

Language Opportunity

Massachusetts Language Opportunity Coalition

July 20, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

On June 15, 2020, President Trump signed an executive order to suspend H-1B, L-1, and J-1 work visas for skilled workers, managers, au pairs, international students, and visiting teachers.

The Issue

This executive order is directly counterproductive to the initiatives underway in Massachusetts (and other states) to bring highly-qualified teachers to the US on J-1 or H1-B visas to address high-need teacher shortages at both K-12 and university levels, and special linguistic expertise necessary for our bilingual programs. As of today, we are aware of two new exemptions that have been made for specific countries who held MOUs with states, for teachers to come. However, without full exemption for educators from other countries on whom we depend, this high need teaching shortage remains urgent. It will be impossible for many districts to comply with Massachusetts General Law Part 1 Title XII, Chapter 71A Section 2 and we fear many programs will not have qualified teachers without an exemption to this executive order. These teachers are essential. The temporary suspension of J-1 and H1-B visas depletes resources financially and educationally for our programs.

Most importantly, this federal executive order undermines efforts to teach the most vulnerable students in our state in a time of unprecedented uncertainty, further exacerbating educational inequities and, the urgent needs of students.

Background

Visiting bilingual, bicultural highly-skilled teachers on J-1 or H1-B visas are vital to requirements for legal, equitable, and rigorous educational opportunities for Massachusetts students. They bring specialized linguistic and educational expertise to bilingual program models (addressed in the LOOK Act of 2017) that cannot be replaced short notice by our current and forthcoming pools of teachers. This undermines programs now, and the longer-term strategy to increase our bilingual teacher pipeline.

Public schools have already done their due diligence to hire the best possible teachers on J-1 visas to meet the needs of their diverse student populations for the coming year. They have spent months preparing for the safe return of students to schools. These efforts have now been thwarted and schools now face an urgent, unrealistic time frame to address the teaching positions necessitated as vacant now due to the suspension of J-1 Visas. This occurs not only in the context of a high-need teacher shortage, with few to no alternatives, but also in the context of a global pandemic where districts are already planning in crisis mode and addressing existing inequities that have become even more devastating for many of our bilingual students and their families.

Our state, individual districts, and several embassies have worked together the past several months, as in past years, to assist in the recruitment and hiring of teachers on J-1 visas, who hold very specific and necessary depth of proficiency and literacy in different languages that our state's bilingual and world language programs depend on. This suspension of J-1 visas for teachers directly impacts schools'

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capacity to support multilingual students to meet our rigorous Massachusetts standards required for success.

With the Look Act of 2017, the educational system has been focused on building resources for bilingual education. Of top priority is a bilingual teacher pipeline, requiring both short and long-term strategies. Local, national, and international organizations and institutions have invested many resources in ensuring our students have teachers with deep linguistic and literacy skills in different languages. The suspension of J-1 visas for these teachers wastes resources that have already been invested in this planning and creates new legal issues and teacher quality issues which must be resolved by next month.

Help Requested

Without intervention and special exemption or consideration, districts have few to no options for hiring qualified teachers. Students' best opportunity for success right now is with teachers on J1 and H1-B visas because they possess deep linguistic competence. Schools who interviewed, hired and attended to the process and documentation necessary to bring teachers to the US legally, on these special skill visas are now left with a qualification, skill and knowledge gap that could force legally required programs for multilingual students to come out of compliance or to disband entirely due to the lack of qualified multilingual expertise. This order makes it impossible for many programs to comply with Massachusetts General Law Part 1 Title XII, Chapter 71A Section 2.

We request your immediate and urgent assistance for seeking a special exemption to the Executive Order for teachers coming to work on J-1 Visas in our public schools. We request that your office (possibly in partnership with other Attorneys General across state lines or legislators) please support our most vulnerable students by reviewing and pursuing this urgent issue.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

The Language Opportunity Coalition

The Portuguese Language Educator Pipeline and Resources Group

The following individuals and organizations have also signed onto this request: