

May 2023

Met With Open Arms: An Examination of the Teachers & Programs Available to English Language Learners in Schools

Summary

Following the arrival of families seeking asylum in New York City, Mayor Eric Adams announced Project Open Arms—an inter-agency effort that included academic support for new students, many of whom are likely to be classified as English Language Learners (ELLs). In October 2022, the Department of Education (DOE) announced it would distribute additional funds to schools that have received six or more students who lived in temporary housing and were first-time entrants to the school system. By April 2023, the city had allocated roughly \$26.7 million through this initiative. The DOE directed schools to use the funds—known as Project Open Arms allocations—to support new students, although the DOE has prohibited schools from using the funds to hire full-time staff.

Advocates and elected officials have called on the DOE to assist newly arriving students with English language support and bilingual instruction. To examine the extent of existing support, IBO used DOE staffing data to determine the prevalence of bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in schools that received Project Open Arms allocations and schools that did not. To provide context, IBO also examined the types of language acquisition programs offered across the public schools during the 2021-2022 school year.

- Citywide, IBO identified 1,873 bilingual teachers and another 3,606 ESL teachers across the 1,594 traditional public schools serving Kindergarten through 12th grade as of October 31, 2022 (Districts 1-32, 75, and 79). Because many asylum-seeking families are reported to have come from Spanish-speaking countries, IBO examined the number of Spanish bilingual teachers. Of the 1,873 bilingual teachers, 1,640 were teaching in Spanish.
- In Districts 1 through 32, just under half of schools that have received Project Open Arms allocations had at least one bilingual teacher (48 percent, or 287 schools) of any language. This includes schools that also may have ESL teachers. Conversely, about 22 percent of schools that did not receive an allocation had at least one bilingual teacher.
- Roughly 49 percent of all schools that have received allocations had ESL teachers only, with no bilingual teachers.
- About 4 percent of schools that have received allocations had neither bilingual nor ESL teachers. In comparison, 15 percent of schools without allocations had no such teachers.
- The vast majority of ELLs during the 2021-2022 school year received language instruction through English as a New Language programs, which offer less instruction in students' home languages than the DOE's other language acquisition programs.

Schools with newly arriving students may also have received additional funds through the Fair Student Funding formula. The DOE issues “midyear adjustments” to school budgets in response to changes in enrollment from projections the previous spring. Unlike Project Open Arms allocations, these funds could be used to hire additional bilingual or ESL teachers, if principals so chose.

Support for English Language Learners

Over the last year, tens of thousands of individuals and families have arrived in New York City, seeking asylum. While the city does not track the immigration status of individuals enrolled in public schools, news coverage and city-established Asylum Seeker Resource Navigation sites indicate many asylum seekers are Spanish-speaking.¹

To support English language instruction for children from these families, advocates and elected officials have called for increases to school budgets and an expansion of school-based bilingual programs. Bilingual programs are often seen as the preferred placement for ELLs as research shows that the inclusion of home languages provides cognitive, social-emotional, and academic benefits to students learning English.² Two out of the three programs that the DOE offers to support English language acquisition—Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual Education—are considered bilingual, while the third—English as a New Language (ENL)—is not. (See the Glossary [here](#).)

In Dual Language programs, students learn in their home language and English with the goal of content mastery in each. Similarly, Transitional Bilingual Education programs provide instruction in home languages and in English, while also aiming to gradually transition students to English-only instruction. As with English as a Second Language (ESL) programs elsewhere, the DOE’s ENL programs—often called ENL Only—provide English instruction as a stand-alone class or as push-in support to students from a range of language backgrounds.³ Teachers providing ENL Only instruction may provide additional resources in students’ home languages, but most of the instruction occurs in English. While the DOE offers families these three options, student enrollment ultimately depends both on family preferences and the availability of program seats.

Distribution of Project Open Arms Allocations

In September 2022, the city’s Department of Education announced Project Open Arms to provide support for newly arriving students. On October 31, the DOE issued a memorandum to distribute additional funds to schools that had enrolled six or more students living in temporary housing who were also first-time entrants since that July.⁴ The memorandum allocated \$2,000 per identified student and directed schools to use funds for “support for multilingual learners.”⁵ At a state budget hearing on February 8, 2023, the DOE estimated that there were roughly 13,000 newly arriving students.⁶

IBO used school budget data to identify schools that have received Project Open Arms funding allocations as of April 3, 2023, the most recent data available. IBO receives monthly snapshots of school budget allocations for schools in Districts 1 through 32. Therefore, these data exclude schools in Districts 75 and 79. IBO’s analysis shows that the number of schools that have received such funds has grown each month since DOE’s initial announcement that 369 schools would receive allocations.

