



English for New Bostonians: A Catalyst for Access to Good Jobs

“English programs are essential, not just for recent immigrants to engage in economic and social opportunities, but also for our great city to benefit from everything new Bostonians have to offer.”

– Thomas M. Menino, Mayor, City of Boston

Immigrants play a crucial role in the state and local economies. One in seven residents in Massachusetts and 1 out of 4 in Boston are immigrants, with 7% of the total population of the city having limited English skills (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2007). Immigrants represent a significant and growing percentage of the Boston workforce—29% in 2005—and their contributions have generated growth in both the state economy—where they represent 17% of the workforce—and population. In fact, without the presence of immigrants, the Massachusetts economy and labor force would have shrunk and the population would have declined between 2000 and 2005 (Commonwealth Corporation, 2006; MassINC, 2005).

Immigrant labor force participation increases with improved English language proficiency. Seventy-one percent of immigrants in the Commonwealth who speak English very well are active members of the labor force compared to 54% who do not speak English well and 45% who do not speak English at all (Comm. Corp., 2006). Despite the English language obstacles that exist for immigrants seeking work, in Boston the unemployment rate for immigrants is 7%, which is lower than the 8% for the native-born population (BRA, 2008). Accordingly, the importance of English language proficiency is not only access to jobs, but access to *good* jobs.

English language skills have become a “fault line” that divides those who prosper economically from those who struggle. Close to 75% of jobs in the Metro Boston area require at least medium-level English language skills, with this percentage projected to remain steady through 2014 (BRA, 2007). This means immigrants with limited English proficiency will have access to a narrow pool of jobs and may not have the language skills to fill higher-paying and benefited vacancies. Consequently, limited English proficiency has a negative impact on wages and access to benefits and career advancement.

The ability to speak English has a significant impact on both current and future earnings. Immigrants who speak only English have incomes 2.5 times higher than those who do not speak English well—\$38,536 compared to \$14,221 (MassINC, 2005). The ability to speak English also improves access to advancement opportunities and, therefore, increases future earning potential.

Improved English language skills provide access to management and professional-level jobs. Less than 8% of immigrants who are limited English proficient (LEP) in Massachusetts have jobs as managers, professionals, or technical workers, compared to 35% for native-born workers (MassINC, 2005). Even immigrants with high education levels require English language skills to access good jobs. An immigrant college graduate who does not speak English well earns about \$20,000 less than one who does. Despite 30% of immigrants in the Commonwealth and 15% in Boston holding at least bachelor’s degrees, they are underrepresented in management and professional-level employment (MassINC, 2005).

ESOL classes help create healthier and safer workplaces. Improved communication at work improves health and safety conditions and makes it more likely that employees will report unsafe or unhealthy working conditions (Occupational Health and Safety, 2006). Many ESOL classes, particularly those that are workplace-based, integrate worker health and safety into their curriculum (Massachusetts Worker's Roundtable).

Future employment projections highlight the economic importance of Boston investing in English language skills. The BRA estimates that the relationship between language skills, job availability, and wages will be even more pronounced in 2014 than it is now, meaning immigrants without English language skills will fall even further behind English-speaking workers. The low-language-skill sector of the Metro Boston economy will only grow 2% by 2014, while other middle and high-language-skill sectors will grow by a low of 6% for medium-low jobs and a high of 15% in high-language-skill jobs (BRA, 2007). To ensure that high-language-skill jobs are filled it is essential that the Metro Boston area invest in its LEP population.

Demographic projections emphasize the importance of investing in English language skills. According to projections, the growth of the Massachusetts population and labor force will continue to rely heavily on immigrants between 2005 and 2015 (Comm. Corp., 2006). Moreover, the retiring Baby Boomer generation will create a significant void in employment, thereby generating pressure on employers in Boston and across the country to fill job vacancies, particularly those with higher language-skill requirements. Immigrants will be critical not only to filling these and other jobs, but also to generating financial resources to support services and entitlements for retired Baby Boomers (BRA, 2007).

English for New Bostonians' (ENB) 24 ESOL programs serve adult immigrant populations in neighborhoods throughout Boston. One beneficiary of ENB is Quinley Miao, who—after taking classes at ENB-funded Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, Inc.—has received two promotions at Brigham and Women's Hospital. "If I didn't know English," says Miao, "I'd be in the same job and I would not be able to learn new things. Immigrants live in the U.S. We need a life here. We need to have a good job and good benefits to provide for our families, ourselves, and the future. English will enable you to do that."

English for New Bostonians is a public-private-community solution initiated by the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians that is committed to expanding the city's long-term capacity to meet the demand for English classes. ENB increases seats in ESOL programs across the city, supports innovation in the field to reach learners at home and at work, and helps to heighten awareness about immigrant and language issues among the public, businesses, funders and all levels of government.

To learn more, contact:

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