



The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc.

Testimony of The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc.

Before the New York State City Council Committee on Education February 25, 2015

Good afternoon, my name is Vanessa Ramos, Sr. Director for Policy of The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc. (CHCF). I want to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for giving us the opportunity to testify today. On behalf of CHCF, I am here: 1) to express our support for the New York State Education Department's requested ESEA waiver amendment exempting newly arrived English Language Learners from taking the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment and (2) to present our recommendations for ensuring quality early education to support English Language Learners (ELLs), who we consider emergent bilingual children.

Since 1982, CHCF has combined education and advocacy to expand opportunities for children and families and strengthen the voice of the Latino community. Believing that the most effective way to support families is by building upon their strengths and fostering self-sufficiency, CHCF provides services through Youth Development programs, an Early Care & Education Institute, and policy and advocacy initiatives. CHCF's innovative model includes implementing cultural and linguistic competencies to effect change, along with hiring and retaining bilingual and bicultural staff.

ELL students comprise 14.8% of New York City's student population; and 62.4% of those come from Spanish-speaking homes. These numbers are why CHCF formed the Latino Coalition on Early Care and Education (LCECE) in 2007. LCECE is committed to increasing the availability and quality of culturally and linguistically appropriate child care and early education for Latino children and ELL students in New York.

CHCF supports Resolution No. 388, which backs New York State Education Department's Elementary and Secondary Education Act Waiver Renewal. The Resolution allows newly arrived English Language Learners be exempted from participating in the English language arts assessments for two years, and accepts the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) as the alternative to the ELA during this period.

English Language Learners are students who are developing their understanding and use of the English language. They differ in native language, national origin, age, socioeconomic status, histories and capacities. (García & Flores, 2013). Seen in this light, the ELA assessment is not an adequate instrument to capture instructional gains or language development; it does not afford newly arrived ELL students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know, what they have learned and what they can do on English Language Arts. The ELA, which requires a high level of English language development, does not offer translations to assist ELL students; therefore, progress in language development is not captured by the ELA. CHCF's work in partnership with K-12 schools to provide student support services and parent engagement has shown that ELLs are unnecessarily disadvantaged throughout their education due to unfair, English-only assessments to promote advancement.

Students would make significant progress in language development if they were given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills in their native language. Language involves more than grammatical structures, it is also "a series of social practices and actions that are embedded in a web of social relations" (Street, 1985; Pennycook, 2010). Therefore, language learning in an academic setting is not only about the mastery over grammar and vocabulary, but also about the development of competency in the language specific to each academic discipline.

The NYSESLAT assessment is better in measuring progress for newly arrived ELLs and an efficient way to meet NY State's high expectations for all ELL students. To further this argument, research informs us that it takes at least five to seven years to develop academic proficiency in a second language (García, Kleifgen & Falchi, 2008; Hakuta, Goto Butler & Witt (2000). Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect that newly arrived ELL students have only one year to attain academic proficiency and excel in the ELA assessment. In light of this research

and of the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, a two year exemption is only a bare minimum. We urge that, going forward, decisions regarding ELL students take into account the research on academic language acquisition.

CHCF also takes this opportunity to provide this Committee with our LCECE coalition recommendations in early education, particularly in pre-K. Pre-K must be inclusive of emergent bilingual children by incorporating children's home languages to develop native English language proficiency.

We salute the positive impact of opening universal pre-K to all children in New York City, and strongly support the principle that all teachers are teachers of ELL students.

CHCF and LCECE recommend that in the process of UPK implementation and expansion:

- Funding is set aside for meaningful, ongoing preparation and professional development of the professional prekindergarten workforce with coursework on dual language acquisition and effective teaching practices for emergent bilingual students.
- New York City promotes specific strategies that encourage parent involvement and support Latino parents in creating engaging language and literacy experiences at home to reinforce children's learning at preschool.
- Salary parity across New York City's entire publicly funded pre-K education system.
- New York City's early education programs ensure that children have opportunities to demonstrate their abilities, skills and knowledge in any language, including their home language; and utilize assessments in both English and the home language to help determine what the child has learned and is capable of doing, as well as the child's level of language development.
- New York City ensures that the web-based information about enrollment, choices, programs, rules and policies, and academics is also available in print-format in the parents' home language.

As a member of New York Immigration Coalition's Education Collaborative, CHCF supports the Build the Bridge Campaign calling upon the Department of Education (DOE) to provide

translation and interpretation services to parents so they can actively participate in the education of their children.

As advocates, we look forward to updates from NYC DOE on the progress achieved in expanding bilingual and dual language programs, and on the development of culturally sensitive, research-based Pre-K curricula for emergent ELL students. We have a collective responsibility to invest in programs, curricula, educators and lessons to fulfill the human right to an education. The deficit-based, remedial and monolingual system must be transformed into a system that embraces linguistic and cultural diversity as assets.

Thank you.