IBO found that the DOE has distributed roughly \$26.7 million in Project Open Arms allocations across 600 traditional public schools serving Kindergarten through 12th grade in Districts 1 through 32. Based on these allocations, IBO estimates that there are at least 13,344 children that meet the Project Open Arms criteria in traditional public schools as of April 3. Principals may use these allocations to pay for additional resources, including extra tutoring hours, supplies, consultant work, instructional curriculum, and staff development, but principals may not use the funds to hire new staff, likely because these are one-time allocations, and the DOE does not want principals to hire for a new position that they can’t then fund the next year.⁷

As of April, individual schools had received between \$12,000 and \$710,300 of Project Open Arms allocations. On average, schools received \$44,500 for an estimated 22 students. The minimum number of students required by the memorandum to qualify for funds was six students. Using school-level allocation amounts, IBO estimates that the maximum number of students at any school that has received allocations was roughly 355 students.

It is important to note that these allocations were intended to be in addition to funding provided to schools through

By April 3 of 2023, DOE Had Distributed Over \$26 Million in Project Open Arms Allocations			
Month— Cumulative To Date	Schools That Have Received Allocations	Allocations Distributed, <i>dollars in millions</i>	Estimated Count of Students Based on Allocations
December	289	\$8.2	4,099
January	399	12.4	6,180
February	479	15.6	7,783
March	546	20.1	10,065
April	600	26.7	13,344
SOURCE: IBO analysis of DOE School Leadership Team budget data. NOTES: Analysis includes traditional New York City public schools serving Kindergarten through 12th grade in Districts 1-32. District 75 (citywide special education schools), District 79 alternative high schools and programs, and charter schools are excluded. <i>New York City Independent Budget Office</i>			

On Average, Schools Receiving Allocations Enrolled 22 Newly Arriving Students								
Number of Schools	Estimated Students				Allocations			
	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum
600	22	15	6	355	\$44,500	\$30,000	\$12,000	\$710,300
SOURCE: IBO analysis of DOE School Leadership Team budget data. NOTES: Analysis includes traditional New York City public schools serving Kindergarten through 12th grade in Districts 1-32. District 75 (citywide special education schools), District 79 alternative high schools and programs, and charter schools are excluded.								
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the [Fair Student Funding](#) (FSF). FSF distributes funds to schools based on enrollment through a formula that considers the grade level of students served and provides additional funding for specific student characteristics, such as students identified as ELLs. Typically, in January or February of each school year, “mid-adjustments” are made to schools’ FSF allocations to account for differences between schools’ projected enrollment and their audited enrollment as of the end of October. Unlike Project Open Arms allocations, FSF funds are discretionary. Principals may use those funds—which IBO [estimates](#) would average about \$6,240 per pupil for ELL students—to hire additional staff, including bilingual and ESL teachers. On February 8, the DOE stated that an additional \$80 million had been distributed in per pupil funding adjustments to schools that have received new arrivals, in addition to the Project Open Arms allocations.⁸ For next year, the DOE intends to add a weight for students in temporary housing and a weight for schools serving high concentrations of high-needs students, so additional funding may be available.

Prevalence of Bilingual or ESL Teachers

IBO also examined the general capacity of schools to provide language instruction, a support that many newly enrolled students may need. To do so, IBO explored the prevalence of bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers at schools as of October 31, 2022, using the DOE’s staffing and state certification data.

IBO analyzed DOE staffing data for the 1,594 schools that serve Kindergarten through 12th grade in Districts 1 through 32, 75, and 79 to identify the prevalence of bilingual and ESL teachers of general education or special education classes. In New York State, teachers may pursue two types of certifications to teach ELLs: a bilingual extension in addition to an existing teaching certification, or a separate English to Speakers of Other Languages certification. The former qualifies teachers to work within the DOE’s Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual Education programs, and the latter qualifies teachers for the DOE’s ENL programs. The DOE issues one license to each DOE teacher based on their active teaching role,

although they may hold additional state certifications in other domains. IBO identified bilingual and ESL teachers by their NYC DOE licenses. Although rare, IBO found some teachers that had bilingual or ESL teaching assignments who did not have the corresponding DOE license. IBO treated those teachers as bilingual or ESL teachers if they held a matching state certification in that area, even if their NYC DOE license did not indicate that certification.

