



LEFT OUT

The struggle of newly arrived Haitian immigrant youth enrolling in New York City high schools through Family Welcome Centers

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project (Flanbwayan) is a youth membership-based organization serving newcomer and young adult Haitian immigrant students in New York City. Flanbwayan's mission is to transform the lives of Haitian newcomer youth through education and leadership development and to raise awareness of immigrant education issues both in the community and citywide. Using a multi-level approach of access to education, advocacy, organizing and cultural activities, Flanbwayan provides rigorous learning experiences where students acquire critical thinking, analytical and leadership skills that deepen community ties and cultural understanding. Flanbwayan assumes that in order for newcomer immigrant youth to grow and develop they need to have a safe space, equal access to resources and opportunities. Flanbwayan provides a safety net for Haitian youth who may possibly fall through the cracks of an overwhelming high school placement process as they enter the New York area, providing much needed services, including individual education assessments and appropriate school placements.

The Community Development Project (CDP) partnered with Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project to conduct this research. CDP provides legal, participatory research and policy support to strengthen the work of grassroots and community-based groups in New York City to dismantle racial, economic and social oppression. CDP's Research and Policy Initiative partners with and provides strategic support to grassroots community organizations to build the power of their organizing and advocacy work. We utilize a participatory action research model in which low-income and excluded communities are central to the design and development of research and policy.

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INTRODUCTION

The high school enrollment process in New York City can be a pivotal moment for a young person. Decisions are made that impact them in numerous ways, with lasting effects. The life of a young person is shaped significantly by their high school experience. There are many factors to consider, such as access to supports that enable them to stay in school and thrive, options that allow them to pursue their interests, a connection to a peer group, teachers and staff who speak their language, the ability to feel safe at school, and opportunities to build skills that inform their prospects for future educational attainment, employment and other goals.

Important themes related to New York City high schools are frequently in the media and in the public eye, ranging from school segregation to the reliance on standardized testing. But a major issue is often left out: the experiences of immigrant youth who arrive in New York City after middle school. These youth must enroll in high school through one of the city's Family Welcome Centers: a very different channel than the more deliberate, more informed and more supported process that many youth who already live in New York City can access during middle school.

Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project's years of work with recently immigrated Haitian youth have shown us that the high school enrollment process through Family Welcome Centers is frequently riddled with challenges and barriers that are extremely difficult for young people and their families to navigate. Haitian youth who have recently immigrated face unique challenges when seeking to enroll in New York City high schools. For these youth and their families, the New York City school system should represent great promise: the prospect of a public education that could equip young people with skills, tools and community to thrive in a new country. Instead, in addition to acclimating to a new city, facing language barriers, and adjusting after an immigration journey, they must navigate a high school enrollment process that is lacking in sufficient support, clarity and access.



Flanbwayan partnered with the Community Development Project (CDP) to conduct a participatory action research project to explore the experiences of young people who have enrolled in high school through Family Welcome Centers. We administered 166 surveys from April to June of 2018, conducted background research, and analyzed documents we received from the Department of Education in response to a Freedom of Information Law request.

The New York City education system is failing immigrant youth. The 2018ⁱ graduation rate was only 34.7% for current English Language Learners (ELLs),ⁱⁱ compared to an overall graduation rate of nearly 76%.¹ To address this alarming disparity, there is much the City must do. Our report focuses on high school enrollment, a critical piece of the puzzle. But there is also the need for improved programing, youth supports, curriculum and instruction to ensure that immigrant youth are provided with the education they deserve.

With this report, we sought to do something new and important by documenting the experiences of immigrant students as they navigate the high school enrollment process. Our research adds an important perspective that is often missing from the conversation and literature: the experience of being a young immigrant in New York City as a barrier to education. By sharing students' experiences and the findings of our research, we are seeking to not only improve the enrollment process but to highlight previously untold experiences. Our research shows that:

- Many youth were not asked about their interests or preferences during the school enrollment process, despite the fact that internal guidance documents from the Department of Education are explicit that family input and youth preferences and needs should be taken into account.**
- Family Welcome Centers do not provide young people the information they need to make informed choices about which schools to attend. In fact, at least half of those surveyed did not get a choice about what school to attend.**
- Youth are not placed in schools that can adequately support them as they work towards meeting their educational goals. Few feel that their school is a good fit for them or that they are making progress toward their goals.**
- Language access at Family Welcome Centers, in the form of both translation and interpretation, is lacking.**

