



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on June 30, 2015

Nearly Half of NYC Public School Students Speak Non-English Languages at Home

“Nearly half of New York City public school students speak a language other than English at home, and more than 180 languages are represented,” stated a June 16 report released by the New York Immigration Coalition’s Education Collaborative, an immigrant advocacy group.

According to the New York City School District website, there are over 1.1 million students in the system, which means that “nearly half” of that figure would be over half a million students.



An article on the report in the New York *Daily News* for June 29 noted that the large number of non-English speakers in the city school system presents major challenges for the city’s Department of Education, which must, according to federal law and city statutes, provide translation and interpretation services for the parents of children whose first language is not English.

An earlier *Daily News* article on June 17 cited a New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) survey released the previous day stating that only four out of 175 parents polled said it is easy to communicate with their children’s school. Half of parents surveyed said they didn’t understand what was going on during school meetings because there were no interpreters and 51 percent said important school notifications sent home with their children were not translated into a language they could understand.

The NYIC’s report, “The Great Parent Engagement Gap: Report on School Translation and Interpretation for NYC Parents,” stated:

In New York City, translation and interpretation services should at least be available in the top 9 languages spoken — Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish and Urdu — according to the Department of Education’s (DOE) own regulations.

And most people think that schools only need to provide educational materials in Spanish, as well as English!

Steven Choi, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, voiced his dissatisfaction with the school system’s current track record:

Currently, the DOE has only two people who are responsible for monitoring and supporting more than 1700 schools on translation and interpretation. This is unacceptable given almost half a million students speak a language other than English at home. We know that [New York City Schools] Chancellor [Carmen] Fariña, who has a strong commitment to parent engagement, will be just as concerned about our report’s results as we are. We look forward to working with the City to make schools more accessible institutions for immigrant parents and their children.

Among the changes that the NYIC wants implemented are providing a “Language Access Coordinator” in each of the 32 community superintendent’s and nine high-school superintendent’s offices, providing



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every school with a trained Language Access Coordinator at all times, and linking schools directly with over-the-phone interpreters.

The report did not even try to estimate the cost of providing all these additional services and personnel, but with the high salaries that prevail among city Department of Education employees, this obviously would amount to more than small change. (For example, starting teacher salaries range from \$45,530 to \$74,796 and with annual increases plus increases for additional coursework, teachers' salaries can rise to the current maximum of \$100,049 per year over time.)

The cost of providing these additional services to non-English speaking parents is, of course, in addition to providing bilingual education to students. In the jargon of educators, students who require bilingual education are designated as Limited English Proficient. While a fair number of such LEP students are the children of immigrants who are here legally, it is also certain that many are the children of illegal immigrants. Whether legal or illegal, however, the cost of educating them is substantial. A 2015 report from FAIR (The Federation for American Immigration Reform) indicated that in the D.C. metro area (which has a population of about six million, compared with New York City's population of eight million) the cost of educating children who are limited English proficient runs to \$2.4 billion.

The NYIC quoted a statement of support from city council member, Mathieu Eugene, who is an immigrant from Haiti. Said Eugene:

We are lucky to live in one of the most diverse cities in the world and we must ensure that all residents have access to the services they need. Many parents of our public school children don't speak English and they need services in order to communicate with their children's teachers. I support the New York Immigration Coalition's request to the Department of Education to designate Language Access Coordinators in every superintendent's office in order to provide more support for schools who are trying to connect parents with vital services.

Putting Eugene's statement in the context of New York's long and proud history as a diverse city that became the first home in America to millions of immigrants, we must recall that for most of that history, the city made none of the special accommodations that the NYIC now demands. When this writer's great grandparents, who were immigrants from Italy, lived in Brooklyn back in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they learned English, as did most immigrants of the day. Schools provided neither bilingual classes nor classes in the native languages of immigrants and did not offer translators to the parents of immigrants children. As a result, my grandparents, as well as another grandmother who was the daughter of German immigrants who also settled in Brooklyn, grew up speaking perfect English. This gave them an advantage in assimilating into the culture and economy of the United States, and their children — in turn — grew up in middle class suburbia, enjoying all the benefits of "the American dream."

The money spent on Language Access Coordinators and translators might be better spent on offering English classes to immigrants so that they can communicate with their children's teachers without the need for translators. In some places, volunteers have offered to teach such classes to eliminate the need for taxpayer funding entirely.

Denying expensive special accommodations for immigrants is not an "anti-immigrant" position. And encouraging legal immigrants to learn our language and become thoroughly involved in their children's education will offer greater benefits to them and their children than enabling their dependence on translators.



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