



## English for New Bostonians: A Gateway to Citizenship

**“An ability to read, write, and speak English” is a requirement of U.S. citizenship.** While many obstacles lie in the path to naturalization, limited English proficiency poses a significant barrier for a large number of immigrants living in the U.S. who dream of becoming citizens and enjoying the social, political, economic, and other benefits of U.S. citizenship. In fact, citizenship is strongly linked with the ability to speak English (MassINC, 2005).

**English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction is an integral part of obtaining citizenship for many immigrants.** A series of focus groups consisting of organizations serving immigrant populations across the U.S., conducted by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, identified ESOL classes as essential to naturalization (USCIS, 2004). In addition to improving language skills, ESOL classes were a meeting place for immigrants from different backgrounds to socialize and exchange information and resources. The study also identified ESOL teachers as the “front line” for many immigrants’ questions about U.S. government, civics, and citizenship.

**Many immigrants are eligible for citizenship but do not have sufficient English skills to pass the examination.** According to The Urban Institute (2003), 60% or 3.5 million adult immigrants in the U.S. currently eligible for naturalization are limited English proficient (LEP). Forty percent report speaking English “not well” or “not at all.” Among those who are soon-to-be eligible, 67% or 1.5 million are LEP. In total, 5 million eligible or soon-to-be eligible immigrants need English classes before continuing on their path to citizenship and the rights it confers. In Massachusetts, over 337,000 immigrants are LEP (Migration Policy Institute) and, thus, likely need to improve their English language skills prior to becoming U.S. citizens.

**In 2002, only 61% of immigrants—179,000 out of 278,000— in Massachusetts who were eligible for naturalization had become citizens.** Among the primary reasons for the failure to naturalize was limited English skills (The Urban Institute, 2003). Other barriers to citizenship include low education level and low income, both of which are linked to English proficiency and can be positively impacted by ESOL classes and the access they provide to other resources. Nationally, only 13% of immigrants who arrived between 1990 and 2000 have become naturalized citizens (USCIS, 2004).

**Immigrant labor market participation, while already higher than in the general population, increases among recently naturalized citizens, especially women** (The Urban Institute, 2003). Naturalization helps remove obstacles to employment, particularly in the public sector, unionized jobs, and white-collar industries (Bratsberg, Ragan, Nasir, 2002), all of which can provide good jobs with family-sustaining wages, benefits, and access to career advancement.

**English proficiency also removes barriers to political and civic participation (Ramakrishnan, 2005).** Along with citizenship comes the right to vote. And, where translated ballots are not available, solid English skills help ensure that non-native speakers have equal access to voting and can follow technical directions. English proficiency also helps enable immigrants to engage in and access public and community resources. Increased English skills also increase immigrants' civic activity, including volunteering and other positive civic behaviors (MassINC, 2005).

**Strong incentives like accessible citizenship for immigrants is one way to ensure that the Commonwealth does not lose congressional seats.** Massachusetts is in danger of losing a congressional seat according to population estimates. If the historic trend of losing seats continues in the Northeast—12 lost since the 1990 Census reapportionment—and Massachusetts—4 lost since 1950—the state is in line to lose strength in funding and advocacy efforts at the highest level of government following the 2010 Census. Without the increase in the immigrant population in Massachusetts, the state would have lost population instead of the slow growth it has experienced since 2000 (MassINC, 2004).

**English for New Bostonians (ENB) programs help immigrants move toward citizenship.** At least 6 of 24 ENB-funded programs also have civics and/or citizenship classes, while many others incorporate the topics into their English classes. ESOL programs can serve as a gateway to both English language acquisition and citizenship-related classes and, ultimately, the benefits, rights, and opportunities held by U.S. citizens.

**The Irish Immigration Center is one ENB-funded program that helps immigrant learners gain the confidence and the English skills to apply for citizenship.** According to IIC's ESOL director Moira Lucey, "One student was in our ESOL class for a couple of semesters when she finally told me that she was studying so she could apply for citizenship. She had been in the U.S. more than 10 years, owned a restaurant, but felt her English was not good enough. We enrolled her in one of our citizenship prep classes and she recently called reporting she has passed the interview."

**English is a critical step in the path to citizenship.** "One of the biggest barriers for many immigrants who want to become citizens is their proficiency in English, not their interest in becoming a US citizen," says Lucey. "ESOL provides not only an opportunity for language development but so much more is incorporated into ESOL classes—information about social, civic, and cultural issues are so often the framework for learning language. For me you can't think about citizenship without thinking about ESOL as a necessary step in the preparation process."

**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 about ENB more, contact:**

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