Flanbwayan calls on the New York City Department of Education to make reforms that will allow new immigrant youth to engage meaningfully in their school selection process, and better position them to thrive in New York City schools. Youth should have access to meaningful information about school options, be presented with clearer materials in a language they understand, and have their needs and preferences considered in the placement process. Staff should be trained on cultural competency and best practices for working with newly arrived immigrant youth and their families. Family Welcome Centers should provide consistent language access services to all youth who need them. Ultimately, appropriate school matches should be made at the time of enrollment. The Department of Education should also create more and improved programs and educational opportunities to better support new immigrant youth and English Language Learners. The high school transfer process should be made more transparent to immigrant youth and their families so that they can better access it. Our research makes the case for the importance of these reforms, and the recommendations section of this report details the solutions that the Department of Education should pursue.

i. The 2018 four-year graduation rate is based on the cohort of students who started 9th grade in 2014-15.

ii. Note that the City has recently changed the terminology it uses from "English Language Learners" to "Multilingual Learners." Most sections of this report will use the term "English Language Learner" because we reference previous studies, reports and programs that use this term, and because it was the term in use at the time we began our research.

OVERVIEW OF THE HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT PROCESS FOR RECENTLY ARRIVED IMMIGRANT YOUTH

There have been many public and well warranted critiques of the regular high school admissions and enrollment process in New York City, which itself is fraught and inequitable. Despite attempts at reform, the system continues to be highly segregated, and meaningful choices between schools are limited for many low income students of color.² The reliance on standardized test scores in the admissions process has long been controversial, and Mayor de Blasio recently announced a proposal to change the admitting processes for some of New York’s elite high schools for which admissions decisions hinge on standardized tests.³ School segregation, issues of access, and school resourcing are long-standing problems that disproportionately impact low income youth of color. That said, while access continues to be inequitable, many youth who already reside in New York at the time of high school enrollment have extended opportunities to learn about, select and apply for high schools, frequently with the support of tailored materials and school staff. These students and their families can receive counseling and attend orientation sessions to find those schools that could best serve them, something that can be particularly important for English Language Learners (ELLs).

The process by which a newly arrived immigrant student is placed in a high school differs drastically from that of other students. Rather than deliberating about school options over time with the support of teachers, guidance counselors or others, newly arrived students must be placed by employees at one of the City’s fifteen Family Welcome Centers, formerly known as the Borough Enrollment Offices. This process is known as the “over the counter” enrollment process.

In order to be placed, students must bring a parent or guardian with them, along with numerous documents and proof of residency.ⁱⁱⁱ

Newly arrived youth are largely dependent on the staff at the Family Welcome Center for making the crucial decision about which school to attend. Many young people enter these centers without knowledge of the New York City public school system. Our research—detailed in the following pages—shows that many youth are not informed of their options or asked about their preferences, and ultimately have limited, if any, choice about their school placement. In our work over the years, Flanbwayan has seen young people channeled into inappropriate placements (for example, placed in a Spanish bilingual program despite the fact that they do not speak Spanish), and have also observed Family Welcome Center staff pressuring older youth to enroll in a GED program (now called a TASC program), despite the fact that these youth have the right to attend a Department of Education school until the end of the school year in which they turn 21. Exacerbating all these issues, language access services at the Family Welcome Centers is often extremely limited.

iii. The full list of requirements can be found in the New York City Department of Education Chancellor’s Regulation A-101: <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/a101-admissions-readmissions-transfers-english>

The challenges with this process do not end at the Family Welcome Center office. Flanbwayan has worked with young people that have been referred to a school by a Family Welcome Center only to be turned away at the school door because the school says they do not have space. In addition, there are young people who have enrolled in the school the Family Welcome Center office sent them to, only to discover that the school does not have appropriate programming or support. These youth, who have enrolled in a school that cannot support them, have extremely limited recourse and are unlikely to be able to change schools.

