

**A Bad Start to the School Year:
Despite New Regulation, Immigrant Parents Still Face Major
Language Barriers**

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Coordinated by:

Advocates For Children of New York
and
The New York Immigration Coalition

In Collaboration with:

Asian Americans for Equality; the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families; Comprehensive Development Inc.; El Centro de la Hospitalidad; Haitian Americans United for Progress; Latin American Integration Center; Make the Road by Walking; and The Metropolitan Russian American Parents Association

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New York City Department of Education (DOE) oversees the largest and most diverse school district in the country. For decades, the school system has had great difficulty communicating with and involving immigrant parents, half of whom come from homes where English is not the primary language. On February 27, 2006, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and DOE Chancellor Joel I. Klein announced a new regulation (Chancellor's Regulation A-663) with the purpose of providing translation and interpretation services to the hundreds of thousands of parents who require these services in order to meaningfully participate in their children's education and interact with school staff. The regulation, which became effective at the beginning of this school year, was supposed to significantly improve the range and quality of translation services provided to parents.

This report reveals serious lapses in the provision of language assistance services to parents found during our month long monitoring of high school registration centers and a recent survey of select parent coordinators. In addition, community groups visited schools or obtained information from parents about the lack of services available in their local schools.

Chancellor's Regulation A-663 sets procedures for the DOE and schools to implement a comprehensive translation and interpretation system that provides meaningful involvement for parents who speak or read limited English. It gives parents the right to have their children's school records and other critical documents translated into their native language and to have interpreters available to explain certain meetings with school and regional personnel. Language services are to be provided, at the minimum, in the 8 languages other than English most commonly spoken by school parents in New York City: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu.

Immigrant communities expected that the adoption and implementation of Chancellor's Regulation A-663 would have resulted in changes to both the services provided at the high school registration centers and how schools, particularly parent coordinators, address the needs of parents who speak limited English. Alarming, in too many cases, this was not the case.

Monitoring and Survey Findings

After visiting 13 of the 15 high school registration centers, which have been temporarily opened for the third straight year to handle thousands of students entering or reentering the City's high schools, our observations revealed that availability of translated materials and knowledge of interpretation services was spotty. *While some centers had translated materials and bilingual staff, many centers lacked translated forms and signs, on site interpreters, and a general knowledge of where to find resources in languages other than English. The problems were even more pronounced for languages other than Spanish.*

AFC and NYIC also conducted school surveys of parent coordinators to assess the level of language services being provided and their knowledge of the requirements outlined in the Chancellor's Regulation, as well as, the resources available to their schools for providing these services. *Our surveys reveal that parent coordinators are typically unaware of the new requirements for translation and interpretation services and the additional funding within their schools to assist with translating documents and providing interpretation services at meetings.*

I. Introduction.

This past February, Mayor Bloomberg, Speaker Quinn, Chancellor Klein, and immigrant leaders stood together to announce a new Chancellor's Regulation (A-663) intended to break down language barriers between the city's schools and the hundreds of thousands of parents who speak or read limited English. The regulation recognized the link between student success and effective communication with students and parents. Regulation A-663 lays out guidelines and requirements for effective system-wide translation and interpretation services. The regulation, which became effective at the start of the 2006-2007 school year, sought to guarantee that, "Limited English Speaking parents are provided with a meaningful opportunity to participate in and have access to programs and services critical to their child's education."

From the time the high school registration centers opened on August 28, 2006, community groups began monitoring the language assistance services and materials available to parents. Monitoring of translation and interpretation was coordinated by the New York Immigration Coalition and Advocates for Children in consortium with the following community groups: Asian Americans for Equality, the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, Comprehensive Development Inc, El Centro de la Hospitalidad, Haitian Americans United for Progress, Latin American Integration Center, Make the Road by Walking and The Metropolitan Russian American Parents Association.

