



English for New Bostonians: Investing in the Next Generation

Limited English skills present immediate challenges for adult immigrants and their families, including access to good jobs, citizenship, and the ability to fully engage in civic institutions. According to the MassINC's 2005 report, "The Changing Face of Massachusetts," 20.8%, or more than 136,000, of Massachusetts' adult immigrants have limited English-speaking skills. Unfortunately, the opportunities for learning English through ESOL classes in the Commonwealth are limited, with the demand for programming far outweighing the supply.

Parents' language barriers can also have longer-term implications for their children's education. In fact, researchers consider limited English proficiency to be one of the major obstacles to parents becoming involved in their children's education (Wong & Hughes, 2007). Parent involvement in schools, through parent-school interactions and participation at school functions, matters to a child's education outcomes. Children whose parents are involved in their education outperform children whose parents are not in academic, social, and emotional outcomes (National Center for Family Literacy). Among the outcomes on which children with involved parents perform better are grades, test scores, attendance, homework completion, positive attitudes and behavior, graduation rates, and enrollment in post-secondary education (American Educational Research Association).

Limited English skills also keep some parents from routine but important interactions with the school. Many parents stay away from school events where speaking English is required, such as parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school, and even reporting student absences. Some children—ashamed by their parents' lack of English skills—discourage their parents from attending school events and activities to avoid embarrassment (Illinois State Board of Education).

A critical area of learning for children takes place at home, but children whose parents speak only limited English may have fewer opportunities to engage in reading and other literacy activities. In Massachusetts, children in 114,000 families have a parent who cannot read to them and 264,000 have a parent who can read at a basic level, but has difficulty helping them with homework (MA Family Literacy Consortium). This is particularly concerning when research has shown that parent-child literacy activities, such as reading, are associated with emerging literacy skills and stimulate interest in books (NCFL).

Language barriers also hinder limited English proficient (LEP) parents as they try to navigate the health and legal systems, putting a burden on their children. Children must often help translate for their parents or relatives at medical visits, financial affairs, and other interactions, which puts undue responsibility on youngsters and poses ethical problems (e.g. sensitive medical, financial, or legal conversations). It can also take time from their school and other activities. When their parents are able to manage their own affairs, children gain.

Many LEP parents would like to become involved in their children's education, but cannot because of language barriers. In one study, a majority of LEP parents made initial attempts to communicate with their children's school but were unable to overcome the language barrier, and many schools also lack bilingual staff, translators, or interpreters to assist parents with limited English skills (Advocates for Children, New York Immigration Coalition, 2004).

The availability of ESOL classes for parents can help bridge the communication gap and remove major obstacles to parents' involvement in their children's education. One clear benefit of improved communication, literacy, and language skills is that parents become more involved in their children's education after participating in ESOL classes (Garcia, 2004). *Involving Immigrant and Refugee Families in their Children's Schools: Barriers, Challenges and Successful Strategies*, a report published by the Illinois State Board of Education and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Refugee Resettlement, listed adult ESOL classes for parents as one of its primary recommendations for involving LEP parents in their children's education.

English for New Bostonians' 24 ESOL programs serve immigrant parents of Boston school children. ENB programs help parents overcome communication barriers and become involved in their children's education. At one ENB program, Action for Boston Community Development, Inc. SouthSide HeadStart Adult ESOL Program, a majority of the 45 students enrolled in classes are married with children and list communicating with schools, helping with homework, and reading to their children as goals enrolling in ESOL classes. For the Thomas Gardner Extended Services School, a central part of the mission is to make the "strong effort to involve parents in their children's education and engage community members in the school environment."

Since starting ESOL classes at the Gardner School, Deni Barrios, the father of five children, has become a member of the parent council, helped with school beautification projects, and communicates more easily with his kids' teachers. "The Thomas Gardner School has helped me a lot, especially with the children," he says. "Now I understand a lot more because we all speak English... One success for me is that when the school principal tells me something about my children, I understand and don't need a translator."

English proficiency has also become an employment "fault line, dividing those who enjoy economic success from those who do not." According to MassINC's report, English language proficiency is associated with higher rates of employment and wages for adult immigrants in Massachusetts. These findings have a direct link to the educational outcomes for children in immigrant families, as higher family incomes have been shown to increase child achievement independent of other variables (Dahl & Lochner, 2005).

Improved child educational outcomes is but one of the numerous benefits of ESOL classes for adults. Investment in adult ESOL is essential to ensuring the success of Boston's next generation.

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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