

Newsday

English classes for immigrants decline

January 19, 2012

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The population of immigrant adults who don't speak English well grew by 12 percent on Long Island between 2005 and 2009, while those attending publicly funded language classes dropped by 25 percent, according to a new study released Thursday.

The decrease isn't because immigrants aren't interested in learning, the analysis by the [Center for an Urban Future](#), a New York City research institute that studies economic issues, concluded.

There just aren't enough classes for those who want to learn, study author Tom Hilliard said. It's a statewide trend that New York needs to reverse if it wants to harness the economic power of its fastest-growing population group, he said.

"Immigrants are a tremendously important economic engine," Hilliard said, "but lack of English proficiency holds them back from realizing their full potential as workers, as business owners, and as citizens."

The findings resonated with Yolanda Marca, a Patchogue resident from Ecuador who has enrolled in English classes over 11 years only to see them closed prematurely or moved to other locations, she said.

Not speaking English well has left Marca unable to ask for directions when she gets lost or help her

children with their homework, she said. And finding medical care requires someone to translate English to Spanish for her.

"I want to learn and better myself," said Marca, 36, who works in an auto parts factory. "I know that speaking English, I could have a better job and make everything better for my family."

The center combined data from U.S. Census Bureau survey results and English for Speakers of Other Languages enrollment figures from the state Education Department between 2005 and 2009.

Of 1.7 million New York adult immigrants who spoke English "less than very well," roughly 71,500 were enrolled in ESOL programs supported through a combination of state and federal funds, the report found. Of Long Island's roughly 181,200 adult immigrants lacking English proficiency, about 15,500 were enrolled in classes.

And while demand for language classes rose, state funding has remained flat, capped at \$96 million a year since 1995, according to the report.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo is keeping funding "at current levels despite the tough fiscal times which have resulted in budget cuts for many other programs," his spokesman Matthew Wing said.

Eastern Suffolk BOCES, which has one of the state's largest English language programs for adults, yesterday had a waiting list of 125 people while 1,400 were enrolled in classes, deputy superintendent Julie Lutz said.

"We certainly don't have a hard time filling our seats," Lutz said.

And immigrants like Marca are not giving up. She has enrolled in a new class that starts Monday.

Language barrier

1.7M: Number of NY immigrants struggling with English.

71,500: Number enrolled in ESOL programs.

181,200: Approximate number of LI adults immigrants not proficient in English.

15,500: Approximate number enrolled in classes.