While existing research on the over the counter enrollment process is limited, a previous study demonstrated that the over the counter process serves some of the highest need students—such as special needs students, youth that have been incarcerated, homeless youth, and new immigrants—and that these young people were disproportionately assigned to schools that were “persistently low achieving” and to schools “subsequently targeted for closure or that are in the process of being phased out through the closure process.”⁴

In addition to the systemic issues at the Family Welcome Center offices, there are structural issues that limit the options for newly immigrated ELL students. These students have limited, if any, access to programs such as the Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs), which are evening programs designed for under-credited high school students who have daytime adult responsibilities, or to Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. A recent study found that ELL students appear to be underrepresented in the city’s high school level CTE programs, which have been shown to help youth, particularly those at risk of not completing high school, to stay engaged and build skills to advance their future careers.⁵

While the de Blasio administration and Department of Education have made recent commitments to improve school services for ELLs,⁶ more must be done to focus on and improve the process for newly arrived immigrants enrolling through the over the counter process. Newly arrived immigrant youth seeking to enroll in high school deserve competent, accessible, and supportive services from New York City. Instead, they are met with numerous issues—the barriers to meaningful access and information at the Family Welcome Center offices, the inappropriate school placements that result, the restricted resources and options available—that systemically disadvantage them.

English Language Learner/ Multilingual Learner Programs

New York City is highly linguistically diverse, and young people enter school with varied levels of English proficiency. The City recently adopted the term Multilingual Learners to describe these students, but because much of the existing material still uses the prior term English Language Learner, as do prior studies and reports, we will use that term here.

The New York City Department of Education sets out a definition of an “English Language Learner, or ELL, [as] a student whose home language is not English and needs support learning English.”⁷ The Department of Education assesses English proficiency through the New York State Identification Test for English Language Learners, and uses a scoring system to assign youth a position on a scale of proficiency that ranges from “Entering” (youth with minimal English) to “Commanding” (youth with English proficiency that would allow them to participate in an English-speaking class).⁸

The ELL population is further subdivided into “Newcomers” (those who have received 0 to 3 years of ELL service) “Developing ELLs” (who have received 4 to 6 years of ELL service) and “Long-term ELLs” (with 7 or more years of ELL service).⁹ For the 2016-17 school year, newcomer ELLs made up 61% of the entire ELL population.¹⁰ The Department of Education has an additional and overlapping category for ELL students with interrupted/inconsistent formal education (SIFE) defined as those “who have attended schools in the United States...for less than twelve months and who, upon initial enrollment in such schools, are two or more years below grade level in literacy in their home language and/or two or more years below grade level in mathematics due to inconsistent or interrupted schooling prior to arrival in the United States.”¹¹

More than 160,000 ELL students enrolled in New York City public schools during 2016-17, and more than a quarter of those were high school-aged.¹² Haitian Creole was in the top ten languages spoken by ELLs in the city in 2016-17, and was the 7th most common home language of Newcomer ELLs, and the 5th most common language of ELL students with interrupted or inconsistent formal education.¹³ These interruptions in schooling may happen for a range of reasons, including natural disasters, family tragedy, war, or poverty in the young person’s home country. Many young people who arrive in the U.S. with interrupted education from their own country face the added challenges of limited literacy in their home languages. Many recently immigrated youth need supports not only in language access but also social and emotional supports as they navigate a new life in the United States.



METHODOLOGY

Flanbwayan, with the support of the Community Development Project, used the following methods for this participatory research project.

Surveys:

Flanbwayan surveyed 166 recently arrived Haitian young people who had gone to Family Welcome Centers between 2014-2018 to enroll in high school. Surveys explored student experiences enrolling in high school through Family Welcome Centers, as well as their feelings about the fit of their schools. Surveys were designed by Flanbwayan organizers and youth members with the support of the Community Development Project. Youth were trained to administer the surveys in Haitian Creole and English. Surveys were collected anonymously at seven high schools throughout Brooklyn and Manhattan^{iv} and at the Flanbwayan office during youth membership meetings and events. Surveying took place from April to June of 2018.

Interviews for youth profiles:

Targeted interviews were conducted with young people who went through a Family Welcome Center to enroll in high school. These interviews inform the youth profiles throughout the report.

