

# CENTRAL NEW YORK'S NEW WORKFORCE

Our survey of the region's businesses finds that 40 percent employ workers with limited English proficiency; upgrading their language skills will be key for local businesses and the area's future economic growth

Until recently, gaps in English language proficiency of the workforce in Central New York were not a major concern of local employers. But that has changed dramatically in recent years as immigrants comprise a rising share of the population and workforce in Syracuse and throughout Central New York. Our survey of 126 businesses across Central New York finds that 40 percent of respondents currently employ workers with limited English proficiency, a surprisingly high figure. Even more astounding, a whopping 68 percent of firms with limited English proficient workers indicated that the English language skills of their workforce are very important to the success of their company.

Conducted in late 2008 in partnership with the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce and the Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce, this is the largest survey ever taken of Central New York businesses regarding the English language skills of the area's workforce. The online survey was emailed to several hundred local businesses and we received 126 responses, from businesses in industries ranging from construction and health care to wholesale trade and manufacturing. In total, 51 businesses reported that they employ workers with limited English proficiency. While a number of respondents said that this was not a major issue, at least one business in every sector we surveyed—except one (retail)—reported that the limited English skills of their workers had an impact on their operations.

The results of our survey suggest that the region's competitive position will increasingly depend upon getting its newest workers the English language skills that employers need.

The survey results underline the demographic changes that have been underway in Central New York for more than a decade. Indeed, there's little doubt that Central New York is an area in transition. As the once-robust manufacturing industry, which long sustained the local economy and employed thousands of area residents, continues to shed jobs, industries like health care and education—in which pay tends to be lower—have emerged as the area's main economic drivers. The population is shifting as well, with native-born young people leaving and a rising number of immigrants and refugees moving to the region. Onondaga County, which includes the city of Syracuse, experienced a two percent decline in overall population between 1990 and 2000, but its foreign-born population jumped by more than 20 percent during this period.<sup>1</sup> In 2007, fully seven percent of working-age adults in the county—nearly 20,000 residents<sup>2</sup>—were foreign-born. Another 10,000 immigrant adults live in nearby Oneida County,<sup>3</sup> while 1,200 immigrant adults call Herkimer County home.<sup>4</sup>

These new arrivals have added vitality and drive to a community somewhat adrift in the post-industrial economy. However, limited English skills present a major roadblock both for workers looking to advance their careers and for businesses trying to boost productivity and reduce turnover. Similar to other regions across the state, only a fraction of Central New York residents with limited English proficiency are currently accessing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs.

Over 10,000 immigrant adults in Onondaga County—more than half the total—have limited English proficiency.<sup>5</sup> Yet as of 2007 there were just 1,277 people<sup>6</sup> enrolled in publicly-funded classes in the county, a huge unmet demand. Oneida County has nearly 7,000 adults with limited English proficiency but only 635 were enrolled in classes; in Herkimer County, a mere 14 of the almost 600 residents in need of English language instruction took part in state-funded classes.<sup>7</sup>

"With the ever-growing population of immigrants in our community, the need for English language skills training is also on the rise," said Darlene Kerr, president of the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce. "These immigrants and refugees have a solid work ethic and helping them to better grasp the English language, both verbal and written, will prepare these current and future employees for a long-term career with opportunities for promotion and pay raises. We need to look at this population as an asset to our business community and language training as an investment in our economy." The ability to communicate with co-workers, supervisors, and the public is perhaps even more important in the social service fields where Central New York has added jobs in recent years. A 2007 study of the immigrant and refugee workforce in the Syracuse area found that while "employers who hire these newcomers generally praise their industriousness and loyalty and often rely on this cohort to fill critical entry-level positions...[there is] a mismatch between the skills employers require and the skills the newcomers present," and cited limited English skills as a major barrier to employment.<sup>8</sup>

