

3 Delayed Graduation

Imagine the anxiety a seventeen-year-old student feels when s/he hears it's necessary to repeat four years of high school. Many of us who were close to graduating in our home countries are placed in 9th grade because of our English level, or because some of the courses on our transcripts will not earn us credit towards graduation in DC.

Since many of our families moved to the States with the sole intention of providing us with better educational opportunities, we're eager to go to college. We want to receive the quality education that will make us eligible to go to prestigious colleges, but we're discouraged when we hear that our credits haven't transferred to DCPS. Additionally, those of us from low-income families feel that, at a certain age, we should either be attending college or contributing financially to our household. We should be able to receive a quality education and have our economic needs met.

4 School Meals

Some of us hold religious beliefs that require fasting on certain days, or forbid eating meat and dairy products. At the school cafeteria, we can usually only eat salad and French fries - because even the standard pizza would require us to ignore our spiritual practices. When we try to raise awareness to adults in our schools, we are often told "just pick the chicken out" or "scrape the cheese off."

When students first come to the United States, we may have some trouble pronouncing the names of certain unfamiliar foods. Furthermore, many of us don't know what's in these foods and if they follow our dietary practices.

5 No ELL Curriculum

DCPS currently lacks a standard curriculum for all ELL educators to follow. This is especially troubling for new teachers who are expected to teach ELL students English and help us excel on standardized tests. It also makes it very difficult for new teachers within DCPS to understand the quality of education their students should be receiving.

Additional Issues Affecting ELL Students and Educators

Some ELL students have poor attendance records because, in addition to attending school, we must also work to help support our families. As we re-envision education, we must also re-envision the current school schedule to accommodate the realities of poor and low-income families.

Many ELL students are subjects of hate crimes and gang violence. Furthermore, we lack access to restorative justice programs that would help us deal with conflict more constructively.

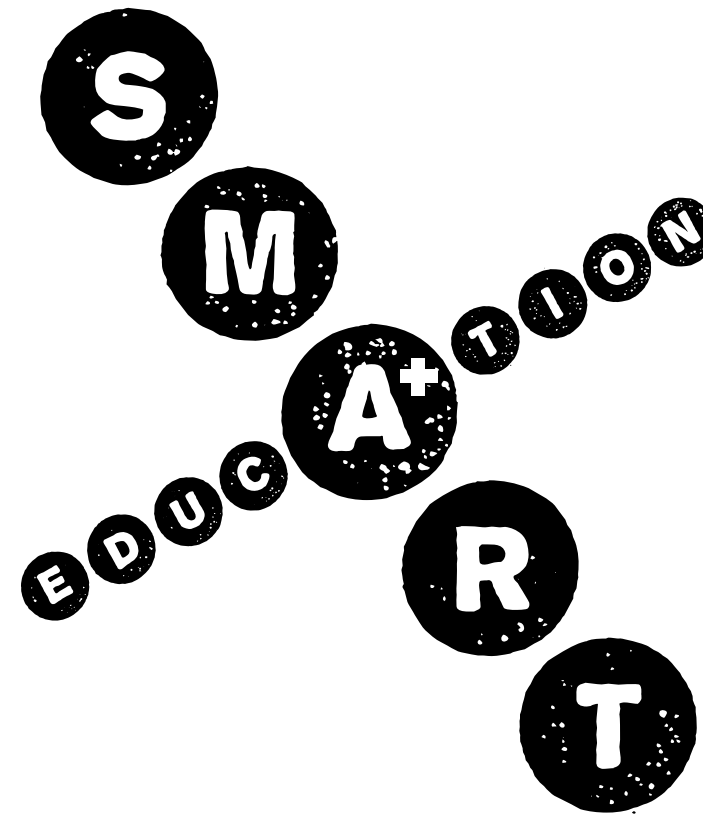
Finally, ELL students are currently being pushed out of school and fast-tracked through graduation so low-performing schools can meet the four-year graduation requirement.



For more information, contact:

SMART
a project of Many Languages One Voice
3166 Mount Pleasant St. NW
Washington, DC 20010

p: 202.621.0001
e: leadstudentorganizer@mlovdc.org
carol@mlovdc.org
w: www.mlovdc.org



Student-Developed Solutions for English Language Learners in DC Public Schools

SMART (Student Multiethnic Action Research Team) is a youth-led organizing group made up of students and educators, working to achieve quality education for all English Language Learner (ELL) students in DC public high schools. SMART is supported by Many Languages One Voice.

