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New York State's Language Barrier

Nearly every corner of New York State is experiencing a spike in immigrants—with the fastest growth occurring upstate—but funding for ESOL classes has not kept pace.

In recent years, nearly every corner of New York State has seen a significant influx of immigrants. Between 2005 and 2013, the state's immigrant population grew by 386,000 people, and the six counties with the fastest growth of foreign-born residents were all located outside of New York City. *Overall, nine of the 10 counties with at least a 10 percent increase in their foreign born population during this period were outside of New York City, with Albany County leading the way (with a 48 percent increase in foreign born population) followed by Dutchess (32 percent), Onondaga (28 percent), Erie (27 percent), Suffolk (25 percent), Rockland (19 percent), Bronx (14 percent), Nassau (13 percent), Orange (12 percent) and Monroe (10 percent)[ii]*

But while immigrants represent a growing share of the workforce throughout the state and have the potential to provide an economic spark to many upstate cities, the state's investment in programs that help newcomers learn English has failed to keep pace. In fact, the number of state-funded ESOL seats has declined by 32 percent over the last nine years, from approximately 86,000 seats in 2005 to 59,000 in 2013.[iii]

The number of New Yorkers served in ESOL programs has dropped not because of funding cuts—state funds have actually remained flat over this period—but due to the rise in per student costs. Indeed, to its credit, officials with the State Education

Department's Office of Adult Education Programs and Policy (AEPP) have encouraged ESOL providers to give their students more time in class, a strategy that has clearly led to more effective programs.[iv] Over the past half-decade, the rate at which students advanced to the next literacy level jumped by almost half, from 38 percent to 55 percent.[v]

While the new focus on quality of instruction has clearly produced positive results, it is troubling that significantly fewer New Yorkers have access to English language instruction at a time when the number of residents lacking English proficiency is only growing.

Statewide, the number of residents who speak English less than very well grew by 14 percent—or 273,000 residents—between 2005 and 2013.[vi] But the number of state-funded ESOL seats across the state declined by 32 percent during this period. While 2.3 million people in the state now have limited English proficiency, there are just 59,064 state-funded ESOL seats. Overall, state-funded ESOL seats can accommodate only 1 in 39 residents lacking English proficiency.

The number of individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) increased by at least 20 percent in five counties between 2005 and 2013: Albany (which registered an 82 percent increase), Nassau (40 percent), Suffolk (33 percent), Onondaga (32 percent), and Rockland (23 percent).

Yet several counties have a shockingly small number of state-funded ESOL seats: Albany County has just 564 seats, Dutchess has 229and Orange has 102.

In recent years, New York State has taken several important steps to embrace immigrants. But more investment is needed in programsthat help the state's newest residents to learn English and integrate into the workforce. Such an investment would provide a key lift for immigrants, aid employers around the state who are increasingly hiring immigrants and deliver significant economic benefits to the state's economy. It would also provide a boost for a significant share of the state's working poor families. Statewide, 221,105 or 37 percent of low-income working families (earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level) include one or more adults who speak English less than well.[vii]

Research has shown that while many immigrants recognize that English proficiency is critical to a better economic future, a significant share of first and second generation immigrants lack workforce skills or lag significantly behind their nonimmigrant peers in terms of high school graduation, college access, and postsecondary degree completion.[viii]

By the Numbers

- *Number of Immigrants in NYS, 2013:* ***4.4 million***
- *Number of NYS residents 18 years old and older who speak English "less than very well:"* ***2.3 million***
- *NYC residents who speak English "less than very well:"* ***1.7 million***
- *Change in immigrant pop in NYS, 2005-2013:* ***10 percent***
- *Change in percentage of New Yorkers who speak English "less than very well," 2005-2013:* ***+14 percent***
- *Change in ESOL enrollment in NYS:* ***-32 percent***
- *Total ESOL enrollment in NYS in 2013-14:* ***59,064***

The following are highlights about the growth in the number of immigrants, the number of residents with limited English proficiency and number of ESOL seats in the state's largest counties outside of New York City.