Our survey demonstrates that the issue of limited English language proficiency presents a growing challenge for local and state economic development officials, particularly in areas like Central New York. While the findings of our survey do not represent the attitudes of every business in the Central New York area, they do show a major gap between the demand for English language instruction and the awareness and usage of existing services among local employers. Employers also may not realize that English language instruction programs can be tailored to the specific needs of their sector or busi-

ness. The full survey results are detailed later on in this report, but several key findings stand out:

### English proficiency and the local workforce

- Forty percent of Central New York businesses that responded to the survey currently employ workers with limited English proficiency.
- More than two thirds of businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency indicated that the English language skills of their workforce are very important to the success of their company.
- About a third of businesses reported that they have seen an increase in the number of job applicants with limited English skills over the past five years.
- Approximately half of the businesses surveyed have hired workers with limited English proficiency.

### Impacts of limited English proficiency

- Among businesses reporting that limited English skills had impacted their day-to-day operations, the responses echoed our past research, which has shown that limited English skills among the immigrant workforce aren't just a barrier for low-wage employees—they have major economic consequences for the businesses that employ them. Indeed, employers said that limited English proficiency had an impact on their business' productivity and led to more safety issues, higher staff turnover rates and increases in costs.

### English language instruction programs

- The Central New York area has several programs that serve adults with limited English proficiency, including the local Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), nonprofits like the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees and a contextualized workplace literacy program run by the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce and funded through the New York State Department of Labor. But among businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency, only 21 percent of respondents reported high awareness of these programs.

Thirty-four percent indicated that they were somewhat aware, and about a third—33 percent—were unaware of the programs' existence.

- Thirty-three percent of firms with limited English proficient workers reported having used local ESOL programs, and indicated that they were generally satisfied with the training.
- When asked if they would take advantage of a vocational ESOL program for employee training, 39 percent of businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency responded that it was very or somewhat unlikely that they would do so. The main reasons were lack of awareness of existing programs, no interest from employees, a failure of programs to focus on relevant skills and the sense that programs weren't at a convenient time or location.
- Asking a business to pay for the full cost of training their workers is a big commitment, especially in today's economy, but it is encouraging that among all respondents, more than two dozen businesses said they would be willing to offer training on site. Another 15 said they would offer compensated release time, paying workers for the hours they spend in classes, while ten said they would be willing to share the cost of training.

This survey is part of the Center for an Urban Future's long-standing effort to document the growing role that immigrants play in the state's economy and workforce. The Center has written extensively about these demographic trends and highlighted the enormous unmet demand for state-funded ESOL programs in communities across New York. We have called upon state leaders to acknowledge this shortfall and devise ways to increase the number of English language programs. In some New York municipalities, the local government has supplemented meager state funds for English language instruction by investing local tax-levy dollars into ESOL training. But even with additional government funds, the system will still be severely under-funded relative to the need, so we have also urged employers to provide some funding, release time and guaranteed wage gains for their workers in need of English instruction.

The Center for an Urban Future is a New York City-based think tank dedicated to independent, fact-based research about critical issues affecting New York's future including economic development, workforce development, higher education and the arts. For more information or to sign up for our monthly e-mail bulletin, visit [www.nycfuture.org](http://www.nycfuture.org). The Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce is the largest business organization in Central New York, representing more than 2,200 businesses of all sizes and from virtually every industry and profession in the area. For more information, visit [www.syracusechamber.com](http://www.syracusechamber.com). Founded in 1896 as the Utica Area Chamber of Commerce, the Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce continues to be the area's regional Chamber of Commerce, representing this community for over 112 years. For more information, visit [www.mvchamber.com](http://www.mvchamber.com). The Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy is a statewide, nonprofit policy analysis and advocacy organization working to shape policies that improve the economic security and health of low and moderate income New Yorkers, and help all children become capable adults. For more information, visit [www.scaany.org](http://www.scaany.org).

