



Meeting the Needs of Immigrant Families, Limited English Proficient Parents & Vulnerable English Language Learners

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Supporting Immigrant Students Town Hall

Co-sponsored by Councilmember Helen Gym & School District of Philadelphia

January 24, 2017

Thank you for this opportunity to speak today. I am a Senior Attorney at the **Education Law Center (“ELC”)**, a statewide legal organization dedicated to ensuring a quality education for all of Pennsylvania’s children. We advocate for the our most educationally at-risk children -- including immigrant students, English Language Learners (“ELs”) and students with disabilities.

I want to raise several concerns tonight emanating from hundreds of calls we receive from families and students through our Intake Line, as well as concerns raised by stakeholders in numerous meetings.

First, it important to recognize that immigrant students are not only learning English for the first time, they are also learning how to learn in a formal setting. They are new to American culture and our education system. Many of these children and youth are “students with limited or interrupted formal schooling” -- they may not have gone to school or grew up in refugee camps. And many have been severely impacted by the trauma of war, famine, discrimination, and fear. They take all of this into their schools and classrooms. In addition, their parents are limited English proficient and

have few supports to navigate the education system and their new environment. They are also impacted by trauma and fear.

Here are some of the issues we commonly hear about from families and some proposed recommendations to address those concerns:

- (1) ***We must support our LEP parents and students to access, engage in and have a voice in schools. However, the District does not provide sufficient translation and interpretation services to permit parents and students to engage in schools.***

Immigrant students are legally entitled to equal educational opportunities but fail to receive those opportunities if their parents are shut out.

This can be remedied through clear policies, requirements and sufficient services and resources in all schools – including an adequate number of BCAs to serve the needs of students and families. We must carefully examine practices and policies to ensure equal access for parents and students. Some examples include: the use of an on-line school selection process which limited English proficient parents are unable to navigate; a lack of interpretation services – often particularly heart-wrenching when students are victimized by bullying and harassment. For example, the District’s bullying hotline provides no options for interpretation services. In addition, many important documents are never translated for parents – such as hearing notifications regarding a proposed transfer to an AEDY programs or notices that a child has been suspended.

- (2) ***LEP parents of students with disabilities are legally entitled to meaningful parent participation in the special education process but they are denied this right when special education documents are not translated and interpreters do not provide comprehensive interpretation services at IEP meetings.*** As many in this room know, the Education Law Center, along with the Public

Interest Law Center has filed a class-action federal lawsuit to challenge the District's failure to translate IEPs, school placement documents, progress reports etc. and to provide sufficient interpretation services during IEP meetings. The federal court recently ruled that this case will move forward. We want to work with the District to address this critical issue for our families.

(3) *Other issues relating to immigrant students with disabilities include –* dispelling the myth that ELLs must “wait 2 years” to be evaluated for special education services and ensuring that all students receive bilingual evaluations whenever feasible. In some schools parents are turned away when they raise concerns or told to wait to see if the child has a language problem or a learning problem.

(4) *Immigrant students and ELLs are among the most educationally at-risk of all student groups. They need robust language services programs across the District to change this narrative. Here are some examples of the stark disparities in achievement reflected in standardized test scores for the 2015-16 scores:*

- a. While 45% of ELLs scored below basic and 44% scored at the basic level, in that same year, 45% of non-ELL students scored at the proficient or advanced level and only 19% scored below basic.
- b. The percent of ELL students who tested below basic in Algebra 1 Keystone exams was more than twice that of non-ELL students. Meanwhile, the percent of non-ELL students that tested proficient or advanced was over 4 times that of ELL students.
- c. Biology – 77% of ELLs scored below basic and the percent of non-ELL students that tested proficient or advanced was *over 6 times that of ELL students*.
- d. In Literature – 53% scored below basic compared with 14% of all students.

- (5) We need to provide robust bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESLO) programming to meet the needs of students and adopt district-wide policies and standards on how to program and how to evaluate ESOL programs, and to implement improvement plans. Principals need support and must be held accountable for ESOL instruction in their schools.

Our recommendations regarding language and content instruction include the following:

- a. ***Establish district wide standards to evaluate ESOL programming and ensure effective language programs, teacher trainings and adequate staffing across the District. At present, there is wide variability in programming for ELL students and immigrant students in particular.***

Some schools provide only 30 minutes of ESOL to all students regardless of their proficiency level. In some schools with only a few ELLs, the District provides only tutoring support or itinerant teacher for a limited time, once or twice a week. Tutors are not certified teachers and do not provide the instruction students need. Bilingual programs and “sheltered classes” which are commonly used as a method for teaching content to immigrant students who are at lower levels of English proficiency, are effective only in schools where they are properly implemented with fidelity.

