The New York Times
nytimes.com

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT SPONSORED BY THE NAMESAKE

February 27, 2007

Demand for English Lessons Outstrips Supply

By FERNANDA SANTOS

MOUNT VERNON, N.Y. — Two weeks after she moved here from her native Brazil, Maria de Oliveira signed up for free English classes at a squat storefront in this working-class suburb, figuring that with an associate's degree and three years as an administrative assistant, she could find a good job in America so long as she spoke the language.

The woman who runs the classes at Mount Vernon's Workforce and Career Preparation Center added Ms. Oliveira's name to her pink binder, at the bottom of a 90-person waiting list that stretched across seven pages. That was in October. Ms. Oliveira, 26, finally got a seat in the class on Jan. 16.

"I keep wondering how much more I'd know if I hadn't had to wait so long," she said in Portuguese.

As immigrants increasingly settle away from large urban centers — New York's suburbs have had a net gain of 225,000 since 2000, compared with 44,000 in the city — many are waiting months or even years to get into government-financed English classes, which are often overcrowded and lack textbooks.

A survey last year by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials found that in 12 states, 60 percent of the free English programs had waiting lists, ranging from a few months in Colorado and Nevada to as long as two years in New Mexico and Massachusetts, where the statewide list has about 16,000 names.

The United States Department of Education counted 1.2 million adults enrolled in public English programs in 2005 — about 1 in 10 of the 10.3 million foreign-born residents 16 and older who speak English "less than very well," or not at all, according to census figures from the same year. Federal money for such classes is matched at varying rates from state to state, leaving an uneven patchwork of programs that advocates say nowhere meets the need.

"We have a lot of folks who need these services and who go unserved," said Claudia Merkel-Keller of the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, noting that her state has waiting lists in every county, "from beginner all the way through proficient level." New Jersey, like New York and many other states, does not keep statewide figures on how many people are on waiting lists.

Luis Sanchez, 47, a Peruvian truck driver for a beer distributor in New Brunswick, has been in this country 10 years — and on the waiting list for English classes in Perth Amboy five months. "You live from day to day, waiting to get the call that you can come to class," Mr. Sanchez said in Spanish, explaining that he knew a little English but wanted to improve his writing skills so he could apply for better jobs. "I keep

on waiting."

Mr. Sanchez is unlikely to get the call soon: Perth Amboy's Adult Education Center recently discovered that it was operating in the red and canceled 9 of its 11 evening classes in English as a second language, including all at beginner and intermediate levels. In Orange County, N.Y., where the immigrant population doubled in the past 16 years, the Board of Cooperative Education Services' adult education program has stopped advertising for fear its already overflowing beginner classes will be overwhelmed.

In Framingham, Mass., 20 miles west of Boston, hundreds of people used to spend the night in line to register for English as a second language, so the program now selects students by picking handwritten names from a big plastic box.

"With the lottery, everyone has the same chance," said Christine Taylor Tibor, director of Framingham's Adult E.S.L. Plus program. "Unfortunately, you might have to enter the lottery several times before you get in."

Census figures show that in the United States there were 32.6 million foreign-born residents 18 years or older in 2005, up about 18 percent from the 27.5 million counted in 2000 (and nearly twice the 17.1 million in 1990). Federal spending on adult education, about $580 million last year, has increased 23 percent since 2000 and more than tripled since 1990; some 45 percent of the money is devoted to English.

But financing varies widely across the states, which are required to allocate at least one quarter of what was provided by the federal government: Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Texas spent the minimum in 2003, according to the Education Department, while California and Connecticut each spent about seven times that.

In New York, the state Education Department added $76 million to the federal government's $43 million for the 2005 fiscal year. That year, according to a recent report by the Center for an Urban Future, a nonprofit research group based in Manhattan, there were about 86,500 people enrolled in government-sponsored adult programs for English as a second language, serving about 5 percent of the state's 1.6 million adults with limited English skills.

