, “Table SF3 SB P-1: Country of Birth for the Foreign-born Population, New York City, Boroughs and Census Tracts, 2000” (July 2003).

¹³ Urban Institute estimates based on specialized datasets drawn from the March 2002 and 2003 Current Population Surveys.

speak English “very well.”¹⁴ Twelve percent of New York City’s total population over the age of five reported that they spoke English “not well” or “not at all.”¹⁵

The sheer number of non-English speaking parents and school-aged children, whether enrolled as ELL students or not, creates important challenges and opportunities for state and local policymakers. Schools must be prepared to respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse, multilingual and multicultural student body, and take steps to ensure that all parents of New York’s students receive a meaningful opportunity to participate in the education of their children.

C. Survey Findings

“To tell you the truth, parent contact is nonexistent. There is a fear factor in these parents who don’t speak English...Parents don’t know the system. I’ve tried to get translations, but have been told that it can’t be done, that I’m out of my place.”

- Brooklyn high school Parent Coordinator

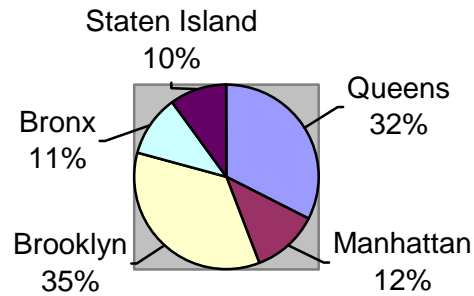
1) Demographic Characteristics of Parent Coordinator Survey Respondents and LEP Parents at Their Schools

A total of 111 Parent Coordinators located at schools in all ten New York City Regions participated in the survey. Sixty-two Parent Coordinators were from elementary schools, 22 from middle schools, and 27 were located in high schools.

¹⁴ New York City Department of Planning, Population Division, “Table SF3 SB P-4: Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 years and Over, New York City, Borough and Census Tracts, 2000” (July 2003).

¹⁵ New York City Department of Planning, Population Division, “Table SB P8: 2000 Census Special Tabulation – Language Other Than English spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 years and Over” (July 2003).

**% Parent Coordinators Surveyed
by Borough**



% Parent Coordinators Surveyed by Region

Region	Percentage
1	5%
2	5%
3	12%
4	37%
5	7%
6	2%
7	14%
8	6%
9	9%
10	4%

Parent Coordinators were asked to identify the native languages spoken by LEP parents at their school. According to survey results, a total of 24 languages were identified as spoken by LEP parents, with Spanish being the most prevalent language (spoken at 96% of schools in this survey). The second and third most spoken languages are Chinese (36% of schools) and Russian (29% of schools), respectively.

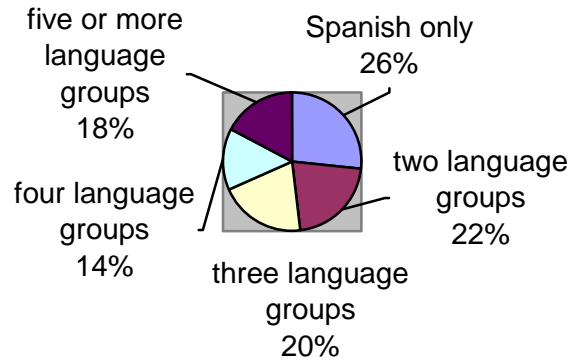
Languages Spoken by LEP Parents as reported by Parent Coordinator

Language	# schools	Language	# schools
Spanish	107	Hebrew	3
Chinese	40	Punjabi	2
Russian	32	Greek	2
Bengali	22	Vietnamese	1
Korean	21	Croatian	1
Hindi	18	German	1
African dialect	13	Japanese	1
Haitian Creole	10	Pakistani	1
French	10	Portuguese	1
Arabic	10	West-Indian	1
Polish	9	Tagalog	1
Urdu	7		
Allbanian	3		

In the vast majority of schools (74%), more than one native language was spoken by LEP parents, according to Parent Coordinators. This figure alone highlights the inappropriateness of expecting already overworked Parent Coordinators to be the primary contacts for all parents, including those who do not speak English. It is hard to imagine how Parent Coordinators staffed at schools with student populations numbering in the hundreds and thousands would be able to effectively communicate with parents who belong to a multitude of language groups with no resources to draw upon. Such a task is not only unrealistic, but unnecessarily risks setting Parent Coordinators up to fail at their jobs.