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## Section I: Demographics

### Years in business

(123 responses)

Number of years in business	Number of responses
100 to 200 years	15
50 to 99 years	36
25 to 49 years	26
10 to 24 years	27
1 to 9 years	18
Less than 1 year	1

### Number of employees

(120 responses)

Number of employees	Number of responses
1 to 10	40
11 to 24	20
25 to 49	10
50 to 99	22
100 to 249	13
250 to 499	6
500 to 999	5
More than 1,000	4

### Industry Sectors\*

(126 responses)

Sector/industry	Number of responses
Professional & Business Services	20
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	15
Manufacturing	14
Health Care	13
Education	11
Wholesale Trade	10
Construction	8
Non profit	8
Hospitality, Leisure, Recreation	5
Retail	5
Not sure	5
Engineering, Architecture, Accounting	4
Human services	4
Government	2
Transportation, Utilities	2

\*Respondents could also select "other" and write in their own industry/sector.

### Zip codes

(126 responses)

Zip code	Number of responses
13501	21
13502	20
13202	15
13413	7
13212	6
13057	5
13088	5
13204	5
13203	3
13207	3
13323	3
13403	3
13209	2
13214	2
13340	2
13440	2
13495	2
13027	1
13053	1
13077	1
13104	1
13126	1
13152	1
13206	1
13208	1
13210	1
13211	1
13220	1
13350	1
13407	1
13424	1
13480	1
13491	1
13503	1
13504	1
13507	1
14623	1

### Notes on Survey Methodology

Survey respondents were not required to answer every question, and we have indicated how many responses were received for each question. If a response was not complete or quantifiable (i.e. if a respondent wrote "many" for the number of employees), we eliminated it from the results presented here. Please note that this survey employed "skip logic," which directed survey respondents to certain questions depending on their answers to a previous question. For instance, if a respondent indicated that they had used vocational English programs, they would skip the question that asked about reasons for not taking advantage of the programs, as it was not applicable. Please also note that for some questions, respondents were able to select multiple responses, and we have indicated those accordingly. Finally, while respondents were given the option to write in their own responses for some questions, we are not listing those responses, as they are considered confidential. Survey responses were collected between November 3 and November 20, 2008.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey. In 2007, there were 19,950 foreign-born individuals between the ages of 18-64 in Onondaga County.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. In 2007, there were 9,994 foreign-born individuals between the ages of 18-64 in Oneida County.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. In 2007, there were 1,230 foreign-born individuals between the ages of 18-64 in Herkimer County.

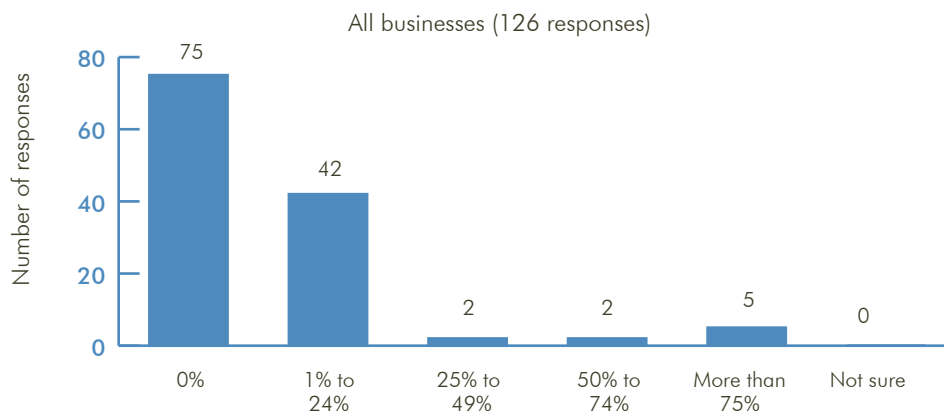
<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.

<sup>6</sup> New York State Department of Education. Represents enrollment in programs administered by New York State Department of Education: WIA Title II, EPE, WEP and ALE.

