

*Repairing the Nation's Education System
for Adult English Learners*



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By Sean Kennedy and John Walters JULY 2013

Executive Summary

Over 23 million U.S. adults lack adequate English proficiency. This will prove a severe hindrance for both the economic mobility and assimilation of these immigrants and some native-born Americans, who are trapped in generational linguistic isolation. Although many are highly motivated to learn English, the current system of adult education in English as a Second Language (ESL) is serving adult English Language Learners (ELLs) especially poorly – with high drop-out rates, low proficiency gains, and rigid barriers to participation and rapid language acquisition.

Federal and state grant programs that fund adult ESL collect little data on these learners and the efficacy of programs designed to promote English proficiency, as the Government Accountability Office reported in 2009. Evidence available suggests that these programs are not working effectively or efficiently – with only 40% of learners improving their proficiency level. The poor accountability for results, and general scarcity of demonstrable outcomes in these programs, is reminiscent of elementary and secondary education programs funded under the Bilingual Education Act prior to 2001. Including K-12 English learners under the same school accountability provisions as other students has proven valuable to improving results nationally, and the success of charter schools serving adult ELL populations suggests a similar outcome can be achieved serving their needs as well.

The design of the programs themselves is also a factor. Largely administered and run by government agencies, adult ESL programs are generally not tailored to the needs of the specific learner and maintain few accountability metrics. Most states, like Illinois, administer the lion's share of adult ESL courses through local community colleges and school district adult education programs, using a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction and course design.

In contrast, community-based organizations, adult charter schools and private sector employers are developing strategies for adult English Language Learners that promote English proficiency more effectively by meeting the learner where he or she is and designing flexible course times and curriculum that accommodate personal and workforce needs. For example, Los Angeles-based PUENTE Learning Center uses 'blended learning' to individualize instruction and track student progress toward proficiency. The result is consistently lower drop-out rates and proficiency improvements than the national average. In one year (2005), fully 85% of learners advanced in proficiency compared to the national average of 40%. Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School in Washington, DC is another example of a community-based program achieving strong results.

This report suggests that federal, state and local policymakers should re-assess adult ESL programs by adopting community-based organization, charter school and private sector innovations including more rigorous and useful data collection, the implementation of flexible and effective learning strategies and financially incentivize programs to accelerate the pace of language acquisition.

Key Points:

- 23 million US adults with Limited English Proficiency — 2.9 million are native-born
- Immigrants are often highly-motivated to learn English
- Available government data suggests the adult English as a Second Language system is failing with only 40% of participants advancing in proficiency each year
- Non-profits including charter schools and private sector organizations are developing best practices in ESL which government providers should adopt

Introduction

For the newest member of any community, and often those with the largest needs, immigrants, ineffective programs are costly both economically and personally. This is especially true with efforts by immigrants to learn English, assimilate and gain greater career opportunities.

Today, the US Census reports there are 23 million adults residing in the U.S. with Limited English Proficiency (LEP).¹ Although the majority (20 million) are newcomers, 2.9 million are American-born adults trapped in linguistic isolation.² They speak over 300 languages and reside in every state and US territory but only a tiny fraction are enrolled in programs to improve their English proficiency. State and federal grant programs supplement the budgets of community colleges and government adult education centers that deliver a traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum – fixed class times and curriculum taught by a single teacher. Most curriculum assumes literacy in another Indo-European language and assumes a basic formal education – a faulty assumption that fails many candidates for instruction. Scant government data exists on the success of these programs and barriers including waitlists and personal needs preclude millions more from ever entering a classroom. The system is in dire need of reform.

For the over 23 million LEP adults in the U.S., Limited English Proficiency has real consequences. For the Latino population, limited English proficiency substantially increases the likelihood of dropping out of school, resulting in an average loss of earnings of \$3,000 per year. For the rest of Americans, the real cost of this phenomenon is nearly \$38 billion lost to limited English proficiency in the economy. For the newcomers themselves, the economic and personal costs are often much higher – the difference between holding down three low wage jobs or pursuing a career track position, enrolling in higher education, or simply communicating with physicians and teachers about their child’s well-being.

