



*Testimony to the School Reform Commission
of the School District of Philadelphia:*
**Meeting the Needs of English Language Learners, Immigrant Families &
Limited English Proficient Parents**

The **Education Law Center** receives hundreds of calls from families and students through our Helpline, and also engages in conversations with advocates, community groups, teachers, administrators and other professionals regarding the needs of English Language Learners (or ‘ELs’), immigrants and limited English proficient parents. These diverse groups have raised significant and similar concerns. The following is a summary of the Education Law Center’s proposed recommendations to better meet the needs of these students. *Test results indicate that immigrant students and ELs are among the most educationally at-risk of all student groups. For instance, 44 percent of EL students scored below basic in 2015-16 in standardized math and reading tests, while only 19 percent of non-EL students were in that category.*

First, we need to ensure that the District’s current programming is overcoming language barriers for all students, as required under federal law. In particular, EL students must not be pushed out of school to graduate 'on time' with their age cohort at the expense of their right to remain in school and learn the English skills that are most pivotal for their later success in life.

We need more thoughtfully implemented newcomer programs to meet the needs of newly arriving immigrant students. These programs provide sheltered instruction, intensive English language programs, and literacy skills in a context that introduces students to formal education and American culture. The District should expand newcomer programming at all levels for our newly arrived language learners – at present, only Franklin Learning Center, offers a high school newcomer program and students placed there need a thoughtful, comprehensive four-year program designed to address these students' particular needs.

We need to provide robust bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESOL) programming and adopt district-wide policies and standards to make sure they are effective. Currently there is wide variability among schools in programming for EL and immigrant students. For instance, in some schools, students get only 30 minutes of ESOL a day regardless of proficiency levels, and schools with only a few ELs may provide only tutoring or meeting with an itinerant teacher just once or twice a week. The District must increase and track the number of hours of ESOL instruction provided to students to meet state guidelines. And all regular education teachers should be trained to modify instruction so immigrant students can access course content and learn to be culturally competent.

Second, parents who are limited English proficient need more support to navigate the education system. The District should examine policies and practices that hinder equal access for parents and students such as the use of an on-line school selection process for accessing high schools, School Advisory Council applications available only in English, and a lack of interpretation services for the District’s bullying hotline. In addition, many important documents are never translated for LEP parents – including special education documents and school discipline notices. LEP parents of students with disabilities are entitled to meaningful participation in the special education process and are denied this right when special education documents are not translated and interpreters do not provide comprehensive interpretation services to develop the IEPs.

Relatedly, we must work to eliminate the myth that EL students need to “wait two years” before being evaluated for special education services. In some schools, parents are turned away when they raise concerns or are told to wait to see if the child has a language problem or a learning problem.

Third, immigrant students themselves need more targeted supports and additional help to navigate the school environment. Many of them report being bullied. Students and staff need to understand and embrace our immigrant students. This requires a district-wide approach to improving cultural competency. We recommend using new targeted federal funding under the Every Student Succeeds Act for trauma-informed trainings for teachers, staff and peers to understand the impact of trauma for immigrant students. Federal Title III funds can be used to support after-school programs, supplementary materials, and expanded summer school programs for immigrant students.

Finally, the District must increase access to educational opportunities – including special admission schools and vocational programs – for EL students. EL students are barely represented in special admission schools in part because parents are unable to navigate the process, are not informed of available waivers for standardized tests and have little support in the process. The target under the consent decree in the *LeGare* case is that special admission schools enroll **7 percent EL students**. But this never happens. For example, last year when nearly 10% of District students were ELs, Masterman reported 0% EL students and Central reported 0.94%. We believe the process must change to make the promise of *LeGare* a reality. Immigrant students are also shut out of many Career and Technical Education and “twilight” programs because they are given no information about how to apply and if they do succeed in applying independently, they find no language supports there. And the high school application process generally – which begins in 8th grade – is fundamentally unfair to high school aged ELs who have recently arrived and are provided no information or avenue to participate. Students with great academic potential, but limited English or no standardized test scores, are unlikely to be accepted to special-admission schools simply because they – through no fault of their own – do not have the standard evidence of grades, test scores or attendance to put forward in their application. Special admission schools and CTE programs must be encouraged to accept EL students and provide the appropriate ESOL support so students can thrive there.

In conclusion, by focusing on these issues as priorities -- providing a rigorous content-based curriculum and effective language program with targeted programming for newly arrived immigrant students, ensuring meaningful parent and student participation, and providing meaningful access to special admission schools and vocational programs -- our English language learner students can and will thrive.

March 16, 2017
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