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**Testimony of Kim Sykes, Manager of Education Advocacy, New York Immigration Coalition
for the New NY Education Reform Commission**

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Good afternoon and thank you to the members of the Education Reform Commission for convening this hearing. I am pleased to have the opportunity to join you today to ensure that English language learners or ELLs and immigrant students are part of the scope of the Commission's work.

My name is Kim Sykes, and I'm the Manager of Education Advocacy at the New York Immigration Coalition. We are an umbrella policy and advocacy organization with nearly 200 members from New York State, and we aim to achieve a fairer and more just society that values the contributions of immigrants and extends opportunity to all. As part of this work, we convene a Collaborative of immigrant organizations that fights for quality education for immigrant and English language learner students. In preparing this testimony, we collaborated with Internationals Network for Public Schools, which fosters high quality education for recently arrived immigrants through a network of 14 International High Schools in NYC, providing professional and leadership development for schools and enhancing better policy for English language learners.

To support the Commission's work identifying real solutions to the challenges within New York State's current education system, I'd like to talk today about key issues impacting ELL and immigrant student achievement - the assessments used to evaluate their progress, programs developed to engage their parents, and the availability of qualified teachers for these students. I will also share frameworks that we ask the Commission to adopt in its interim report.

First, however, I'd like to give you some context regarding English language learners. Not all immigrant students are ELLs. ELLs may have been born in the U.S. or they may be recent immigrants themselves. However, most ELLs come from immigrant families and those families may be of mixed status, meaning they may include both documented and undocumented individuals. There are 227,000 ELLs in public and charter schools in New York State and more than 154,000 ELLs in New York City's public schools, which makes New York City the second largest ELL enrollment district in the nation. According to the New York State Education Department (SED), the achievement gap between ELL students and the overall student population is immense. ELLs' proficiency levels in core subjects, as measured by national and state assessments, are well below the proficiency levels of the total student population. 38.2% of ELLs statewide graduate after 4 years, almost 40 percentage points behind English proficient students, and compare with 74% for all students statewide. In New York City, only 7% of those ELLs graduating on time are ready for college and careers. The impact of ELLs being left behind is compounding; according to SED, the number of ELL students in New York State has increased 33% from 2005 to 2010.

However, we know that with the right support, English language learners overcome these obstacles and boost the system as a whole. ELLs who become proficient in English perform even better than their peers. In addition, they contribute valuable language skills and cultural competencies to our future workforce, which is an enormous asset in a global economy.

Performance based assessments, an instructional and assessment model that features a rigorous project-based assessment alternative to high-stakes testing, are more fair and accurate in measuring ELL performance. Performance based assessments allow students to demonstrate, in an individualized fashion, that they meet standards, and this type of assessment is well aligned with the deeper, more complex learning that the common core state standards require for college and career readiness. Performance based assessments are also a meaningful experience for youth. They save their projects and have a true sense of accomplishment about how far they've come and what they've mastered.

In order to graduate, students in performance based assessment schools do rigorous projects – an analytic literary essay, a social studies research paper, an original science experiment and a project showing an application of higher level mathematics. These projects are evaluated against set rubrics aligned with state standards and students present their projects to panels that include outside evaluators. In this way, performance based assessments differ from the one-size-fits-all approach of Regents assessments, which have a very heavy language load, penalize students who lack cultural knowledge, and often require students to endure 9 hour testing days.

Another advantage of this system is that performance assessment is embedded in classroom instruction. Teachers focus on designing projects that progressively build each student's capacity to successfully complete projects. Teachers also spend time analyzing student work products in order to give feedback to students and to design their next set of classroom projects and activities. In this way, tightly integrating assessments with instruction builds greater capacity among all teachers to assess ELLs in a fair and accurate manner. This system also sets up a dynamic where students are held to rigorous standards, and they receive the instructional support necessary to meet these standards. In addition, since these graduation-level projects and similar, smaller projects preparing students for these final assessments, become the core of the instructional program, "teaching to the assessment" fosters teachers capacity to focus on the mastery of content, independent problem solving, research skills, and builds students' capacity to think critically.

Most significantly, performance based assessments have proven dramatically effective at increasing ELL achievement, as well as that of immigrant students. The graduation rate for ELLs in Performance Assessment Standards Consortium schools is 69.5% compared with 39.7% for ELLs in NYC high schools. Graduation rates for Hispanic and Asian students are also more than 10 points higher and for Black students the rate is 6 points higher. Furthermore, a data analysis was conducted comparing students in 9 NYC Internationals Network schools with graduating classes, all of whom were required to pass the ELA Regents exam, and some of whom met the remaining graduation requirements through performance based assessments and some of whom, alternatively, were required to pass 5 Regents exams. The analysis revealed that 20% more students total at just the 3 Internationals schools who graduate students through portfolio-based performance assessments passed the ELA Regents exams than did students in the 6 International schools that are required to pass 5 Regents in order to graduate. These data powerfully illustrate the value of performance based assessments in increasing student achievement. Given these results, the opportunity to graduate students through performance based assessments should be expanded so that more ELL students have the opportunity to benefit.