Literature review and background research:

CDP researchers conducted a literature review of reports, media coverage and other documentation related to high school enrollment processes, immigrant youth and the New York City Department of Education.

iv. Brooklyn International High School, Clara Barton High School, Emma Lazarus High School, High School for Service and Learning, International High School at Prospect Heights, Linden Learning Center, and the Academy of Hospitality and Tourism.

Freedom of Information Law Request:

In January 2018, CDP filed a Freedom of Information Law request to the New York City Department of Education requesting written materials pertaining to procedures at the Family Welcome Centers and the provision of translation and interpretation. At the time of report writing, responsive documents had been received for portions of the request, specifically written materials related to student placement policies at Family Welcome Centers and in general, as well as information about in-person interpretation and telephonic interpretation records. At the time of this writing the Department of Education has not provided requested de-identified records for students who enrolled in high school at a Family Welcome Center (including a request for data on school assignments, reason for enrollment via Family Welcome Centers, the countries students were most recently served by, and student home language, race and gender). The Department of Education has also not provided requested de-identified records from the ELL Parent Choice Update (ELPC) screen in their ATS system that relate to ELL programs, specifically data on parent selection of ELL programs, placement into programs, and transfer requests as they relate to these programs.

Research Limitations:

The discrete resources and capacity of Flanbwayan, a community-based organization, meant that we had to prioritize certain geographic areas of focus for our research. The research is focused in Brooklyn, where Flanbwayan is based and where there is a large Haitian community, as well as in Manhattan. We know this issue to extend beyond these regions, as well as to other immigrant communities.

In addition, from a decade of organizing experience, Flanbwayan knows that some young people who enroll through Family Welcome Centers are deterred from going to high school and channeled instead to GED programs (now called TASC programs) without making an informed decision about whether such a program is preferable for them. Sometimes, youth are told that the GED/TASC program is their only option. However, because our sample focused on youth who are in high school (and not in GED programs), youth who were pushed into GED/TASC programs are not captured in the research. Nonetheless, we call on the Department of Education to investigate these issues and ensure that Family Welcome Center staff do not discourage older immigrant youth from enrolling in high school.

Our research sample allows us to show a snapshot of youth experiences that makes clear the need for systemic improvements and resources that will better serve newly arrived immigrant youth seeking to enroll in high school. While our project focuses on Haitian youth, our recommendations extend to the need for reforms to better serve all immigrant young people.

Demographics of Research Sample

Our survey sample focused on young people born in Haiti (with two initial respondents who were born in the United States excluded from the analysis) who had enrolled in high school through a Family Welcome Center between 2014 to 2018. Virtually all survey respondents identified as African American or Black. 54% identified as female and 47% as male. Ages ranged from 15 to 21: with 61% of surveyed youth between 15-18 years old and 39% between 19-21 years old. Nearly all (93%) were currently in high school at the time of surveying.

Demographics of Survey Sample (166 Total Surveys) *		
Gender N = 157	Female	54%
	Male	47%
Race/Ethnicity N = 160	African American or Black	99%
	Latino/a or Hispanic	<1%
Age N = 158	15 - 18 years old	61%
	19 – 21 years old	39%
Country of birth N = 163	Haiti	98%
	United States	2%**
	Other	<1%
Went to Family Welcome Center to Enroll N = 168	Yes	99%
	No	1%**
Year respondent first went to the Family Welcome Center N = 165	Before 2014	2% **
	2014	5%
	2015	29%
	2016	29%
	2017	32%
	2018	4%
Education Status N = 155	Currently in high school	93%
	Graduated high school	2%
	Currently in a GED program	5%
	Completed GED program	<1%
Current Grade level N = 152	9th grade	16%
	10th grade	36%
	11th grade	27%
	12th grade	21%

*171 Total surveys were collected, with 5 excluded from analysis.

** These cases are excluded from the analysis, for a total of 5 excluded cases.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

These findings are based on 166 surveys of recently arrived Haitian youth collected between April and June of 2018 by trained youth volunteers from Flanbwayan. Documents received from the New York City Department of Education were also analyzed to inform the findings.

Finding 1: Many young people were not asked about their interests or preferences during the school enrollment process, despite the fact that internal guidance documents from the Department of Education are explicit that family input and youth preferences and need should be taken into account. Our analysis of documents received from the Department of Education shows that they have internal guidance for placing students that includes taking into account student interests, preferred programs and other needs. However, most young people were not asked about their interests and preferences.

