



Report and Findings:

Chinese immigrant student experiences with the Pennsylvania Keystone Exams

A report by the Chinese Youth Organizing Project,
a program of Asian Americans United

Asian Americans United
November 17, 2014



November 17, 2014

Dear City Council Members,

On behalf of the Chinese Youth Organizing Project under Asian Americans United (CYOP), we present this report to the Philadelphia City Council on Chinese immigrant students' experience with the Keystone tests.

In February 2014, the CYOP youth started working on the investigation of the Keystone tests. This is an important test because it decides whether or not they can graduate from high school. CYOP youth surveyed 110 Chinese immigrant high school students in Philadelphia public schools about their experiences in school, including their Keystone test taking experience. Most of the students interviewed expressed hardship with the test. These are some of the key findings from the interviews:

- 1) Schools and teachers were not aware of the language accommodations that ELL students were entitled to.
- 2) ELL students were not informed of the language accommodations they were entitled to.
- 3) ELL students did not receive appropriate language accommodations.
- 4) Students feel negatively impacted by the Keystone tests.

Please see the report for details. If you have any questions about the report or CYOP, please contact me: (215) 925-1538 or xulinsunraiser@gmail.com.

Best regards,

Xu Lin
Youth Program Director
Asian Americans United

Summary of findings

The Chinese Youth Organizing Project (CYOP) interviewed 110 Chinese immigrant students about their school experiences, including their experiences with the Keystone Exams. Our findings show that many immigrant students across the city are not receiving appropriate accommodations on the Keystone exams in spite of state regulations. Most students were denied access to qualified interpreters and some were not even given the option of having approved dictionaries - even though these are rights identified by the state. Chinese immigrant students described having extreme negative experiences with the exams. Many students reported spending 10 hours or more on each exam. Others questioned the purpose of staying in school. As a result, immigrant students perform very poorly on the test and could see their future threatened with no high school diploma. Based on our findings, CYOP recommends that:

1. School District and City Leaders should investigate students' experiences with the Keystone Exam to see if students are being fully informed of their rights and given the resources to pass the exam.
2. School District of Philadelphia must send a letter to every school informing them of ELL students' rights to accommodations.
3. The School District of Philadelphia must provide resources and support teachers in order to fully prepare students for the Exam.
4. State leaders should stop any expansion of the exam, and delay the 2017 deadline until clear plans are in place for students who may not be able to graduate due to the Keystone Exam.

Background

In the spring and summer of 2014, the Chinese Youth Organizing Project (CYOP) interviewed 110 Chinese immigrant students about their school experiences, including their experiences with the Keystone Exams. CYOP is investigating immigrant students' experience with the Keystone exam to know their understanding of the Keystone exam, how they are being affected by the test, and what do they want to see change or improved about a test that could affect their future.

Keystone Exams are end of course assessments designed to assess proficiency in three subject areas: Literature, Algebra I, and Biology. The exams are given in English and Spanish only. All immigrant students must take the Biology and Algebra Keystone exam no matter how recently they arrived in the U.S. All students must take the Literature Keystone in English after just one year in the U.S. Passing all three Keystone Exams with a proficient or advanced rating is required for high school graduation requirements. Students who fail to score proficient or advanced, have to complete a project based assessment. Students who fail the Keystone test and project-based assessment will be denied a diploma.

Failure rates for Keystone exams is poor in the English speaking population but is twice as bad for immigrant students. According to the School District of Philadelphia, in the 2013 pilot test, 84% of immigrant students failed the Algebra 1 Keystone exam, 90% of immigrant students failed the Literature Keystone exam, and 97% failed the Biology Keystone exam.¹ Statewide, 80% of students in Pennsylvania failed their project-based assessment, which is the back up to the Keystone exam.

¹ Source: School District of Philadelphia, SRC Policy & Planning Meeting on English Language Learners, March 2014.

