

EDUCATION'S WORTH FIGHTING FOR

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Body

Battle lines are drawn.

On one side are the state's education authorities and their forfeiture of their mission to teach every child. On the other side are advocates, teachers, immigrant parents and community leaders outraged by the officials' irresponsibility. It is a fight worth having.

At the heart of the conflict is the failure of the city's school system to provide the resources to educate the 50% of its students who come from immigrant families.

And the state officials' adoption of tougher graduation standards that, absurdly, do not differentiate between a native speaker and a kid with a couple of years of English instruction.

Not surprisingly, in 2000, the first year the Regents' English exam became a graduation requisite for every high school senior in the city, the dropout rate for immigrant students went through the roof.

"New standards were supposed to be a way to improve education for all students," said Margie McHugh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, "not a way to rob thousands of children of a basic high school education."

But according to a report issued by the city's Board of Education last month, the number of English Language Learner dropouts was larger than the number who graduated.

"In the city's class of 2000, the ELL dropout rate was 30.6%," said Margie Feinberg, a Board of Education press officer.

Outrageous.

Yet the Board of Regents and state Education Commissioner Richard Mills held their monthly meeting last week without as much as a mention of this crisis.

"If they are looking for a confrontation, they will get it," said Councilman Guillermo Linares (D-Washington Heights). "We are not going to let a massive desertion of immigrant students happen."

Firsthand knowledge

Linares, who was born in the Dominican Republic and came to New York at 15, understands better than most what these students go through. He knows by experience what it means to move to another country, with a different culture and a strange language. And to enroll in school under such adverse conditions only to be told that you are not capable of making it.

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"As it happens to many Latino children today, a counselor advised me to forget about graduating from high school," Linares remembered. " 'You'll never make it. Go for a GED,' he told me."

But the Dominican immigrant proved the counselor wrong. He grew up to become the first Dominican-born elected official in New York, and an effective advocate for his people and the city. "That kind of advice is inadmissible," Linares said.

He is not the only one determined to give these children the opportunity to have a future.

A united front

The New York Immigration Coalition, an umbrella organization for more than 200 groups; Alianza Dominicana, the city's largest Dominican organization, and the South Asian Youth Action, a Queens-based group that works with public school students, have brought a suit against the state **Education** Department, the Board of **Education** and the Regents.

"We are demanding that more resources are made available for ESL and bilingual classes," said Sandra del Valle, a Puerto Rican Legal Defense and **Education** Fund attorney who is in charge of the case. "And also for ELL students to be given a test that makes sense for them."

Not much to ask.

"As a member of the council's **education** committee, I am willing to propose a resolution asking for public hearings," Linares said. "And to take this issue to the federal level, if necessary. The rights of these students are being violated."

Battle lines are drawn, and it is a **fight** that is **worth** having. At stake is the future of thousands of children.

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