Citywide. IBO identified 1,873 bilingual teachers and another 3,606 ESL teachers across 1,594 schools as of October 31, 2022.⁹ These schools include Districts 1 through 32, 75, and 79. Of the 1,873 bilingual teachers, 1,640 (88 percent) were bilingual in Spanish. Additionally, IBO found 91 teachers assigned to a bilingual role who did not hold an active bilingual state certification and 72 teachers assigned to an ESL role who did not hold an active ESL certification.

Variation Across Schools By Project Open Arms

Allocations. IBO compared the prevalence of language acquisition teachers at schools that have received allocations with those that have not. To identify schools that have received allocations, IBO used school budget data available for Districts 1 through 32; as a result, these comparisons do not include any schools within Districts 75 and 79. IBO identified 600 schools that had received allocations as of April 2023, the most recent month that data is available for. IBO found that schools that received Project Open Arms allocations had disproportionately higher shares of Spanish bilingual and ESL teachers, and were far more likely to have at least one bilingual teacher (of any language) or an ESL teacher.

Roughly 74 percent of Spanish bilingual teachers in Districts 1 through 32 were in schools that have received Project Open Arms allocations (1,169 of 1,587 teachers). This share is larger than the overall share of schools that have received allocations: as of April 2023, 39 percent of schools had received a Project Open Arms allocation, totaling 600 schools. There was also a disproportionately larger share of ESL teachers in schools that have received allocations: of the 3,394 ESL

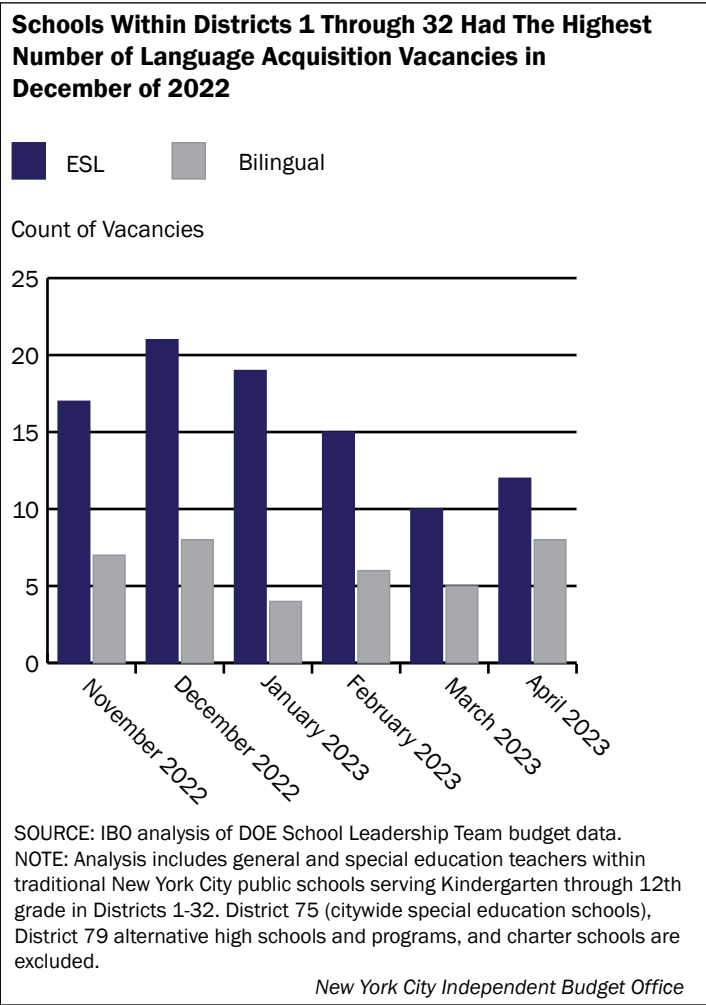
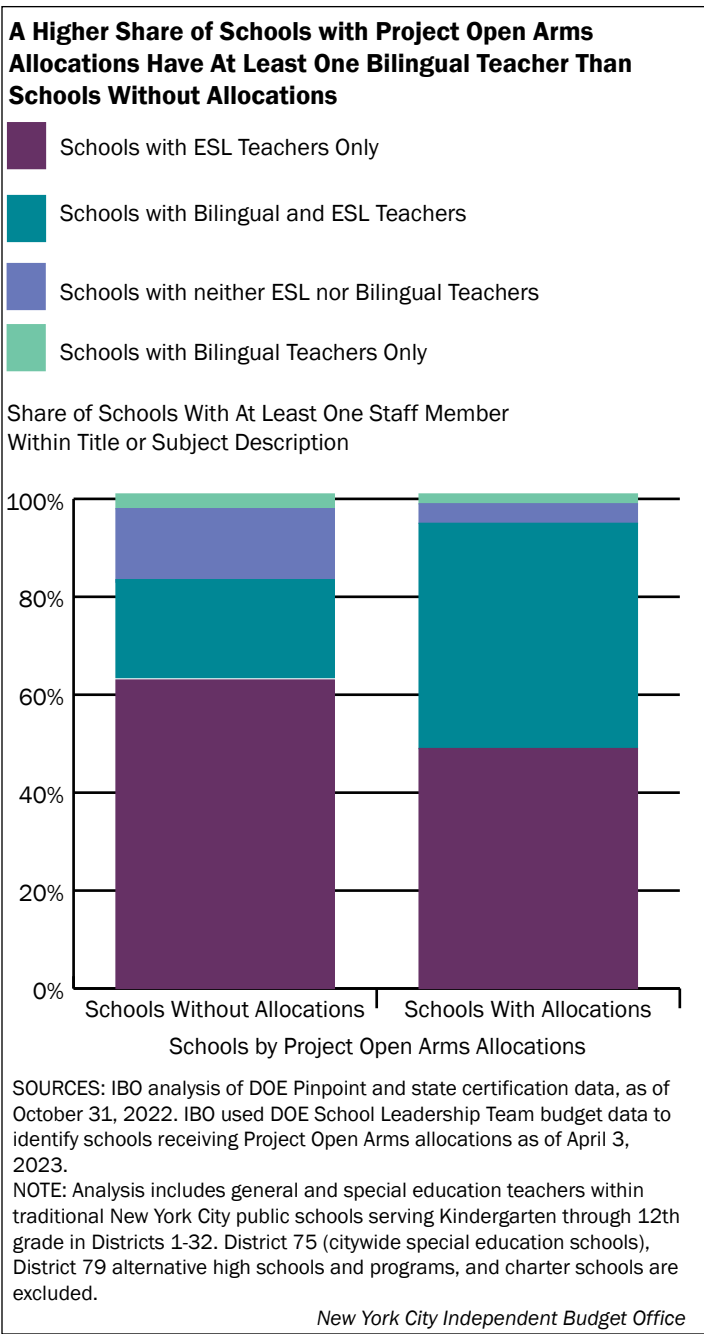
teachers in Districts 1 through 32, 56 percent of those teachers were in schools that have received Project Open Arms allocations (1,915 teachers).