After a year-long process of sharing, discussing, and analyzing issues faced by ELL students and educators, we researched a variety of possible solutions that DCPS can take to better support the learning processes of newcomer students.

The following is a compilation of the most important issues faced by ELL students and educators across DCPS, as well as suggested action steps at the school level.

DISTRICT-LEVEL SOLUTIONS

1 Lack of Multiculturalism

Many ELL students and our families are new to the United States. Not only do we have to get accustomed to the English language, dominant culture, and food, but also to the American education system! For both students and parents, it can be very scary, confusing, and alienating not having adults who know our language, or schools which celebrate our culture.

As students, we might not trust school staff enough to report a serious case of bullying. Our parents also face serious barriers in participating in our education.

2 Limited Counselors

Not only do ELL students speak many different languages, but we also have special academic needs. We do not expect counselors to speak all different languages, but we do want all counselors who work with us to be properly trained in using phone interpretation and maintain relationships with the Office of Bilingual Education.

We already have many great ELL counselors, but they are swamped with work! Not only do they have to address the issues of all the ELL students, they also have to act as liaisons for family members who speak English as an Additional Language who want to be involved in their children's education.



DISTRICT LEVEL SOLUTIONS

1 Multicultural School Environments

ELL SUPPORT GROUPS

Provide financial support for schools with high populations of ELL students to start an “ELL Support Group.” ELL Support Groups are school-based groups meant to support schools with creating a safe learning environment for ELL families. ELL Support Groups meet once a month and are made up of 2 teachers, 2 ELL students, 2 parents who speak English as an Additional Language, and 2 community representatives. They are responsible for organizing an annual ELL orientation to the school, mediating and evaluating school-based issues with interpretation and translation services, and coordinating festive multicultural events!

LANGUAGE ACCESS COORDINATORS

Require Language Access Coordinators in schools with a high population of ELL students. Currently there is only one Language Access Coordinator for all of DCPS, which means that when one school wants a single document interpreted, the school must go through the Office of Bilingual Education. If schools with high numbers of ELL students had their own Language Access Coordinator (even an itinerant one), this person could maintain direct contact with hired translators, the registrars, attendance, and nursing office as well as handle language access complaints on a school level.

2 ELL Counselors

MORE COUNSELORS

DCPS should significantly reduce the bilingual counselor to student ratio to 1:150 in a fully-resourced school, and make the ratio even smaller in school with a higher percentage of high-need students. Bilingual counselors have to serve both ELL students and their families, often acting as mediators between families with limited English proficiency and the entire school. Lowering the bilingual counselor-to-student ratio allows counselors to have more one-on-one meetings, developing meaningful relationships with families and students.

LANGUAGE LINE

The Office of Bilingual Education should train all counselors on how to use the Language Line, a service that provides over-the-phone interpretation. Some schools do not have enough ELL students to secure a bilingual counselor, and counselors who are not aware of, or trained on how to use, the Language Line have a difficult time talking to us. Sometimes, communication is almost impossible without it.

3 Opportunities to Earn Graduation Credits

STUDENT EVALUATIONS

ELL students should have access to consistent and realistic evaluations. For many ELL students, only their high school transcripts are evaluated. However, many students have taken high school-level courses in middle school in their native countries. We should receive credit for certain courses required by DCPS, regardless of where or when we completed these classes.

OPTION TO PETITION THE OFFICE OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

If a student feels s/he has been placed in the wrong grade level, s/he should be able to petition the Office of Bilingual Education for a reevaluation of his/her transcripts and should be able to retake the English placement test. Students should be allowed to do this with the support of a teacher and with class work that demonstrates the student’s competency in the disputed subject area.

ADDITIONAL ENRICHMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Provide more enrichment courses for ELL students during summer school and/or give ELL students priority when trying to fill in “empty seats” during summer school.

