

English Classes In Short Supply

Programs for immigrants underfunded

By Mae M. Cheng

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While the New York City foreign-born population has grown during the past decade, the number of adult immigrants being taught English has not kept pace due to a lack of adequate government funding for these classes, according to a report released yesterday.

Only about 50,000 immigrants — or less than 5 percent of the estimated 1.1 million foreign-born adults in New York City who are not fluent in English — are enrolled in a language class, The New York Immigration Coalition found in its report.

The coalition, an umbrella group of about 150 organizations, recommends that governments more than double their spending for the English-language classes, from the approximately \$35 million now spent annually to more than \$75 million.

"There's absolutely no question that immigrants have a high desire to learn English and the thing keeping them from enrolling is the availability of classes," said Margie McHugh, the coalition's executive director. "The shortage was much worse than expected."

Out of the 50,000 immigrants estimated to be enrolled in free English classes, more than half — or about 26,000 — participate through programs funded by the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative, which uses federal, state and city money. The 26,000 students taught annually is

3,000 less than were enrolled at the start of the last decade, the report states.

And while federal funding for these classes has grown in recent years, the report found that state and city funding have remained stagnant for at least the past five years.

"There are a lot of people who are underserved," said Maria Quiroga, a program director at the Union Settlement Association in Manhattan.

She said she is forced to turn away more than a quarter of the immigrants who try to enroll in English classes. "It's hard mostly [to turn people away] because we know they need it," Quiroga said.

"We supply the services," said Jerry Cammarata, commissioner of the city's Department of Youth and Community Development, which distributes funding for English classes. "We continue to strive to improve our services every year."

Susana Torres remembers the frustration of attending her first school conference for her then-5-year-old son about eight years ago and not being able to communicate with his teachers in English.

Torres, 32, a native of Mexico living in Jackson Heights, not only fully participates in her children's parent-teacher conferences now, but she also is often tapped to translate.

Torres was among those who won a lottery held some two years ago at a community center offering English courses.