The programs devoted to helping adult English learners are proving unable to keep up. According to a 2009 Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report, both federal and state efforts (including direct administration and funding streams to third-parties) are uncoordinated.³ These lack data on the number of enrolled participants in English as a Second Language programs and little to no data on the progress of enrolled students. With the exception of the Department of Education’s National Reporting System (NRS) administered by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, none of the 25 federal and state programs sufficiently demonstrated how grants intended, at least partially, to promote English proficiency performed.⁴

It is imperative to look outside the traditional government providers for best practices pioneered and executed by organizations that have demonstrated success in promoting English proficiency.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) have thrived since the founding of our republic according to historian Gordon Wood as “newly independent American men and women came together to form hundreds and thousands of new voluntary associations expressive of a wide array of benevolent goals” including “mechanics societies...orphans’ asylums...societies for the promotion of industry, indeed societies for just about anything and everything that was good and humanitarian.” Private citizens have ensured that these institutions grew up, adapted and innovated to meet their own needs and those of their neighbors.

Government, as history has shown, is less adept at changing and evolving to meet these needs and wants. When programs are established by the government on behalf of the public good, they can often prove inefficient and sclerotic.

This report suggests that these flexible and adaptive non-governmental organizations offer an alternative to the broken government-run adult ESL system. Their innovative models offer lessons for policymakers and ESL practitioners looking to reform and improve the current system to better serve adult ESL learners.

Data and Adult ESL in the U.S.

Although there are over 23 million individuals with Limited English Proficiency in the United States, including 2.9 million native-born Americans, the Department of Education's English Literacy (EL) program enrolled and tracked 1.24 million learners who demonstrated progress over a 3 year period in programs receiving the Adult Education – Basic Grants to State program.⁵ Approximately 40% of enrollees over the 2007-2010 period demonstrated any progress over the six identified literacy levels. In 2009-2010, only 401,732 students, or 44% of those enrolled, demonstrated progress.

Furthermore, the data shows an 8% decline in enrollment in the latest year (2009-2010), at a time of severe economic recession, with a marked decline among Hispanic/Latino enrollees of 15%.⁶ As the GAO report makes clear, there is insufficient data on a number of key metrics related to these grants. The Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Labor collect no specific data on the programs they fund and monitor related to English Language Learners.⁷ The Department of Education's reports do not reflect the advancement rate of participants compared to drop-out with and without level advancement in the English Literacy programs. According to GAO, 29.4% of participants dropped-out in 2007 without advancing, while another 32% continued to attend but did not advance.⁸ In short, more than half of participating adult English learners failed to improve their proficiency under the government-run ESL system.

The adult English as a Second Language categories of proficiency are divided, according to the Department of Education's National Reporting System (NRS), into six levels ranging from ESL Literacy (NRS 1) and Low Beginning ESL to Advanced ESL (NRS 6). Most government administered and run programs follow the NRS guidelines or a variant thereof – dividing learners into categories of advancement – regardless of the fact if they collect any student progress or retention data or not.

More than half of participating adult English learners failed to improve their proficiency under the government-run ESL system.

Within the data available for states, uneven progress and low enrollment numbers make drawing statistically significant conclusions difficult. For example, Arizona, with almost 10% of the adult population classified as LEP (498,000),⁹ only 11,018 individuals advanced an ESL level between 2007-2010.¹⁰ Indiana,

by contrast, with many fewer adults who lack English proficiency (172,000) successfully advanced more individuals (11,142) an ESL level between 2007-2010.¹¹ For 2009-2010, 54% of Indiana enrollees improved their level of proficiency measurably. Neighboring Illinois, with 1 million LEP adults, enrolled over 192,000 adults in 2007-2010 but only advanced 72,979 of them a level of proficiency or a substandard 38%.

	# Students Served (2009-2010)	% Students Advancing (2009-2010)	Students Advancing (2009-2010)	LEP Adults (2010)
Indiana	6,259	54%	3,380	172,000
Illinois	62,858	38%	23,886	1,042,000

Source: Department of Education; Migration Policy Institute; U.S. Census

Data for New York and New Jersey also draws a strong contrast. Although both state populations are approximately 13% adult LEP, New York improved proficiency for 53% (38,068) of its total ESL students (71,826) one level of proficiency in 2009-2010 compared to New Jersey's abysmal 27% (5,692). New York's programs also handled many more students after adjusting for population size.

