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English-only rise in New York City high school graduation rates

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High school graduation rates have increased under [Mayor Bloomberg](#) - except for students not fluent in English.

While the general graduation rate climbed to 52.2% in 2007 from 46.5% in 2005, the rate for students learning English (called English language learners, or ELLs) dropped from 28.5% to 23.5% over the same period.

Advocates say some city efforts that have improved achievement in general missed the mark when it comes to English language learners.

"We support high standards," said [Deycy Avitia](#), education advocacy coordinator at the [New York Immigration Coalition](#), "but what we need is the increased resources and strategies to make sure they can meet the higher standards."

As an example, she noted that for one of the mayor's biggest initiatives, the creation of new, small schools, the city allowed the exclusion of nonfluent students.

English language learners are also overrepresented in some of the system's worst schools, accounting for one in five students at the 15 failing schools that were shuttered this year. ELLs made up more than a quarter of the student body at the two high schools that were closed.

Two years ago, advocates successfully fought for increased funding for these students, but say more is needed. Among their suggestions are a longer school day, reduced class size and access to full-day pre-K and kindergarten. They warn that the coming change in graduation standards, requiring all students to pass all five Regents exams, will only make things worse. Currently, only about 10% of English language learners meet that standard.

But there are programs that work, the advocates say.

Flushing [International High School](#) in [Queens](#), where students speak 18 languages, boasts a 2% dropout rate and a 92% college attendance rate.

[Bronx International High School](#), which has 40 languages spoken in its hallways, has a similar record.

An Education Department spokeswoman acknowledged that four-year graduation rates remain a concern, but said overall academic performance had improved.

Progress is easier when students are younger, say experts, and, by some measures, there has been improvement.

The percentage of English language learners in the third through eighth grades able to read English at grade level jumped to 22.6% in 2008 from 11% in 2006, according to state tests. Those who were proficient in math grew to 59% from 36% over the same period.

On national achievement tests, however, there was no progress in reading shown by the system's fourth- or eighth-graders. The same was true for eighth-graders in math, though the fourth-graders made some improvement.

"These are problems that have been accruing for some time," said [Maria Torres-Guzman](#), professor of bilingual studies at [Columbia University's Teachers College](#).

"It's too easy to ignore, because it's a population that's not going to make a lot of noise in the political world."

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