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# Immigrant advocates press city schools to fund program for newly arrived students

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When 17-year-old Lovely first arrived in New York City from Haiti in September 2017, she said she had no idea how she would finish her high school education.

On top of having to work to support her mother and siblings, she was unfamiliar with the maze of New York City schools and how she would transfer the education she'd already received in Haiti to the city's public school system.

She ended up at Manhattan Comprehensive Night and Day High School — a transfer school designed to meet the needs of older immigrant students coming to the city for the first time. But she told POLITICO in an interview that she only found out about the school through her cousin.

There are roughly 4,200 city students in the same position: between the ages 14 and 21, not fluent in English and who often have to work to support themselves. Advocates say many are unaware they even have an option to attend public school in New York.

The New York Immigration Coalition Education Collaborative, which includes the groups Advocates for Children of New York and the Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project, is pushing the Department of Education to develop a \$6 million pilot program that would create classrooms citywide to cater to the needs of older, newcomer immigrant students.

“We’re really trying to target that group of students — the ones that ultimately never made it inside of the school where they actually enrolled,” Rita Rodriguez-Engberg, director of AFC’s Immigrant Students’ Rights Project, told POLITICO. “They may have made it past the enrollment point and were told, ‘Sorry, you’re too old’... those youth who came from their home country thinking they can enroll in school but ultimately didn’t is really what we’re trying to target with this effort.”

The pilot would serve approximately 600 students, to start.

Lovely, who asked to use only her first name, said she receives instruction in English but is often paired up with someone who speaks her language, Haitian Creole, and classes are taught “in a way that you understand.” The school also helps with job hunting, immigration services and health insurance.

“It would be great if they were to put schools like Manhattan Comprehensive in other boroughs for the kids that are coming after ... so they wouldn’t have to go through the hassle that [I] went through in order to be able to go to school,” she said.

There are five English Language Learner (ELL) transfer schools in New York City — four in Manhattan and one in the Bronx — that provide support for students to learn English either before they can access a curriculum or while they are learning in class. They also partner with community-based organizations and legal clinics to help students locate housing and public benefits. Some schools offer an evening program to accommodate working students.

But advocates say the programs are small and don’t have the same types of support for older and newcomer immigrants. And since most are in Manhattan, it poses a challenge for immigrant students in outer boroughs. ELLIS Preparatory Academy in the Bronx tends to fill up by late fall and has been over-capacity for many years.

And youth are often incorrectly told, prior to even trying to enroll, they cannot enter school because of their age, advocates said. When they try to enroll at Family Welcome Centers, they are sometimes directed to a GED program or aren’t informed about transfer schools.

Their needs center on language acquisition, interrupted education, responsibilities outside of class like a job and wraparound services such as tutoring, counseling and help accessing social services like housing.

“We see them as a really good avenue for us to put our pilot programs in those schools ... they do have some of the structural pieces that are gonna be important for us to make it the most successful,” Andrea Ortiz, the coalition’s education policy manager, said.

The groups said that if money is allocated toward the pilot, it could start this September, and they have worked with the DOE to identify some schools.

The education department said it is reviewing the pilot.

“We’re working to increase access to quality programs for our older and newly arrived English Language Learners, and we thank these organizations for their partnership on this important issue,” Danielle Filson, a DOE spokesperson, said in a statement. “We are currently reviewing the pilot program and will continue to focus on how we can expand ELL programs to more transfer students.”

During the first year, the pilot would start in four transfer schools — two in Brooklyn and two in Queens. The number of classrooms will depend on space in the school and principals’ individual decisions. In the second year, an additional two would be added in the Bronx and in the third year, each of the schools that started would get an additional year.

About \$1.6 million would be allocated for the first year and then \$2.2 million for each additional year. The advocates said they will conduct outreach during the summer.

The Migration Policy Institute’s National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy looked into the number of newly arrived immigrants, ages 14 to 21, who could potentially benefit from high school programs in the five boroughs.

Out of 21,500 young people who met the criteria, 17,300 were enrolled in school and 4,200 were not — 400 were 14 or 15 years old, with another 3,800 between ages of 16 to 21. The largest group of newly arrived, non-enrolled students lived in the Bronx, followed closely by Queens and Brooklyn.

“It’s very difficult to capture the number of students who could have enrolled in school and didn’t because it’s hard to capture who gets turned away,” Rodriguez-Engberg said. “Census data doesn’t always take into account who’s here, especially students who are undocumented and unaccompanied minors.”