4 Vegan Lunch Options

HEALTHY OPTIONS

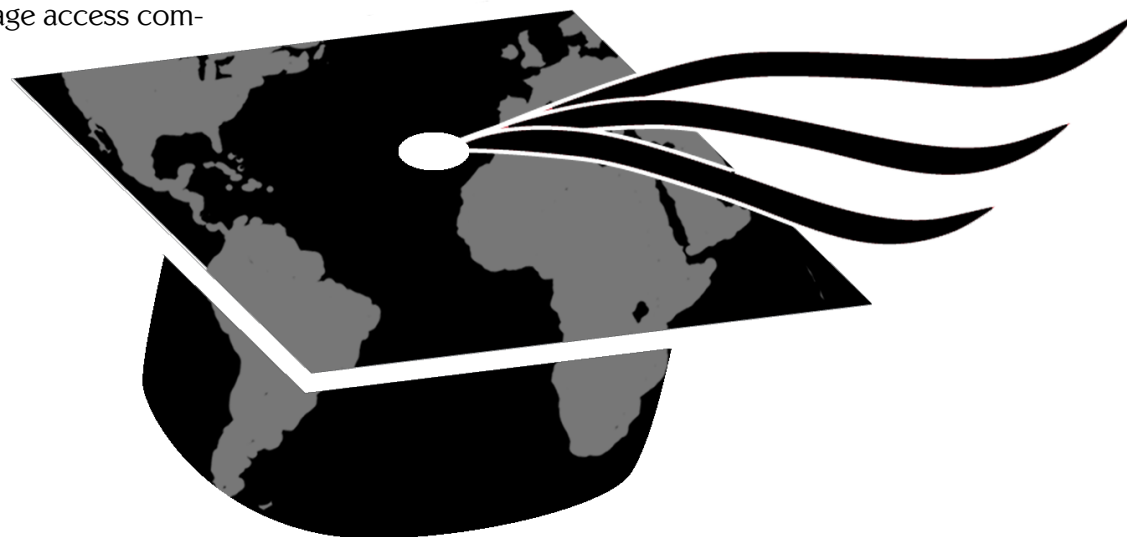
Students should have access to healthy vegan options every day of the week! Salad is not enough. Working with programs such as the “DC Farm to School Network” would provide DCPS an alternative to working with companies with limited access to fresh, local vegetables.

NUMBERED LUNCH MENUS

Additionally, school lunches should come with menus. If each lunch option was identified with a number, students can pronounce “3,” “4,” and “5” more easily than “macaroni and cheese,” “baked potatoes,” and “cheese pizza.”

5 A District-wide ELL Curriculum

Chancellor Kaya Henderson should work with the Office of Bilingual Education and ELL educators currently teaching in DCPS to determine the best ELL high school curriculum options DCPS can adopt.



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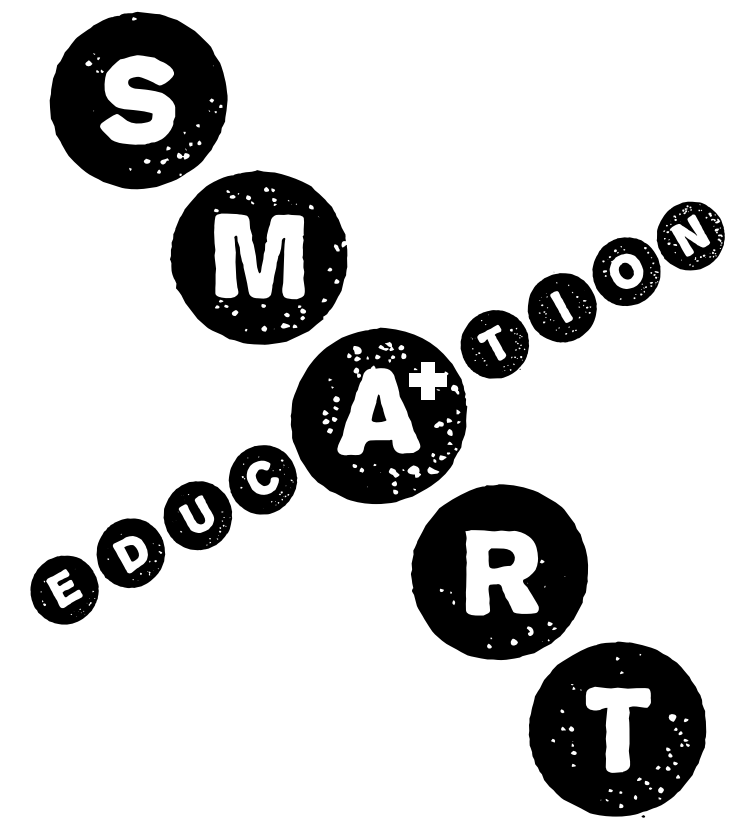
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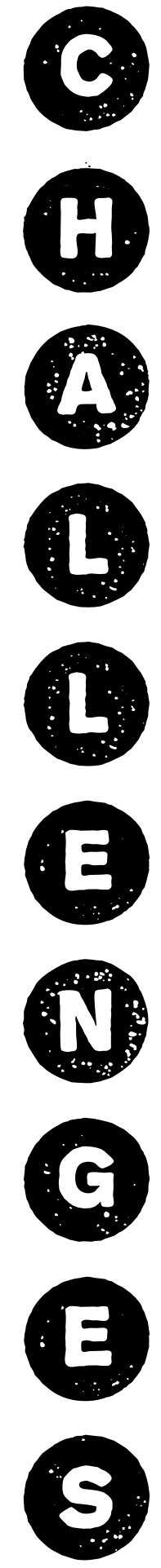
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TRAIN STAFF TO USE LANGUAGE LINE

