INTRODUCTION

Newly arrived Haitian immigrant students often arrive as older students, entering the United States school system for the first time in high school. Not many schools serve these students, but over time Samuel J. Tilden High School became a community school for older Haitian students. Unfortunately, the Department of Education (DOE) decided to phase out Tilden High School starting in 2007, and the school officially closed its doors in June 2010.

During the 2009-10 school year, Tilden’s last year, the Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project conducted a series of interviews, surveys and roundtable discussions with Haitian immigrant English Language Learners (ELLs) remaining at Tilden, as well as interviews with the principal and other school staff. Through their experiences, this report reveals the struggles newly arrived ELLs face in a closing school and provides recommendations to improve ELL programs in New York City with hopes of preventing another Tilden experience at other schools.
In December 2006, the DOE announced that it would close Tilden High School. Starting in the fall of 2007, the school stopped accepting incoming ninth grade students, and closed completely in June 2010. In November of 2009, the school’s last year, the principal of Tilden said that 500 students were officially registered at Tilden, but only 180 students actually attended. By June, 123 students remained and only 65 of those students graduated.

See NYC’s strategy for shutting schools leaves some students lost in transition June 2010 http://hechingerreport.org/content/nyc%E2%80%99s-strategy-for-shutting-schools-leaves-some-students-lost-in-transition_3209/

There were 80-90 ELLs left in the school that last year, with about 60 ELLs who actually attended. It is not surprising that so many ELLs still had not graduated from Tilden. Newly arrived immigrant ELLs are often at a disadvantage. They have only a few years to become English proficient, pass the NYS Regents exams, and graduate on time. Also many older Haitian students who arrive in high school have limited experience with school in Haiti, and low literacy in their native language. Many of these students, called Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE), attended Tilden. Of those 60 ELLs attending Tilden in 2009-10, the majority were Haitian immigrant students and 20 were SIFE.

While meeting the needs of ELLs and SIFE can be a challenge for schools, it was not until the final year of Tilden’s phase-out, that a plan was put in place to meet the needs of ELLs.

Flanbwayan, Advocates for Children, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund and other advocacy groups met frequently with the DOE in the last two years of Tilden’s phase-out, to advocate for better supports and programs for the ELLs left behind and figure out alternatives for students who could not graduate by the time the school closed.

It was not until the last year, however, that the extra help that students needed from the beginning was actually put in place. The last year the school implemented a credit recovery program, started ELA prep classes and tried to figure out transfer options for students who needed more time to meet the graduation requirements.
While a few students were able to benefit from these programs, for the majority of them it was too late. Of those 60 ELLs who were still in the school the last year, 44 of them did not graduate by June 2010 when the school officially closed.

Despite repeated inquiries about the fate of these students and assurances by the DOE that they were trying to find placements for these students who needed more time to graduate, only one of the ELLs was able to enroll in a transfer school, Manhattan Comprehensive Day and Night.

The other ELL students could not find a school that would accept them because of their age, lack of Regents passed and because they still were not proficient in English.

**TILDEN’S ELL PROGRAM**

Each school is required to have services for ELLs to help them learn English. The language programs available for ELLs include English as a Second Language (ESL), Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE), and Dual Language. [http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/ELL/default.htm](http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/ELL/default.htm)

For years Tilden had one of the few bilingual Haitian-Creole programs left in the city. In 2006, a review done by the Department of Education showed that the bilingual Program at Tilden was doing very well. ELLs at Tilden passed their Regents exams at a rate 25.3% higher than ELLs at similar schools.

*(See Advocates for Children and Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, *Empty Promises*, June 2009.)*


**The History of Haitian Creole Bilingual Programs in New York City**

Bilingual education for the Haitian community in New York City started in the early 80’s. Several high schools, like Erasmus, Prospect Heights, Samuel J. Tilden, Wingate in Brooklyn, and Springfield Gardens High School in Queens had thriving transitional bilingual programs, which benefitted many Haitian students. These schools are all closed now.

Bilingual programs gave students the advantage of learning in Haitian Creole, their native language, while developing English-language skills. Grants, certified teachers, and school staff helped many of these programs flourish. But, when schools began to close, many bilingual programs started disappearing. Clara Barton in Brooklyn is now the only high school Haitian Creole bilingual program left.