Approximately 48 percent of schools that have received Project Open Arms allocations (287 out of 600 schools) had at least one bilingual teacher, compared with about 22 percent of schools that did not receive an allocation. This includes schools that have at least one bilingual teacher and at least one ESL teacher. About the same percentage of schools that have received allocations, 49 percent (291 of 600 schools), had only ESL teachers, with no bilingual teachers. The remaining four percent of schools that have received allocations (22 out of 600 schools) had neither

bilingual teachers nor ESL subject teachers. By comparison, 15 percent of schools that have not received allocations (136 of 927 schools) had no such teachers.

Capacity Within Schools. Because teaching staff sizes vary across schools, IBO examined the share of all teachers within each school who held bilingual or ESL licenses. On average, schools that have received allocations had higher shares of teachers with ESL licenses and higher shares of teachers with bilingual licenses. Despite this, among the teaching staffs both at schools that have and have not received allocations, the median share of teachers who had bilingual licenses was zero percent.

Vacancies. IBO examined school budget data to identify vacancies for regular and substitute positions that would address language acquisition. A vacant position indicates that a principal has dedicated funds for a role, but the position has not yet been filled. Positions may remain vacant due to the timing of the school year, or the current availability of bilingual and ESL teachers. As of April 2023, there were 20 bilingual or ESL vacancies posted across 18 schools. Ten schools that have received Project Open



Arms allocations had posted vacancies (for two Spanish bilingual teachers, two Mandarin bilingual teachers and seven ESL teachers), compared with eight schools that did not receive allocations (for one Spanish bilingual teacher, three Chinese languages bilingual teachers, and five ESL teachers). The month that had the highest count of vacancies related to language acquisition this school year to date was in December 2022, for 21 ESL positions and eight Spanish bilingual positions citywide. However, IBO is currently unable to track whether the decrease in vacancies was because additional staff were hired (which IBO will only be able to determine next year) or if schools' needs changed and positions were no longer required.

Availability of Programs for English Language Learners

DOE representatives recently publicly shared their plan to open 36 new bilingual programs in the fall of 2023.¹⁰ To understand the context for this expansion, IBO examined student-level enrollment data for the 2021-2022 school year (the most recent data available) and in past years in Districts 1 through 32, 75, and 79. IBO examined the enrollment of ELLs within bilingual programs, although some programs may also enroll non-ELL students, who were not included in this analysis.

