

English Works Campaign Survey Report: A Call for Cross-Sector Policy and Practice

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English for New Bostonians

Introduction

English for New Bostonians' (ENB) English Works Campaign advocates for greater public and private investment in Massachusetts' English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) system to benefit immigrant workers, the businesses that employ them and the Commonwealth. In July/August 2018, ENB conducted a statewide online survey to inform and update the Campaign's ESOL Policy Agenda.

Purpose and Core Topics. The Mauricio Gastón Institute analyzed survey responses related to resources, policies, and tools needed to promote the economic success of limited-English residents and their employers. This report summarizes findings across four areas of inquiry:

1. Business role: What is the role of businesses in offering ESOL classes and other English learning opportunities, and what challenges and opportunities affect partnership between employers/small business owners and ESOL providers in developing ESOL programming?

2. ESOL system responsiveness: Given the challenges faced by ESOL programs as they seek to address the needs of diverse immigrant/refugee constituencies, to what extent do survey respondents find the ESOL system on course, and what changes would boost responsiveness?

3. Funding for ESOL programs: What resources and policies would make the Massachusetts ESOL system more proactive in fully integrating immigrants into the state's economy?

4. Technology and ESOL: What are opportunities and challenges related to the role of technology in advancing ESOL adult education?

The survey elicited priorities from 91 members of the English Works Campaign Committee and other organizations that interact with limited English proficient (LEP) residents. These included 29 respondents categorized as community and/or workforce development organizations, 28 as ESOL providers, 15 as businesses and business groups, 14 as immigrant and advocacy organizations, and five as philanthropic groups. The survey collected input on needs for English instruction, benefits of improving English skills for



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immigrant workers and their employers, and strategies to boost ESOL access and effectiveness.

Context. Data from the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA)¹ illuminate the imperative to improve access to English instruction for the benefit of Massachusetts' workforce and economic vitality. A full 10% (528,324) of adults in the Commonwealth speak English "less than very well."² About 67% (352,607) of these LEP residents are in the labor force and stand to improve their economic well-being through English classes. Among all LEP workers, 80% are concentrated in eight occupations: Production & Transportation (20%); Building & Grounds (14%); Food Prep & Serving (12%); Healthcare Support & Personal Care (11%); Natural Resources & Construction (9%); Administrative Support (7%); and sales (7%).³

A 2016 English for New Bostonians survey⁴ of 1,500 ESOL students statewide also found that 77% of those employed worked in occupations that correlate to the industries identified by BPDA data. This clustering of limited English speakers into low-wage occupations factors heavily into the overall Massachusetts earnings gap: LEP workers earn an average of \$25,000 per year, 55% of what native English

speakers earn (\$45,000).⁵ In Boston, the gap is even wider: LEP workers earn an average of \$22,000 per year, or 38% of what their English-speaking counterparts earn (\$58,000).⁶ **Data overwhelmingly demonstrate the impact of English skills on earnings.**

The need for policy that specifically addresses the importance of immigrants' English and workforce skills, and employers' explicit role in developing these skills, is timely on the local, state and national stage. Not only is the current tight labor market compelling employers to invest more thoughtfully in recruitment and retention but, as the BPDA notes "*In the absence of explicit national public policies aimed at integrating newcomers, the workplace has been the most important immigrant-integrating institution.*"⁷

Key Findings

Primary impediments to LEP adults improving their English skills include: 1) inadequate public and private investment in ESOL at state, regional, and local levels; and 2) ESOL students' childcare needs and inconsistent work schedules. Other key barriers include ESOL program waitlists, transportation, and a shortage of classes tailored to low English levels and to specific educational attainment levels. Correspondingly, respondents identified an expanded employer role as critical. They also called for increased public dollars funding as a core solution at every

¹ Kim, C. (2018), Demographic Profile of Adult Limited English Speakers in Massachusetts, Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA). Available at <http://www.bostonplans.org/research/research-publications?search=english&sortBy=date&sortdirection=DESC>

² Kim, C. op. cit. Page 1. For the context of this report, individuals are considered "limited-English speakers" if they respond "not at all," "not well," or "well" to the U.S. Census when asked if they speak English.

³ Kim, C. op. cit. Page 10, Table 3 (Author computations.)

⁴ English for New Bostonians (2016). Talking Jobs: Lessons from ENB's 2016 ESOL Student Employment Survey. Boston.

⁵ Kim, C. op. cit. Page 11.

⁶ <http://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/73239d8c-07de-48ac-9f9c-a150282b8a4b>

⁷ Boston's Immigrant Labor Force. Socio-Economic Characteristics and Economic Integration. Boston Planning & Development Agency Research Division, January 2018. P 5

step of ESOL program administration – from reducing waitlists to increasing offerings for students at diverse educational starting points, plus business content embedded in ESOL for entrepreneurs. Respondents also said both employees and employers need incentives – such as affordable childcare for students, and reimbursement to employers to cover shifts while workers attend classes.

A full 92% of survey respondents agreed that the private sector should play a role in ensuring opportunities for LEP workers to improve their English

a. Employers' Role in ESOL Design, Development and Availability

Survey results reflect close alignment between respondents' views and the aims of the English Works Campaign, i.e., workplace ESOL as a key strategy to improve employees' English skills. As shown in Figure 1 on the following page, respondents agreed that workplace English programs hold several benefits for businesses. In turn, a full 92% agree that the private sector should play a role in ensuring opportunities for LEP workers to improve their English. Eighty percent of respondents ranked "Offer workplace

ESOL" and "Provide incentives for workers who complete ESOL training" as first and second among opportunities employers can offer. Interestingly, "Provide consistent schedules" ranked third. Predictable schedules would likely have far-reaching benefit for those balancing multiple jobs, education, and family responsibilities.

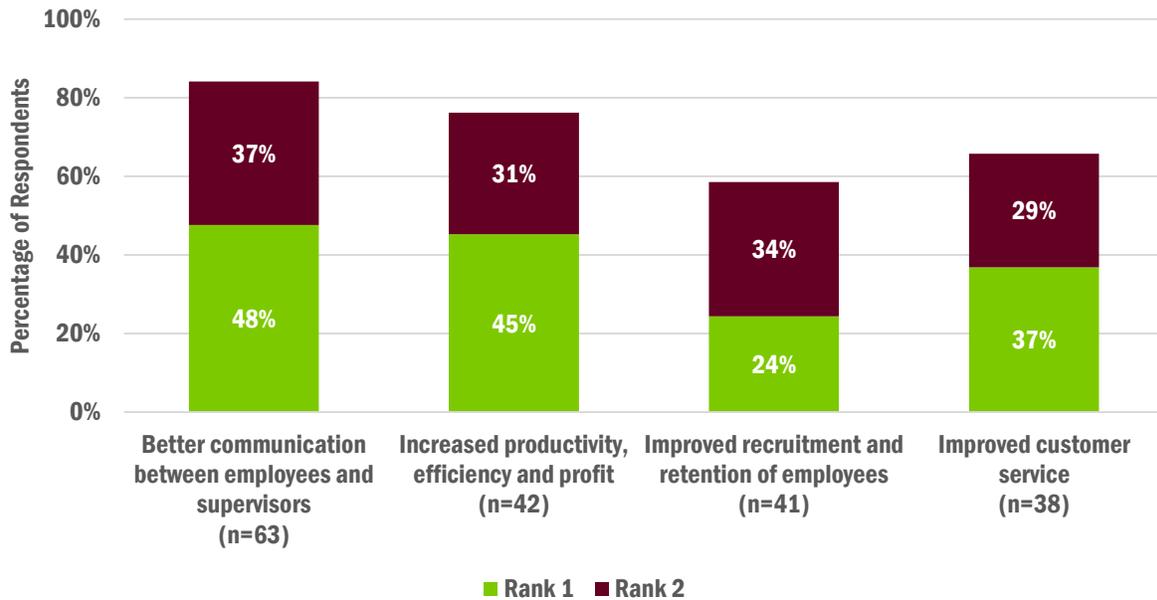
Survey participants also called for workplace ESOL programs that closely align with particular job qualifications and that integrate industry-recognized credentials. This is significant because 44% of respondents were businesses/business groups or community/workforce development organizations that see first-hand the needs of both English students and the business community. With a workforce that is clustered in seven main industries, lead firms in these industries could leverage resources to offer such ESOL programs.

"[Companies should] allocate a percentage of their training/professional development budget for ESOL instruction that is proportional to the number of limited English speakers they employ. This money can then be used to fund ESOL programs in a number of ways."

-ESOL provider respondent

Primary obstacles to implementation of workplace ESOL include lack of awareness among businesses of both public funding for employee training, and of existing industry-customized ESOL offerings. These obstacles point to the need for improved outreach to inform businesses that they can partner with ESOL programs to access funding and to develop programming tailored to sector and company (including small business) needs.

Figure 1: Survey Responses. How might a workplace benefit from offering English classes to its employees? (Rank top 3 most beneficial) (N=97)



A significant share of respondents also felt that recent federal immigration policies are preventing businesses from offering English classes. Several respondents addressed the current climate of fear among immigrants as a thorn in the side of adult ESOL classes; further inquiry would be useful in understanding employer views and behavior on these issues.

b. ESOL System Responsiveness

Survey participants overwhelmingly feel that Massachusetts’ ESOL system overlooks the layers of complexity—varied educational backgrounds and English levels, fear of exposure in an anti-immigrant political climate, etc.—among diverse and underserved populations. They noted that the State’s ESOL quality standards fail to address these complexities; funding shortages simply exacerbate the problem.

It is telling that lack of childcare is seen as one of the top barriers to LEP parents

improving their language skills. External yet critical obstacles such as childcare and transportation, in fact, make the difference in whether students can ultimately access and stay in English classes long enough to improve their skills and employability.

“People have very full lives working, having families, running businesses and ESOL classes fall off the radar quickly. I believe ESOL needs to be integrated into workplaces, workforce training and business development opportunities, etc., so that it isn't yet another thing that families have to juggle.”

-Advocacy organization respondent

With immigrants almost twice as likely as native-born residents to become entrepreneurs, ENB’s survey asked how to best meet their needs. Respondents overwhelmingly felt that customized classes that integrate ESOL and business

development training would help LEP small business owners and employees advance.

c. Funding Issues

Not surprisingly, improving the level and process by which state ESOL funding is distributed is viewed as a critical public policy measure that will address numerous issues limiting Massachusetts' ESOL system. FY19 and projected FY20 increases may begin to ease some of the significant strain on the state Adult Basic Education (ABE)/ESOL system, but a significant mismatch between demand and supply remain. Respondents identified service gaps based on geography, scheduling, and technology-based ESOL offerings, and also called for child care subsidies and employer incentives to offer ESOL. Many emphasized fundraising demands on ESOL providers as a critical issue.

“The talents and skills of limited English speakers in Massachusetts remain untapped and wasted because of inadequate funding for ESOL programs.”

-ESOL provider respondent

Funding also is called for to broaden program offerings and address diverse educational and English levels, plus tech-based options. The gaps are perceived as statewide rather than regional issues. Correspondingly, 79% of respondents said the dearth of politicians who support services that benefit immigrants is a significant obstacle to ESOL access.

d. Technology Solutions

When asked “What prevents limited English speakers in your region from accessing classes?” 70% of respondents named lack of online/technology-based ESOL classes. In addition, 82% said that accelerated ESOL courses using

online/tech-based tools would encourage more businesses to get in the game. At the same time, respondents seemed to eschew a single innovation—say, online instruction—as a solution to improve ESOL offerings without implementation of a whole ecosystem of support.