- From our FOIL request we received a number of internal documents from the Department of Education which emphasize the importance of considering student preference. For example:
 - From guidance for placing students new to New York City schools: “Determine programs of interest, *seeking family input on important factors for placement such as...services the students may need...[and] student interests.*”¹⁴ [Emphasis added]
 - From protocol for Family Welcome Centers: “High school: Identify potential options, including zoned High School if applicable, *seeking family input on important factors of placement.*”¹⁵ [Emphasis added]
 - From guidance on peak enrollment periods and special populations: “If a family/student indicates or implies that the student is not proficient in English, place them in accordance with normal enrollment protocol...*For high school, work with them to find a high school that has programs with seat availability that may match their interests,* including international high schools and other Screened for Language Programs.”¹⁶ [Emphasis added]
- However, 31% of surveyed youth report that their enrollment counselor did not ask them about their interests, preferences or educational history before deciding on a school for placement. 40% of youth couldn't remember, and only 30% said they remembered the enrollment officer asking them about these things.

Youth Profile: Jean Guardy Cassamajor

Jean Guardy Cassamajor moved to the United States two years ago and is currently a senior in high school. "I would like to be an engineer. I want to graduate high school and go to college," Jean Guardy says.

Flanbwayan worked with Jean Guardy to exercise his right to transfer placements after he was originally assigned to a GED program by Family Welcome Center staff. "I don't know why that decision was made. I felt like I wasn't learning the right way in the program. I felt like if I changed programs I would be more successful," Jeans says.

Although the Family Welcome Center provided telephone translation services for his visit, Jean Guardy feels that "there should be someone there to help you in the language you are the most comfortable with. They shouldn't have the person on the phone. The person should be physically there. I did not get to choose. They made me think they were sending me to a great program, but that's not what happened. If I had stayed there, I don't think I would have succeeded." If he were in charge of designing enrollment services for immigrant youth, Jean would ensure that "people feel welcome as soon as they walk in. I would send them to the right program based on their needs."

Jean Guardy loves the new school that Flanbwayan helped him get. "I feel supported, I feel that the teachers care and [that] the school is preparing me for graduation. The teachers are very welcoming and patient; they take time to help you. They respect students and they encourage you to learn," he says. When asked if he thinks Family Welcome Center staff value students' preferences, Jean Guardy was clear: "I don't think they value student's preferences. In my case they chose for me. If I had a choice I would not have chosen a GED program over a High School." Had he not transferred out of the GED program, he thinks it would have "taken much longer to learn English." Jean Guardy remains positive despite his initial placement: "my overall experience as a new immigrant was not too bad because I was lucky that I was able to find an organization that helped me to go the right school."

Finding 2: Family Welcome Centers do not provide young people the information they need to make choices about which schools to attend. Our research shows that young people are not routinely provided with information that is crucial to their understanding of the New York City high school system or the types of schools and programs available to them. Without such information young people and their families cannot ask informed questions about their options, advocate for themselves, or make meaningful decisions.

- Only about half of surveyed youth report they were told about the different types of high schools in New York City (48%).
- Less than one in ten were told about the types of English Language Learner programs (8%).
- Only a quarter of surveyed youth could remember using the High School Directory to choose a school (25%), and, of those, more than half reported it was not in their home language.

Finding 3: Most youth did not have a choice in what school they attended. Our research shows that, at the end of the enrollment process, at least half of surveyed youth did not get a choice of what high school they attended.

- Half of surveyed students reported they did not get a choice about what school they ultimately attended (52%). 24% percent could not remember. Only 25% said affirmatively that they got a choice about what school they were sent to.

Finding 4: Family Welcome Center placements are often not a good fit. Some youth have to be reassigned to different schools. Many youth are not placed in schools where they can meet their educational goals. Our research shows that youth are not placed in schools that are a good fit for them or where they can advance their educational goals. Some youth have to be reassigned from their initial school placement, and many others stay at schools that are not serving their educational needs.

- Only a quarter of surveyed youth feel their school is a good fit for them (25%).
- Fewer than a quarter feel like they are making progress toward meeting their educational goals (22%).
- A third of surveyed youth report feeling unsafe at their school (32%).