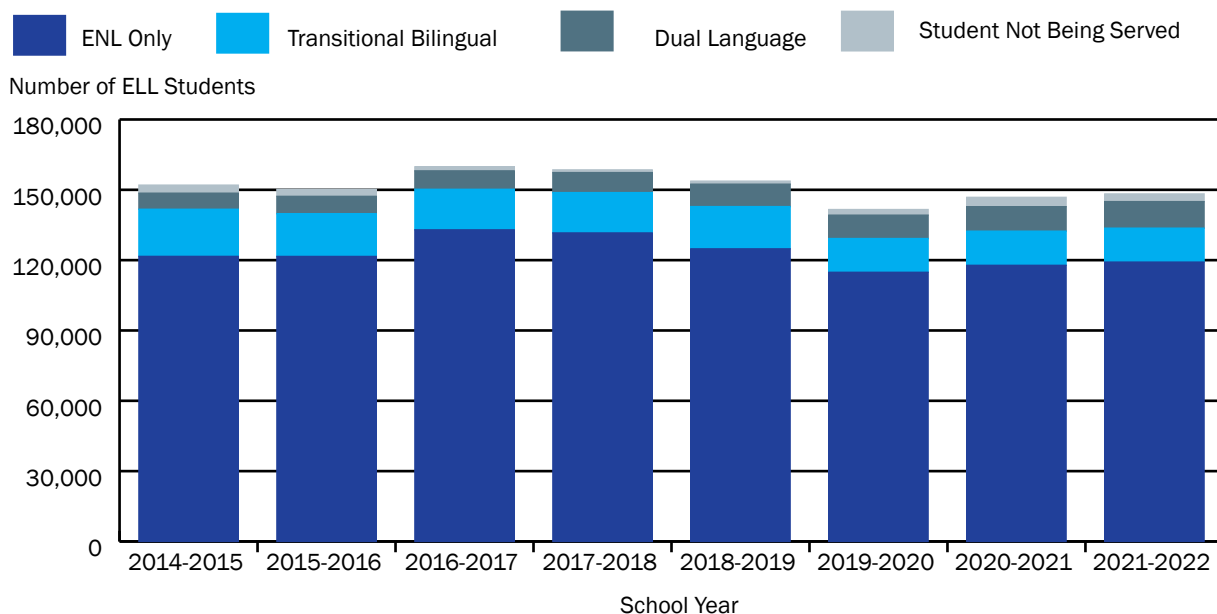
IBO examined student-level enrollment in ELL programs by grade, borough, and school size, and compared the

distribution of language acquisition programs across the city to the distribution of home languages of ELL students.

In 2021-2022, the total number of ELL students within traditional public schools increased year over year for the second time since the 2016-2017 school year—from 146,800 students in 2020-2021 up to 148,254 students in 2021-2022.¹¹ While total enrollment has fallen, the share of traditional public school students that were identified as ELLs increased in 2021-2022 to 17.3 percent from 16.3 percent the preceding year.

IBO found that 80 percent of students who qualified as ELLs in 2021-2022 received language instruction through ENL Only programs. The share of students enrolled in ENL Only programs has remained relatively steady in recent years, despite an expansion of the number of Dual Language programs in the city under the de Blasio administration. Since the expansion launched in the 2015-2016 school year, the share of ELL students enrolled in Dual Language programs has increased from 5 percent to 8 percent as of 2021-2022 (a total of 11,325 students in the 2021-2022 school year). At the same time, the share of ELL students enrolled in Transitional Bilingual Education programs decreased from 12 percent in the 2015-2016 school year to 10 percent of all ELL students in the 2021-2022 (a total of 14,466 students in the 2021-2022 school year).

Majority of ELL Students Enrolled in ENL Only Program, Share Relatively Stable Over Time

