

MARCH 2016

# TEACHING TOWARD EQUITY:

The Importance of English Classes to Reducing Economic Inequality in New York

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**The Center for Popular Democracy** works to create equity, opportunity and a dynamic democracy in partnership with high-impact base-building organizations, organizing alliances, and progressive unions. CPD strengthens our collective capacity to envision and win an innovative pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda.



**Make the Road New York** (MRNY) builds the power of Latino and working class communities to achieve dignity and justice through organizing, policy innovation, transformative education, and survival services. MRNY is the largest grassroots community organization in New York offering services and organizing the immigrant community, with more than 19,000 members and community centers in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and Long Island.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This report was prepared by the Center for Popular Democracy and Make the Road New York. It was written by Kate Hamaji and edited by Connie Razza (CPD), Theo Oshiro and Daniel Altschuler (Make the Road New York).

# Teaching Toward Equity: The Importance of English Classes to Reducing Economic Inequality in New York

## Executive Summary

In 2016, economic inequality remains one of the most pressing issues facing New York. Despite growing overall economic prosperity, New York continues to struggle with high rates of poverty.<sup>1</sup> And while New York is home to some of the wealthiest people in the country,<sup>2</sup> many New Yorkers can barely afford to meet their basic needs. Income inequality in New York City has surpassed the national average<sup>3</sup> and New York State now has the second highest level of income inequality of any state in the country.<sup>4</sup>

As the immigrant population continues to grow throughout New York, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes have become essential to any plan that comprehensively tackles income inequality and builds family economic stability. Approximately 37 percent of New York City's population is foreign-born.<sup>5</sup> While more immigrants reside in New York City (three million)<sup>6</sup> than outside of the five boroughs, the growth of New York State's immigrant population outside of the five boroughs has been more rapid.<sup>7</sup> Between 2005 and 2013, the total immigrant population in New York State grew by 10 percent, with approximately 4.4 million immigrants now residing in the state.<sup>8</sup> This report finds that in order to address persistent income inequality, New York must account for the growing language needs of an increasingly diverse population.

Investments in ESOL are an investment in greater equality in New York. By a number of measures, ESOL classes increase economic opportunities and build family economic stability—improving labor market outcomes for adults and educational and workforce opportunities for their children. Nationwide, working-age limited English proficient (LEP) individuals are over-represented among the poor.<sup>9</sup> Census data shows that a lack of proficiency in English lowers the probability of employment and of attaining full-time work.<sup>10</sup> And it is well-established that immigrants with English proficiency earn between 13 and 24 percent more than immigrants who are not English proficient.<sup>11</sup> **The Center for Popular Democracy and Make the Road New York estimate that by bringing all LEP individuals to English proficiency, the city's current LEP population could see a cumulative increase in earnings of \$3.1 to \$5.8 billion. At the state level, earnings could increase by \$4.5 to \$8.2 billion.**<sup>12</sup>

This report also highlights the educational and workforce development gains that accompany investments in ESOL. Studies show that English proficiency leads to improvements in children's educational and workforce outcomes.<sup>13</sup> And research shows that when families are involved in their children's early education, children experience greater success transitioning to elementary school—a critical period in childhood development.<sup>14</sup> In interviews conducted for this report, English students at Make the Road New York explained that with increased English proficiency, they have become

more comfortable engaging with their children's teachers at school, reading to children in English, and helping children with homework, which has positive long-term implications for a child's academic and economic success.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the growing importance of ESOL in an increasingly diverse city and state, funding has not kept pace with the need. The number of state-funded ESOL seats declined by 32 percent from 2005 to 2013—a decrease attributable to stagnant levels of state funding and rising per-student costs.<sup>16</sup> State-funded ESOL seats can accommodate only one out of 39 residents who need ESOL classes.<sup>17</sup> At the city level, there have also been losses in ESOL seats in recent years.

As New York continues to tackle persistent income inequality and strives to boost family economic stability, its strategies must necessarily address the language needs of a growing immigrant population.