Ives Raymond, a former Haitian Creole bilingual teacher at Erasmus and program coordinator for over thirty years, saw firsthand the successes of these programs. For as he states, “At one time, in Erasmus High School, there were a total of 900 Haitian students, they all showed up for school, and graduated.”

*Interview with Yves Raymond*
When the DOE decided to close the school, the first thing to go was the bilingual program. Lillianne Jean, a former Tilden student who enrolled in 2005 noticed the changes right away. “By 2007 the teachers who helped me the most during my first two years were gone. Services were immediately cut.” In the 2008-09 school year, while there were 144 ELLs enrolled in the bilingual Haitian-Creole program, there was only one certified bilingual teacher. And in the last year, there was not even one bilingual certified teacher left.

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Source: Response to Advocates for Children and Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund data request to the New York City Department of Education.

**Who Were the Haitian Immigrant Students at Tilden High School?**

By the time the school closed in June 2010, 44 Haitian ELLs did not graduate. During the 2009-10 school year, Tilden’s last year, we interviewed 10 Haitian students left behind in Tilden, to learn about their experiences and struggles in a closing school.

We also surveyed 20 Haitian ELLs from Tilden. In 2010-11 we held several roundtable discussions with 7 former Tilden students, to find out where they were now, what their plans were and to find out more about their experience at Tilden.

All 10 of the students we interviewed in 2009-10 were newcomer students who entered Tilden High School in 2005-06, their first school experience in the United States ever. 7 of them were two or more years behind in schooling for their age when they started at Tilden. These students are all 20 or 21 years old, and had attended Tilden High School for 4-5 years. Of the 20 students we surveyed, 18 had attended Tilden for 4 or more years.
The students we interviewed had high hopes when they entered Tilden High School. Many of them chose Tilden because they knew it had a large Haitian student population, and Haitian staff. For all of them, it was the first and only school they had attended in the United States. They all were hoping for a diploma. Many of them came to this country for a better opportunity, which for young people means access to a high school diploma and college so that they can have a job that can support their families.

When the students first entered the school, they found a welcoming environment with supportive staff.

“I entered the country in 2005. My parents were the ones who chose Tilden High School for me. I got involved in activities right away, like dance and soccer. Some of the teachers were very helpful.”

Marie Deseus

“In 2005, I enrolled at Samuel J. Tilden High School. I was excited. I thought it was a good school because teachers were always willing to help me afterschool. I felt confident because I was learning English. But, when I entered the 11th grade, I quickly realized that I made a mistake in choosing this school.”

Lilianne Jean

“I enrolled at Tilden in 2005. Many of the teachers were very nice. They always tried to push us to do better.”

Joane Pierre
Once the school was announced that it was closed, the students immediately started to see the impact, and not a good one. “Being inside the school was demoralizing, the building was already full with new schools with lots of new energy, I would see it around me and our school with such low energy, it was hard to wake up everyday to go to school, to go to the little bit of space that was left to us” Joseph Jean.

“Being inside the school was demoralizing...”

“Tilden was the only school I attended in this country. I don’t know if I will be able to graduate because I am still missing the English Regents. I feel that I can pass it, but I must wait a month before I can take it. Hopefully, I will pass it. I am now 20 years old and if I don’t pass, I don’t know where I will go.”

Max Michel

Other students found themselves lying about where they go to school, because the school was phasing out and other people knew and they just didn’t want to be associated with it, because they said they had enough of other people’s comments.

“As a student you even begin to doubt yourself, all the good teachers were gone and the ones who stayed didn’t really care, I remember getting very excited when it was going to be my turn to have this teacher that was very helpful, that cared. And many of my friends were able to pass their English regents exams being in her class. When it was my turn, I thought finally I am going to do it with this teacher. I was devastated when I found out she was no longer there” said another student, Marie Rose Latortue.
“Many of my friends and I feel stuck...”
Most ELL students left at Tilden in 2009-10 had all or most of the credits required for graduation. As the principal of Tilden once stated, “Haitians are not LTAs” or long-term absence students because they attend school every day. What students needed were adequate teachers and programs that will teach them strong English skills and prepare them to take the NYS Regents Exams. Of the 20 students we surveyed, 17 did not think the school staff and teachers cared about their needs and 19 thought the school did not meet their needs. Without this assistance, students are unable to pass the English Language Arts and the Global History Regents Exams, which require students to write long essays in the English language. The failure to pass the Regents then becomes a major barrier to higher learning for ELL students.