Youth Profile: Vickencia Emmanuel

Vickencia Emmanuel moved to New York three years ago when she was 17 years old. In Haiti she was in the 11th grade at the time of her move, and she is currently a senior in high school in New York. “The subject I like most is math,” Vickencia says. “My dream is to finish school and to become a nurse.”

Her experience at Family Welcome Centers was negative from the onset. “The Family Welcome Center staff was not very welcoming,” she recalls. When she and her stepmother arrived at the Center, translation services were not available. “I think there should be someone at the Family Welcome Center to translate for families,” she says. “We didn’t understand anything they told us.”

After being matched with a school, she and her stepmother went to the school. “My stepmother immediately did not like the school,” she says. “When we first arrived, we saw a lot of police. We had to go through the metal detectors. They looked through our stuff before we entered.” Ultimately Vickencia and her stepmother were told they were lacking the documents they needed to enroll. When she returned with the documents, she was told that because “I was turning 18...I would not have time to graduate high school”. She was not accepted to the school.

Vickencia knows that having access to translation would have made a difference in the enrollment process: “[With language access] my stepmother would have better understood what they were telling her about the school. My stepmother would have been able to make a better choice for me.”

She is now enrolled at a different school where she feels supported and although she says her English is “not great yet, I think by the time I go to college it will be better.”

If she oversaw the Department of Education’s enrollment services for immigrant youth, Vickencia’s priority would be to “hire employees that speak multiple languages. I would let parents choose schools that they know are best for their children’s education.”

Finding 5: Language access at Family Welcome Centers is lacking.

Language access is a critical need for Haitian youth when interfacing with the Family Welcome Centers, but our survey respondents reported relying primarily on people they brought with them for interpretation help, rather than receiving interpretation from the Family Welcome Center. Many youth also received written materials only in English. Relatively few telephone interpretation calls were made for Haitian Creole, and the average call was less than 16 minutes: certainly not sufficient time to successfully navigate the high school choice process. Without spoken interpretation and written translation, youth and family access to information about their placement options is limited.

- Almost all respondents (96%) reported that they felt most comfortable using Haitian Creole when they first arrived at the Family Welcome Center.
- Half of the youth we surveyed relied on someone they brought with them to help them with interpretation (51%), with only about a quarter being helped by someone from the Family Welcome Center (27%).
- More than a third were given paperwork to fill out in English (39%), despite the fact that they felt most comfortable using Haitian Creole. Only 17% of respondents reported their paperwork was printed in their home language.
- Only one in ten students (11%) reported that they used the High School Directory in their home language. Fewer than 16 minutes were dedicated to Haitian Creole telephone interpretation calls from Family Welcome Centers, on average.
 - Data received through our FOIL request included the duration of interpretation call times. For the most recent year available (July 1, 2017-Feb. 28, 2018) the average interpretation call time for Haitian Creole was 15.7 minutes, and it is unclear if some of that time may include hold time or introductions made to the telephonic interpretation service. The fact that fewer than 16 minutes were allotted to interpretation—the time during which a young person would have meaningful ability to participate in their high school placement process—underscores the fact that insufficient time is spent deliberating with students and that language access is lacking.

Youth Profile: Woodlen Jean Baptiste

"I believe in hard work and studying hard. I don't believe in miracles. I believe I have to make efforts with myself to get what I want" says Woodlen Jean Baptiste. Woodlen is in the 12th grade and has been living in New York City for about a year. "When I was younger, I wanted to be a doctor, but now I want to study computer science," he says.

"The first time I went to the Family Welcome Center, I didn't really have an idea what it was. When we arrived, we didn't really know what to do or what to expect. The second time we went, [it] took a long time before someone came to help us. We did not speak English." That's how Woodlen describes his experience trying to enroll in high school through Family Welcome Centers.

Determined, Woodlen visited Family Welcome Centers "about four times-- if there was interpreter from the beginning I probably wouldn't need to [have gone] so many times. I went in May with my cousin. We were looking for a bilingual program. They said no, they wouldn't take me. During school vacation I went back to the Family Welcome Center alone. When I went they told me the same thing again."

