

Commentary: English classes should be a company mandate and a state economic development strategy



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Feb 6, 2025

Updated Feb 6, 2025 10:01am EST

Regardless of where you stand on federal immigration policy, it is clear that immigrants, including individuals with limited English skills, will continue to make up a large part of our labor force. For Massachusetts companies, the rationale for expanding services that help these workers build their English skills is stronger than ever, and may prove a lifeline to companies retaining staff and remaining competitive. Fortunately, Gov. Healey and legislative leaders are laying the groundwork for long-overdue investments.

Across the commonwealth, some companies are benefitting from English Works Business Services, English for New Bostonians' successful model that combines customized English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) with skills training. Other

nonprofits and community colleges offer similar services. With more state support and a coherent strategy, we can effectively scale this and other highly effective programs to reach far more immigrants and businesses.

An Act to Promote Economic Mobility through ESOL, newly filed in the State House, would result in a comprehensive statewide strategy and additional resources to prepare recently arrived immigrants as well as other untapped workers for full participation in the workforce. Healey's inclusion of an additional \$30 million for ESOL in her budget over two years would kickstart this effort. These measures warrant businesses' full support.

MassINC's recent study, *Massachusetts Needs an Actionable Strategy to Expand ESOL Services*, reveals the urgent need to pass this legislation and act on the governor's budget request. The number of Massachusetts residents with limited English proficiency (LEP) has grown 50% over the past two decades. While we have developed innovative instructional models that cost-effectively increase labor productivity, resources to deliver these ESOL services have not kept pace. State funding per LEP resident is down 25% since 2001; federal funding to Massachusetts has fallen by 40% over this period.

Programs providing ESOL geared toward employment are even more scarce. Surveys and intake records have long noted that most immigrants seek ESOL to improve their job prospects, yet Massachusetts has few slots in programs designed to help them gain employment or perform more effectively at work.

If ever there was a time for a plan, it is now. Online learning and other innovations provide excellent new models to expand reach and improve service quality. The state's current ambitious workforce-preparation effort is allowing newcomers living in emergency assistance shelters to gain work authorization, learn English, connect to responsible employers, and secure jobs and housing. It works; more is needed.

Failing to shape a coherent plan will have major ramifications for economic competitiveness. One in 10 workers in Massachusetts now has limited English proficiency. The more English a worker acquires, the more productive they become. Studies consistently find ESOL generates large returns on public investment. MassInc's report showed that if we helped each working-age limited English proficient individual increase their English skills by just one level it would generate \$3 billion dollars in additional annual earnings.

The investment compounds intergenerationally: Parents who acquire English have a far easier time navigating systems and ensuring that their kids get the opportunities that they need to thrive.

Massachusetts' leadership on ESOL provides an opportunity to highlight for other states the positive impact of no-nonsense commonsense policies. By allocating new resources to proven ESOL programming and packaging it into a strategy with goals and

milestones, Massachusetts will ensure that immigrants can contribute at their fullest to our Commonwealth and that our economy will continue to grow. A clear strategy also will respond to what will surely be a call from business leaders for the state to provide relief, and an incentive for a jittery workforce to actually stay.

Our shared future depends on it.

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