	# Students Served (2009-2010)	% Students Advancing (2009-2010)	Students Advancing (2009-2010)	LEP Adults (2010)
New York	71,826	53%	38,068	2,500,000
New Jersey	21,081	27%	5,692	998,000

Source: Department of Education; Migration Policy Institute; U.S. Census

One of the most successful states in terms of advancing students across proficiency levels is Arizona – showing continuous improvement from a 43% successful completion rate in 2007-2008 to a 63% rate in 2009-2010. But these more successful programs serve very few eligible adult learners. Arizona enrolled relatively few students (6,487 adults) compared to demographically similar states.

New Jersey is serving only a small fraction of adult English Learners, and serving them inefficiently and ineffectively.

The ESL system across the US fails many more students than it aids. For example, New Jersey enrolled over 21,000 adults under the Department of Education grant program but only managed to advance 5,692 adults toward proficiency in 2009-2010. In a state with nearly a million English Learners, New Jersey is serving only a small fraction of adult learners and those it does serve, it does so inefficiently and ineffectively. Across the US, the number of enrolled students is dwarfed by the need. With 23 million LEP adults, the Department of Education program only served 913,000 of them or 4% of eligible adults and only 1.7% of adult English Learners managed to improve proficiency under the government-run system.

The NRS data doesn't track students' longitudinal success in learning English over time.¹² It remains unclear at what NRS levels the students entered and where they exited upon successful completion of a level. The data does not show which states advanced individual students over multiple levels within a year or over time. This narrow snapshot effectively limits the value of the data.

The providers and methods of instruction varied across the programs – but limited data exists about who receives the grants and what methods they use to provide instruction. Moreover, GAO notes “[t]here is broad consensus among academics that very limited scientifically based research has been conducted to identify effective approaches to adult English language instruction.”¹³ A subsequent study published by the Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences, *The Impact of a Reading Intervention for Low-Literate Adult ESL Learners*, and released in 2010 found that two different approaches to ESL literacy had some minor effect on student outcomes but the two approaches – language instruction versus intensive reading – had no discernibly different outcomes.¹⁴ The study's posted gains (1-2 months in reading and 5-6 months in English language assessments) were not distinguished from no instruction, thus do not show that either program is significantly effective.

The result is a hodge-podge of unproven, generally ineffective and often rigid formats for adult ESL instruction. Instruction presumes student literacy in their student's first language (often not the case), course times do not make allowance for busy schedules, and most programs are not designed with student goals in mind.

Despite this design and methodological flaw, state and government-run programs like community colleges institute rigid curriculum and structures. For example, the Illinois Community Colleges Board (ICCB) developed “Illinois ESL Content Standards” for adults in compliance with a federally-funded mandate from the Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education.¹⁵ Despite the new standards, Illinois' adult English Literacy scores remain below the national average and flat, even as national scores have risen slightly.¹⁶

Since the methods currently employed have not proven effective through rigid inputs-focused accountability metrics, it is imperative that those seeking to improve outcomes and to spend tax dollars wisely look outside these systems to the community-based organizations that operate independently of such programs. A number of private sector and non-profit efforts have pioneered methods and approaches to teaching English to learners more effectively.

These innovative approaches are characterized by a number of traits including self-designed and rigorously implemented success metrics, student and organization accountability, and a flexibility and willingness to adapt methods and structures to their clientele. This flexibility of private associations is markedly absent from government-funded and -run programs targeted at the same populations.

The reason is clear: private organizations have accountability to their own funders and students for their programs' outcomes. Government programs, complying with input-based accountability metrics, and funded regardless of success often with no tracking or concern for outcomes creates a perverse incentive against adaptation and differentiated programs that may work more effectively.

Community-based Organizations, Charter Schools and Private Sector Innovations

Community-based organizations, in contrast to government providers, of adult ESL instruction are proving more effective at matching their programs to the needs of their student populations. As a result of the flexible and student-centered approach of these private and non-profit efforts, students more successfully acquire the English language and achieve their personal goals. Those goals vary widely but can be more simply described as 'motivating factors' and fall into three broad but overlapping categories: citizenship and assimilation, economic mobility, and day-to-day life skills.

According to Abigail Umazor of the non-profit Casa de Maryland, which provides a range of immigrant services to a largely Central American community, "immigrants have come to the understanding that the English language is the key to a better life – the American Dream."



Chicago's Polish American Association offers ESL classes seven days a week.