Respondents mainly called for tech implementation that augments learner access; ESOL staff professional development; and hardware investment. The implication, however, appeared to be that statewide conditions are not ripe to make full use of technology as a way to strengthen outreach and quality of current ESOL offerings. While tech solutions are highly promising, there is also a need for a better understanding of technology assets and needs across immigrant communities and demographics, and of appropriate and affordable tech-based options across the state.

“Adopt a statewide technology-based solution for learning English and make it free to all residents.”

-Business respondent

Preliminary Recommendations for the English Works Campaign Policy Agenda

Recommendation 1: Identify and remove barriers to participation of businesses and employees in high-quality workplace ESOL classes.

- **Promote statewide awareness, aimed at business decision-makers,** highlighting evidence of investment returns related to workplace ESOL. Collaborate with local chambers of commerce and business industry groups across sectors to raise private funding for workplace ESOL.
- Research and implement best practices for ESOL instruction that **integrate industry-specific content** and that combine ESOL instruction with other on-the-job training.

Recommendation 2: Enhance system responsiveness to ESOL needs via diverse program offerings.

- Identify and disseminate best practices for ESOL instruction that **broaden implementation of offerings targeting diverse constituencies,** including LEPs at low English levels, those with little formal education, those with foreign credentials, and small business owners.

- Educate politicians and their constituencies about mutual benefits of ESOL system improvements to LEP residents as well as to the state's businesses and the overall economy.
- Work with ESOL programs and employers to **increase understanding of the impact of federal immigration policies** on immigrant adult students/workers, workplaces that employ LEP workers, and education and training opportunities.

Recommendation 3: Increase state budget line item for ABE/ESOL to enable more geographic and scheduling options, more workplace opportunities, and other supports for LEP residents who need ESOL classes.

- **Elevate workplace ESOL to the advocacy platforms** of adult education, workforce development and immigrant rights organizations.
- **Explore financial incentive mechanisms for employers** to cover shifts while employees take ESOL classes.
- **Increase access to state-subsidized childcare programs** as a way to allow parents to attend ESOL classes.

Recommendation 4: Promote accelerated and other specialized ESOL classes using online or other technology-based instruction methods.

- **Evaluate technology assets and needs relevant to ESOL**, across immigrant communities.
- **Establish a cross-sector, state-level taskforce** to evaluate challenges and opportunities for developing technology-based solutions to unmet ESOL needs.
- **Work with for-profit, non-profit, and tech sectors** to encourage legislators to allocate public funding for online and other technology based ESOL solutions, including for small business ESOL.
- **Educate stakeholders about the need for technology-based options** to better meet the language and business needs of LEP small business owners, aspiring entrepreneurs, and employees.

About English for New Bostonians

ENB creates opportunities for immigrants to learn English and pursue their educational, economic, and civic aspirations. We are an activist grant-making organization that funds and augments quality and capacity among 20+ ESOL programs that provide free or very low-cost instruction to over 1,100 immigrants each year. ENB conducts community and policy research and shares it with ESOL programs, policymakers, funders, and employers.

Through our English Works campaign, ENB elevates immigrants' own voices among employers, community leaders, students, unions, and educators to advocate for greater public and private investment in English language learning programs.

About the Gastón Institute

The Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston has conducted research on and for the Latino population in New England since 1989. Our goal is to generate the information and analysis necessary to develop more inclusive public policy and improve Latino participation in policy-making.

Report Preparation

English for New Bostonians (ENB) staff designed and administered the survey. The Gastón Institute standardized post-survey data, prepared tables, and conducted analyses, including a rigorous qualitative data analysis of open-response survey questions. The writing of the report, including the drafting of conclusions and policy recommendations, was a joint effort by the Gastón and ENB teams.