

Internationals Network for Public Schools
Written Testimony for Rockefeller Institute Foundation Aid Study
September 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on the NYSED Foundation Aid study. My name is Lara Evangelista, and I am the Executive Director of Internationals Network for Public Schools, a national non-profit organization founded and headquartered in New York City. Our organization partners with school teams, leaders, and systems to ensure that newcomer adolescent multilingual learners (MLLs) have access to an equitable education that prepares them for college, career, and beyond. We take great pride in advancing our mission. The students in our schools come from 116 countries, speak 68 different languages, and reflect the beautiful diversity and promise of the United States.

As a non-profit with a 20-year history, we have a strong foundation from which to address the significant and growing unmet educational needs of New York State's newcomer MLL population. However, our history is longer than that, reaching back nearly 40 years to when our first school, International High School, was opened at LaGuardia Community College. This school was established by a group of educators who recognized that public schools were not well equipped to provide newcomer MLLs with an equitable and adequate education - so they developed a school model to better serve them. We continue to implement and enhance that same model today.

Our network of public schools has grown significantly - now including 31 schools and academies nationwide. Most of our schools are in New York State, with one in Buffalo and 16 in NYC. We also partner with districts and schools outside our school network to support them as they learn to welcome and educate growing numbers of newcomer MLLs across the nation.

Today, Internationals Network remains the only school development and support organization dedicated to addressing the educational needs of the newcomer MLL population, and we have become a leading voice in education reform and immigrant/MLL education in New York. A special testament to our success are the almost 50 Internationals High School graduates who have returned to work in our organization and schools.

With this history and expertise, we are uniquely positioned to provide testimony about the realities New York public schools encounter to adequately and equitably educate newcomer MLLs.

Importance of Adequately Funding Public Education for Newcomer MLLs in New York

Adolescent newcomer MLLs are migrating from other countries and moving from other states to New York and enrolling in schools. In the 2022-23 school year, 10% of New York public school students were English language learners (ELLs¹), with a higher population of 18% in Queens.² Youth who immigrate as adolescents face extraordinary educational, social, and financial challenges. In four years, they must acquire the English, content knowledge, and academic skills needed to pass courses and graduation requirements for a high school diploma. Some students like SLIFE (Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education) arrive with limited literacy in their home languages and math, which adds to the effort and time it will take them to meet graduation requirements. Additional factors that MLLs face can include low teacher expectations if lessons are based only on MLLs' English proficiency level, and not the wealth of experience and knowledge they bring to their learning; a

¹ We prefer to use the term *MLL* because it is asset-based and not focused on something our students do not yet have (English proficiency). We use *ELL* when referring to NYSED regulations and data to match the state's usage of the term.

² Data from [NYSED portal](#)

shortage of teachers qualified as MLL specialists; and the consequences of accountability systems in which low test scores demotivate MLLs to continue with their education and/or schools from serving them.³

When newcomer ELLs are not able to overcome structural inequities in schools and socio-economic pressures, they may drop out. While the New York state dropout rate of 5% might appear low, ELL students contribute disproportionately with an 18% dropout rate. This issue is especially prevalent in counties in and around New York City, where dropout rates are even higher than the statewide average: Richmond (30%), Manhattan (26%), Suffolk (21%), and Westchester (19%)⁴. When newcomer ELLs drop out before graduating, it becomes a systemic economic and societal problem for the residents of New York.

More resources are required to adequately and equitably educate newcomer MLLs who tend to be at the lowest levels of English proficiency and frequently have limited or interrupted formal education. In addition, newcomer ELLs' needs often intersect with those of students in temporary housing and unaccompanied youth. Ensuring that newcomer MLLs persist in school in the face of these manifold challenges requires more funding and resources than are presently provided.

Our Recommendation

The current structure of the Extraordinary Needs percent in the Pupil Needs Index of Foundation Aid acknowledges the added costs of providing extra time and help for certain students to succeed, and we appreciate the 0.5 allocation for ELLs. However, the extra time and help that public schools must provide newcomer MLLs extends beyond instructional time, class size, and teacher-to-student ratio. Additional interventions are required to create the conditions and readiness for newcomer MLLs to attend, earn credits, persist, and graduate from high school.