Immigrants are often highly motivated to learn English according to a 2006 study by Dr. James Tucker of the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO). This demand for ESL programs is taxing on the overburdened system and leads to extended waitlists for access to ESL instruction.¹⁷ For example, programs in New York are so overburdened that in 2005 only 41,000 students were admitted to an ESL program although 1 million expressed interest. Huge backlogs and waitlists result and create an additional barrier to entry for students who already may find the available course structures and curriculum inconvenient or irrelevant to their needs.

Some cities are trying to tackle the problems of newcomers let down by the current system in unique ways. In 2011, Chicago

Mayor Rahm Emanuel launched the Office of New Americans (ONA), funded out of administrative cuts to the Office of the Mayor's budget. The new office seeks to better coordinate immigrant services in a city that is 20% newcomer "through enhanced collaboration with community organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector."¹⁸

Chicago's Office of New Americans lacks strong outcome-based metrics, and the city's Adult English Learners have much riding on its ability to guide better results.

According to ONA's head Adolfo Hernandez, to "make Chicago the most immigrant-friendly city in America," the office must meet the needs of adult learners – something, to date, the city has failed to do. While demand for ESL services is heavy and immigrants are eager to learn, Chicago's adult ESL programs administered by city colleges had outcomes and graduation rates that were "not satisfactory" and even the community college administrators agreed the programs were in need of an overhaul.¹⁹ The programs failed to account for the needs and wants of the immigrants themselves, like a focus on workplace English or the availability of childcare during classes. Hernandez's office is in the process of reforming the system to better account for those needs by surveying immigrant communities. It is also committed to flexibility based on rigorous data tracking.

Chicago's Office of New Americans and the ESL programs at the community colleges will be re-inventing themselves in a number of key ways. ONA and the city college partners are developing quality standards, and tracking data including student retention. Previously, Hernandez says, "retention rates were being tracked but we were not doing enough" to reduce the extremely high drop-out rate. In 2011, only 33% of ESL students advanced a level and according to Hernandez, at some sites the figure was as low as 20% of students advanced at least one level.²⁰

The office will also "track proficiency levels and ask: are they progressing and if not, why not? Before we just weren't seeing it. We also want to ask new and pressing questions. We are interested in measuring 'are they more employable? are we getting people hired for jobs? are they getting certifications and qualifications to be ready for the job?'" ²¹

For a government office, Hernandez's approach to solving the problem is novel: ask the community-based organizations serving immigrants how the city can do it better. Those private sector and non-profit innovations and effective strategies, once identified and field tested, will be implemented in the city college ESL programs. For Hernandez, CBOs are important partners in the effort to improve assimilation and English proficiency, "Non-profit bridge ESL programs serve as a great model for collaboration between our city colleges and community based organizations. There are gaps that community colleges may not have the capacity to fill, through our college to careers program, I think there will be plenty of opportunity for community partners to help develop tailored bridge programs that include ESL and prepare individuals to succeed at city colleges."



Washington, DC's Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School offers workforce training and computer literacy as students progress toward English proficiency.

New Neighbors ELL and Family Literacy Programs – Campagna Center

The Campagna Center has been serving the local northern Virginia immigrant community since its founding in 1945. The New Neighbors language program became part of The Campagna Center in 2010, having been started in 2002 by Historic Christ Church. The program has already grown to help about 200 immigrants each year. Its outcomes-focused curriculum averages a 40-45% increase in adult English proficiency per semester, and consistently advances students between levels.

New Neighbors offers eight levels of English classes, along with childcare so that adults who wish to attend won't be held back by family restrictions.

This is especially important, as most students in the program are between 25 and 45 years old. They are busy, hard-working people, and "all of them have already had their lives disrupted in some way," according to Marcia D'Arcangelo, New Neighbors program director. This is not at all atypical in immigrant communities.

Under Campagna's New Neighbors Program, English learner parents are actively taught to help their own children learn English, so the program's benefits extend beyond those adults who actually sit in on the classes.

Campagna's theory is that parents are the first and most important language teachers to their children. Little or no English at home severely hinders a child's ability to make linguistic progress at school.



