

Learning English in California: Free of Charge, But with a Catch

A consistent point of agreement in the often contentious debate over immigration is that learning to speak English is essential for successful integration into California life. The benefits, and beneficiaries, are myriad: More job opportunities and greater earning power are likely to accrue to speakers of English; family bonds can be strengthened when parents are able to help with their children's English-language homework; and Californians gain by having citizens who are able to understand the state's legal and political frameworks and participate in its civic life. California has recognized these ideals for more than a century, having begun in the 1850s to provide English-language instruction free of charge.

But in the 21st century, delivery of free English instruction to those who need it most is far from consistent. Most adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are offered through adult education programs run by local school districts. However, legislation dating back to 1979 limits their funding, even in the face of a tremendous increase in California's immigrant population. This means that in some schools where demand for classes exceeds funding, immigrants wanting to learn English may be turned away. Most school districts are choosing to absorb the extra costs by overenrolling English learners, but that reduces their ability to fulfill educational commitments to others. In *California's Commitment to Adult English Learners: Caught Between Funding and Need*, PPIC researcher Arturo Gonzalez examines the discrepancy between the state's ideal of giving all immigrants an equal opportunity to learn English and the reality that those opportunities are far from equal.

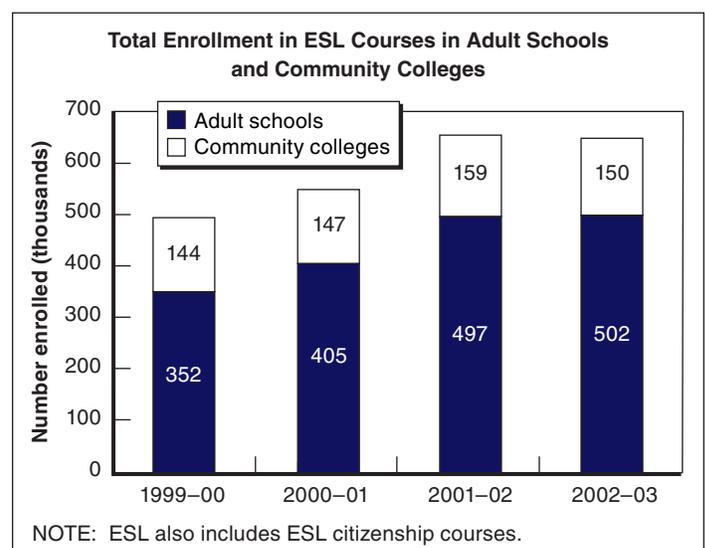
One Goal, Multiple Systems

Demand for ESL classes has been growing as the immigrant population has grown. In 1980, the foreign-born adult population in the state that was classified as limited-English proficient (LEP) stood at fewer than

900,000. Growing at almost 6 percent per year, by 2000 this population had tripled to 2.7 million—about 35 percent of the 7 million adult immigrants in the state that year. The LEP percentage is far higher among some immigrant subgroups.

In the 2002–2003 school year, the latest period for which complete records are available, there were about 501,000 ESL students enrolled in the state's adult schools. Los Angeles County accounted for about half, with 247,000. The San Francisco Bay Area and the region surrounding Los Angeles County enrolled about 85,000 and 64,000 students, respectively. San Diego County and the agricultural counties of the Central Valley enrolled 20,000 ESL students each, with the remaining 65,000 distributed throughout the rest of the state. The demand for ESL classes is not expected to diminish; past trends imply a statewide annual enrollment growth of 3.5 percent.

Community colleges also provide ESL classes to a significant number of LEP students in the state, 150,000 in 2002–2003. And in a few other locations, the responsibility falls to various community organizations and libraries.



(Private providers of ESL classes are not studied in this report.) Each provider is funded in a different way. Community colleges fund their adult ESL classes locally according to local need. But local school districts, which dominate the ESL field, depend on funding from Sacramento. These programs teach approximately 75 percent of all ESL students statewide. (ESL students constitute more than 40 percent of all adult school students.)

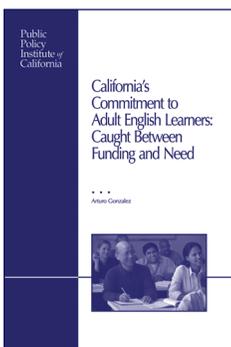
However, the outdated state funding mechanism for adult education ESL is hindering districts' ability to provide sufficient ESL classes where they are—and will be—in most demand. The 1979 legislation used contemporary adult education enrollment figures as a baseline. Among other provisions, it required that adult education funding growth not exceed 2.5 percent per year, regardless of the actual enrollment at a particular school district. Adult education programs that served few immigrants in the late 1970s but have experienced significant growth since then are still tied to their initial low levels of funding. Conversely, districts that had a significant adult education program in the 1970s continue to receive the base amount even if their enrollments have declined. Thus, adult education funding is not linked to any current measure of demand. And until the passage of legislation in 2005, unspent adult education funding in one district could not even be redistributed to other school districts that might need it; instead, it had to be returned to Sacramento.

Policy Results and Implications

How have school districts dealt with this problem? Although they can turn English learners away, they usually

try to accommodate them. With limited funding, they have at least three options: redirect resources from other adult education programs, reduce the quality of ESL classes, or accept a lower per-pupil funding rate than that established by the state. Statewide, nearly 60 percent of districts exceeded their level of adult education funding in 2004–2005, and among these, 80 percent exceeded the 2.5 percent limit. In monetary terms, the difference between what the state provided and the actual enrollment during the 2004–2005 school year amounted to about \$15.7 million. The problem was more acute in some areas. All adult schools in the Central Valley enrolled students in excess of the 2.5 percent funding limit. One-third of all districts in the region immediately surrounding Los Angeles County overenrolled by 20 percent or more, and another 20 percent exceeded their enrollment limits by less than 2.5 percent. (It is unclear if districts cut off enrollment when they reached the 2.5 percent threshold or if demand for ESL classes was less than 2.5 percent above the enrollment limits.) Cutting off enrollment prevents some immigrants who want to learn English from doing so. But the policy of overenrolling is also less than ideal, since funds to accommodate the excessive enrollment might be shifted from other educational programs. Indeed, some of those funds could be used to develop more innovative ways of delivering ESL education.

State policymakers may want to consider revamping ESL funding in the face of growing demand for ESL programs. Given the public's interest in the pace of the immigrant population's acquisition of English, policymakers must also recognize that a shortage of ESL classes may only exacerbate California's linguistic divide.



This research brief summarizes a report by Arturo Gonzalez, California's Commitment to Adult English Learners: Caught Between Funding and Need (2007, 90 pp. \$10.00, ISBN 978-1-58213-123-8). The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 (outside mainland U.S.). A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, non-partisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.

PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA
500 Washington Street, Suite 800 • San Francisco, California 94111
Telephone: (415) 291-4400 • Fax: (415) 291-4401
www.ppic.org