It's unclear to Woodlen why he was not accepted to a school he visited on the recommendation of a Haitian nurse he met while getting immunized for school. "I think they were talking about my age. I didn't really have an idea why because they didn't really speak to me. They spoke to the person I was with." When he was finally matched to a school, he knew it "wasn't a good fit when I realized that I didn't have any math classes. I started to question 'would this school help me with what I want to become?' It didn't feel like it was the right school. I was almost done in Haiti; I was in my last year. The school made me feel like I was going backwards," he recalls.

Flanbwayan helped Woodlen transfer to a new school. "It's completely different. I have all different kinds of subjects. They tested me before placing me in classes. The teachers are very helpful. The teachers want to help us accomplish our dreams. I don't have a favorite subject; I think everything I'm learning will help me with the future," Woodlen says.

Woodlen also made sure that one of his friends wasn't stuck in a bad placement, "I had a friend who was [at a Family Welcome Center] with me. They told him he was too old, and they sent him to a GED program. He felt discouraged because he was 19 in July, turning 20 in September. I took him with me to my current school. He was enrolled. He should be graduating in January this year."

Woodlen knows that Family Welcome Center staff "are supposed to speak to the student first." When asked what he would do if he were in charge, he says "I would [hire] people who speak different languages to help new families. I would talk to the students. I would discuss different options. I wouldn't choose for them. When you choose for them, it shows students that they don't have a choice... Also, after choosing a school, I would explain to the student the benefits of the school. I would tell them what they will find there. I would work to make sure the student is comfortable with the school they will be attending."

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Flanbwayan calls on the Department of Education to take the following steps to better serve new immigrant youth enrolling in high school through Family Welcome Centers:

1. **Ensure young people have access to meaningful information to inform their school choices, and that they are asked about their preferences and needs prior to school placement, so that appropriate matches are made at the time of enrollment.** Our research and organizing shows that existing tools are not utilized, not provided in translated form, or otherwise insufficient to help new immigrant youth understand their options. Research also shows that staff do not ask youth about their preferences and needs, despite the Department of Education's own internal guidance to do so.
 - **Develop and utilize documents specifically designed for newcomer immigrant students entering high school that clearly explain the types of high schools, the placement process, and school options available to them.** The Department of Education's Office of Student Enrollment has committed to putting together more targeted guide sheets for youth. As the sheets are developed they should be translated and consistently utilized at all Family Welcome Centers to help young people and their family make meaningful choices.
 - **Have meaningful conversations with young people and their families about their preferences, needs and background.** These conversations, which the Department of Education's own guidance indicates should happen, should be routine and should include genuine opportunities for young people and their families to talk about their preferences and to deliberate about their options with Family Welcome Center staff.

2. **Create more and improved educational opportunities and support systems for immigrant youth and Multilingual Learners.**^v
 - **Reserve space at all New York City high schools** for students who enter or transfer mid-year.
 - **Increase language supports at transfer schools, Career and Technical Education programs, Young Adult Borough Centers, and Pathways to Graduation programs** where Multilingual Learners (MLLs) demonstrate a need for intervention that is more specialized than what a general English as a New Language (ENL) program can offer. These programs must be viable options for MLLs at least to the same degree that they are viable options for English proficient students.
 - **Create more specialized programs, such as night school, to meet the needs of the most vulnerable Multilingual Learners,** including students with interrupted/informal education (SIFE), and young adult students who may have work and/or child care obligations during the day.

v. Note that for our recommendations section we have used the new term Multilingual Learner (which the City has recently adopted to replace English Language Learner), as this section looks towards future policy changes.

- **Consider the geographic distribution of program options** so that MLLs in every district and borough can access a program that meets their needs.
- **Monitor the outcomes and benefits of each of the Department of Education's programs for MLLs** and use this data to improve programming.

3. Improve access to the high school transfer process for immigrant youth, and track placement outcomes.

- **The high school transfer process should be transparent to youth and their families during the enrollment process.** The enrollment process should include a document that lists the types of transfers possible and the resources to assist with the process.
- **Create tracking systems that capture the placement outcomes from Family Welcome Centers** including the basis for the placement determination, what placement determination was made and whether youth were reassigned to new schools and why.

