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PRESS RELEASE

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Report Documents Rising Dropout Rate for Immigrant Students Still Learning English; Groups Present Plan for Mayor Bloomberg to Reverse Dropout Trend

New York City, June 18. The New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), Advocates for Children (AFC) and other immigrant community groups, parents and students held a press conference today to release a report on rising dropout rates for immigrant students who are struggling to learn English and proposed a plan to reverse the trend. The release of the report was timed to coincide with the administration of the State's English Language Arts Regents Examination, an exam for which the groups claim too few immigrant students have received the level of instruction they need in order to pass. "New York's immigrant families are being robbed of the opportunity to achieve the American dream. Too many of their children who are English Language Learners have not received the additional help they were promised to meet the new graduation standards, with the result that these students now have the highest dropout rate of any group of students in the school system," said Margie McHugh, Executive Director of the NYIC, an umbrella policy and advocacy organization for roughly 150 groups in New York that work with immigrants and refugees. "The report we are releasing today shows that the implementation of the new testing requirements for graduation have resulted in escalating dropout and pushout rates for students who could be among the system's best performers. As Mayor Bloomberg takes control of the New York City schools, we call on him to make the goal of increasing graduation rates for ELLs a top priority," McHugh said.

The report, entitled *Creating a Formula for Success: Why English Language Learner Students are Dropping Out of School and How to Increase Graduation Rates*, analyzes student performance data from the past several years and shows that the majority of children who have utilized bilingual or ESL programs with enough time and support have become proficient in English and have the highest rates of success on the new state tests. The report also shows that students currently enrolled in these programs – many of whom are very recent arrivals in the country or are students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) – fare the worst under the new standards, with more of them dropping out than graduating since the advent of the new standards.

"The data in our report show that students whose native language is not English have fared both the best and the worst under the new standards," said Jill Chaifetz, Executive Director of AFC, an educational advocacy organization dedicated to assuring that New York City school children have access to a quality education. "The report provides a blueprint for making sure that the ingredients for successful ELL programs are available everywhere they are needed. High quality ESL and bilingual programs are the best

vehicle for helping immigrant kids to succeed under the new standards. Let's fix the problems by building upon what works, and targeting resources where there is the greatest need," said Ms. Chaifetz. "One of our key recommendations is for the Mayor to adopt a "Comstat-like" approach to improve ELL graduation rates. We believe the Mayor should focus on all middle and high schools in which ELL educational outcomes are below acceptable levels, have the Chancellor assume oversight for these schools and increase accountability for improvements in educational outcomes for ELLs," Chaifetz said.

The report documents the fact that 60% of students in the Class of 2001 who began high school as an ELL became proficient in English during high school. These "former" ELLs have the highest four-year graduation rate (58.2%) and the lowest dropout rate (15.2%) of all students; in comparison, 52.6% of native English-speaking students graduated in four years and 19.6% dropped out. However, for those students who were in ELL status as seniors, only 30.1% graduated and 30.3% dropped out at the end of four years. This data is similar to that for the Class of 2000, meaning that since the implementation of the new graduation standards, more ELLs are dropping out after four years of high school than are graduating.

"The fact that ELLs who have become proficient in English have the highest graduation rates and lowest dropout rates is clear and convincing evidence that bilingual and ESL programs in many schools are working well in preparing ELLs to both learn English and to meet the standards," said Joseph Semidei, Deputy Director of the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families. "Many of the students who did not become proficient in English arrived in New York City during middle and high school and were over-age for the classes they were placed in, and many had an interrupted education in their native countries. These students are under tremendous pressure to learn English and also be able to pass Regents exams not just in English, but in math, science, and social studies as well," Semidei continued. "The only way they can do that is with an extended day and weekend and summer classes that are taught by certified, well-trained teachers who are using an ESL curriculum that teaches students what's being taught in regular English classes," he said.

The experiences of dozens of ELL students who had dropped out or been pushed out of school were included in the report to add a human dimension to the report's data. They spoke of their feelings of hopelessness trying to meet the tough new standards when their classroom instruction was so inadequate, and of school personnel who encouraged them to leave school and obtain a GED if they could, since they were behind other mainstream students in accumulating course credits and were unlikely to meet the new standards. "It has been shocking for many immigrant community leaders and parents to see that the standards have become a vehicle for less, rather than more, accountability for the education of our children," said Vladimir Epshteyn, Director of the Metropolitan Russian American Parents Association. "The one-size-fits-all nature of the standards means that we must act as though a student who has been in U.S. schools since first grade is the same as a student who arrived yesterday from Russia and is entering the tenth grade not speaking a word of English. This is lunacy, and because the State and the City have not provided sufficient resources and trained teachers to work with these students, the standards have the effect of encouraging those in the school system to pushout students who are unlikely to meet the standards, rather than giving them the education the need," he said.

The need to recruit and retain certified ESL and bilingual teachers, to expand professional development, and to assign the most experienced teachers to the lowest performing schools are other key recommendations in the report. "The greatest shortage of certified teachers in New York City is for ESL and bilingual teachers. Fifty-nine percent of ESL and bilingual teachers in New York City are either

uncertified or are eligible for retirement,” said McHugh of the New York Immigration Coalition. “Unfortunately, little progress has been made in addressing this long-term systemic problem. New incentives, such as additional pay and scholarships, are needed to recruit certified ESL and bilingual teachers. Also, we need to help our current teachers to do a better job,” she said. “Just as students need summer school to catch-up, we should have an intensive summer school for teachers, so they can also catch-up and learn best practices in teaching to the standards. The other key is to match the most experienced, best-qualified teachers to the lowest performing schools. The Chancellor should have the ability to assign teachers where there is the greatest need,” McHugh said.

Another key recommendation to lower dropout rates and increase graduation rates for ELLs is to provide an alternative assessment to the English Language Arts Regents requirement for late entrant ELLs. “New York State’s one-size-fits-all graduation standards are inappropriate for late entrant ELLs”, said Chaifetz of Advocates for Children. Two advisory groups created by Commissioner Mills have recommended alternative assessments for late entrant ELLs, but the Commissioner rejected these recommendations. “It makes no sense to require ELLs who who meet all core subject requirements, but have not had the time to become academically proficient in English, to remain in high school until they can pass an ELA Regents exam designed for native-born English speakers who have been studying English language arts since kindergarten. These students should be able to graduate high school with a local diploma by passing an English proficiency test based on the number of years they have been in ESL classes and by demonstrating language arts proficiency in their native language,” Chaifetz said.

Nearly one-half of families in New York City speak a language other than English at home. Since research clearly shows that parental involvement in a child’s education results in improved educational outcomes, the report recommends the need for a comprehensive language access policy. “Immigrant parents want to be involved in their children’s education, but language barriers make them feel confused and unwelcome,” said Songyun Kang, Community Development Coordinator for the Flushing YWCA. “Schools need to translate important school documents and provide interpreters for school meetings if they want parents to be involved. We also need to make ESL classes available for parents, as well as their children. If parents learn English they can help their children with schoolwork and reduce the need for translators,” Ms. Kang said.

For more information and to arrange interviews with ELL students experiencing dropout and pushout pressures because they are facing new testing and graduation standards for which they have not had sufficient time or instruction to meet, call Jill Chaifetz of Advocates for Children at 212-947-9779, extension 18 or 646-765-6125 or Margie McHugh of the New York Immigration Coalition at 212-627-2227, extension 221.

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