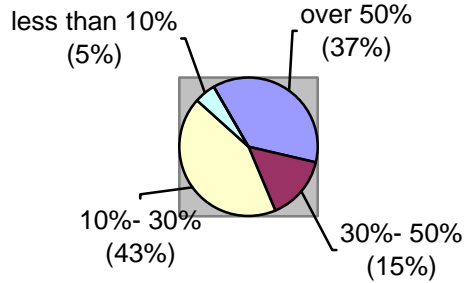
In 28 schools (26%), Spanish was reported to be the only language spoken by parents other than English. While this may imply that Parent Coordinators who are bilingual in Spanish at these schools are able to communicate with all the parents, it certainly does not make the job of ensuring translation and interpretation for LEP parents any less complex and demanding, as is confirmed by the findings discussed later in the report.

of Language Groups Represented by LEP Parents



When asked to approximate the percentage of limited English proficient parents at their school, 67 Parent Coordinators, or 60% of those surveyed responded. The rest did not answer, possibly because they did not know the approximate percentage of LEP parents at their school. Of those who responded, nearly all (95.5%) reported that LEP parents comprised at least 10% of their parent constituency. Only 4.5% (3) answered that LEP parents made up less than 10% of all parents of children who attend their school, while 43% (29) said that LEP parents made up between 10% and 30%, 15% (10) said that LEP parents made up between 30% and 50%, and 37% (25) of Parent Coordinators said that over 50% of parents at the school were LEP.

**% of LEP Parent at Schools
as Reported by Parent Coordinators**



According to the Parent Coordinator job posting issued by the DOE’s Division of Human Resources, a preferred qualification was that the Parent Coordinator applicant be “bilingual where there is a significant non-English speaking population.”¹⁶ This survey attempted to determine how consistent this effort was in practice and how it matched up to the language needs of particular schools.

Parent Coordinators were asked if they were bilingual, and in what language they were proficient if they responded affirmatively. Out of the 109 Parent Coordinators who responded to this question, 71 ¹⁷ (66%) answered that they were bilingual and 37 (34%) responded they did not speak a second language. Of the 61 Parent Coordinators who identified the second language they were proficient in, 88% (54) spoke Spanish (5 of which spoke Spanish plus another Romance language), 3% (2) spoke Russian, 3% (2) spoke Hebrew, 2% (1) spoke Chinese, 2% (1) spoke Korean, and 2% (1) spoke Italian. It was heartening to find out that so many Parent Coordinators, at least in our sample, were

¹⁶ New York City Department of Education, Division of Human Resources, “Job Posting- School Based Parent Coordinator.” Last viewed April 28, 2004.

¹⁷ Two parent coordinators who responded that they there were bilingual were not counted into this figure because the second language they spoke was not reported to be a language LEP parents at the school spoke.

in fact bilingual, but their skill alone was unfortunately not enough to adequately serve their parent population, as was revealed by further survey responses.

Speaking a second language did not ensure that the Parent Coordinator was reaching all or even a majority of LEP parents at the school. Sixty-three percent (40 out of 63) of Parent Coordinators reported that they were at schools where several different languages are represented and the Parent Coordinator spoke only one language other than English.

2) Provision of Language Services by Bilingual Parent Coordinators

When bilingual Parent Coordinators were asked if they personally provided written translations for parents or students at the school, 86% (57 out of 66) responded that they did and 14% (9 out of 66) responded that they did not.

“I am fluent in Spanish and I try to provide translations, but to translate the intent in some documents is very difficult. It took me half a day to smooth out a letter that the principal wanted to send out to parents in Spanish and to make it culturally sensitive. Meanwhile, I had a pile of work on my desk. If the language in the letter is not appropriate, parents are not going to understand or respond.” - Queens elementary school Parent Coordinator

*“I translate flyers and letters [into Spanish], but sometimes it’s legal documents that I can’t translate.”
- Manhattan elementary school Parent Coordinator*

When bilingual Parent Coordinators were asked if they personally provided oral interpretations for parents or students at the school, 94% (64 out of 68) responded that they did and 6 % (4 out of 68) responded that they did not. Out of the 64 Parent Coordinators who did provide oral interpretation, 58 indicated the frequency for which

they did so. Of these, 26% responded that they always did, 50% said they often did, and 24% responded that they only rarely or sometimes provided oral interpretation. The level and complexity of both translation and interpretation were not formally measured.

*“I give a mini-interview. I get by with my little Spanish and their little English to direct them to the proper office.”
- Manhattan high school Parent Coordinator*

It is important to note once again, however, that 63% (40 out of 63) of bilingual Parent Coordinators were at schools in which the number of languages spoken by LEP parents exceeded the language capabilities of the Parent Coordinator. Clearly, a single Parent Coordinator is unlikely to be able to provide interpretation along with his or her myriad of duties for the hundreds, and in some cases, thousands of parents in need of these services.

According to survey findings, Parent Coordinators provide verbal translation more often than written translation. The reasons for this can perhaps be found in some of the anecdotal stories told to the surveyors by Parent Coordinators found throughout this report. They include difficulty translating different types of documents, workload, and proficiency of ability to provide written translation.