Specifically, New York City should:

- 1) Dedicate \$16 million in fiscal year 2017 in new investments to help an additional 13,300 students access adult literacy programs, including ESOL, Basic Education in Native Language (BENL), Adult Basic Education (ABE), and High School Equivalency Preparation (HSE).<sup>18</sup>

New York State should:

- 2) Increase New York State Education Department funding for Adult Literacy Education (ALE) to \$17.2 million (from \$6.3 million) and support the Regents' recommendation of a \$10 million investment in bridge programs—programs that prepare individuals with low educational attainment for entry into a higher education level, occupational skills training, or career-track jobs.<sup>19</sup>
- 3) Increase funding of the Office of New Americans to \$10 million to further bolster ESOL and workforce development programs for immigrants across New York.

## Introduction

Combatting income inequality is one of the greatest challenges confronting New York. Since taking office, Mayor de Blasio has tackled this issue from a number of fundamental vantage points, including expanding paid sick days, raising wages for city employees, and providing universal pre-kindergarten access. In New York State, Governor Cuomo has prioritized efforts to raise the minimum wage and increase paid family leave. Despite growing overall economic prosperity, however, New York continues to struggle with persistent income inequality.<sup>20</sup> In fact, income inequality in New York City has surpassed the national average, and 45 percent of New York City residents live in or near poverty.<sup>21</sup> New York State, too, is characterized by major disparities in wealth and now has the second highest level of income inequality in the country.<sup>22</sup>

As New York's immigrant population continues to grow rapidly, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) has become essential to tackling income inequality and building family economic stability. Studies have shown that when working-age adults are more English proficient, they are less likely to live in poverty,<sup>23</sup> more likely to be fully employed,<sup>24</sup> and more likely to earn higher wages.<sup>25</sup>

English proficiency is critical not just for the economic well-being of workers, but for the economic stability of whole families. When parents become English proficient, they are better able to engage in their children's education. And, with greater English language proficiency, residents are more comfortable navigating civic life and accessing the services and programs that support economic stability for families.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the established impact of English proficiency on worker and family economic stability, the availability of ESOL services does not match the growing need. As New York continues to confront persistent income inequality and boost family economic stability, its strategies must address the English language needs of its growing immigrant population. Funding for expanded ESOL classes is the next logical step.

## A Growing Demand for ESOL Services

As New York's immigrant population continues to grow, so does the demand for ESOL services. New York State's immigrant population has grown more rapidly than within New York City itself. The Center for an Urban Future found that, between 2005 and 2013, the six counties with the fastest growth of foreign-born residents were all located outside of New York City.<sup>27</sup> In that same time period, the total immigrant population in New York State grew by 10 percent, with approximately 4.4 million immigrants now residing in the state.<sup>28</sup> Approximately 37 percent of New York City's population (or three million people) is foreign-born.<sup>29</sup> Immigrants comprise almost half of the city's workforce (47 percent) and have been growing both in number and as a proportion of the workforce in the last 15 years (up from 44 percent of the workforce in 2000).<sup>30</sup>

More than half of the immigrant population in both the city and state are considered limited English proficient (LEP), meaning they speak English "less than very well." Citywide, 1.7 out of three million immigrants are LEP, and statewide, 2.3 out of 4.4 million immigrants are LEP.<sup>31</sup> The Center for an Urban Future found that between 2005 and 2013, the number of all LEP New Yorkers grew by 14 percent.<sup>32</sup>

Nearly half (49 percent) of the city's foreign-born population speaks a language other than English at home.<sup>33</sup> Almost 50 percent of the city's LEP population speaks Spanish, followed by Chinese (17 percent), and Russian (6 percent).<sup>32</sup>

### Key Statistics about New York's Immigrant Population

	New York City	New York State
Number of Immigrants	3 million	4.4 million
Percentage of Immigrants	37%	22%
Number of LEP Immigrants	1.7 million	2.3 million
Percentage of LEP Immigrants	57%	52%

Problematically, funding for ESOL has not kept pace with the needs of a growing immigrant population with significant levels of limited English proficiency. **The number of state-funded ESOL seats declined by 32 percent from 2005 to 2013 (from 86,000 to 59,000 seats).**<sup>36</sup> Overall, state-funded ESOL seats can accommodate only one out of 39 residents in need of ESOL classes.<sup>37</sup> At the city level, there have also been losses in ESOL seats in recent years.