Alexandria, Virginia's Campagna Center serves over 200 adult English learners a year. (Courtesy Alumbra Photography)

It remains unclear if this government-coordinated initiative has made any progress in improving ESL since it launched its strategic plan in December 2012.²² Furthermore, the office's plan includes 27 different and wide-ranging initiatives that may detract from its efforts to improve the quality of instruction for adult English learners. ONA's directive lacks strong outcome-based accountability metrics. The office's primary challenge as a 'coordinating body' is to drive improved outcomes for those it serves. Its ultimate success in doing so will likely hinge on its ability to tie funding decisions to performance measures on a consistent basis. While this may seem a tall order for such a politically-connected city funding office, Chicago's communities of English Learners have much riding on its ability to guide better results.

Across the US, a number of organizations have developed and implemented strategies for successfully helping immigrants learn English and achieve their career and personal goals. Government agencies from New York to Los Angeles who, despite millions upon millions of dollars in the budget, have failed to develop and implement a program that meets the needs of adult English language learners by successfully teaching them English and preparing them for career and life success. These agencies should look to the community-based organizations that have a proven track record of success. Chicago's interest in learning from private-sector best practices is an important first step but much more progress is necessary.

The Needs of Adult English Language Learners

Unlike most government programs for adult ESL, the most successful and innovative non-profits and private sector organizations orient their programs around the needs of the learner first.

This client or student-centered approach drives organizations like charter high school Nueva Esperanza Academy in North Philadelphia, according to English Language Learner (ELL) Coordinator Karen Sergovic, “The typical one size fits all ESL program doesn’t work anymore...our students and all ESL students for that matter are so diverse in their needs from literacy to academics — you need to look at each English language learner and meet them where they are.”²³ Luis Marquez, the CEO of the PUENTE Learning Center, an adult education non-profit with two sites in Los Angeles, echoes Sergovic’s approach, “We meet the learner where he or she is by assessing their skills, then design a program based on their strengths, and support their ability to go as far and as fast as they choose.”²⁴

Practical Needs

One of the biggest challenges for most immigrants is scheduling, since they have additional childcare and work responsibilities that preclude attending classes during fixed daytime hours. Chicago’s Polish American Association offers classes 7-days a week including intensive Saturday and Sunday block classes to accommodate those students who cannot attend weekday evenings.²⁵ Casa de Maryland tailors its scheduling to its specific student population – Latin American immigrants – and offers a daily class with no prerequisite knowledge on a drop-in basis for day laborers unable to find work that day. They also offer more formal classes targeted at newcomer mothers after their children have left for school.²⁶ Many others offer wrap-around services like on-site childcare during class time, so parents can attend without the extra cost or personal burden of seeking independent childcare.

Learning Needs

Another frequent challenge for immigrants is finding a program that actually teaches them what they need to know. Michele Rainis, an ESL teacher at Rio Hondo Community College in southern California, observes “I have a diverse range of students from illiterate Mexican immigrant mothers to mainland Chinese students with impeccable English grammar who need dialogue practice.”²⁷ One of Rainis’ students has very specific needs – the American-born student has strong grasp on vernacular English and Spanish but must improve her written English grammar or her local government agency will terminate her employment. For Rainis, “it’s a challenge because I have 5 ESL levels in one class and I must deliver differentiated lessons to all of them – most ESL teachers would be overwhelmed.”

Drop-In Day Laborer Program – Casa de Maryland

Casa de Maryland is a state-wide organization dedicated to improving the lives of Central American immigrants and refugees. Casa helps over 4,000 individuals each year, with around 1,500 participating in language programs.

To tailor its English instruction to the specific needs of the community, Casa offers a unique program for immigrant day laborers – a drop-in English program each morning. If a day laborer is unable to find work that morning, they are invited to stop in for a self-contained lesson in English. The program’s flexibility allows adult students to learn English while working.

Casa’s staff has developed their own proprietary textbook for the program: *English in the Lives of Day-Laborers*, which they sell on their website (<http://www.casademaryland.org>) for \$8. Instructors also strive to make their programs as practical and relevant as possible. When talking about nutrition, teachers bring in food labels. When covering bank visits, students get practice filling out real deposit slips. “One of the favorite topics,” says Abigail Umanzor, a former English instructor who now is the community education manager, “is police stops. They’re not covered in any textbook, but they can be very scary to someone who doesn’t know the language and customs of this country. We try to get the students to talk about their own experiences and help each other.”



Harlem's African Service Committee tackles its biggest challenge, English literacy, using technology.

Similar challenges face most adult ESL programs like the African Services Committee in Harlem, New York. ESL Coordinator Amy Kaiman says that most of her African-born students have acquired basic spoken English in their time in the country but lack any formal education. The flaw in traditional ESL is “the underlying assumption that people are literate in some other language, more and more people were coming but were not schooled at all.”²⁸ For Kaiman, state budget cutbacks in New York resulted in her organization losing a significant funding stream and significantly reduced classroom hours. However, it also meant fewer strings attached to which students they could accept, how they assessed them, and what they taught. “The state’s mandated BEST PLUS exam is a strictly oral test...the literacy

students were not technically in the program. When the mandate went away, I could stop sneaking people in.”²⁹ The African Services Committee is still committed to data and created its own internal benchmark with help from the Queensboro Public Library to better assess the students’ progress.

Another community-based provider achieving powerful results with a highly diverse, adult student population is Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School in Washington, DC, the nation’s first charter school for adults. Principal Ryan Monroe notes that his school faces its students as adults because “they have adult problems – we have students from 16 to 85 years old and they are all unique – we can’t treat them as a one size fits all population.” The school has developed a 10-step ESL curriculum (8 levels with two orientation classes) and based on pre-tests of their language skills (reading and speaking) as well as their formal education and places them accordingly.³⁰ Over 90% of their student body requires some ESL instruction but the school offers the students additional coursework tailored to their needs.

Differentiated Instruction through Blended Learning – PUENTE Learning Center

Since the mid-1980s, Los Angeles-based PUENTE Learning Center has been using adaptive learning software for adults. Teachers use an authoring tool developed by Duke University called Computer-Assisted Language Learning Project, or CALIS, to create their own lessons that are targeted towards students’ specific needs.

CALIS works by “enabling teachers to create computer-based lessons with their own subject material, presentation styles, question types, and interaction with student responses. In turn, students can practice grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary, and reading at their own pace until the lessons are mastered.” Today, PUENTE has a collection of over 1,500 proprietary lessons.

PUENTE’s method of individualizing instruction is called “blended learning” – a method dozens of K-12 charter schools are now using to effectively and efficiently improve outcomes. Luis Marquez, PUENTE’s CEO explains, “Using computers in this way allows a teacher to be more effective – when you put teacher-created lessons on the computer, this is one-to-one instruction.” This is a tool that allows a teacher to direct the lesson the specific need and intervene based on data collected by the computer programs.

The technique has proven both effective and efficient. In 2005, 85% of English learners in the program advanced in their proficiency level compared to the national average of 40%. Blended learning also enables PUENTE to help more students more efficiently, according to Marquez, “Sometimes, we have 50 people in a class but it allows an individualized experience.”

From a Spanish-language General Educational Development (GED) program to computer, nursing and culinary industry certification programs, Carlos Rosario serves 2,000 students in its programs per semester and tracks their progress rigorously with frequent assessments that help teachers map out the appropriate curriculum plan for each student. The approach has proved successful. According to its 2011-2012 Test of English Language Proficiency results, Rosario's approach is working – and exceeding its own expectations. Seventy-eight percent of students in levels 2 and 6 achieved a passing score. In levels 1 and 4, where Rosario uses the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems or CASAS English proficiency exam, 87% achieved proficiency in their respective levels.³¹

At various levels of ESL completion, students are eligible for workforce training. After completing level 3 ESL, students are eligible for computer literacy courses. After exiting six out of eight ESL levels, students can enter a culinary training program provided at the school. If students complete the entire program and exit at level 8, they become eligible for a nurse aide program or can pursue a community college degree. Since most students are “highly self-motivated to make a better life for themselves and their families,” the workforce training program eligibility requirements further incentivizes them to succeed in ESL.

Maintaining partnerships with world-class companies and organizations including Marriott, Microsoft IT Academy, the Culinary Institute of America, Walmart, and the Red Cross also permit the school to keep its programs and focus aligned with constantly-evolving real-world practices and needs, to the considerable benefit of its students.

Carlos Rosario also collects and analyzes data for its annual accountability plan, “recognizing the importance of collecting reliable data in a streamlined and efficient manner” through a robust and constantly monitored Student Information System.³² In contrast to more traditional programs administered by government agencies, community-based organizations like Rosario are committed to constantly producing maximum outcomes for their students, using best practices in data use and evaluation of their programs to continuously improve and innovate.