3) Provision of Translated Documents by the School

When Parent Coordinators were asked if their school provided written information translated into the native languages spoken by parents, 14% (14 out of 105) responded that the school rarely or never did.

Thirty-one percent (31 out of 105) of Parent Coordinators responded that the school sometimes translated school-related information into parents’ native languages.

Of these, however, the vast majority (79%) responded that the information was not translated into all the languages spoken by LEP parents at the school.

Thirty-two percent (32 out of 105) of Parent Coordinators responded that the school often translated school-related information into parents' native languages. Of these, 56% responded that the information was not translated into all the languages spoken by LEP parents at the school.

Twenty-four percent (24 out of 105) of Parent Coordinators responded that the school always provided written translation of school-related materials. Out of the 23 Parent Coordinators who indicated into which languages the written information was translated, 35% reported that it was not translated into all the languages spoken by LEP parents at the school.

Taking into account the significant gap between the language needs of LEP parents and the actual provision of written translation in all the languages represented, these survey results buttress the finding of Advocates for Children's February 2004 report that 47% of parents never or rarely receive written information from the school, school district, or Department of Education translated into their native language.¹⁸

4) Provision of Translated Documents by the Regional Office or Department of Education's Central Office

When Parent Coordinators were asked if their Regional office or the central office of the Department of Education provided written information translated into the native languages spoken by LEP parents, 26% (28 out of 107) responded that the Region or the central office of the DOE rarely or never did.

¹⁸ Advocates for Children and the New York Immigration Coalition, February 19, 2004.

Twenty-seven percent (29 out of 107) responded that the Region or central office of the Department of Education sometimes translated school-related information into parents' native languages. Of these, however, 52% responded that the information was not translated into all the languages spoken by LEP parents at the school.

Twenty-eight percent (30 out of 107) of Parent Coordinators responded that the Region or central office of the Department of Education often translated information into parents' native languages. Of these, 53% responded that the information was not translated into all the languages spoken by LEP parents at the school.

Twenty percent (19 out of 107) of Parent Coordinators responded that the school always provided written translation. Of these, 33% reported that the school-related materials were not translated into all the languages spoken by LEP parents at the school.

5) Interpreters in the School

When Parent Coordinators were asked if they ever used a bilingual staff person in the school as an interpreter, 82% (86 out of 105) responded that they indeed had. Among those in the school who were called upon were: teachers (in 36% of schools), guidance counselors (18%), other parents (15%), students (14%), security guards (6%), principals (5%), paraprofessionals (4%), secretaries (3%), social workers (3%), school aides (2%), as well as a speech therapist and custodian.

“We don't have a large amount of bilingual staff so we have to schedule around the particular interpreter, like during their lunch period.”
– Manhattan elementary school Parent Coordinator

These responses echo the finding of Advocates for Children's February 2004 report that 41% of parents have had to use his/her child or another student as an interpreter at school in order to speak to a school staff member. Using other students is at odds with the federal Department of Education Office of Civil Rights decisions that make clear, that in order for an educational agency to be in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act¹⁹, schools may not rely on other students for interpretation services or assume that parents will rely on family members for language assistance.

While it is laudable that various school staff people are willing to lend a hand to interpret for parents, doing so often takes away from their own time and interferes with accomplishing their own important work. It is hard to imagine that such personnel are available constantly and consistently to provide services whenever a LEP parent walks into the school with a concern. Furthermore, it cannot be guaranteed that the level of their proficiency is suitable for effectively and meaningfully communicating with LEP parents.

6) Participation in School Activities

Parent Coordinators were asked if LEP parents at their school participated in school activities, including parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, workshops, and school fairs, among other events. Out of the 100 Parent Coordinators who responded to this question, 35% answered that LEP parents always or often participated in such activities despite barriers of language that may exist. Another 39% of Parent Coordinators responded that LEP parents sometimes participated. Twenty-six percent of Parent Coordinators responded that LEP parents rarely or never participated in school activities.

¹⁹ Advocates for Children and the New York Immigration Coalition, February 19, 2004, fn. 26.

*“Parents are willing to be involved- crying to be involved.”
- Manhattan high school Parent Coordinator*

It is quite heartening to find that so many non-English speaking parents were involved even without regular translation or interpretation services. When Parent Coordinators were asked if they think LEP parents *would* participate more in school activities if translation and interpretation services were available, however, nearly three-quarters (74%) responded affirmatively. Only 3% of Parent Coordinators who responded to this question answered that, in their opinion, LEP parents would not participate more even with the provision of language services. The remaining 22% Parent Coordinators were unsure if LEP parents would participate more if language services were provided.