### Yanilda, ESOL Student

My name is Yanilda and I'm from the Dominican Republic. For me, English is very important. I have to speak English at work because I work in [Bushwick] and in this area a lot of new people are moving in. Last year, I had a kidney transplant, so I am only able to work part-time. I work at a grocery store four hours a week, but later on I want to find another job. If you don't know English, you can't find a good job—only cleaning or other low-paying jobs. If you know English, you can get a better job and better pay.

If you don't speak English, it's harder to understand your rights. Sometimes the boss or manager only speaks English and if you can't speak English, you can't talk to them or tell them your opinion.

Before I learned English, when I went to the doctor, someone else like my sister-in-law had to go with me in order to translate. Now, I can go by myself and I can talk to my doctor.

Right now I live with my brother and his family. Sometimes when my sister-in-law is busy, I can help my niece with her homework. She's in kindergarten now and when I help her read her books, I learn too.

English is also very important to me because I want to become a citizen. I go to English classes in the morning and then citizenship classes at night so that I can pass the U.S. citizenship test.



# Tackling Income Inequality and Boosting Family Economic Stability with ESOL

## The Impact of English Proficiency on Poverty, Employment and Earnings

In the United States, English proficiency has a direct, positive impact on workers' and families' economic stability. Nationwide, individuals with limited English proficiency are more likely to live in poverty. LEP individuals are over-represented among the poor, comprising 16 percent of the working-age poor population compared to 9.3 percent of the total working-age population.<sup>38</sup> A 2014 Brookings Institute study found that almost a quarter of working-age LEP adults in the 89 largest metropolitan areas live below the federal poverty line—nearly double the poverty rate of their English proficient counterparts (13 percent).<sup>39</sup>

Further, English proficiency has a positive impact on employment status. An earlier Census study showed that, even when controlling for a number of personal characteristics (age, sex, race/national origin, education, and occupation), primarily speaking a non-English language lowers the probability of employment and of attaining full-time work. This disadvantage was found to increase as English proficiency decreased.<sup>40</sup> Nationwide, working-age, English proficient adults are somewhat more likely to be in the labor force than their LEP counterparts (74 percent versus 71 percent, respectively), and their employment rates are somewhat higher (67 versus 64 percent, respectively).<sup>41</sup>

English proficiency not only affects poverty status and employment status, but it has a direct impact on earnings. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that immigrants who are proficient in English earn between 13 and 24 percent more than immigrants who are not English proficient.<sup>42</sup>

Based on this finding, **the Center for Popular Democracy and Make the Road New York estimate that by bringing all LEP individuals to English proficiency, the city's current LEP population could see a cumulative increase in earnings of \$3.1 to \$5.8 billion. At the state level, earnings could increase by \$4.5 to \$8.2 billion.**<sup>43</sup> When workers have more money in their pockets, they spend more locally and generate increased tax revenue for the city and state.

The earnings discrepancy is even greater when comparing LEP adults to the total English-speaking population. The Working Poor Families Project (WPFP) estimates that working-age LEP adults earn 25 to 40 percent less than their English proficient counterparts.<sup>44</sup> Census data show that, even when accounting for a variety of languages and personal characteristics, the positive relationship between English proficiency and earnings holds true: individuals who speak a language other than English at home have lower median earnings than those whose primary language is English.<sup>45</sup>

A worker's level of English proficiency has a significant impact on her ability to earn higher wages—not just when she moves from non-English proficiency to English proficiency, but with each incremental increase in proficiency. Research suggests that increasing a worker's English proficiency by one level has roughly the same impact on productivity and earnings as an additional year of education.<sup>46</sup>

