

## **STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE DUAL LANGUAGE PROGRAM ON THE UPPER EAST SIDE MANHATTAN**

My name is Agnès Ndiaye Tounkara and I am the program officer of the French Heritage Language program. For the past 15 years, our program has helped francophone and Haitian students make French an asset in their becoming new Americans. Our program, by using resources from the rich African and Haitian cultures, has given them, through the French language, a space to express their complex identities, access to the French AP and more recently to the Seal of Biliteracy.

Unfortunately, with access to only 10 high schools and in an after school setting, our impact is minimal. There are around 2000 students identified as French speaking students in NYC public schools and we know that this number is an underestimation as it is blind to the students' multilingualism; it only captures those who declare French as the language spoken at home, ignoring the majority of those who chose to list another of their home languages. They are immigrants or children of immigrants from Francophone Africa or Haiti and most of them attend schools where French is not offered.

The reality is that less than 7% of the heritage speakers in NYC have access to bilingual programs which means that the majority of them are asked to leave their home languages, thus part of their identities, at the classroom's door; therefore, they are denied the opportunity to leverage their cultural and linguistic assets in their schools' communities.

We must fight the perception that the French language is only for the French people; it is the language of the incredibly diverse francophone world, and the language of the African and Haitian students we serve.

For some of these multilingual students, French is a bridge to their own cultures and gives them access to the rich and diverse francophone cultures. It is also an incredible asset which prepares them for a global world and builds pathways to graduation and to college. For them and their families, more bilingual programs in French mean cultural pluralism and not cultural assimilation, it means earlier access to a Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education, better performances in English literacy, better graduation rates and an equitable access to a high quality education.

Agnès Ndiaye Tounkara

French Heritage Language Program Program Officer