If we want to boost student achievement in New York, we also need to look beyond students at their families and facilitating their connections to the wider community. The New York Immigration Coalition has partnered with CBOs, schools, consulates and the New York City Council to establish Family Resource Centers, or FRCs, in New York City schools. The NYIC, in partnership with our local CBOs, has worked to establish FRC anchor programming –described below – in Brooklyn, Staten Island and Manhattan schools. While we have conducted similar programming in Queens and the Bronx, specific school site selection will be made in the near future. Family Resource Centers offer one-stop-shopping for immigrant parents on school-related and other issues and foster strong family, school and community partnerships to address the needs of immigrant families. FRCs give parents a trusted place to go for information, support, as well as connection to other support services in the community that they may need. FRCs are also a resource on immigrant issues for schools citywide, city agencies, elected officials and other institutions that serve immigrant communities.

Due to the NYIC's Education Collaborative's advocacy, the Department of Education and NYPD School Safety Division now officially accept Consular IDs and passports to enter school buildings. FRC teams and partners help parents obtain passports and consular IDs, which are a valid forms of identification to which even undocumented parents have access. This is critical because these forms of identification facilitate physical access to schools. They are also essential to accessing financial institutions to save for college and to file the taxes necessary for FAFSA forms, and to interacting with public safety officials. To date, more than 10,000 of the most isolated and hardest to reach immigrant community members and families have come through 8 schools' doors from 619 schools citywide and in the tri-state area to obtain passports and Consular IDs. More than 6,500 documents have been issued. And all this is in partnership with just one Consulate – Mexican Consulate. The Consulates of Guatemala, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic will also be working with us.

Through FRCs, we will also lead workshops for immigrant parents to help them understand the college application process and begin to help their children prepare for college. The workshops are based on an immigrant parents' guide to college that we developed after conducting focus groups to surface immigrant parents' questions. Written at a 5th grade level, and in the process of being translated into 9^[4] languages, the guide reaches the hardest-to-reach and most at-risk families and represents a multi-pronged partnership between the NYIC, City University of New York, the Department of Education (DOE), Citibank, and several ethnic papers. Thus, not only do FRCs provide essential information for parents about college, they also are poised to catalyze the creation of a college-going culture within immigrant communities, giving parents a powerful reason to ensure that their children receive a quality education and complete high school.

FRCs are also a resource for those institutions/agencies serving immigrants on the front line. For example, the NYIC and partner CBOs are working closely with NYPD to inform Precincts, School Safety Agents and police officers working with youth of the new school access policy and other crucial policies for immigrants such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, Language Access, Executive Order 41 etc. To date, we have worked with close to 1600 School Safety Agents citywide in just two days of training and have also worked with multiple precincts. FRCs also serve as base for working with school staff borough-wide on certain issues. For example, our Staten Island FRC served as the point of coordination to brief all parent coordinators in Staten Island schools on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, and the same is in the works for other boroughs.

^[4] These languages include: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, English, French, Haitian Creole, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Urdu – the same languages the DOE covers in their Language Access policy (A663).

Family Resource Centers demonstrate that parents who have traditionally been amongst the hardest to reach will turn out in droves when the right constellation of trusted partners who understand their needs are at the table. Immigrant families outside of New York City deserve the support and opportunities offered by Family Resource Centers as well, and the state should develop a strategy to expand wrap-around resource centers to immigrant families across the state that are hubs for information and programming.

Finally, no English language learner can succeed without access to teachers who understand their needs and have the necessary training to ensure that students not only become proficient in English, but also master new content at the same time. The number of schools and districts throughout the state that educate ELLs is increasing due to the increasing number of ELLs even in districts that a decade or so ago, did not serve this population of students. Both pre-service and in-service teacher professional development must prepare teachers to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse students. The state should also consider creating additional ELL credentialing to provide extensions on existing certifications for teachers who are not ESL and/or bilingually certified and new initiatives to incentivize teachers to gain such credentialing.

As the new teacher evaluation systems are implemented in districts throughout the state, it is important to ensure that the systems do not inadvertently penalize teachers who serve ELLs. Such a disincentive could be created, for example, if student assessments are not fair and accurate and thus ELL students' progress is not fully reflected in the assessments used to evaluate teachers. The danger in such a system is that it could decrease the number of teachers serving ELL students at a time when the demand for teachers is increasing and expectations for student performance are rising. As the teacher evaluation system is developed, measures must be developed that take into account that ELL performance on standardized tests won't reflect their growth in the same way as English proficient students.

I'd like to conclude by thanking the Commission for your time and consideration. The NYIC looks forward to working with you as you develop your preliminary recommendations and to continuing the conversation.

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