We recommend that the Rockefeller Institute prioritize providing additional weight for newcomer MLLs, unaccompanied youth, SLIFE, and students in temporary housing. The latter increased significantly in recent years with the population of Internationals students in temporary housing up from 31 to 39% from 2023 to 2024. In the 2022-23 school year, 70% of the MLL population in NYCPS were newcomers, and Foundation Aid funding should account for this disproportionality.

Rationale

Like Ed Trust-NY, we are concerned about the speed of this process, with testimony largely over summer months, and call for Foundation Aid to be equity-focused and based on a “comprehensive and data-driven process that puts the needs of students above any state fiscal and political considerations.”⁵ Our rationale provides qualitative data about the actual needs of newcomer MLLs beyond instructional time, class size, and teacher-to-student ratio, and we hope they are accounted for in updates to Foundation Aid.

Our extensive experience has taught us that school structures and practices that are effective for welcoming and educating many students often need to be changed to be accessible for newcomer MLLs. The most common of these structures and practices are described below. All of these situations require extra time and bilingual

³ Sugarman, Julie, *The Unintended Consequences for English Learners of Using the Four-Year Graduation Rate for School Accountability* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2019), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/ELGradRates-FINALWEB.pdf>.

⁴ Data from [NYSED portal](#)

⁵ Arlen Benjamin-Gomez's July 16, 2024 testimony on behalf of Ed Trust-New York to Rockefeller Institute about Foundation Aid study

personnel, often with a language other than Spanish, and some require additional dedicated space to ensure confidentiality.

Preparing Newcomer MLLs for Learning and Success

- **Student Registration.** As part of the new student registration process, schools should conduct interviews with students who may be SLIFE to gather their educational background information and administer home language and math assessments so course selection, instruction, and assessments can be planned. Getting accurate responses requires trust between the interviewer and student; thus, typical telephone translation services are insufficient to hold these sensitive conversations so schools can collect accurate student intake data. One-on-one sessions must be held.
- **Health Requirements.** Newcomer MLLs usually need health education and clinic appointments to meet school districts' immunization requirements. Making referrals, connecting students with clinics and community-based organizations, and ensuring follow-up with providers are much more involved when working with newcomer MLLs than more English proficient MLLs familiar with local health services.
- **Social Emotional Support.** As a point of reference, our Internationals high schools with 300-500 newcomer MLLs and two or more full-time staff counselors and/or social workers typically must enlist the help of two to four bilingual graduate students studying social work or school counseling to assist with caseloads that come with enrolling newcomers; many newcomers have had adverse childhood experiences that impact their mental health and readiness to learn. Additional staff are needed to help newcomer MLLs and families navigate temporary housing options, ensure food security, and provide employment assistance in students' and guardians' first languages. Additionally, many newcomer MLLs live in temporary housing, and all are unfamiliar with schools' codes of student conduct and benefit from regular check-ins with counseling staff.
- **Guidance and Post Secondary Planning Support.** Ensuring graduation and providing college access to newcomer MLLs requires special processes and personnel unlike those needed for more English proficient MLLs. In addition to supporting students and families in understanding attendance expectations and graduation requirements, counselors of newcomer MLLs must evaluate foreign transcripts, do course programming, and track credit accumulation in non-standard ways. Many of these duties require professional training and consultation time with other counselors. Helping families understand the college landscape, FAFSA, financial aid options, varied college admissions pathways, changing standardized testing requirements, and college applications all require particular strategies to make college accessible for newcomer MLLs.
- **Family Involvement.** Immigrant family members are often reluctant to participate in large school community gatherings like open school nights and PTA meetings because they do not understand the language and their role in such events. Getting newcomer families involved in school requires special outreach; parents and guardians typically prefer to meet with school staff in small groups or one-on-one.
- **Unaccompanied Youth:** These newcomer MLLs are separated from their families and require intensive health and social emotional support. They are often unaware of available assistance for housing and food, or they may be discouraged by the complexity of getting help, so it is important for school staff to regularly follow up with them to ensure their basic needs are met so they can engage in learning.