To determine whether the regulation was indeed being implemented and that the DOE had a well coordinated rollout and implementation strategy, advocates and community leaders 1) observed and monitored New York City's high school registration centers and 2) conducted surveys of parent coordinators and documented examples of schools unaware of these news services or not providing the services. The results uncovered widespread violations of the regulations. While monitoring the registration centers and surveying parent coordinators, groups found critical gaps in services and materials available and that many parent coordinators and enrollment center staff were unaware of the new regulation or its requirements.

II. Registration Center Monitoring Findings

This year, the Department of Education had 15 borough-wide high school registration centers available to enroll new, returning and unplaced incoming high school students. While translation and interpretation services are always important, they are especially important at the high school registration centers since parents of new, returning or unplaced students must go there in order to enroll their children in high school and make important decisions that will affect the student's academic life over the next four years. The enrollment centers are often the first interaction between immigrant parents and the New York City's public school system. It is in situations such as this that the new Chancellor's Regulation was meant to give parents, a "meaningful opportunity" to participate in their child's educational experience.

Yet monitoring visits to 13 of the 15 high school registration centers revealed that the level and consistency of translation and interpretation services, signs and materials were insufficient and did not provide language access improvements mandated by the regulation. Monitors documented problems ranging from a lack of translated signs showing the center's location within the school, which had sometimes been changed, and that might affect a parent's

ability to find the center, if they did not read English, to a lack of translated documents and interpretation services leaving some parents to rely on their children for interpretation. For example, upon arriving at several sites, many monitors noted the same problems:

- Several centers changed the entrance address listed on the DOE website, but did not provide signs instructing parents where to go in languages other than English.
- With the exception of the outstanding language services offered at the Queens Courthouse Square registration center near where DOE's Central Translation and Interpretation Unit is located, all of the sites visited only had English versions of the welcome posters that list the requirements for enrollment.

We were happy to see that some sites posted smaller translated flyers underneath the large sign after preliminary findings were shared with the DOE, while many sites did not post translated versions at all. Translation of these welcome posters can help prevent unnecessary waits as long as 60 minutes before parents reach the first station where center staff first check for required registration documents.

Upon closer observations, monitors identified even more troubling inconsistencies. During the first weeks that the registration centers were open, when the largest number of parents and students were arriving at the registration centers, there were few translated materials including intake forms or flyers explaining the process and services available. At a number of locations, monitors did not find translated forms at the first intake table. Interestingly, the forms were occasionally made available once the monitors inquired with the center's supervisor highlighting poor coordination of resources even within the center.

While a few centers had translated flyers and intake forms, several critical documents were only available in English at most of the sites¹. These included:

- Parent & Non-Parent Affidavits
- September 2006 flyer stating the medical requirements for new school entrants
- Immunization Walk-In Clinic announcement
- Safety Transfer Intake Form
- New Schools New Options
- A listing of the Regional Enrollment Centers, their contact #s and directions to the centers by both train and bus
- A listing of contact information for Regional Committees on Special Education
- Education and Job Training flyer detailing a free program for adults
- Is a GED program appropriate for your student? Information flyer²

Regulation A-663 specifically states that DOE's Translation and Interpretation Unit will, "identify documents which are distributed or electronically communicated to all or substantially all parents" for translating. Nonetheless, our findings show that parents who speak limited

¹ The Courthouse Square site was the only site that had some of these documents available in other languages.

² Although this document was available at the enrollment centers, AFC and NYIC had concerns that it did not contain vital information about a student's right to remain in school and the difference between a regular school program and a GED program.

English continue to have significantly lower access to important school documents. For example, we received complaints that students sent to Richmond Hill High School from the local enrollment center were provided with disposition letters only in English regardless of the language the parent and student spoke.³

Similarly, while several centers had some bilingual staff or interpreters available for parents, monitors continued to identify cases of students interpreting for parents, insufficient number of interpreters, particularly of non-Spanish languages, centers asking students and parents to translate forms or meetings themselves, and unskilled interpreters that were unable to address parent questions. It has been established that children are not the best suited to serve as interpreters for many reasons. Students themselves might not be proficient in English or in their parent's native language or might be unable to effectively comprehend the Department of Education's language.