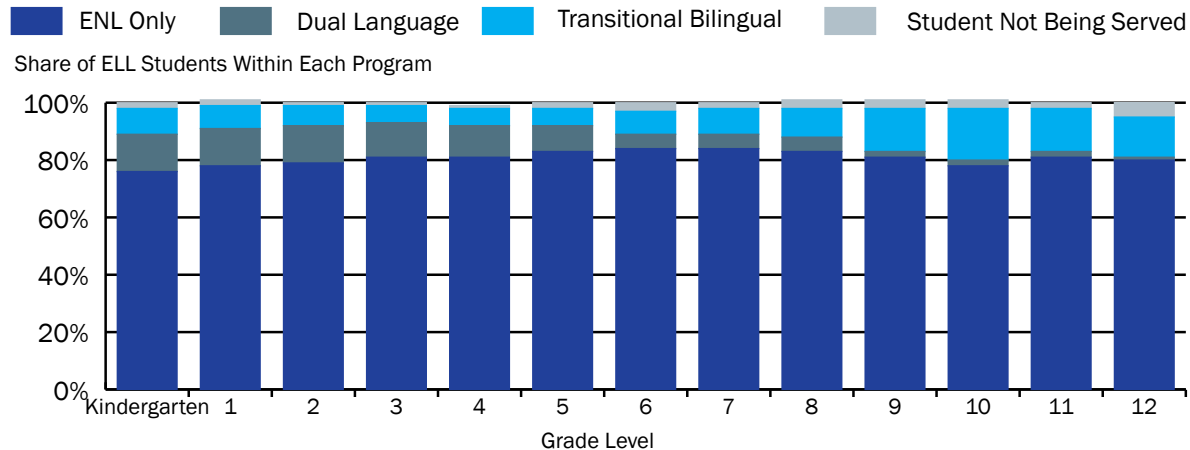


SOURCE: IBO analysis of DOE Bilingual Education Student Information System data.

NOTE: Analysis includes students in grades Kindergarten through 12th grade attending traditional New York City public schools in Districts 1-32, District 75 (citywide special education schools) and District 79 alternative high schools and programs. Students in charter schools are excluded.

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In 2021-2022, Students in High School Grades were Less Likely to Enroll in Dual Language Programs and More Likely to Enroll in Transitional Bilingual Education Programs Compared with Early Grades



SOURCE: IBO analysis of DOE Bilingual Education Student Information System data, school year 2021-2022.

NOTE: Analysis includes students in grades Kindergarten through 12th grade attending traditional New York City public schools in Districts 1-32, District 75 (citywide special education schools) and District 79 alternative high schools and programs. Students in charter schools are excluded.

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During the 2021-2022 school year, the majority of ELL students at all grade levels were within ENL Only programs. Elementary school students saw higher rates of enrollment in Dual Language programs than other grade levels. High school students were more likely to attend Transitional Bilingual Education programs and more likely to not be served than students at lower grade levels.

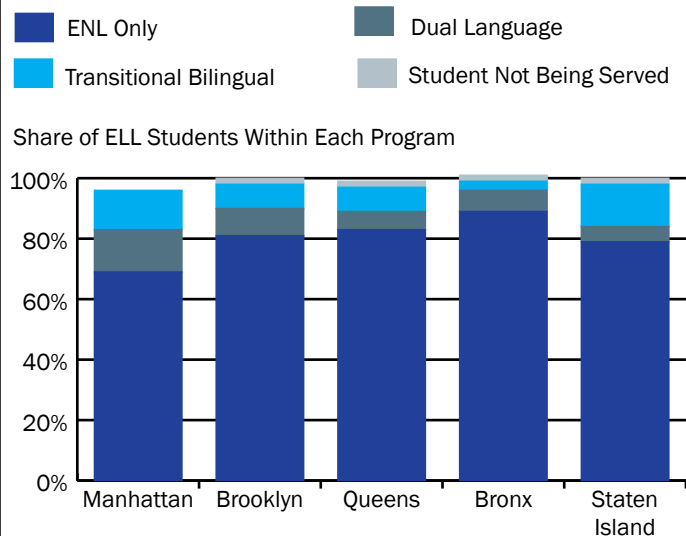
Students enrolled in programs within Manhattan were more likely to attend Dual Language programs than students in the other boroughs. About 14 percent of ELL students enrolled in Manhattan were in Dual Language programs, compared with 5 percent of ELLs enrolled in the Bronx. ELL students enrolled in the Bronx had the highest rates of Transitional Bilingual Education enrollment (14 percent). In comparison, three percent of ELL students in Staten Island were enrolled in those programs.

IBO also examined program enrollment by school size. In 2021-2022, program enrollment did not vary much by size of school across small (400 students and fewer), medium (401 to 600 students) and large (601 students and greater) schools.

Finally, IBO compared the distribution of Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual Education programs to the distribution of home languages spoken by ELLs within Districts 1 through 32, 75, and 79. In 2021-2022, (the most recent year that data are available), the most common languages spoken at home by ELL students were Spanish (64 percent of ELL students), Chinese languages (12 percent of ELL students), and Arabic (6 percent of ELL students).¹² This current school year, 2022-2023, the

top three most common languages for Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual Education programs were Spanish (447 programs, or 80 percent of programs), Chinese languages (69 programs, or 12 percent of programs), and French (11 programs, or 2 percent of programs). Only 0.5 percent of programs that year were Arabic (3 programs), despite its prevalence as the third most common home language.

