



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Testimony to be Delivered to the New York City Council Committee on Education

Re: Language Access in New York City Public Schools

September 30, 2025

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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss language access in New York City public schools. 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 more than 50 years, AFC 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. We speak out for students whose needs are often overlooked, such as students with disabilities, students from immigrant families, and students who are homeless.

AFC's Immigrant Students' Rights Project advocates for better educational opportunities for English Language Learners (ELLs) and immigrant families in New York City Public Schools (NYCPS). We provide direct one-on-one assistance to families whose primary language is not English on education-related issues including enrollment, special education, ELL services, and language access, and we provide know-your-rights workshops in multiple languages and share resources at family fairs throughout the City. Based on this work and our extensive contact with immigrant families, we are highlighting several concerns and recommendations regarding language access and communication.

Diversity of NYCPS Families Requires Multifaceted Communication Methods

As you know, New York City is home to families who speak over 200 languages, including Indigenous and unwritten languages. Many NYCPS parents have limited literacy in their home language, and others have limited digital literacy or lack reliable internet access, preventing them from fully engaging with their children's schools. In our work, we see parents who rely on translated paper communications because they do not use email or the web. We meet other parents who do not read or write in their home language, and who rely entirely on in-person meetings and phone calls with an interpreter to stay up-to-date on their children's education. When we



address language access, we must address communication more generally because providing translation and interpretation is not enough – families must first have access to the language. This is why we urge NYCPS to utilize a multifaceted approach to communicating with families which uses phone calls, paper notices, in-person meetings, ethnic media, poster campaigns in our neighborhoods, partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) and other forms of culturally appropriate communication.

Schools Must Provide Language Access to All Families Who Need It

We continue to hear from families who do not receive basic language access services from their schools or NYCPS offices. For example, we hear about:

- Family-facing school staff who do not offer the use of phone interpretation to families and turn them away when they visit their school with a concern or question
- Special education teams who are not aware that parents have the right to translated special education documents provided by the Office of Language Access
- Educators who ask children to interpret for adults at Parent-Teacher Conferences
- School staff who are not trained interpreters and do not follow basic practices when serving as interpreters at formal school meetings such as Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings
- Parents who inform the schools that they speak one of the top 12 covered languages but who continue to receive school documents in English only
- Schools that do not address the language needs of families who speak low-incidence and Indigenous languages despite having a budget for translation and interpretation needs
- Automatic-reply emails from NYCPS offices which are in English only
- Information and links on NYCPS's website which are not translated properly

We urge NYCPS to ensure that all schools have a designated Language Access Coordinator, as required by the Chancellor's Regulations, who is trained to ensure parents receive high-quality, culturally appropriate translation and interpretation services from their schools and to make sure parents know who this staff member is and how to get assistance from them.

Renew and Baseline Funding for Immigrant Family Communications

I want to express my gratitude to the Council for working to secure investments in NYCPS's language access services and immigrant family communication initiatives. With the \$4M allocated each year for the last four school years for immigrant family communications and outreach, NYCPS has been able to help families whose primary language is not English by:

- Partnering with community-based organizations to reach families where they live
- Utilizing local and ethnic media to share school-related updates
- Providing translated paper notices about special education



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- Supporting schools in acquiring interpretation equipment
- Conducting outreach to ensure parents understand their right to an interpreter
- Carrying out language access campaigns on NYC's subways and buses
- Offering centralized translation and interpretation services for schools with high numbers of newcomer immigrant students

This funding is essential to help ensure all parents can understand important communications from schools, including information about their rights, their children's progress, and important school events. However, we are concerned that this funding is not baselined and advocates have to fight for it each year. We therefore urge the City to provide long-term funding for immigrant family communications and outreach which would allow NYCPS to plan ahead and ensure continuity of these essential services.

By investing in these vital services, we are empowering parents to be active partners in their children's education, and we are creating a more equitable and inclusive school system for all. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.