

The Maze of America

Finding a high school for an immigrant child is tougher than you think

by Jessica Siegel

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Ralph Antony Louissant is a sweet-faced 16-year-old, tall with closely cropped hair. Quiet and polite, he greets a visitor to his aunt's apartment with a soft "bon soir."

He arrived from Haiti in August to join his sister Carla, his aunt, and his cousins in Brooklyn. His family's attempt to get him registered in a New York City public high school started back then and culminated during two weeks in September, in an odyssey through five public high schools, trying to find one that would accept him.

Such is the situation with many English-language learners (ELLs), advocates say, where more than half of New York City's new small schools—the centerpiece of Chancellor Joel Klein and Mayor Michael Bloomberg's reorganization of city's education system—have student bodies in which less than 5 percent are ELLs. And despite a number of rulings saying that each school must provide services for ELLs, Ralph Antony's experience shows that it's perhaps only through family persistence and the intervention of advocates that many immigrant students are getting the services to which they are entitled. In March 2006, the Citywide Council on High Schools, a parent group, filed a civil-rights suit with the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Division, accusing the city's Department of Education of discriminating against ELLs and special-education students. The group is awaiting a determination in the case.

Ralph Antony and his sister Carla live with their aunt Michelle Xavier and cousins Thierry and Stephanie in a walk-up apartment south of Prospect Park. Devout Seventh-Day Adventists, they are very active in their church. Michelle is a cook at a Seventh-Day Adventist school, Carla (who is taking a semester off from York College) baby-sits for their pastor's children, and Ralph Antony attended a Seventh-Day Adventist high school in Port-au-Prince, where he learned some English.

While Carla and Michelle sat on a beige couch in their Brooklyn apartment and Thierry and Ralph Antony stood nearby, they related the tale of their

quest to get Ralph Antony into a high school, each picking up as the other left off and translating each other at times. Ralph Antony had carefully saved all his papers in a red-and-yellow DHL Express envelope, and Carla clicked on her cell-phone calendar to verify the dates on which things happened.

Parents and guardians of students who have recently arrived or who have moved into New York City are told to go to one of 14 enrollment centers. In August, the Xavier-Louissants took Ralph Antony to one that was then located at Clara Barton High School in Crown Heights. They were told to get him immunized, and when they returned a week later they were told that they needed to get the form notarized. They had waited all day, Michelle taking off the whole day from her job, bringing Ralph Antony, with Thierry, a senior at New Utrecht High School, there to translate.

"They didn't tell us anything about that before," said Carla, a striking young woman, wearing a red sweater with an American flag across the chest.

They returned on September 6 with the notarized immunization form in hand only to be told that the enrollment center didn't have his file anymore. They waited for a second worker, who also couldn't find his file. "She also told us that she had a problem with his report card," said Carla. "It was all in French."

Aren't they supposed to have translators? I asked.

"The lady who could read French was out to lunch," said Thierry, "and never came back."

In the third week of September, Ralph Antony was finally sent to the High School for Human Rights, one of the small schools in the old George Wingate High School.

"The told us there was no room for a 10th-grade ESL student," said Carla. The family traipsed back to the enrollment center.

The next day they were sent to the International High School at Prospect Heights in Crown Heights. One of the initiatives of the Klein administration is to increase to nine the number of international high schools across the city. These schools are designed for ELLs, and serve only them.

But despite being sent there by the enrollment center, they were told there was no room for Ralph Antony. The person who spoke to them suggested they try another small school in the building, the High School of Music and Theater.

There, Ralph Antony was asked if he could play an instrument. He had studied the piano for five years, so he was asked to audition.

He played "When the Saints Go Marching In" and what Thierry called "a little piece from Mozart," and was asked to sight-read another piece of music. "A guy watching said he was really good," said Thierry.

Yet when they got home, they were greeted with a message on their answering machine from the school's 10th-grade guidance counselor, who said they couldn't accept him because of his level of English-language proficiency. Had they given him an English test? No.

Back to the enrollment center. Thierry suggested the ESL program at New Utrecht High School, where he goes. The enrollment office said no. Carla had suggested John Dewey High School, where she had learned English, but again the answer was no.

On the advice of their pastor, Jude Lors, they tried one of the small schools at Erasmus Hall High School in Flatbush, where Lors knew someone. Again, they were told that there was no room. "We were upset," said Thierry, "but we kept going."

During one of their visits to the enrollment center, they had met Micheline Cadet Duval, a resource specialist at the Haitian Bilingual/ESL Technical Assistance Center (HABETAC) at Brooklyn College, one of the 14 bilingual-education assistance centers contracted by the New York State Education Department to help ELL students. Carla or her cousin Stephanie, a student at York College, would call Duval, keeping her abreast of what was happening.