While minor gains were seen in the ability of centers to handle Spanish language needs by having some bilingual staff or interpreters and forms ready for parents, there were major deficiencies in the services available to parents who speak other languages. One monitor visiting the Brooklyn High School of the Arts registration center asked about translation services in Chinese and was told that if a parent needed Chinese translation, they would have to go to an enrollment center in Manhattan because that center would have Chinese interpreters and documents translated in Chinese. A staff at another center put it more bluntly by stating that they did not have Asian language services because they had, "no Chinese people" in their school. Similar problems were noted with Arabic and Haitian Creole language services. Regulation A-663 stipulates, at a minimum, translation into Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu, the top 8 languages spoken in New York City.

III. Parent Coordinator Survey Findings

While monitoring the registration centers presented a good picture of how the Chancellor's Regulation was being implemented at the city level, immigrant groups were also interested in how it was being implemented at the school level. The Regulation calls for all schools to have a Comprehensive Educational Plan on how to assist parents with limited English. Each school's plan must explain how its staff will "provide translation and interpretation services to parents who require language assistance to communicate effectively with the Department."

In order to gauge the implementation of Chancellor's Regulation A-663, we surveyed Parent coordinators because as stipulated in the regulation, they are the liaison for ensuring parents obtain the language services stipulated in the regulation. Thus, parent coordinators' knowledge of the new language requirements is one of the major indicators of whether or not schools are actually providing services at the school level.

We called forty Parent coordinators in all 10 Regions in the New York Public School system and asked a series of questions regarding resources at their school for parents who speak limited English. Of the forty Parent coordinators, only 17.5% responded to our calls or agreed to answer questions about the services available at their schools. The Regions we received

³ Important information relevant to English language learner students such as information about ELL programs was not available at all at the centers.

responses from were Regions 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9. Additionally, the consortium of groups collected information from observations or complains about the services provided in their local schools.

Our survey revealed that parent coordinators are typically unaware of the new requirements set forth in the regulation. There is also a lack of knowledge of funding sources within their schools to assist with translating documents and providing interpretation services at meetings. While some parent coordinators had some knowledge of the Translation and Interpretation Unit, the school-based requirements and resources outlined in the regulation.

When asked about the translated documents available at their schools, parent coordinators reported not having hard copies available throughout the school while only some of them were aware that they might be available to obtain some documents from the Translation and Interpretation Unit website. Many parent coordinators were unaware of their option or the mechanism for obtaining translation services from the T & I Unit and often relied on themselves, teachers, or “grab[bing] a student” to act as the default interpreters and materials translators for the school. Several parent coordinators did not know about the notice requirement of the new regulation while some sent notices to parents once a year at the beginning of the school year and then relied on “word of mouth” to spread the word. It is important to note that some parent coordinators appeared to be welcoming of non-English speaking parents. For example, some parent coordinators had their voicemail messages in two languages.

Widespread violations of translation and interpretation services were also noted by community members in their local schools particularly regarding the school’s mechanism for interacting with parents at the moment they walked in the school. Groups shared information about security guards asking parents to come back with interpreters, parent coordinators defensively asking parents to volunteer their time if they wanted language services in Arabic, and community groups being called on to volunteer to interpret at school-wide meetings.

IV. Conclusions

Chancellor’s Regulation A-663 was a much needed step in the right direction. However, monitoring of this year’s high school registration centers and our survey of parent coordinators revealed that the major lapses in the implementation of the regulation.

In order to correct the violations of the regulation highlighted in this report, we call on the Department of Education to fully implement Chancellor’s Regulation A-663 by creating a comprehensive training initiative for DOE staff at the city, regional and school levels. We also urge the DOE to work closely with community leaders to create an effective outreach strategy to inform immigrant families and communities about the new service and to follow through on the promise to form and convene the Translation and Interpretation Task Force to ensure full implementation of Chancellor’s Regulation A-663.