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Broken English

■ There's a huge discrepancy between demand for immigrants' classes and the actual supply

BY TARA COLTON

The immigration debate is focused on flash point topics like driver's licenses for illegal immigrants, hiring halls and border fences.

But all the rhetoric and punditry obscures a crisis among immigrants themselves: the growing unmet demand for English-language instruction.

This is a crucial problem, because the more fluent immigrants are in English, the more they can contribute positively to society. This is a point that all sides of the immigration debate agree on. Making this improvement in the lives of millions of people living and working here has got to be as vital as deciding whether to punish them for how they arrived.

For business and government, it's also a matter of economic development. Boosting workers' English skills improves productivity, reduces turnover and helps growth.

In New York State, more than 1.7 million immigrant adults have limited English proficiency, yet only 5 percent are enrolled in state-run English for Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL, programs, according to figures from the State Department of Education and the U.S. Census. If this trend continues, the state faces dire economic consequences.

In an economy increasingly dominated by service and information jobs, only in a shrinking number of industries can a worker advance to the middle class without at least some command of English. Workers need English to communicate with supervisors, interact with customers and understand everything from computer databases to safety regulations.

Nowhere is the discrepancy between the supply and need for language classes more evident than on Long Island, where immigrants have been driving population growth at an astonishing rate. Experts predict that immigrants will constitute a growing share of the region's workforce.

But ESOL programs are filled to capacity and meet only a fraction of the need. In 2006, Nassau County had almost 90,000 working-age adults with limited English proficiency, but only 9,466 seats in state-administered ESOL classes. In Suffolk, nearly 87,000 have limited English skills, but only 12 percent were getting English language classes.

We know from enrollment in language classes that immigrants desperately want to learn English. Nassau County's Coordinated Agency for Spanish Americans, which links Latinos with government services, fills its English language classes in a matter of days — without any advertising. Nonprofit literacy providers like Literacy Suffolk and Literacy Nassau have people on waiting lists who number in the hundreds.

Plenty of anecdotal evidence shows that these programs work. Two years ago, for example, a Peruvian-born former computer programmer was stuck on the assembly line at Love and Quiches Desserts, a Freeport-based manufacturer. After he completed Freeport Adult Education's ESOL program, he was promoted to supervisor.

In the Long Beach school district, several women from Central America who were dentists in their home countries but worked in dead-end jobs here boosted their English and found jobs as dental hygienists.

Given the state budget deficit, it may be unrealistic to expect increased public funding for language classes in adult education programs offered by public schools and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services. But it should be possible to distribute funds more fairly. Under the Employment Preparation Education Program, areas like Long Island are shortchanged by an outdated reimbursement system that pays course providers according to a formula based on local property values. The more wealth a community has, the less funding it receives.

This 1980s-era legislation penalizes places like Long Beach, where it's hard for language class providers to break even, because they receive just $3.70 an hour to serve one student, compared to more than $9 an hour in Rochester and Buffalo.

Locally, elected leaders would do well to follow the example of New York City, which has poured more than $60 million into ESOL. Washington state's I-BEST program, which offers industry-specific ESOL classes, is the national gold standard. Boston has raised millions from the public and private sectors, boosting enrollment in publicly funded ESOL by 50 percent.

In the midst of a heated immigration debate that is likely to figure prominently in the presidential election, more people need to understand that English-language instruction isn't optional. It's an economic development benefit that's in all of our interests.

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Commentary/Op-Ed - December 2007

Immigrants Would Thrive With More English Classes

In this op/ed for *Newsday*, the Center's Tara Colton argues that the growing unmet demand for English-language instruction could have dire economic consequences for Long Island.

by Tara Colton

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