The State of Pennsylvania has published a guide called “PSSA & Keystone Exams: Accommodation Guidelines for English Language Learners.” This document states that ELLs are entitled to the following accommodations for two of the three exams:

1. Word-to word translation dictionaries, without definitions and without pictures for Keystone Algebra I and Keystone Biology;
2. Qualified interpreters/sight translators for Keystone Algebra I and Keystone Biology;
3. Fully translated Spanish/English tests for Keystone Algebra I and Biology Exams.

Findings

The Chinese Youth Organizing Project (CYOP) interviewed dozens of Chinese immigrant students about the Keystone exams. Chinese is the second most common language among ELL students behind Spanish. Over 27% of the District’s ELL population is Asian. Most of the students interviewed are ELL students from different neighborhood high school, such as Furness High School, Northeast High School, South Philadelphia High School. Some students had lived here for as short as four months; others had been in the U.S. for several years. Most of the students took two Keystone exams. Some had taken all three.

These are our findings:

1. ELL students are not being given our right to accommodations.

Many immigrant students across the city are not receiving appropriate accommodations in spite of state regulations. The “PSSA and Keystone Exams: Accommodations Guidelines for English Language Learners” states that word-to word translation devices (without definitions and without pictures) must be provided. In addition, qualified interpreters who can read and translate student responses into writing must also be made available to immigrant students.

Our interviews showed that many ELL students who were allowed to use the word-for-word devices felt like it did not help them on the exam.

“Dictionary was useless because it took a long time to look up for one word. And need to understand the meaning after translation. For example, it took about 20 minutes to look up for 5 words,” Student, 10th grade, South Philadelphia High School, less than two years in U.S.

None of the students reported having a qualified interpreter/sight translator at their test site, although it was stated in the guideline.

2. Schools do not understand the rights of immigrant students to have accommodations.

Students reported that schools and teachers did not provide clear rights to accommodations. Many schools did not explain to ELL students what the Keystone Exam was or what the consequences were. Some schools provided word-to-word translation devices; others did not. None of the students said they were offered the right to have qualified interpreters.

One student, who was taking a long time, reported that his classmates yelled at him during the testing period for taking too long. There was no intervention from teachers to say this was unacceptable.

3. Chinese immigrant students’ experiences with the test are extremely negative.

With inadequate accommodations, many students struggle through the test. Several reported spending more than 10 hours of testing on one exam; a few reported spending as long as 12 hours on a single test. Other students gave up. One student said he tried to take the test, but after a few attempts, closed his book and went to sleep.

A 9th grade student at Furness High School said the first time she took the test was when she only been in the U.S for just 3 months. She did not know that she had to take the exam until a

couple days before the exam through a friend of her who speaks Chinese. Although the translation device was provided in the Algebra I exam, she felt totally lost during the test: *“Half an hour on the dictionary for one problem.”*

Although ELL students who only attend school in the U.S for less than a year are not required to take the Keystone literature exam, all ELLs are required to participate in the Algebra I and Biology exam. Some people believe that immigrant students will be able to complete the Algebra I exam because math is just about number. However, many immigrant students did not understand vocabulary on the test, and many math-related words could not be found on the translation devices. Many ELLs students gave up and quit testing because they do not understand the materials due to their English language ability.

Because immigrant students were likely to spend such a long time on the test, some reported that they went hungry as they worked on the test for hours.

“No break, no lunch time, only candies.” Student, 12th grade, Constitution High School.

Many of the students we interviewed expressed that many materials on the test they have never learned in school.

考有老师教过的, 学生学过的 *“Materials on the test should be on what teachers taught and what students learned.”* Student, 12th grade, George Washington Carver High School of Engineering and Science

4. Immigrant students feel negatively about themselves and school because of this exam.

The Keystone exam is important to CYOP because many students whom CYOP interviewed had a negative experience with the Keystone Exam and are worried about how the Keystone exam will affects their graduation.