Further, English proficiency is associated with an earnings advantage at all levels of educational attainment (among full-time, year-round workers), though its impact varies.<sup>47</sup> English proficiency makes the biggest difference in earnings for those in the middle of the educational attainment range (high school diploma or some college). Among this group, median earnings are 39 percent higher for English proficient workers than non-English proficient workers (\$40,000 versus \$28,700).<sup>48</sup> Among

those with a BA, non-LEP individuals earn about 30 percent more than LEP individuals (median annual incomes of \$65,000 and \$50,000, respectively).<sup>49</sup> English proficiency makes the least difference for those with the lowest levels of education, pointing to a poor labor market for those without a high school degree. Still, English proficient individuals with less than a high school diploma earn 24 percent more than their LEP counterparts (median annual income of \$28,000 versus \$22,600).<sup>50</sup>

Because of its impact on poverty, employment, and earnings, English proficiency in the workforce contributes to an overall economic impact. By providing expanded ESOL services to its residents, New York would be investing in its own human capital, while generating increased tax revenues for the local and state economy.<sup>51</sup>

## The Impact of English Proficiency on Workplace Rights

English proficiency is particularly important for immigrant workers, who are disproportionately represented in the low-wage workforce where workplace violations, including wage theft, are far too common.<sup>52</sup> Employers steal working people's wages through various means, including failing to pay overtime, failing to pay the minimum wage, taking illegal deductions in paychecks, directing workers to work off-the-clock, calling employees freelancers or independent contractors, or simply not paying them at all.<sup>53</sup>

### Ruth Lopez, ESOL Student

I was born in Cartagena, Colombia, and I have been in New York for about eight years now. I've studied English for four years at Make the Road New York. For me, learning English gives me a sense of security when I'm out in the city and I need to communicate with people or ask questions. I used to have a lot of fear when I had to ask people questions and they didn't always understand me. I feel much more comfortable now and less scared than I used to.

I am a member of a worker-owned cleaning company called *Pa'lante*. Almost all of our customers are English speakers, so knowing English is very important for communicating with my customers. Learning English has really improved my ability to talk to my clients.



When some employers know that a worker doesn't speak English, they sometimes take advantage of the fact that the worker doesn't speak English and doesn't know what their rights are. For example, my husband received all of his documents from his employer in English and because he didn't understand what was written on those papers, they took advantage of him. When we know English, we can better understand our rights and we won't permit others to take advantage of us.



In a landmark survey on wage theft, the National Employment Law Project (NELP) found that those who spoke English “well” or “very well” (as self-reported) experience significantly lower minimum-wage violation rates than those who speak “not well” or “not at all.” Violation rates for immigrants, however, varied surprisingly little between recent arrivals and those who are more settled in the U.S.<sup>54</sup> In other words, among those surveyed, lack of English proficiency was more of a factor than length of time in U.S. when it came to minimum wage violations.

According to ESOL students, a worker’s English language proficiency can be a determinant of how an employer perceives and treats an employee. Workers who have English proficiency may have a better understanding of their rights and can communicate and advocate for themselves if workplace rights are violated. English proficient workers are also often better equipped to negotiate a raise and can help other non-English proficient workers understand their rights on the job.<sup>55</sup>

## The Impact of English Proficiency on Family Economic Stability

ESOL proficiency is not only a predictor of labor market outcomes, but also has an impact on the economic stability of whole families. Studies show that English proficiency leads to improvements in children’s educational and workforce outcomes, as children with limited English skills often perform poorly in both school and later in the workforce.<sup>56</sup> English students at Make the Road New York explained that, with increased English proficiency, they have become more comfortable engaging with their children’s teachers at school, reading to children in English, and helping their children with homework,<sup>57</sup> all of which have a positive long-term impact on a child’s economic success.<sup>58</sup>

### Building on the Mayor’s Leadership in Schools: UPK and Community Schools Are Key Opportunities

As part of his strategy to combat inequality, Mayor de Blasio has committed to expanding community schools—neighborhood hubs where students receive academic instruction, families access social services, and communities share resources.<sup>59</sup> A central component of the community schools model is increased parental engagement and family participation, wherein parents are “enlisted as partners in their child’s education.”<sup>60</sup> In order for many immigrant parents to comfortably engage with teachers and school administrators—and in particular, to take advantage of the city’s expanded Community Schools initiative—they first require access to ESOL classes to become English proficient.