“Yes, of course- especially at parent-teacher conferences. I could be more resourceful in other areas. We’re short-staffed like anywhere else.” - Brooklyn elementary school Parent Coordinator

PART III: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Though the majority of Parent Coordinators surveyed were bilingual, they clearly cannot fulfill the needs of their non-English speaking constituency, no matter how dedicated they are. Many Parent Coordinators had hundreds, if not thousands, of parents to serve and the majority of schools served more than one language other than English. Parent Coordinators are meant to be a resource for parents, but they would not be fulfilling the majority of their responsibilities as set forth in their job description if those that were qualified to do so spent their time doing interpretation and translation for LEP parents. Those with the available skills are clearly trying to fill a need, but this survey makes clear that it cannot be done by one person at a school without centralized resources and support. Parent Coordinators are the front line for parental outreach and assistance. As such, they need the support and tools to reach out to their parent constituency in order to serve the parents at their school effectively. To achieve this goal, and to help assure that children are academically succeeding, the NYC DOE needs to implement a comprehensive language access service.

Create and Implement A Comprehensive Language Translation and Interpretation Program in New York City

New York City, the largest school district in the nation, and with the greatest concentration of English Language Learners in New York State, must create a comprehensive language translation and interpretation program to serve limited English proficient parents. Such a program would provide that:

- a) All notices and materials going to parents must be provided in the native language of parents with limited English proficiency. The

Department of Education should create a centralized translation unit providing translations in the major languages, with referrals for outside translation for those languages spoken by smaller segments of limited English proficient families. Each school must post signs informing parents of their rights to language assistance. Schools must collect information on the language assistance needs of their parents and the principal must be held accountable for meeting those needs.

- b) An Interpretation Unit offering verbal interpretation services must be put in place. This central unit would arrange for interpretation at all Department of Education citywide meetings (i.e., meetings that are open to all city residents, such as hearings, etc.), as well as all school meetings (i.e., parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, workshops, school fairs, etc.). The Department of Education should also develop a telephone-based system to provide translated messages to parents with limited English proficiency. The phone service would alert limited English proficient parents of citywide information, such as elections for community school district personnel.
- c) Each school must post translated signs in key areas informing parents of their rights to language assistance. Schools must collect information on the language assistance needs of their parents. Principals must be held accountable for meeting those needs.
- d) The Department of Education's website should be made accessible for parents with limited English proficiency through translation of key

components into major languages. An evaluation should be conducted of its utilization and effectiveness as a mechanism for improving language access.

These services would help ensure that parents with limited English proficiency know what is happening in their children's education and can actually be involved in their children's education. It is only through such a system that nearly half of New York City school parents can be meaningfully involved in their children's education. In so doing, there would be a major tool put in place to increase student achievement. Such services would also bring New York City into compliance with the letter and intent of city, state, and federal regulations and law. In this manner, parent participation should markedly improve and students are likely to make greater academic progress.

Appendix A

PARENT COORDINATOR- LANGUAGE ACCESS SURVEY

*School _____ *Borough _____ *District/Region _____

** Information necessary to validate surveys, and will be used in the aggregate (ie "30% of Parent coordinators in Brooklyn are bilingual".)*

1. Languages spoken by parents?

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish | <input type="checkbox"/> Bengali | <input type="checkbox"/> Arabic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Hindi | <input type="checkbox"/> Polish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Korean | <input type="checkbox"/> Haitian Creole | <input type="checkbox"/> African dialect |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Russian | <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

2. Approximate percentage of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) parents at the school? _____

3. Are you bilingual? Yes No If yes, Language: _____

4. Do you personally provide written translations for parents or students at school? Yes No
If yes, how often? Rarely Sometimes Often All the time

5. Do you personally provide oral interpretations for parents or students at school? Yes No
If yes, how often? Rarely Sometimes Often All the time

6. Does your school provide written information translated into the native languages spoken by parents? (circle one)

Never Rarely Sometimes Often All the time

If so, language(s) provided: _____ Type of information provided: _____

7. Does the regional office or Dept of Education provide your school with translated written information? (circle one)

Never Rarely Sometimes Often All the time

If so, language(s) provided: _____ Type of information provided: _____

8. Does your school (outside of you, if you answered yes to question 5 above) provide oral interpretation in the native languages spoken by parents? (circle one)

By phone? Yes No In person? Yes No

Never Rarely Sometimes Often All the time

Language(s) utilized: _____ Type of information provided: _____

9. Have you ever had to use a bilingual person in the school as an interpreter? Yes No

- another student
- guidance counselor
- security guard
- teacher

10. What other resources do you use to communicate with LEP parents? _____

11. If an LEP wanted to find out about his/her child's academic progress, is there a process for helping him/her communicate with the school? _____

12. LEP parents participate in school activities:

Never Rarely Sometimes Often All the time

13. Do you think LEP parents would participate more in school related activities if translation/ interpretation services were available? No Yes Unsure