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POLICY BRIEF

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ESL Education Helps Immigrants Integrate

Interest remains high despite a national shortage of ESL programs

Although the immigrant population increased during the past decade, the 2000 U.S. Census indicates that the rate of assimilation is keeping pace. Recent studies show that improved English language education may lead to an increase in this rate and help immigrants achieve their goals of a more complete integration into American society.

The Language of Assimilation

New data from the 2000 census suggests that the immigrants who arrived in the United States during the 1990s are eager to adapt to life in America. This is evident in the constancy of the naturalization rate among the U.S. foreign-born population. However, since 20 percent of America's homes speak a language other than English, the need for English as a Second Language (ESL) is more apparent than ever.

According to education experts, English proficiency is a significant indicator of successful integration. Sadly, funding for ESL programs has sharply declined, especially at the primary and secondary education level. For example, in Colorado, the State funding dropped from \$221 per student to just \$90 per pupil in 2002.¹

A recent study found that the children of immigrants increasingly prefer English to the native language of their parents. By the time they reach their senior year of high school, immigrant children prefer English to their parent's tongue by 80 percent.

In addition to programs for schoolchildren, a greater need exists for adult ESL initiatives. This is evidenced by ESL program waiting lists often numbering in the thousands, with waiting periods to begin classes numbering in years. In Seattle, a recent report counted 3,000 adults on one program's waiting list, while in New York, over 1,000 were anxious for an opening on a public library's program, and in Dallas there are reports of 6,000 people on a one-year waiting list.

Eager To Learn

According to the 2000 U.S. census, As the number of immigrants to the U.S. increased in the 1990s, the number of people in the country that identify themselves as "American" also increased, by 7 million overall.² This not only reflects an increase in the number of immigrants

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that are already assimilating, but also reveals an increase in immigrant desires to become "American." Experts agree that improved ESL programs will only raise these figures.

Experts have found that immigrants are enthusiastic about learning English in order to be able to contribute more fully to American society. The U.S. Department of Education reports that in 1998 alone 1,927,210 adults were enrolled in federally funded ESL programs. This figure represents 48% of overall enrollment in national adult education programs.

New Teaching Techniques

Researchers have noted that one cause of the challenges in the nation's ESL programs is that administrators have not adapted to changing trends among the non-English speaking community. For example, the Washington Post reports that in Montgomery County, Maryland, the school district still uses an ESL program "designed decades ago primarily for well-educated Cubans fleeing Fidel Castro's regime."³ Because of such outdated programs, less privileged immigrants, representing hundreds of different languages and countries may be at a disadvantage.

Analysts also believe that the nation's ESL programs may not be improving because, until recently, such programs have been low on most schools' lists of priorities. Patricia O'Neill, Vice President of the school board in Montgomery County, Maryland, explains that no one has taken initiative to reform the ESL system in her area because, as she puts it, "It's been nobody's baby."⁴

Still, reluctance exists on the part of the country's school districts to take on the challenge of reforming English language education. Research shows that many people have more success learning a second language when they simultaneously work on improving proficiency in their native language. Therefore, some experts suggest that ESL programs can only be effective if they incorporate education in immigrants' first languages. This requires resources and training beyond the scope of traditional ESL programs. Unfortunately, in some states, "bilingual" remains a controversial subject for policymakers.

In many states, ESL program waiting lists often number in the thousands.

Governmental Support

Fortunately, the U.S. Department of Education is taking steps to increase awareness about the benefits of bilingual education. A statement by the Department's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages reads: "A well-designed, instructional program-using a student's native language (to varying degrees) and designed and implemented at the local level-can be very effective in promoting English proficiency and subject area competence."⁵ As the nation's school districts work to design and implement these types of programs, immigrants to the U.S. will be able to integrate faster and more effectively into American society.

Conclusion

Many opponents of immigration claim that immigrants are generally unwilling to assimilate to American society, and therefore add to perceived cultural divisions within the U.S. However, studies show that this is not and need not be the case. The promotion and implementation of improved programs for teaching immigrants English, programs in which proficiency in native languages is also pursued, will increase the numbers of immigrants who call themselves "Americans."

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