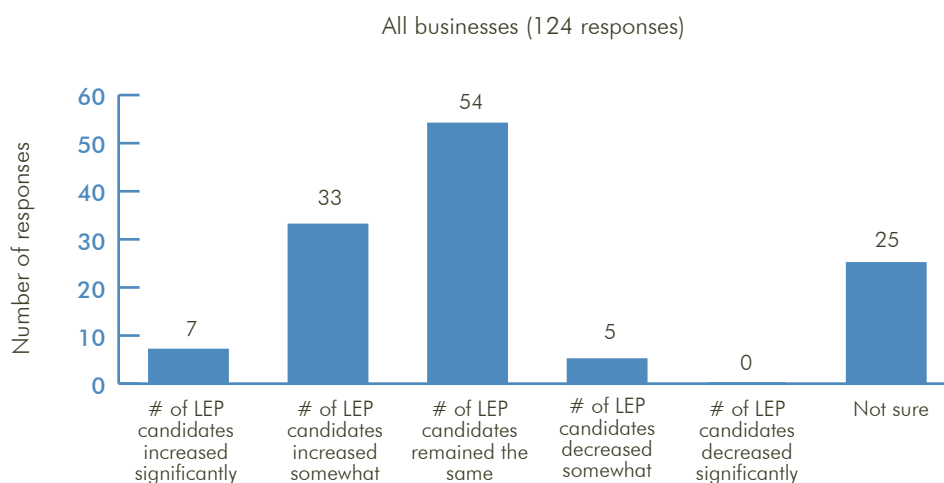
<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey and New York State Department of Education.

<sup>8</sup> Maralyn Edid, "Bridging the Gap: Training Needs Assessment of the Immigrant Workforce in Onondaga County, NY," Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations, June 2007.

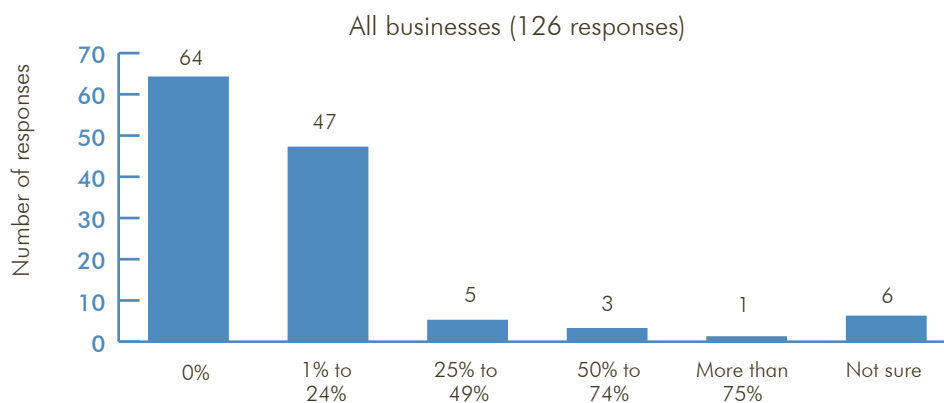
What percentage of your current workforce has limited English proficiency?