In 2020-2021, About 67 Percent of ELLs Enrolled in Manhattan Attended ENL Only Programs, Compared With Roughly 80 Percent of ELLs in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn



SOURCE: IBO analysis of DOE Bilingual Education Student Information System data, school year 2021-2022.

NOTE: Analysis includes students in grades Kindergarten through 12th grade attending traditional New York City public schools in Districts 1-32, District 75 (citywide special education schools) and District 79 alternative high schools and programs. Students in charter schools are excluded.

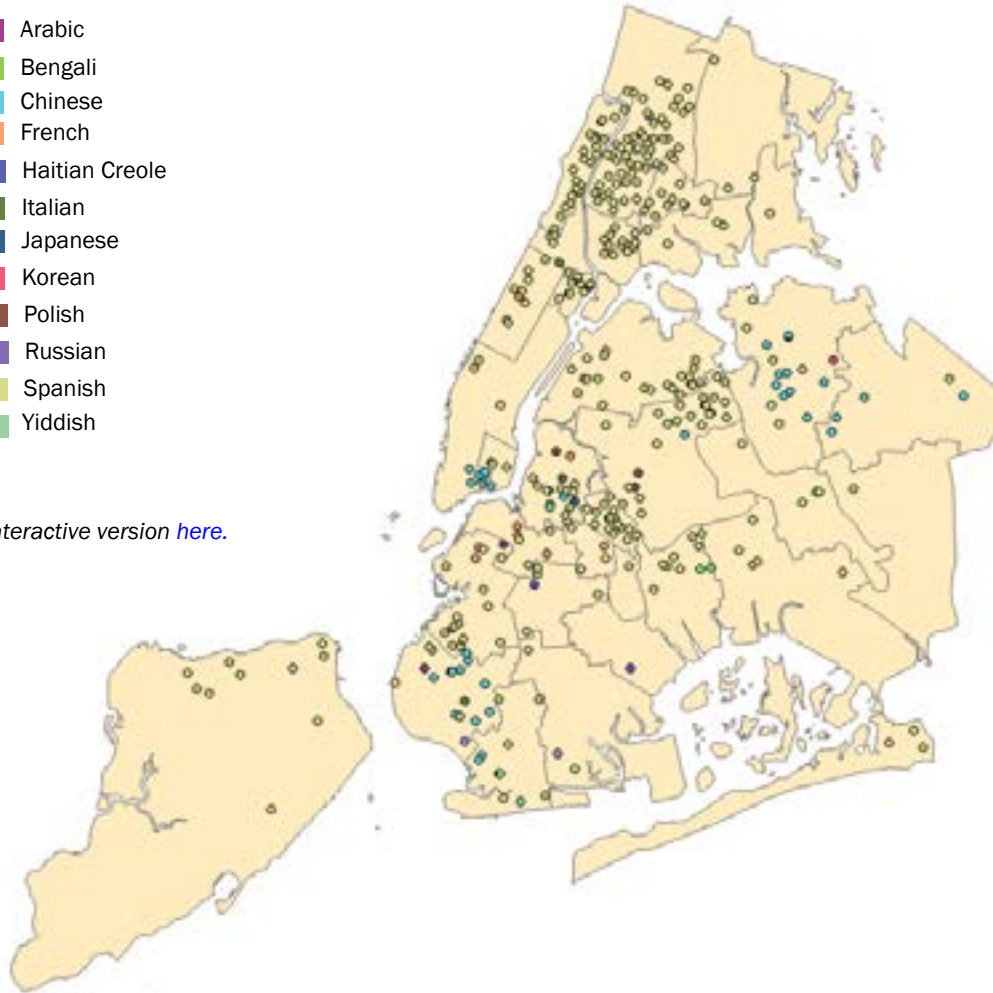
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Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual Education Programs, 2022-2023

Legend

- Arabic
- Bengali
- Chinese
- French
- Haitian Creole
- Italian
- Japanese
- Korean
- Polish
- Russian
- Spanish
- Yiddish

Interactive version [here](#).