Principals should train all their staff to use the Language Line. ELL students don't only interact with teachers and staff from the ELL department, we interact with the whole school; it's important for the whole school to know how to interact with us. Look to the Office of Bilingual Education and Many Languages One Voice as resources.

Students agree that it is important to practice our English with native speakers, but NOT when we are trying to communicate important problems, barriers, or questions - that is a time for us to receive your services just like all other students. So please - when a student comes in to ask you to review a transcript, do not force him or her to communicate in English just to practice the language. Use the Language Line.

MORE BILINGUAL STAFF

Principals should hire more bilingual staff to fill positions outside of the ELL department. ELL families interact with staff at the main office, deans, counselors, etc. It is often the case that a few bilingual teachers or counselors are given the informal duty of acting as liaisons for all limited-English families. Hiring more bilingual staff will assure our schools are prepared to interact with limited-English proficient families, and allows ELL students to build relationships with adults they can identify with.

SIGNS IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

DCPS's Biannual Language Access Plan requires schools included to have visible signs in different languages, informing community members they have the right to interpretation and translation services. In many schools, these signs are hidden behind plants, desks, and other posters where community members are not likely to see them. These signs must be present so people may choose whether they want interpretation services. It is not up to staff members to assume what the needs of incoming community members are.

2 ELL Counselors

USE LANGUAGE LINE

All counselors should be trained in using the Language Line. The Language Line is a phone interpretation service provided to all schools by DCPS. Counselors should also be trained on how to work with phone interpreters.

COUNSELORS FOCUSED ON ELLS

Principals should help ELL counselors limit their work load by assigning them to help only limited English proficient students and families. If a school's ELL population is large enough, instead of utilizing the ELL counselor's bilingual skills to coordinate with the registrars and attendance office, principals should hire bilingual staff to fill positions outside the ELL department.

SPLIT UP COUNSELORS' CASELOADS

No counselor should be assigned to serve the entire senior class. Seniors are an especially time-consuming group to serve and when ELL counselors are assigned the entire senior class, it leaves very little time for them to serve limited-English proficient families. Instead, every counselor should be assigned a percentage of the senior class.

3 Opportunities to Earn Graduation Credits

Teachers, if your ELL student communicates to you that his/her class work is too easy, you should assign your student more advanced extra credit work. If you see that this student is capable of doing advanced work, offer to write a letter of support or accompany them to the Office of Bilingual Education so they can be placed in a higher level class. Make sure you or your student keeps his/her extra credit assignments as proof of his/her competency in your subject area.

4 A District-wide ELL Curriculum

Principals and educators alike should make their need for an ELL high school curriculum heard to the Office of Bilingual Education.

If you would like to meet with educators and counselors across DCPS to discuss the need for an ELL curriculum and other issues in "SMART Education for DCPS' ELL Students," contact the Lead Education Organizer at Many Languages One Voice via email (carol@mlovdc.org) or call us at 202.621.0001.