Last fall, Arizona voters approved an initiative banning illegal immigrants from benefiting from all state-financed programs, including English instruction; administrators of English-as-a-second-language classes in several other states said they do not check for documentation when registering students and thus do not know how many of them may be in the country illegally.

Advocates for more English classes say the state-federal financing split leaves an adult education system whose quality and reach vary widely from place to place — and is lacking most everywhere. Senator Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, where the immigrant population has tripled since 1990, largely because of an influx of Mexicans, sponsored a bill last year that would have given legal immigrants $500 vouchers to pay for English classes since so many of the free ones were full.

“Most education policy is the prerogative of state and local governments, but I would argue that the prerogative to help people learn our common language is a federal responsibility,” said Senator Alexander, a Republican who was education secretary under the first President George Bush. “If we make it easier for people to learn English, they will learn it. I think that ought to be a priority of our government, and I don’t think it has been.”

The government-financed classes are most often run by school districts or worker training centers and generally require only a registration fee of perhaps $10. Libraries, churches and community centers often also provide free or inexpensive classes, like the English Language Institute at Westchester Community College in Valhalla, N.Y., which offers nine levels of instruction for $76 to $247 per three-month session. Then there are private programs like the one at Pace University in Pleasantville, N.Y., which costs $790 for two classes a week for 14 weeks.

With immigrants accounting for half of the growth in the nation’s labor force from 1990 and 2000, and expected to make up all of the growth in the two decades to come, “the issue of English proficiency has become an issue of economic development,” said Tara Colton, the author of the Center for an Urban Future report. Indeed, some business owners, frustrated at the lack of low-cost classes, have begun teaching immigrants English at work.

At Skyline Furniture Manufacturing Inc. in Thornton, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, about half of the company’s 60 employees have learned English at the factory over the past five years, under a state program in which the government pays to bring teachers to work sites if companies pay workers for the hours in class.

“It makes sense to us because our workers can do their jobs better, and it makes sense to them because they can advance in their jobs,” said Cinthia Nowakowski, the plant’s manager, adding that three of the company’s eight foremen were promoted after completing the program. “Besides, it’s convenient. The guys don’t have to worry about having to arrange transportation to get to school or getting there and finding that there’s no room in the class.”

In Newburgh, N.Y., an Orange County town where one in five of the 29,000 residents are immigrants, Blanca Saravia has amassed an impressive portfolio of odd jobs since arriving from Honduras in 2004: gas station attendant, office janitor, cook’s helper, and, for the last 14 months, packager at a local nail-polish factory. Speaking in her native Spanish, Ms. Saravia said that she has been able to get by with co-workers’ translating, but that “when the boss gives orders, I don’t understand.”

So earlier this month, Ms. Saravia joined 30 others in a cramped classroom learning to conjugate the verb “to be” as part of the adult English program in Orange County, where the immigrant population doubled in the last decade — and the number of free English classes has jumped to 26 from 2 in 1995.

“If I tell her, ‘We’re full, come back in a couple of months,’ chances are she’ll get discouraged and never come back,” said Ramón Santos, who runs the Newburgh program.

Carl DeJura, director of adult basic education at Brookdale Community College in Long Branch, N.J., said he has lately crammed as many as 40 students into a class — “double what it should be.”

“If you have to cut back on textbooks, supplies and materials to serve the people who need it,” he said, “that’s what you do.”

In Mount Vernon, Haitian, Chinese, Somali, Arab, Mexican and Brazilian students flock to the beginner class each morning at 8:30 before heading out to work or to look for work. Ahmed Al Saidi, 49, who works at a gas station and moved from Yemen in 1994, said in halting English that he wants to learn the language “for better work and to talk to people when I go to the store.”

Ms. Oliveira, the immigrant from Brazil, said she still knows too little English to venture into the marketplace; her husband, who is American born and supports the couple financially, encouraged her to enroll in the classes, held five mornings a week.

“I hope that when I’m speaking a little better, I’ll be able to find a job where I can use the English I learned here and the skills I have from back home,” she said in Portuguese. “When I was on the waiting list, there were times I thought this time would never come.”

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company