SOURCE: IBO Analysis of DOE Bilingual Program List, 2022-2023

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Additional 2022-2023 programs served the following languages: Bengali (five programs), Russian (five), Haitian Creole (four), Italian (four), Yiddish (four), Polish (three), Japanese (one), and Korean (one).¹³

Conclusion

The arrival of thousands of students from asylum-seeking families into the New York City public school system has raised questions about the capacity of city schools to support their language needs. In this brief, IBO examined the distribution of allocations to support new arrivals and the prevalence of bilingual and ESL teachers in the city's public schools. Using budget data available for Districts 1 through 32, IBO identified schools that have received Project Open Arms allocations through April 2023 and found those schools were more likely to have bilingual teachers than schools that did not receive an allocation. Those schools were

also more likely to have ESL teachers than schools that did not receive allocations. Still, 22 schools that received Project Open Arms allocations had neither bilingual teachers nor ESL teachers as of October 2022.

To add context, IBO also examined what types of language acquisition programs the city offers within Districts 1 through 32, 75, and 79. While the DOE offers three types of language programs, the vast majority of the city's ELLs receive support through ENL Only programs, where most of the instruction occurs in English. To provide additional support to the city's ELL population, the DOE has shared plans to expand its offering of bilingual programs. Such an expansion will ideally increase availability across grade levels and the five boroughs.

Glossary of Terms

Dual Language: A bilingual program in which instruction occurs in students' home language and English, with the goal of proficiency in both languages

ELLs: English Language Learners; defined by the New York City Department of Education as students whose home language is not English and need support learning English

ENL: English as New Language; a New York City Department of Education program to support English acquisition

ESL: English as a Second Language; a New York City Department of Education license for teachers

ESOL: English to Speakers of Other Languages; a New York state certification for teachers

FSF: Fair Student Funding; a funding formula for individual schools based on student enrollment and characteristics

Project Open Arms: An interagency mayoral plan that includes one-time funding allocations to specified schools

Transitional Bilingual Education: A bilingual program in which instruction occurs in students' home language and English, with a gradual transition to English-only instruction

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Endnotes

¹New York City Office of the Mayor (November 20, 2022). "Mayor Adams Announces Opening of Satellite Asylum Seeker Resource Navigation Sites to Support Newly Arriving Asylum Seekers." Mayor Adams Announces Opening of Satellite Asylum Seeker Resource Navigation Sites | City of New York ([nyc.gov](#))

²Billings, E. and Walqui, A. (January 5, 2021). "Topic Brief 5: Dispelling the Myth of 'English Only': Understanding the Importance of the First Language in Second Language Learning." New York State Education Department. Topic Brief 5: Dispelling the Myth of "English Only": Understanding the Importance of the First Language in Second Language Learning | New York State Education Department ([nysed.gov](#))

³New York City Department of Education. "Enrollment for Students Learning English." Enrollment for Students Learning English ([nyc.gov](#)); New York City Department of Education. "English Language Learners." English Language Learners ([nyc.gov](#))

⁴New York City Department of Education (October 31, 2022). "School Allocation Memorandum No. 65, FY 2023." SCHOOL ALLOCATION MEMORANDUM NO. 65, FY 2023 ([nycenet.edu](#)).

⁵New York City Department of Education (October 31, 2022). "School Allocation Memorandum No. 65, FY 2023." SCHOOL ALLOCATION MEMORANDUM NO. 65, FY 2023 ([nycenet.edu](#)).

⁶Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2023 Executive Budget Proposal: Topic Elementary & Secondary Education | NY State Senate ([nysenate.gov](#))

⁷In this way, the Project Open Arms allocations have similar allowable uses as federal Title III funds, which may be used only for supplemental services.

⁸Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2023 Executive Budget Proposal: Topic Elementary & Secondary Education | NY State Senate ([nysenate.gov](#))

⁹These counts include both general education and special education teachers, as well as teachers with regular and substitute statuses.

¹⁰City Council Hearing Committee on Education, March 15, 2023 ([The New York City Council - Calendar \(nyc.gov\)](#)).

¹¹In 2021-2022, the DOE reported 148,933 ELL students. IBO's count of ELL students in Districts 1 through 32, District 75, and District 79 differs from the DOE's publicly reported counts by 679 students. Similarly, IBO's count of ELL students in 2020-2021 (146,800 students) differs from the DOE reported count of 147,287 ELL students by 487 students. For both DOE Demographic Reports, the DOE reports "all ELLs who came in and out of the NYC DOE school system during the entire school year." IBO identifies ELL students' enrollment using DOE Bio data as of June 30th. IBO excluded 679 students in 2021-2022 and 487 students in 2020-2021 whom our records indicate were enrolled that year in a charter school or home school setting.

¹²Due to state reporting requirements, the DOE groups all Chinese home languages as "Chinese", a category that includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages such as Amoy.

¹³NYC Department of Education. "Bilingual Program List." <https://infohub.nyced.org/in-our-schools/programs/english-language-learners-programs-and-services>