Preparing Teachers to Educate Newcomer MLLs

As new waves of immigration bring even more newcomer students to New York schools, teachers face the challenge of adapting their teaching. The fixed curricula, instruction, and assessment methods used in most schools were not designed to respond to dynamic migration patterns that result in students with various degrees of formal schooling, math skills, home languages, English proficiency, and literacy levels learning together in the same classes. Furthermore, college teacher training programs often do not adequately prepare teachers to meet the needs of newcomer MLLs in content classes like math, science, and social studies.

Consider the following situation that typifies the challenge teachers of newcomer MLLs encounter.

A school uses a biology textbook that presents lessons on food webs and energy transfer calculations via an example of a snowy alpine tundra ecosystem. The biology teacher adapted the lesson to be culturally relevant to her class of 50% Central American MLLs by situating it instead in a tropical rainforest ecosystem. The following school year, the composition of her biology class changed to 25% Afghani, 10% West African, and 15% Central American MLLs. Some have been out of school and struggle to read in their home language, others work to support family, and most have never been in linguistically diverse classes. Last year, the teacher relied on bilingual Spanish-English strategies to teach her students. This year, she again needs to make lessons relevant to her students by including grassland and desert ecosystems and providing scaffolds to address MLLs' different home languages and math and literacy levels.

One scaffold the teacher would need to learn would be to identify the language functions and sentence frames for a native Spanish speaker to do energy transfer calculations with a native Wolof-speaking partner and an appropriately scaffolded sequence of collaborative learning activities with instructions for completing them.

No college teacher training program provides this mix of language, content, and instructional methods training. Thus, teachers of newcomer MLLs require job-embedded professional development. The most effective way for teachers to learn how to teach newcomer MLLs effectively, we have found, is scheduling collaborative team time for educators who share students and having multiple educators in the room to learn together, which may require additional resources of professional learning time and personnel.

Some of the most common professional learning that teachers of newcomer MLLs benefit from includes:

- **Learning about newcomer MLLs' home countries, cultures, and languages** so they can be validated and leveraged when differentiating curriculum and instruction
- **Training to act as an advisor** to a small group of students; newcomer MLLs benefit from small group peer interactions since they must negotiate both the language and cultural values at play when discussing social and emotional issues
- **Collaboration time with content area colleagues** to learn linguistic scaffolds for differentiating district curriculum that is generally written for a homogeneous group of native English-speaking students
- **Collaboration time with grade-level colleagues and counseling staff** to learn about new students, collectively design, develop, and iterate instruction, and monitor its effectiveness with newcomer MLLs

- **Training on instructional interventions for SLIFE** to help them develop literacy in their home language, math literacy, and accelerate instruction in core content knowledge so they can reach grade level while also learning English and formal schooling behaviors
- **Study visits to other schools with newcomer MLL populations** where they can observe effective practices and share experiences with educators facing the same challenges
- **Workshops to learn how to assess linguistic demands of grade-level content and integrate language and content** for MLLs

The school needs to have funding to pay for substitute teachers and coverages which are also often required for such professional development. Furthermore, in addition to the overall changes described above, newcomer MLLs benefit when bilingual classroom aides are available to provide support during class and assessment administration. Providing adequate funding for these situations is crucial to the success of educational programs for newcomer MLLs.

In light of this reality, it is essential that differentiated weights for newcomer MLLs, unaccompanied youth, SLIFE, and students in temporary housing in the Pupil Needs Index be considered so schools can provide all students with an equitable learning environment to meet or exceed the academic expectations of our state. By recognizing the additional support required for these students and adjusting funding allocations accordingly, the state can take a significant step towards ensuring equity and accessibility in education for all New Yorkers, regardless of their backgrounds.

Thank you for considering our recommendation, and I am available to provide further information or clarification as needed.

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