"She told me that her mother couldn't take another day off of work," said Duval later. "It's crazy. You have a job and you also have to be a community activist as a job to get what you want."

Duval wrote a letter to the assistant principal of Clara Barton High School, which has a Haitian Creole bilingual program. "Ralph is being referred to you, hoping that Clara Barton can welcome him to the New York City public schools and address his academic needs," she wrote. And she accompanied Michelle and Ralph Antony to the school and waited to see the principal.

Finally, said Duval, the principal, Dr. Richard Foreman, accepted Ralph Antony into the school's Haitian Creole bilingual program.

"It was a match," says Foreman. "He was very personable young man. I'm a parent of a high-school student. I want my students to be treated the same way as my daughter." (Clara Barton, incidentally, is severely overcrowded. It has 2,200 students in a building built for 1,800.)

Is the relay race that the Xavier-Louissant family had to run typical?

Deycy Avitia of the New York Immigration Coalition says yes. "We know that there are dozens of schools that don't have any kind of program—bilingual or ESL—for English-language learners at all."

Bilingual programs are those in which students take ESL to learn English as well as having their other content-area classes like math, science, and social studies taught by a bilingual teacher who can move from their native language to English to ease the transition. ESL schools are those in which students, usually from a variety of countries and with many different languages of origin, learn English either in a self-contained class or in something called a "pull-out" (in which they are taken out of class for a period to learn English) or a "push-in" (in which ESL teachers come into the regular class to help ELLs). It's only the big schools, which generally have larger concentrations of students with one language background, that have bilingual programs—which is why the number of these schools is decreasing, as large schools are increasingly being closed. But the bigger question is not whether bilingual programs work better than ESL programs, but whether immigrant students are being served at all.

"As we are moving into a trend of more small schools," Avitia said, "we're seeing that there's no place for [ELLs]." In their joint 2006 report, "So Many Schools, So Few Options," the New York Immigration Coalition and Advocates for Children of New York found that "out of the 183 small

schools we analyzed, more than half (93) had less than 5% of ELLs in their student body."

Which means, according to Avitia, "we only have one or two [ELL] students and we meet with them 15 minutes before school starts. We don't have any other services for them."

Regarding Ralph Anthony, Melody Meyer, a spokesperson for the city's Department of Education, said, "What you're describing shouldn't happen." She went on to say, "I'm not going to speculate where the error occurred. If a school is sent a student from the enrollment center, the school should take him or her."

Advocates like Avitia say that the city's new small schools have gotten a pass on servicing both ELL and special-education students, the argument being that the difficulties in starting a new school are such that they need two years before they can begin to integrate those students. In response to the civil-rights suit and wide criticism, the Department of Education offered 10 small schools an extra \$30,000 if they put together a program serving ELLs and special-education students. Only seven schools applied for the grant, which would only pay for half a teacher.

"As a matter of policy, a school can't deny a place to an ELL student," said Meyer." But, she went on, "we don't want to send a student to a school that doesn't meet his or her needs. If a school can't support an ELL student, then their needs can't be met."

"It's not enough to say that 'we don't have a program,'" said lawyer and Brooklyn College School of Education professor David Bloomfield, a member of the Citywide Parent Council, which brought the civil-rights suit. "They need to have programs at the schools where the students want to enroll. Every school should have a program serving English-language learners, whether it's a bilingual or an ESL program. That's the law."

It's a bit like a chicken-or-egg situation, said Avitia, where schools wait until ELL students apply before setting up the programs, but until those students do they don't have those programs, so the schools can't accept the students. She feels that the new schools should have programs for ELLs from the beginning. "Unless you set up the program from the beginning, it's very hard to shift the culture of the school two or three years later," she said.

But, says the New York Immigration Coalition, the Department of Education should be doing more than that. The coalition's new report, which is expected to come out in late December or early January of next year, found that workers at enrollment centers weren't even aware of translated documents that they had available or that there are phone interpretation services available through the Department of Education, and that most centers didn't have a mechanism for identifying parents in need of interpretation services.

"The major problem is that the Department of Education is not monitoring and doesn't know which schools provide services," said Avitia, "and then the students are being sent back to the enrollment center. Or, worse case, they are keeping the students and not providing the additional services."

Not every family is like the Xavier-Louissants, who tenaciously kept going back and forth to the enrollment center, took days off of work and school, were lucky enough to find an advocate and reach out to her, and persisted until they got what they wanted: 16-year old Ralph Antony is now, as of October 1, going to high school.

"I'm happy," he said. "I'm with my family and going to school."