4. Train Family Welcome Center staff on cultural competency and working with new immigrant youth. In 2018, in partnership with the Department of Education's Office of Student Enrollment and the New York Immigration Coalition's Education Collaborative, including Flanbwayan, designed and conducted a two-part training for city-wide Family Welcome Center staff. The purpose of the trainings was to help staff create a more welcoming climate for newcomer families and to help facilitate a cultural understanding of the families served in Family Welcome Centers. Flanbwayan recommends that the Department of Education:

- **Expand these trainings to include information on the rights of immigrant students and ensure that Family Welcome Center staff share this information with youth and their families.** While the Department of Education is committed to protecting the right of every student to attend public school, regardless of immigration status and national origin, and provides training to Family Welcome Center staff on the Department of Education's policies on supporting immigrant families, many youth and their families are not aware of these protections.

5. Provide consistent language access services at Family Welcome Centers and ensure that young people and their families know these services are available. Our research shows that interpretation and written translated materials are lacking at Family Welcome Centers. In our conversations with the Department of Education, they have indicated that written materials have been translated, but our research shows that they are inconsistently used. In order to ensure young people have meaningful access to information, the Department of Education Should:

- **Ensure that translated written materials are consistently available and visible at Family Welcome Centers in at least the top 10 most commonly spoken languages, and that young people and their families know about these materials.** While existing translated materials may exist and be utilized occasionally, our research shows they are not consistently provided and visible to youth and their families.
- **Consistently offer and utilize telephone interpretation services.** While these services exist and are sometimes utilized, more should be done to ensure that every young person who needs interpretation is aware that it exists.
- **Offer interpretation even if someone who is with the young person might be in the position to serve as an informal translator.** Attorneys, advocates and family members should not be asked to serve as interpreters. Family Welcome Center staff should be trained to offer interpretation to all young people who speak a language other than English, even if someone who is with the young person speaks both English and the primary language of the young person.
- **Prominently display materials that allow young people and their families to ask for interpretation or translation.** “I Speak” cards or posters that allow youth or family members to point to their language should be prominently displayed at multiple locations in the Family Welcome Centers, such as the front desk, offices and meeting areas.

Youth Profile: Tamika Taverne

Tamika Taverne is in the 11th grade at International High School. She moved to New York City from Haiti when she was 14 years old. "My favorite subjects are English and History. I want to go to college to study law," Tamika told us.

Her experience enrolling in school was mostly positive, thanks to the expertise and advocacy of Flanbwayan and her family. "I think it was easy to enroll in school, Tamika says. "Flanbwayan helped me. They already had an idea what would be a good fit for me," she says. Her father worked with Flanbwayan to get information on International High School, and she did her own research and "found out it was a diverse school. It has students from different countries."

Tamika notes that Family Welcome Center staff "did not ask me any questions when I got there...and there wasn't a translator." But, she says, "it was okay, because Flanbwayan already had an idea about the school, because Flanbwayan does that for many other Haitian families."

"I think it was the best fit for me," Tamika says of her placement at International High School. "I was new, and I didn't speak the language, my school helped me to learn English. They are patient with you. They help you in every step of the way. If you don't understand something you can always find someone who can translate or help you."

When asked about her overall experience at Family Welcome Centers, Tamika says staff were welcoming and patient. She notes that Family Welcome Center services are not particularly well known. "I think there should be information about the Family Welcome Center. It should be a place that people know more about because a lot of my friends don't know what the Family Welcome Center does. I think advertising it, telling people about it and anything that could help to get information to communities" could make a difference. She also recommends that the Family Welcome Centers "should have a diverse staff, so students and families can find someone to relate to."


CALL TO ACTION

New immigrant youth deserve a New York City public education system that serves them. They deserve access to information and options when enrolling in high school. They deserve support from people who can speak to them in their home language, and who ask them about their preferences and history. They deserve to go to schools that can meet their needs, make them feel safe, and help them achieve their goals. Our research shows that the process for newly immigrated youth enrolling in high school through Family Welcome Centers falls short in providing young people what they deserve. We are encouraged by recent steps by the administration to make improvements, and our research demonstrates the need for additional reforms. We call on the administration to work with immigrant-serving organizations in New York City and to implement our recommendations. This would move the New York City Department of Education towards being an institution that serves immigrant youth and allows them to thrive in the new city they call home.

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