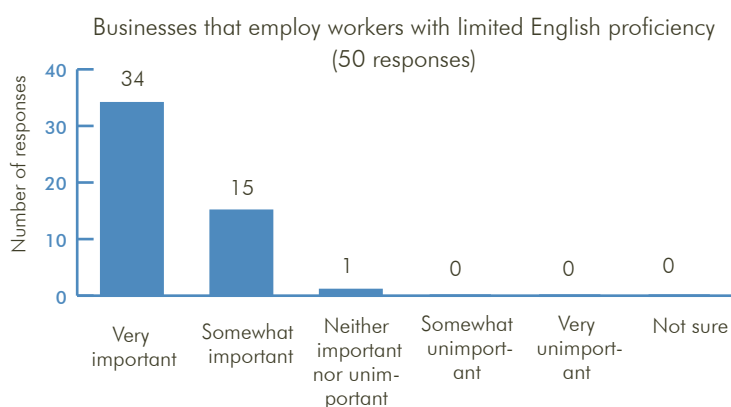
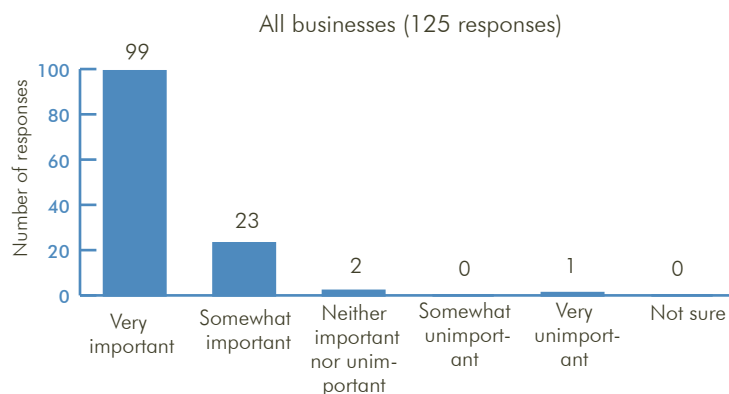
Which of these statements best describes the number of potential employees (people who have applied for jobs) with limited English proficiency (LEP) at your business over the past five years?



Looking back at your TOTAL hires over the past five years, what percentage of them had limited English proficiency?



How important are the English language skills of your workforce to the success of your company?



How has hiring employees with limited English proficiency impacted the day-to-day operation of your business? Please check all that apply.\*

Businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency (50 responses)

Impact	Number of responses
Decreased my level of productivity/daily output	10
Increased safety issues	9
Increased my level of productivity/daily output	7
Increased costs	6
Increased the rate of staff turn-over	4
Decreased my ability to meet deadlines	3
Increased my ability to meet deadlines	3
Decreased the rate of staff turn-over	3
Decreased safety issues	2
Increased my ability to bid on contracts	1
Decreased my ability to bid on contracts	1
Decreased costs	1
Not sure	5
None of the above	14

\*Multiple responses allowed. Respondents could also select "other" and write in their own response.

How has hiring employees with limited English proficiency impacted your long term plans for your business? Please check all that apply.\*

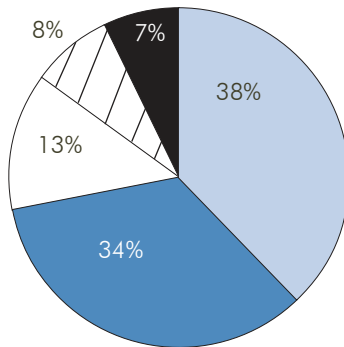
Businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency (44 responses)

Impact	Number of responses
I have gained ground on competitors	7
Increased expansion efforts	5
Prevented me from promoting from within	5
Prompted me to consider expanding/venturing into other markets	3
Prevented/slowed expansion efforts	2
Aided me in promoting from within	2
I have lost ground to competitors	0
Aided me in making necessary equipment upgrades	0
Prevented me from making necessary equipment upgrades	0
I have considered relocating my business outside of the Central New York region	0
Not sure	4
None of the above	27

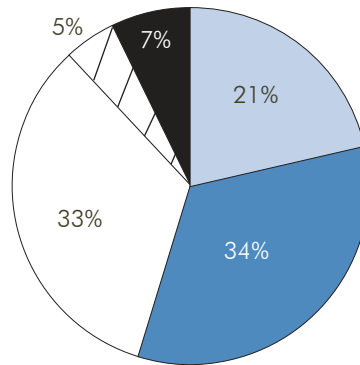
\*Multiple responses allowed. Respondents could also select "other" and write in their own response.

Is your company aware of free or low cost programs and services available to provide your employees with vocational English skills training?

