

Why Massachusetts Is Investing \$10 Million to Boost English Learning

New funding supports immigrant success in jobs and community



Rosanna Marinelli

Jul 30, 2025



Gialesdi Navarro (Photo by Rosanna Marinelli/The Latino Newsletter)

Gialesdi Navarro came to Boston from Venezuela 15 years ago with a degree in accounting and business experience. However, amid political upheaval back home, her career stalled, and in the United States, the language barrier prevented her from starting over for a time.

“I didn’t speak a word of English for six months. Nothing. It was so hard, especially as an adult,” Navarro tells The Latino Newsletter. After fainting and hitting her head, she ended up in the hospital, terrified and unable to explain herself. A medical interpreter stepped in, and the relief was immediate. “Someone understood me and could speak for me. I thought. ‘I want to do this.’” That moment pushed her to stay, keep learning, and become that same source of comfort for others.

“It was powerful. I saw how much being able to communicate can change things,” Navarro adds.

While more than 30,000 Massachusetts residents like Navarro are currently enrolled in adult ESOL programs to learn English, many others never get that chance. Long waitlists, limited outreach, and a lack of information leave too many unaware that these programs even exist.

Pedro Rentas was one of them. When he arrived in Lawrence from the Dominican Republic in 2015, he was undocumented, didn’t speak English, and his first job was cleaning bathrooms. With no access to formal classes, he taught himself, using movie subtitles, music, and conversations with his partner’s English-speaking family. “We communicated with Google Translate at first,” Pedro laughs.

Learning English changed everything. He discovered MassReconnect, a state program offering free college to adults without a degree. He qualified, applied, and passed placement tests with high scores. Today, Pedro is a Branch Manager at Reading Cooperative Bank in Lawrence, has graduated with honors from Northern Essex Community College, and dreams of becoming an immigration lawyer.

Pedro’s story shows what’s possible, but also how much harder it is when someone has to learn English on their own.



Pedro Rentas (Photo courtesy of Northern Essex Community College)

The Healey-Driscoll administration recently dedicated \$10 million to expand access to adult ESOL programs across Massachusetts. This funding aims to help more residents gain the language skills they need to succeed in high-demand jobs, access career pathways, and fully participate in the state's economy.

These adult ESOL programs, like the one Navarro is taking, highlight the opportunities that can open up through language learning. When Navarro launched The Crafty Girls, her creative party business, she enrolled in a free YMCA ESOL course designed for immigrant entrepreneurs. The program helped her strengthen her business English, promote her work on social media, and pitch ideas with confidence—skills that helped her win the English For New Bostonians' 3rd Annual Immigrant Small Business Pitch and turn her project into a fully registered company.

“Immigrants don’t just come looking for opportunities. We come to create them. When we learn English, start businesses, and work with passion and preparation, we actively contribute to economic growth, cultural diversity, and the well-being of our cities,” Navarro says.

Massachusetts' \$10 million investment in workforce training programs, which includes career-focused English education, is funded through revenue generated by the **Fair Share Amendment**, a surtax approved by voters in 2022. The amendment adds a 4% tax on annual personal income over \$1 million, with the funds legally earmarked for education and transportation.

Organizations such as the International Institute, English for New Bostonians, and many others across the state play a central role in making these efforts a reality.

“People leave their families behind,” English for New Bostonians' Iván Justino says. “They need a place where they feel welcome, where they can gain skills, and move forward.”

In 2023, 42.6% of the state's foreign-born population of around 1,250,000 people over 5 years old **speaks** English less than “very well.”

While many Massachusetts residents support expanding English learning opportunities for immigrants, not everyone agrees with how these initiatives are funded. Resident Daryl, a native English speaker from Lawrence, voiced concern: “I’m not against people learning English. I think it’s important. But I don’t think it’s fair that I have to pay for it. The money should come from the private sector.”

For now, by combining new and existing resources, Massachusetts expects to deliver career-focused ESOL training to 3,000 to 3,500 residents and finally reduce the long waitlists that have delayed access to English classes.

“I don’t know if it was a coincidence,” Navarro says, “but my mom had been on a waitlist for over a year at the International Institute of New England. Right after they approved the funding, they called to say she could finally start.”