

## **Creating a Workplace ELL Program**

### **I. The Need for Workplace English Language Learning (ELL)**

The lack of English ability has a direct impact on the future success of industries employing high levels of foreign-born workers. The U.S. Department of Labor projects there will be a shortage of 10 million skilled workers in the next five years.<sup>1</sup> Immigrant labor is the key to filling the impending gap, but business and labor alike will only be able to adapt to this change if foreign-born workers learn English, develop relevant vocational skills and integrate into the businesses and communities where they work by becoming U.S. citizens.

A large number of these LEP workers want to learn English. Yet in a survey of adults whose primary language was other than English, 27.7% of those surveyed reported that they are prevented from studying English because of barriers to accessing classes,<sup>2</sup> including lengthy waiting lists resulting from a shortage of federal and state ELL funding.

The Department of Education reports that ELL instruction is the fastest growing area of adult education.<sup>3</sup> Funding to support adult English instruction is severely limited across the country compared to the need.<sup>4</sup> Waiting times are greatest for professionally instructed English classes and can range from several weeks to two years.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these LEP individuals also wish to become U.S. citizens but are prevented from doing so because they cannot meet the English and civics requirements of the U.S. citizenship test.

The issue of English language literacy among the foreign-born is a shared concern among many institutions and groups, including: schools and universities; employers; civic groups; elected officials; law enforcement; faith communities and houses of worship; immigration advocates and literacy promoters.

Lack of English proficiency poses significant barriers to employment and naturalization, especially for recently arriving immigrants, who are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to be well-educated in their native countries or to speak English than immigrants who came before them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Rice in *Workplace Education: Twenty State Perspectives* (accessed December 10, 2007); available from <http://www.nationalcommissionadultliteracy.org/content/parkerpolicybrief.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, "Adult Education for Limited English Proficient Adults," in *The ELL Logjam: Waiting Times for Adult ELL Classes and the Impact on English Learners*, Dr. James Thomas Tucker (Los Angeles, CA: The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, 2006), 6.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, available at: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/9499hinvest.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Asian American Justice Center. *Adult Literacy Education In Immigrant Communities* (2007), p. ix.

<sup>5</sup> Tucker, J. T. *Waiting Times for Adult ELL Classes and the Impact on English Language Learners*. (Los Angeles, CA: National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, June 2006), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Chenoweth and Laura Burdick, *A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan* (Washington, DC: Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., 2007), 59-60.