



English classes for immigrants fall short of demand

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Mexican immigrant Olivia Moreno has lived in the United States for 14 years, but she still doesn't speak English well enough to communicate with her two American-born children.

"They speak to me in English, and I answer them in Spanish," said Moreno, who is in the country legally. Moreno illustrates a major challenge facing Arizona and the rest of the country. Immigrants, both legal and illegal, make up a large and growing share of the population, but the amount of resources being invested to help them learn English is far from adequate, experts say.

Without the skills to communicate proficiently in English, the nation's soaring foreign-born population is at risk of not fully integrating into society. And that could hurt the nation's economy.

"(English acquisition) makes them more productive. It pays for itself over time," said Michael Fix, vice president of the Migration Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.

The nonpartisan organization issued a report this month that found that spending on English instruction for immigrants falls far short of demand. The report estimated that \$200 million more should be spent on English instruction each year for the next six years to help legal immigrants gain enough English proficiency to pass the citizenship exam.

Learning English leads to higher earnings, which boosts tax revenues and lowers welfare usage, Fix said. It also helps immigrants communicate with teachers, health-care providers and landlords and is crucial to passing the U.S. citizenship exam, which opens the door to voting in elections and full participation in the community.

If illegal immigrants were factored into spending for English classes, as required under the legalization considered and rejected by the U.S. Senate this summer, it would add \$2.9 billion to the annual estimated cost of instruction. That is on top of the \$1 billion state and federal governments already spend annually on English as a Second Language instruction for adult immigrants.

The need is particularly acute in Arizona, where the foreign-born population is soaring but access to English classes for immigrants is shrinking.

The state's foreign-born population grew nearly 30 percent from 2000 to 2005. The nearly 845,000 legal and illegal immigrants in Arizona represent 14.5 percent of the state's population. Only seven other states have higher shares of immigrants. About 12.5 percent of the nation's population is foreign-born, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

As the state's immigrant population has grown, so has the demand for English classes. More than 14,500 people enrolled in English classes during fiscal 2005-06, the most recent period for which data is available.

But adult immigrants, legal and illegal, are finding that it is becoming increasingly hard to get into one of the government-funded classes offered throughout the state. Most classes have a waiting list to get in, some as long as two years. As of June, the total number of people waiting to get into an English class was 4,382, according to the state Department of Education.

Under Proposition 300, an anti-illegal-immigration ballot initiative passed by voters in November, undocumented immigrants are now barred from participating in government-funded English classes. During the first six months of this year, nearly 12,000 people applied for adult-education programs, including English classes. Of those, 1,403, or 12 percent, were denied instruction because they could not prove they were in the country legally, according to the Education Department.

What's more, the Education Department this year shifted funding from English classes to help pay for more adult-education programs for dropouts. That decision, however, was based on a federally mandated survey that showed that the need for adult-education classes for dropouts in Arizona was higher than for people with limited English skills, state Tom Horne, state superintendent of public instruction.

The state spends about \$14 million on adult education. About \$9.5 million comes from the federal government. In the past, about 60 percent of that money went to English-language acquisition classes. This year, that will be reduced to about 40 percent.

"This is the result of federal guidelines and not a decision that the state Department of Education made," Horne said.

Horne said he asked the state Legislature this year for \$2 million more to eliminate the waiting list for English classes, but the request was denied. The Legislature, however, did pass a bill that will allow government-funded English programs to charge fees to people who can afford them. The money will be used to reduce waiting periods. The fees could start in January.

Meanwhile, growing numbers of immigrants such as Moreno are seeking alternatives to learn English. She enrolled this month in Inglés Perfecto, a new English school that opened Aug. 1.

The school on Camelback Road near 19th Avenue is one of a growing number of English-language schools that have opened in the Valley to meet demand. There are at least four other English-language schools on Camelback.

"I want our community to learn English so they can participate fully in this society," said Irisdea Hawkins, president of Inglés Perfecto.

Students attend a three-hour English-immersion class twice a week. A 10-month program costs \$2,000,

which comes out to \$50 a week. The private school doesn't care about immigration status.

But Hawkins acknowledged that many immigrants can't afford the school's tuition.

"A lot of immigrants don't make much money, but they want to learn English," she said.

Moreno, a legal permanent resident who works as a mortgage broker, said she enrolled in the class to improve her English skills so she can pass the citizenship exam in four months.

Susy Martinez, 41, another student in the school, said immigrants such as her often lack the confidence to learn English out of fear of pronouncing words wrong or making mistakes. The large number of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the Valley, along with a proliferation of Spanish TV and radio stations, makes it easy to speak only Spanish, she said.

Martinez, a native of Agua Prieta, Sonora, has lived in the United States for 22 years and has been citizen since 1994.

But the beauty-shop owner said she still can't communicate comfortably with some of her English-speaking clients.

That's why she decided to enroll in the new school.

"I know my English needs to get better," she said. "I want to feel fully like an American."

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