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Help more immigrants learn English



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Since 1990, 1.3 million immigrants have come to New York state. They've bought homes, started businesses and revitalized communities from Syracuse to Schenectady — and Rochester. Of the Rochester area's approximately 60,000 immigrants, nearly half have come to the United States since 1990. From 2000 to 2005, Monroe County's foreign-born population grew by 8.8 percent, while its overall population actually declined.

Immigrants play an increasingly important role in the economic life of New York's communities. In today's knowledge economy, however, workers without English proficiency have few opportunities for advancement beyond entry-level jobs. More New Yorkers need to boost their English skills than

ever before, but far too few of them are receiving the services to do so.

In Monroe County, the state-run English for Speakers of Other Languages program hasn't come close to keeping pace with demand: Just 11.3 percent of the county's 18,239 adults with limited English skills were enrolled in state-funded ESOL programs last year. Statewide, there were only 86,433 seats for the 1.6 million adult New Yorkers with limited English proficiency, and long waiting lists for ESOL programs in dozens of communities.

Investing in English-language instruction offers payoffs for workers and employers alike. For immigrant workers, even a slight improvement in English proficiency can mean a higher paycheck or a promotion. For businesses, that same improvement increases productivity and reduces turnover. New York's competitive position increasingly will depend on getting its workers the skills that employers need — and failure to do so could mean businesses looking

to relocate or expand in the Empire State might look elsewhere.

Yet as immigrants become ever more central to New York's economic future, resources for improving their English language proficiency lag.

For example, the state's Adult Literacy Education program funds ESOL around the state, but its budget has failed even to keep up with the rate of inflation since it was first passed in 1988. Another problem is that Employment Preparation Education grants, the largest pool of state money that supports ESOL, are off-limits to many providers — including libraries, community colleges and community-based organizations.

Gov.-elect Spitzer and the state Legislature have a tremendous opportunity to chart a new course for New York on English-language programming. Broadening eligibility and putting more resources behind the literacy program are good first steps.

Local leaders can play a vital role, too, by providing supplementary funding for ESOL pro-

grams in their communities. As the third-largest city in the state, Rochester could set an example — and significantly boost that 11 percent figure — by providing local funds for ESOL instruction.

Finally, the business community also must step up. State officials and business leaders should urge larger employers to provide funding for their workers in need of English instruction, and jointly seek affordable ways to support ESOL for workers in smaller businesses.

For years, state and local officials have fallen short in their support for ESOL programs. Improving the English proficiency of our work force is an investment worth making — and not doing so invites a risk that New York state can't afford to take. □

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