“If I fail this test, cannot graduate, then where is my future?” Student, 10th grade, South Philadelphia High School

“People who were born here did not even pass the test, then how are immigrant students going to pass?” Student, 12th grade, Academy at Palumbo, in U.S. for 6 years

Some questioned whether the Keystone exam assesses proficiency in different subjects or just their language ability. Knowing that the exam is available in Spanish, some said:

“This test was unfair from the start because there are Spanish test but not Chinese test.” Student, 11th grade, Furness High School

Many became doubtful of their personal abilities after the test results came out. A lot of students did not understand the purpose of the test and did not receive any tutoring when the test is approaching,

“If I cannot pass, why do I need to study? Why do I still need to go to school?” Student interviewee

5. Immigrant students believe their education is given too little attention and that testing in schools is given too much attention.

With almost a cut of \$1 billion from education statewide, thousands of teachers and staff members laid off, closures of 24 schools, lack of supplies, and over-crowded classrooms, many students question why the school districts are not using the money they put in the exams to their schools.

“如果教育局局长在面前：把你的心思放到如何培养更好的学校上，而不是考试。给学生更帮助的资源，而不是硬生生的考试” (Translation: If Superintendent Hite were in front of me, I would say: Put your heart into how to train better school, not tests. Give students more helpful resources, not hard tests.”) Student interviewee.

Conclusions and recommendations

让教育局知道 *Keystone* 的严重性，很多人不及格“*Let School District know how serious is the Keystone, most people failed.*” Student interviewee

Based on our findings, we ask the Superintendent of Schools and the City of Philadelphia to take a serious look at the experience of students and resources for schools to prepare students for the *Keystone* Exam. We believe the School District, the City and State should stop the 2017 deadline for the exam until schools are fully informed of their responsibilities, have sufficient resources, and that there is a clear plan to assist students who may not pass the exam and are threatened with not getting a diploma.

We ask Dr. Hite to send a letter to every school informing them of ELL student rights to translation and that they must submit information about how many students will require accommodations in the spring. It is the School District’s responsibility to provide those accommodations to every school – no matter how expensive. This is our future and our graduation.

We ask that the District meet with us again in early 2015 to discuss progress on this issue.

Thank you for reading our report.



ABOUT US

Founded in 2010, the **Chinese Youth Organizing Project** is a year-round youth leadership program of Asian Americans United serving more than 80 high school age recent Chinese immigrant students. Many of the youth are in ESOL programs in neighborhood comprehensive high schools in the city. Throughout the school year, youth meet weekly to address issues they experience everyday: school violence, low school attendance, low high school graduation rates, language barriers (English as second language), limited exposure to artistic and recreational activities, limited or no knowledge of college & career options, social oppression, etc. CYOP youth have helped lead civic engagement efforts and address safe school climates and quality learning environments in schools. AAU's youth programs develop youth to become individually, socially, and politically aware, exercise their voice and participate in active struggles for justice. Through this work, we create leaders who sustain, fight for, and give back to our communities.

Youth Program Director: Xu Lin, xulinsunraiser@gmail.com, 215-925-1538

Asian Americans United (AAU) is a three decade old organization that works to build the leadership of Asian Americans across Philadelphia to strengthen their communities and unite to challenge oppression. AAU has helped organize Cambodian tenants to fight for and win the renovation of their West Philadelphia apartment building into subsidized housing; initiated a lawsuit that resulted in the hiring of bilingual staff and services for English Language Learners; played an instrumental role in halting a proposed baseball stadium and Foxwoods casino in Chinatown; established a multiracial charter school designed especially to serve immigrant and non-English speaking children; founded a two-decade old community arts festival; and led a federal civil rights campaign to establish safe school climates free of bias and harassment. AAU's work in youth leadership, the arts, community development and policy has earned it local and national attention.

Executive Director: Helen Gym, aau@aaunited.org, 215-925-1538