- b. ***Train ALL regular education teachers to modify instruction and ensure effective accommodations for all ELLs.*** Train all regular education teachers regarding how so that immigrant students can access content and learn and to be culturally competent. At present any trainings on language modifications are extremely minimal -- and non-existent for many teachers.

- c. *There is wide variation in the number of hours of ESOL instruction provided to ELL students at different levels of English proficiency and disparities in the qualifications of ESOL/Bilingual teachers. In addition to an insufficient number of ESOL instructors to serve students, many ESOL teachers are often pulled away from teaching ESOL classes in order to substitute teach in other classrooms. The failure to provide sufficient hours of ESOL instruction to ELL students, particularly those who are beginners significantly impedes the ability of these students to learn. The District must increase and track the number of hours of ESOL instruction provided to students to comport with state guidance and WIDA standards as Pennsylvania is a WIDA state. This is a particular problem for “Entering” Level I immigrant students who need intensive 2.5 hours of ESOL instruction per day and almost never receive it. In the absence of this intense support they are not able to make significant progress.*
- d. *Expand newcomer programming at all levels for our newly arrived “Entering” language learners – elementary, the middle and high school level. At present, there is only one HS – Franklin learning Center – which offers a high school newcomer program and students placed at FLC can be forced out after one or two years. We need more programs to target newly arrived immigrant students – these programs provide sheltered instruction, intensive English language programs, literacy skills in a context that introduces students to formal education and American culture. We support a 4-year program designed to address these students' needs.*
- e. High teacher-student ratios and overcrowded classrooms, as well as reductions in remedial supports, reduced ESOL and BCA staff and the elimination of support services disproportionately impact immigrant

students and undermines the ability of ELL students to learn and make needed progress. *We need to ensure that resources are targeted to these vulnerable students. Immigrant students need more targeted supports in school, including dedicated liaisons to support them and a culturally competent school climate. Many ELL students, particularly students from immigrant and refugee families, often need additional help navigating the school environment.*

- f. *Many ELL students report being bullied and the elimination of hall monitors and many assistant principals clearly undermines a positive school climate and exacerbates incidents of conflict. Students and staff need to understand and embrace our immigrant students.* This requires a district-wide approach to improving cultural competency. These students often need the support of bilingual guidance counselors, school-based behavioral health, and mentoring programs which have a proven track record of success.
- g. **Use new targeted ESSA Title I funding for trauma-informed trainings for teachers and staff** to understand the impact of trauma for immigrant students.
- h. **Use federal Title III funds to support after-school programs,** supplementary materials, expanded summer school programs to target the needs of immigrant students. Invest in new curriculum materials designed for immigrant students with limited or interrupted formal schooling.
- i. **Ensure access to diverse learning opportunities** for immigrant students. At present, students are shut out of Career Technical Education (CTE) and twilight programs because there is no language support for ELLs in these programs.
- j. **Expand access to special admit schools.** The high school application process is fundamentally unfair to ELLs who have recently arrived.

ELL students are barely represented in these schools as parents are unable to navigate the process and are not informed of available waivers for standardized tests etc. and have little support in the process. Students with great academic potential, but with limited English or no standardized test scores, are unlikely to be admitted to special-admission schools. While *the agreed-upon target under the LeGare Consent Decree and SRC policy is to enroll 7 percent of ELL students* in special admission schools, this never happens. For example, last year when 9.52% students were ELLs, Masterman reported “0%” ELL students and Central reported “0.94%” ELL students. We believe the process can be made more accessible to immigrant families and efforts must be undertaken to do so.

Increasing numbers of “multilingual” immigrant English Language learners are entering the District. These students are legally entitled to equal access to educational opportunities under federal, state, and constitutional law. This includes removing language barriers and ensuring access to high-quality instruction. This means providing appropriate support services to empower students to become proficient in English, learn critical content and graduate from high school. *As multilingual students strengthen their English skills through bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL or ESOL) instruction, they become more successful academically.* Teaching essential language acquisition skills to students rapidly and efficiently must be a high priority for the District, all teachers, in both ESL and general education. In order to be successful, teachers must address both linguistic and cultural differences in a supportive learning environment. To serve the needs of this vulnerable student cohort, teachers need training and support to modify instructional methods, implement effective instructional programs across content areas and become culturally competent and trauma informed.

By focusing on these issues as priorities -- providing to a rigorous content-based curriculum and effective language program, ensuring meaningful parent and student participation, and improving school climate -- our immigrant students can and do thrive.

Thank you for your time and the attention you are devoting to this important issue.