All 20 of the students we surveyed thought the school should stay open, even though 19 of them felt that the school did not meet their needs. When we asked them what they thought should happen with the school, nine thought there should be new programs, six wanted the school to stay open and five wanted new staff and teachers. During the 2008-09 school year, Flanbwayan and others met with the Department of Education to advocate for more educational opportunities in schools with large number of ELLs. Only during its last year did Tilden start an English Regents Prep course for ELLs preparing for the Regents. But, by that time, it was too late.
Flanbwayan followed seven students since the school closed down in June 2010. All seven students are 20-21 years old, have completed 4-5 years of high school, and attend class regularly. Out of the seven, only one student has graduated from Tilden.

This recent graduate from Tilden received a local diploma. She is also applying to college. She is nervous about the next steps, particularly because she does not feel ready for college. She will need a lot of tutoring to prepare for college.

Unfortunately, the other six students did not pass the English Language Arts and Global History Regents exams. These exams require strong English skills that make it very hard for ELLs to pass where they have not been properly prepared.

Today, four out of the seven Tilden students are working in low-wage jobs and are not planning to attend a GED program. They were also unable to transfer to another school.

One student is now attending a Young Adult Borough Center (YABC), a full-time evening program that takes place at a designated high school campus, with hopes of graduating by the end of this school year.

Another student is unsure about whether he even graduated. He was told that he had completed the requirements, but was shocked when he was prevented from walking with his fellow classmates in the school’s last graduation. After the school closed, he continued to visit the building several times, but Tilden no longer exists. No one has given him his diploma and has not explained why he has not graduated. He does not know where he stands or where to go from here. With frustration in his voice, he stated, “It’s like working hard for years and never getting paid.” Patrick Thomas

“It’s like working hard for years and never getting paid...”
CONCLUSION

Every time a school or an institution serving a community closes down its doors, it always feels like a death occurred. The closing of Samuel J. Tilden High School is not any different. In recent times, the school served a large number of immigrants from Africa, and the Caribbean, especially Haiti. In 2007, Tilden High School was announced to be closed by 2010. Even though everyone believed 2010 was far away, four years went by very fast. In spite of community efforts to keep the school open, Tilden was closed.

The Department of Education must recognize the distinct needs of ELLs when they announce school closings, and not wait until the doors are about to close. Every student remaining in a phase-out school requires special resources to help them graduate. For many ELLs, because of their age, low literacy, and performance in school, or lack of English proficiency, it is very difficult to find alternative programs that are willing to take them. While there are many programs available for students who are over-age and under-credited, many of these programs do not take ELLs. See Advocates for Children, Dead Ends: The Need for More Pathways to Graduation for Overage, Under-Credited Students in New York City. 10 December 2007. http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/pubs/dead_ends.pdf

As a community organization working with newcomer Haitian immigrants, Flanbwayan recognizes the struggle of students as they start over in a new country. ELLs, like all students, need a quality education to be successful in life. Tilden High School is the perfect example of what happens when a school does not provide adequate programs and support for newcomer immigrant students. When ELLs are not given the right programs and support, they face unequal challenges, preventing them from passing exams, graduating and achieving post-secondary education. When passing exams and receiving a diploma become steppingstones to higher learning, overage, under-credited, and ill-equipped students become severely disadvantaged. While the students we interviewed all attended high school for many years, without their diplomas they are precluded from exploring quality post-secondary education to attain the resources, training, and skill development to achieve a better standard of living in society.

It feels like Tilden has already closed and has been forgotten. I just don’t think there is much that will be done. We have to help ourselves...”  -Lilianne Jean
Tilden is an example of how a school closing resulted in severe hardship to students who need the most help, including immigrant, special needs children, ELLs, and all those who fall behind. The following section contains recommendations that came out of the roundtable discussions, interviews and surveys with former Tilden students. Overall the students did not think the school should have been closed. Rather, they wanted more programs and teachers, specialized staff and resourceful classrooms. Based on these students' experiences and what they hoped Tilden and the DOE would have given them, the following suggestions seek to meet the needs of ELLs in low-performing schools that are at-risk of being closed.

**THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SHOULD:**

1) **Create Individual Plans and Evaluations for At-Risk ELLs**

Create a standardized individual assessment for ELL students, to identify their needs and make a plan to meet their needs for each at risk student. The assessment should identify what English language skills they still need to develop, whether they are behind in credits and Regents exams, how many years they have to graduate if they are older students, and if they have any unique needs such as SIFE students who need academic, social and emotional, and native language supports. The assessment should be done by an appointed social worker or caseworker who knows the needs of ELLs, and should be done when the student is identified as at risk for not graduating on time. School staff should use the assessment results to create an individual graduation plan for those students.

2) **Create Targeted Programs for ELLs At-Risk of Not Graduating, and Alternative Programs for ELLs Who Cannot Graduate in a Traditional School**

For ELLs who are behind in credits and need extra help learning English, schools should have specialized programs that help them recover credits, develop literacy and English language skills, and prepare for regents exams especially the ELA and Global History exams. For students who need alternative programs, there are many transfer schools in New York City, but many do not take ELLs and do not have teachers and supports for ELL students. The DOE should create ELL programs in all transfer schools and YABCs so that ELLs who cannot graduate from traditional high schools can still have other options to work towards a diploma.
3) Enrollment

Often times students are placed in schools that do not have the support and programs that ELLs need to be successful. Enrollment centers should provide training to staff on the needs of newcomers and the schools that have ELL programs that can meet their needs. Many new immigrant students are older, have low literacy and are behind academically. Placing these students in struggling schools that are at risk of closure is a recipe for disaster. Enrollment staff should be able to identify the academic, literacy and language needs of ELLs and place them accordingly. In order to do this, enrollment centers should have staff who speak the languages of the immigrant communities around them. Also, because these students often arrive once school has started and is behind academically, centers should place newcomer students in schools immediately and not delay in placing them.

4) Release of Students Records

The records of students become difficult to access after school closes. Records of students should be made available in a timely manner for students so they can better evaluate their options.

**LOW PERFORMING SCHOOLS WITH ELLS SHOULD:**

1) Identify Community Services and Resources for ELLs

Organizations and services providers in the community know immigrant students and their needs well. These organizations can provide out of school support to students to help them stay connected to their culture, adjust to a new country, and develop leadership activities to help them to develop skills to advocate for themselves. Schools should identify those organizations and services in the community to partner with them. These partnerships help students stay engaged in school, help schools better understand the needs of their students and bring more resources into schools to provide holistic supports to students.

2) Classrooms Organized By Students Skills and Needs

The students we spoke to felt that there were many different levels in the classroom that made it challenging for the teacher. The students also felt that the teachers did not know individual students well enough to know what their needs were. Students who were more advanced did not feel they were learning as much because of students who needed more attention. For students who struggled with basic literacy skills they did not understand the lessons and did not gain much from those classes.

The students said that teachers should know the individual needs of the students in class, and organize classes according to students’ needs and skill level.
3) Individualized Academic Support for Students

Schools should have a system to identify students that need extra help and provide one on one or small group tutoring. The students who really struggled in the general classroom felt that they needed more individualized attention so that they could improve their language and literacy skills.

4) Basic Skills-Building Programs

Many newcomer students are behind in basic literacy and math skills when they enter high school. These students need a program that can focus on building these basic skills that they need for the general classroom. Without this help, these students fall more and more behind in classrooms where they do not understand the lessons. Schools should have a separate program for these students that would help them build the skills that they need for the classroom. These programs should take place over the summer, before the students enter the ninth grade, or for students who enter the country during the school year, there should be a similar program for the first semester or two when they enter the school.

5) Teacher Training

Many students felt that teachers were not well prepared for working with them, did not know or understand the needs of the students, and because of this the students generally felt that school staff and teachers did not care about them. The students felt that the teachers needed training on working with students with low literacy, students who are learning English, and students who lacked basic skills. Schools with high needs ELLs, and ELLs who are at risk of not graduating should have intensive professional development for all teachers who work with these students (i.e. not just the designated ESL or bilingual teachers). This professional development should train teachers on how to identify the needs of their ELL students, what techniques work for students with low literacy and who are behind academically, and should inform teachers of available resources and curriculum that they can use with their students.

ABOUT FLANBWAYAN HAITIAN LITERACY PROJECT

Flanbwayan is a community organization focusing on Haitian newcomer access to public education. We target youth ages 14-21 years old and we ensure Haitian newcomer youth are appropriately placed in high schools that support their ability to remain in school and graduate. Our out of school time programs develop their capacity as productive citizens through youth and leadership development activities that build their self-esteem and nurture their voices.
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