

# RENEWING MAYORAL CONTROL IS CRITICAL FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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*New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio testifies at a state Senate hearing to urge passage of legislation to extend mayoral control. (Demetrius Freeman/Mayoral Photography Office)*

Imagine trying to learn about science in a language that's not your own, or not knowing how your child is doing in school simply because you don't speak English.

Imagine trying your hardest to do well as a student or a parent, but hitting brick walls around every corner – unsure of where to turn for help, or facing silence when you found someone to ask.

For decades, that was the experience of the thousands of English language learners in New York City's public schools. We know, because we stand up for millions of immigrant families across the city, giving them a greater voice in the halls of government.

We were among those who were once so frustrated by a school system that operated under a convoluted board model that was weakened by a lack of clear authority, rife with corruption and plagued by dysfunction.

But in recent years, the tide has started to turn for our English language learners and hundreds of thousands of other children in our public school system. And a major reason why is that in 2002, the state voted for the first time to allow the schools to report directly to one person, the mayor of New York City. That system is known as mayoral control.

And now all the progress that has been made hangs in the balance as the state Legislature decides whether to extend mayoral control for years to come.

To us, it's an obvious choice, as it is for some of our elected representatives, too: just two days ago, the state Assembly voted for a three-year extension. Now, it's up to the state Senate to do the same.

Why wouldn't they? Under mayoral control, the city has invested in innovative initiatives that make a real difference in our children's lives, like community schools and universal pre-K. Graduation rates are steadily rising, attendance has improved and test scores have gone up.

These facts alone should convince anyone.

But we recognize that mayoral control also puts in place the building blocks that allow teachers and staff to support students who need it the most.

Take, for example, the 140,000 English language learners across the school system today. We continue to push the city to improve education for these kids. But they are already benefiting from a philosophy we share with Mayor Bill de Blasio and Chancellor Carmen Fariña: Opportunity should never be limited by where you came from or what language you speak. Mayoral control has helped that philosophy become a reality in our schools.

It allows us to focus our energies – and advocacy – to work with one stakeholder who has the power to make changes across the board, instead of a byzantine and chaotic system.

Consider that in 2014, the first-ever standalone division entirely devoted to supporting English language learners was created.

This school year, the city opened 40 dual language programs and 10 transitional bilingual education programs, strengthening students' native language skills while building their social and academic English skills.

These programs have received the funding they need to build a classroom library of books in Spanish, or Chinese, or whatever the language of instruction may be. The teachers get the specialized professional development they need to do the best possible job teaching in two languages.

More schools offer free ESL classes for families so parents can help their kids with their homework and look for a job. Schools now have access to over-the-phone interpreters who can relay messages to parents in over 200 languages.

All of this happened because of mayoral control. And it's added up to real progress for our English language learners. More are taking AP and SAT exams, more are graduating and fewer are dropping out.

We still have a long way to go. But it's impossible to imagine that will happen in a city without mayoral control.

The only thing that's worked for our children and our families is a system where *one person* is held accountable for implementing one powerful and unified vision.

And for the immigrant families of New York City – Latino, Asian, African, European, Arab and so many more we represent – that is possible, and only possible, with mayoral control.

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