The public charter school structure allows for this constant emphasis on performance and results. The agency responsible for charter oversight of Carlos Rosario and the 101 other charter campuses in the Nation's Capital, the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, has worked with school leadership to implement accountability plans as part of an overall Performance Management Framework, against which the performance of schools are evaluated.

Responsible charter school governance requires establishing strong accountability for results, making it an attractive approach to handling the unique challenges of this sector. But very few jurisdictions nationally have charter school laws and funding streams that allow adult education charters. The District of Columbia's School Reform Act explicitly permits the establishment of “adult, community, continuing and vocational education programs.”³³ Carlos Rosario was accredited by the Middle States Commission in 2005.



Strong neighborhood involvement aids adult charter school Carlos Rosario's staff, here leading small group sessions.

Parent University – United Neighborhood Organization

Chicago-based United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) is a charter school system that uses immersion into mainstream academic curriculum combined with extra support for English language learners instead of dedicated ESL classes. UNO serves about 6,500 students each year— mostly in grades K-8 — although they do currently operate one high school.

UNO is currently expanding to meet the greater demand of the growing Hispanic community.

UNO's Parent University program is an essential component in the charter school's efforts to bridge the gap between families and schools. Each UNO campus has a Parent Outreach Coordinator to keep parents engaged and involved. There are a number of workshops in the program, including: Preparing my child for life, Nutrition, Financial Guidance, How to help your child with homework, and more.

UNO also offers classes to parents on everything from ESL to Yoga to Computer Literacy, and they have clubs for a diverse range of activities: Zumba, Knitting, and Jell-O Design.

For UNO, it's not enough to simply encourage parents to get involved in their children's education—you need to show them how and continuously motivate them to keep at it.

Work Needs

Like Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, many CBOs and private sector companies and organizations view English language training as a key component of the economic success of their students and employees. Los Angeles' PUENTE Learning Center's Luis Marquez explains the mission of his ESL program: "Any individual who chooses to invest their time, they walk out with more and better options for educational opportunity, career opportunities, just being able to be retained and promoted. It's all about preparing them for the workforce."³⁴

PUENTE offers adult basic education courses including job training and placement services to its participants but Marquez points out that ESL is the largest and most in-demand program because, "[I]anguage acquisition is a clear need, it directly ties into the lack of opportunity. If you can't speak the language, you can't find jobs except the poorest paying ones. It leads to family instability."³⁵ To prepare someone "who is clearly ready for the workforce," PUENTE integrates workforce skills and application into its ESL curriculum by giving student assignments and experiential office lessons that present practical as well as academic English. Students who graduate from the ESL program and job training classes are eligible for PUENTE's job referral services where they help connect employers with highly trained and qualified employees.

Corporate leaders are also providing language training for their employees. Hotelier Marriott International launched the program "Sed de Saber" (Spanish for 'thirst for knowledge') in 2006 to help train immigrant employees in English.

The program uses a portable electronic device that "uses storytelling, voice recording, games and review exercises to build and improve English language skills. Sed de Saber™ combines English as a second language curriculum with the Leapfrog Quantum Pad Plus Microphone™, allowing the learner to record, playback, and compare his/her voice to the word or phrase being learned, which increases confidence in pronunciation skills."

In the first four months of the pilot, over 85% of program participants gained in English proficiency.³⁶ Pilot participants also saw their English vocabulary rise by 65%.³⁷

For janitors at Google, completing the program means they can transition from the night shift to the day shift and earn higher wages.

According to the Migration Policy Institute which recognized the program with its *E Pluribus Unum* award for Corporate Leadership in 2011, employees learning English can do so at their own pace at the place of their choosing. The device and curriculum gives them the learning flexibility to advance in proficiency as fast as he or she wants, on their own terms. Since they can bring the device home, family members of participating employees also have use of the device and can improve proficiency themselves.³⁸

Although the program has a positive social impact in the lives of their employees, Marriott's decision is fundamentally a business decision – English proficiency improves the ability of employees to interact with guests and managers. In addition, Marriott created small language learning communities where managers help associates practice their language skills and develop relationships with their employees.³⁹

