

OPINION

By Jean Kerbensky Altesse

Welcome centers failing immigrant students

The centers must address language barriers and improve staff training so that immigrant families get the support they need.



People look from a ferry at the Statue of Liberty on Liberty Island. Photo Credit: BRYAN R. SMITH/AFP/Getty Images

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I emigrated to NYC from Haiti when I was 15. In Haiti, I was an excellent student. But things didn't go well in NYC: I am nearly 20 and still in high school.

The NYC Family Welcome Centers are set up by the Department of Education to provide transition services, including high school enrollment for immigrants and others. Unfortunately, the Family Welcome Centers failed me. The centers didn't provide interpreters who spoke Haitian Creole. So it was difficult for my family and me to understand the process and how best to make decisions. I was assigned a school without any choice and wasn't able to learn about my options.

At my assigned school, I received help with learning English only for two hours a week. I studied and took multiple Regents exams. But I just couldn't keep up. I got frustrated and started to hate school. Eventually, I stopped going.

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While my story is personal, this is common, according to research by the nonprofits Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project and the nonprofit Community Development Project. Their in-person survey of 166 recently arrived Haitian young people who enrolled through the centers reveals that NYC is failing immigrant students.

Some survey highlights:

- Only 48 percent of the students surveyed were told about the different types of high schools available.
- More than half of the students didn't get to choose their school. A quarter of students remembered using the high school directory to choose a school; of those, more than half reported that the directory was not in their home language.
- Fewer than 10 percent of students received essential information about English Language Learner programs.

The centers must address language barriers and improve staff training so that immigrant families get the support they need. While Family Welcome Centers are not the only problem — changes should be made to the educational system, too — they're a good place to start because they have sent students in the wrong direction.

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Young immigrants like me need a system that serves us better. The Family Welcome Centers must live up to the promise of its name by giving students a warm welcome that includes the support they need to succeed in school.

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