- ***Albany****: Among the state's 15 largest counties, Albany County experienced the largest spike in both foreign-born residents (48 percent) and residents with limited English proficiency (82 percent). Though the county saw a slight uptick in ESOL seats during the same time period, demand far outstrips the number of available seats.*
- ***Dutchess****: Among the state's 15 largest counties, Dutchess County has experienced the second largest increase in its immigrant population at 32 percent growth between 2005 and 2013. Over the same period, Dutchess saw a 12 percent increase in the number of adults with limited English ability. But with only 229 people enrolled in ESOL classes countywide in 2013-14, current programs are only serving a fraction of the need.*
- ***Onondaga****: Between 2005 and 2013, Onondaga Co. saw a 28 percent jump in its foreign-born population compared to just a 3 percent increase in its native-born population. Over the same period, there was a 32 percent increase in the number of adults with limited English proficiency. With enrollment in state-funded ESOL classes falling well below 2,000 in 2013-14, current programs are meeting only a fraction of the need.*

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- ***Suffolk**: Between 2005 and 2013, Suffolk County's immigrant population grew by nearly 46,000 people (representing a 25 percent increase), compared to a decrease of over 1,200 native-born residents over the same period. The number of adults who are limited English proficient grew 33 percent between 2005 and 2013. But with 7,202 ESOL seats, a tiny fraction of the adults who need English language instruction can enroll in state-funded programs.*
- ***Erie**: Between 2005 and 2013, all of Erie County's population growth came from an increase in the county's foreign-born population, which grew 27 percent compared to -.14 percent decrease in the native-born population. With over 22,000 LEP adults and just 2,000 people enrolled in state-funded ESOL programs in 2013-14, current programs are meeting a tiny fraction of the need.*
- ***Orange**: Orange County's immigrant population grew by 12 percent between 2005 and 2013, compared to just 2 percent for the native-born population over the same period. Over 23,000 adults in Orange lack the English skills to fully integrate into the workforce, and with enrollment in ESOL programs at a paltry 102 people in 2013-14, current programs and funding levels are meeting a tiny fraction of the need.*
- ***Monroe**: Monroe County's foreign-born population increased 10 percent between 2005 and 2013, compared to just 4 percent for the native-born population over the same period. The number of adults with a limited ability to speak English grew by 19 percent in that time. With nearly 30,000 limited English proficient adults in the county, current ESOL programs are meeting a tiny fraction of the need.*
- ***Rockland**: Between 2005 and 2013, Rockland County's foreign-born population grew by 19 percent, and the number of adults with limited English ability increased by 23 percent over the same period. With over 38,000 limited English adults, current state-funded ESOL programs (with just under 2,000 enrollees) are meeting a tiny fraction of the need.*
- ***Nassau**: Between 2005 and 2013, Nassau County's population growth was fueled almost entirely by immigrants. The county's foreign-born population grew by 13 percent, compared to just 0.5 percent growth among the native-born population. Over the same period, the number of adults with limited English proficiency grew 40 percent (second highest among NYS's 15 largest counties). With over 140,000 limited English proficient adults and only 6,000 people enrolled in state-funded ESOL programs, current programs are meeting a tiny fraction of the need.*
- ***Westchester**: Between 2005 and 2013, Westchester County's foreign-born population increased by 8 percent and its native-born population by only 4 percent. Over the same period, the number of adults with limited English ability grew by 8 percent, leaving current state-funded ESOL programs (accommodating only 3,600 people) woefully inadequate to meet demand.*

Top Counties by Growth of Foreign-Born Population (among 15 largest counties in NYS)

County	Foreign-Born Pop. 2005	Foreign-Born Pop 2013	Foreign-Born % Change 05-13	Total 05-13	Native-Born Pop 2005	Native-Born Pop 2013	Native-Born %Change
Albany	18,735	27,683	47.76%	8,948	261,838	277,583	6.01%
Dutchess	25,516	33,791	32.43%	8,275	251,373	260,753	3.73%
Onondaga	24,974	32,063	28.39%	7,089	419,354	432,255	3.08%
Erie	45,898	58,309	27.04%	12,411	853,083	851,847	-0.14%
Suffolk	183,360	229,149	24.97%	45,789	1,261,282	1,260,057	-0.10%