The Building Skills Partnership (BSP), founded in 1994 and based in California, is a collaboration between the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and corporate partners including those that employ janitorial workers like Google and commercial building owners.⁴⁰ The BSP offers two types of ESL instruction to accommodate many low-wage workers and help them advance in their careers. One program offers 3-month block classes on a 'learner-centered' basis at union halls in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles regions. The second program, ADVANCE Workplace ESL and Job Skills, teaches employees at their worksite – before and after their shifts. Employers help defray the costs of the site-based programs because they focus on workplace English. The program benefits employers since their employees have improved customer interactions, work rules compliance and enhanced job skills.⁴¹ For janitors at Google, completing the program (which 95% of participants do) means they can transition from the night shift to the day shift and earn higher wages. Google employees participate as tutors, since they are already on-site, there's a minimal time and transportation barrier to volunteering. Furthermore, janitor and other low wage earner participants can use up to a half-hour per shift to learn English on the job – making it easier for them to make the commitment to the program.⁴²



Marriott International's Sed de Saber program allows ESL employees to learn at their own pace and place of their choosing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current system of promoting English proficiency for adults is broken. Highly motivated English learners are precluded from attending programs due to structural and personal challenges. Few government-administered programs seek to accommodate the needs of these learners or adapt their curriculum to their work and learning needs. Moreover, the programs fail to collect performance data to evaluate the success of the existing government-funded programs. What little data is available does not accurately represent the long-term success of the program and limits the ability of policymakers and funding institutions to analyze outcomes and adapt.

In contrast to the government-run community college and adult education system, non-profits and private sector employers are meeting the needs of English learners more effectively through flexible program design and a commitment to data. Organizations, like Carlos Rosario school, that collect and analyze data demonstrate strong outcomes for English learners since they adapt programs and practices to increase effectiveness. The willingness to evaluate and adapt demonstrated by employer-sponsored and community-based organizations should serve as a model for adult ESL programs across the US.

Based on these observations, this report recommends:

1) Hold Programs Accountable for Outcomes Through Data

As the Government Accountability Office report makes plain, few federal and state grant programs are collecting standardized and, most importantly, useful data for evaluative purposes. Since there has not been a rigorous body of research identifying effective strategies for improving proficiency for adult English Language Learners, federal and state grant programs should standardize the types of data collected to help better identify effective approaches to include:

- Rate at which programs graduate students to proficiency;
- Post-graduation metrics that track job placement and retention, including in-field job placement over time for individual students to assess long-term effects of ESL programs;
- Longitudinal data on individual student persistence and level advancement over time;
- Require level-specific proficiency improvement for individuals (e.g. 10 individuals advanced from level 1 to 4); instead of collapsing all proficiency improvement into a single indistinct category.

2) Design Programs around Learner Needs and Goals

The current rigid structure of government-run ESL programs does not meet the needs of most learners and contributes to the high drop-out, low advancement, and poor placement rates. Instead, programs like those of most community-based organizations should be focused on personalizing the ESL program to individual student needs. Differentiating instruction and structures enables programs to reduce drop-outs and accelerate proficiency rates by meeting the students where they are. Adult ESL students require appropriate and tailored instruction that aligns with the student's own proficiency needs and goals on both a personal and career basis. The faulty assumption of most ESL curriculum that students are educated in their first language contributes to student dissatisfaction and low advancement since basic corollary skills are necessary to advance to higher levels of literacy.

- Design programs based on personalized education including the use of innovative K-12 models like blended learning that differentiate instruction digitally and allow for greater self-pacing.

3) Establish Funding Models Built Around Success, including Adult Public Charter Schools

As available Department of Education data suggests, states and localities that succeed in accelerating the learning of students toward proficiency are not being rewarded for their success. Since 'level advancement' is a singular category, the outcomes-based accountability data is of limited value since it is difficult to measure real progress for individual students or programs. Programs that have the most success in advancing students should be incentivized to expand through additional resources. This should include the expansion of public charter schools like Carlos Rosario for adult learners. If held accountable for outcomes, these publicly funded non-profits provide an easily replicable and proven model for expanding access and quality.

- Pay organizations for level-advancement and proficiency completion based on revised outcomes metrics;
- Incentivize innovative models that accelerate advancement and graduation rates and reduce drop-outs;
- Align incentives to organizations who are successfully aiding their students in meeting personal and career goals.

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Cover photo: The Campagna's Center's New Neighbors program offers childcare so parents can bring their children to the center while they work on their English.
(Courtesy Alumbra Photography)