All businesses (105 responses)



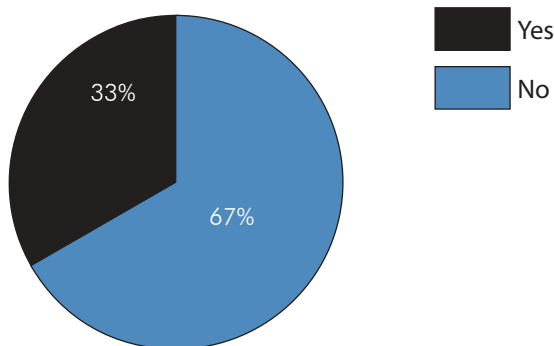
Businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency (42 responses)



- I am very aware of these programs
- I am somewhat aware of these programs
- I am not aware of these programs
- None of the above
- Not sure

Have you used these programs?

Businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency (24 responses)



If you have not taken advantage of a vocational English program, what are the reason(s) for not doing so? Please check all that apply.\*

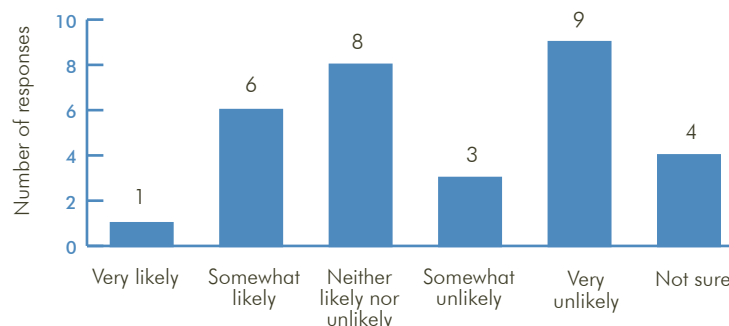
Businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency (25 responses)

Reason	Number of responses
Unaware of existing programs	6
My employees weren't interested	6
Programs aren't convenient	3
Programs aren't focused on relevant skills	2
Programs are too expensive	1
Don't want my employees missing any work	1
Not sure	3
None of the above	8

\*Multiple responses allowed. Respondents could also select "other" and write in their own response.

If you have not taken advantage of a vocational English program, how likely are you to utilize one of these programs to train your employees?

Businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency (31 responses)



Which of the following do you believe is responsible for ensuring workers have the English language skills they need for the workplace? Please check all that apply.\*

All businesses (73 responses)

	Number of responses
Employee	59
All equally responsible	23
Employer	20
Government	11
I do not have an opinion	9
None are responsible	1
Not sure	2

\*Multiple responses allowed. Respondents could also select "other" and write in their own response.

Businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency (38 responses)

	Number of responses
Employee	21
All equally responsible	11
Employer	9
Government	6
I do not have an opinion	3
None are responsible	0
Not sure	1

\*Multiple responses allowed. Respondents could also select "other" and write in their own response.

I would be willing to contribute in the following way(s) to the vocational English training of my employee(s). Please check all that apply.\*

All businesses (91 responses)

	Number of responses
I would be willing to provide space in our facility for my employee(s) to receive training	27
I would be willing to give my employee(s) paid time to receive training	15
I would not be willing to commit any company resources to these programs	13
I would be willing to share the cost of training	10
I would be willing to pay for the entire cost of training	2
Not sure	17
None of the above	26

\*Multiple responses allowed. Respondents could also select "other" and write in their own response.

Businesses that employ workers with limited English proficiency (34 responses)

	Number of responses
I would be willing to provide space in our facility for my employee(s) to receive training	15
I would be willing to share the cost of training	7
I would be willing to give my employee(s) paid time to receive training	7
I would not be willing to commit any company resources to these programs	3
I would be willing to pay for the entire cost of training	1
Not sure	7
None of the above	5

\*Multiple responses allowed. Respondents could also select "other" and write in their own response.