Investments in adult education can also build on New York City’s universal pre-k victory, strengthening another key component of the Mayor’s plan to combat income inequality. Studies show that parental engagement in children’s education in pre-k and elementary school is important to the success of schools in helping students learn.<sup>61</sup> Research also shows that when families are involved in their children’s early education, children experience greater success transitioning to elementary school—a critical period in childhood development.<sup>62</sup> By addressing the language needs of LEP parents, the city can help parents become engaged during this crucial time in their children’s lives, thereby bolstering the success of the city’s pre-k initiative.

## Building on the Mayor's Leadership to Enhance Civic Participation

With increased English proficiency, people not only have an easier time participating in their children's education, but also in navigating civic life more broadly. By ensuring that immigrants have opportunities to become English proficient, and thus more comfortable navigating civic life, the city is increasing the effectiveness of its own Municipal ID program—another success under the Mayor's leadership that has helped to open up civic life to immigrants throughout the city. When immigrants are more comfortable navigating civic life, they are better able to access the services, benefits, and programs that can provide economic support to their families. For example, Willy, an ESOL student at Make the Road New York, explained that he is now more comfortable riding the subway because he can understand announcements about train delays.

Another ESOL student, Yanilda, described how her communication with her doctor has dramatically improved since becoming more proficient in English.<sup>63</sup> Facility with navigating the transportation system means that workers are better able to get to and keep their jobs, and when individuals can speak to their doctors, they are better equipped to keep themselves and their families healthy. Taken cumulatively, these daily experiences can have a profoundly positive impact on a person's ability to navigate civic life—ultimately benefiting not just individual parents and workers, but whole families.

### Willy, ESOL Student

My name is Willy and I am from Peru. I've been taking English classes at Make the Road New York since 2009 and I have moved through different levels. I take English classes because I don't want to stay quiet—I don't want to be shy.

I wanted to learn English because about three or four years ago, my daughter was going to school here and I wanted to talk to her teachers and advisors. And I wanted the principal to understand what was best for her.

English is important when getting around the city. My first year here, I only knew how to take the J and F trains. When the train isn't running, there are announcements in English. Now, I can read the signs and understand the announcements and it's very helpful.

English is also very important for my work. Right now I work in the kitchen as a cook. I take delivery orders in English and I talk to the customers in English. Sometimes my boss says, "Hey Willy, something is missing from the order!" and I have to understand English to figure it out. At work, English is also important for earning better wages. If I can talk to my boss in English, she'll consider giving me more responsibility and maybe a little bit better pay.



## Conclusion

Today, economic inequality remains one of the most pressing issues facing New York. If New York City and State intend to effectively tackle persistent income inequality and promote family economic stability, they must account for the growing language needs of an increasingly diverse population and ensure that immigrant New Yorkers have meaningful opportunities to increase their English proficiency.

By a number of different measures, ESOL classes increase economic opportunities and build family economic stability—leading to better labor market outcomes and enhanced educational and workforce opportunities for whole families. Robust funding for expanded ESOL is the next logical step for a city and state that adopt a comprehensive approach to combatting income inequality.

Specifically, New York City should:

- 1) Dedicate \$16 million in fiscal year 2017 in new investments to help an additional 13,300 students access adult literacy programs, including ESOL, Basic Education in Native Language (BENL), Adult Basic Education (ABE), and High School Equivalency Preparation (HSE).<sup>64</sup>

New York State should:

- 2) Increase New York State Education Department funding for Adult Literacy Education (ALE) to \$17.2 million (from \$6.3 million) and support the Regents' recommendation of a \$10 million investment in Bridge Programs—programs that prepare individuals with low educational attainment for entry into a higher education level, occupational skills training, or career-track jobs.
- 3) Increase funding of the Office of New Americans to \$10 million to further bolster ESOL and workforce development programs for immigrants across New York.

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- 64 Make the Road New York is a member of the New York City Coalition for Adult Literacy (NYCCAL). This recommendation is consistent with NYCCAL's priorities.



