



**Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Immigration Oversight Hearing:
The Demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages Programs Among Immigrant
Adults in New York City**

Testimony of Tara Colton, Associate Research Director, Center for an Urban Future

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Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Tara Colton and I am the associate research director of the Center for an Urban Future, a non-partisan policy institute that studies economic development, workforce development and other issues that are important to New York City's future.

I want to start by thanking Councilmember Stewart and the members of the Immigration Committee for holding this hearing, and for inviting me to testify. I want to commend the Council for its continued support of English-language instruction for New York's immigrants through the landmark \$9.25 million Immigrant Opportunities Initiative. I also want to commend Mayor Bloomberg for establishing and funding the Mayor's Office of Adult Education, and in particular, Anthony Tassi, for his commitment and forward-thinking around these issues.

Today's hearing shines a light on a critically important issue: are English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs for New York City's immigrants keeping pace with the growing demand? Unfortunately, across the city and state, the answer is a resounding no. Last fall, the Center for an Urban Future and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy released a report titled "Lost in Translation," which found that immigrants have been fueling population growth throughout the state, from Brooklyn to Binghamton, but the state-run ESOL program hasn't come close to keeping pace with the demand. Our report shows that even though the state's foreign-

born population has grown by nearly 1.3 million since 1990, adult ESOL programs administered through the State Department of Education added only 15,000 new seats over the same period.

This isn't a new problem, but it has gotten more serious in recent years, and New York City feels the pinch more profoundly than anywhere else in the state. There are nearly three million foreign-born residents in the Big Apple and the numbers continue to climb. In 2005, Brooklyn was home to 728,000 foreign-born adults; 59% of Queens adults were born outside of the U.S.; and Staten Island, long the least diverse of the boroughs, gained nearly 20,000 immigrants since 2000.

Coupled with this growth in immigration is a steady uptick in the number of New York City residents with limited or no English proficiency. Our report found that citywide, there were 1.23 million adults who spoke English "less than very well" in 2005, but fewer than 42,000 were enrolled in state-funded ESOL programs that same year, or 3.4% of those who could benefit. In other words, for every seat available, there were 33 potential bodies to fill it.

To drill down a little deeper, I want to share 2005 ESOL enrollment figures for each of the boroughs. One caveat, though – enrollment figures are based on the location of the agency offering services, not the student's county of residence. For instance, if a student lived in the Bronx but took a class in Brooklyn, they would be counted in the Brooklyn total. But enrollment figures do paint a good picture of how many students are being served in each borough, regardless of residence.

Brooklyn has the highest enrollment of any borough – approximately 20,000 people were enrolled in state-funded ESOL, but the borough was home to 343,000 working-age adults with limited English proficiency. In the Bronx, 2,600 people were enrolled, compared to 230,000 adults in need. Manhattan had 170,000 adults with limited English skills but served just 9,500 people. Queens had by far the largest number of adults who didn't speak English well – about 450,000 – but classes in the borough enrolled just 8,600 students. Lastly, Staten Island, which has a growing immigrant population, had just 750 adults enrolled, compared to the 38,000 who could benefit.

Again, I credit the Council for its work on the Immigrant Opportunities Initiative, but funding across the board is still astonishingly low – the state spent \$74 million on adult ESOL last year, which served just 5% of adult New Yorkers with limited English proficiency.

Unless action is taken, the huge gap between demand for ESOL and the services available will have serious economic and workforce development consequences. Today's immigrants must compete in a knowledge economy, and from manufacturing to home health care, there aren't many jobs available beyond the entry level if you don't have at least some English proficiency. Language barriers also hurt businesses: they reduce productivity and cause high turnover. Many businesses told us that ESOL is one of the most important workforce development issues they're facing.

While our report focused primarily on the changes that need to take place at the state and federal level, the city does have a major role to play in boosting the availability of ESOL for immigrant New Yorkers. There are several things the city could do.

First, funding for ESOL must be increased across the board. As much as the city has already done, the rising number of immigrants suggests that a larger investment in ESOL is an investment in our future. Expanding city funding for the IOI and other adult literacy initiatives would be an important start. The current level of funding, around \$9 million, is just a drop in a very large bucket and a sizable chunk of it doesn't even go to ESOL programs.

Secondly, city officials should press for additional state and federal funding for ESOL to help shrink the enormous gap between supply and demand. There are two state programs in need of major reforms – and the City Council and the Mayor could serve as powerful advocates for change.

The state's Adult Literacy Education (ALE) program funds ESOL, but its budget doesn't reflect the fact that more than 1.5 million new immigrants have entered the state since it was created 19 years ago. The Employment Preparation Education (EPE) program, which is the largest pot of state funds for ESOL, is rife with problems. EPE funds, which are allocated by the legislature,

cannot be used by libraries or community-based organizations to offer English language instruction. And an outdated funding formula shortchanges cities that need funds the most, including New York City, which receives substantially less for each instructional hour compared to large cities upstate.

Even with additional government funds, the system will still be severely under-funded relative to the need. The city's economic development agencies, especially the Department of Small Business Services, are our portal into the business community, and it's important for them to take action around these issues. They are increasing their focus on ESOL, but there is more that can be done. In partnership with local business groups, they should urge employers to provide funding and release time for their workers in need of English instruction. Employers could also guarantee wage gains for workers who participate in ESOL programs. The city and local intermediaries can also bring together small businesses that can't afford to provide these services on their own.

There are huge payoffs to English language acquisition – for workers, businesses and the city as a whole. The American dream has a higher barrier of entry for today's immigrants than their predecessors – but it's not unattainable. But if we don't increase investment in ESOL, it could have major consequences, and it's a risk the city can't afford to take.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.