

Study rips city, state on English aid

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An estimated million New Yorkers don't speak English well or at all, and their language skills won't get better anytime soon, according to a citywide study on immigrants released yesterday.

Despite the staggering decade-long growth in the city's immigrant population — as Census 2000 figures revealed — city and state funding patterns have remained flat, according to the study prepared by the New York Immigration Coalition.

And, in the face of costs driven upward by inflation, public libraries and community-based organizations have been forced to cut back the numbers of English classes they offer, or have endless waiting lists for existing classes.

"We were really surprised to learn not that there are not enough English classes being offered, but that the numbers have actually declined," said coalition director Margaret McHugh.

At a press conference in Manhattan, she called for an increase in federal, state and city funding for English language instruction.

"Immigrants have a high desire to learn English, but the No. 1 thing that keeps them from learning is the availability of classes," she said.

According to the study, 29,000 students were enrolled in publicly funded English classes throughout the city in 1990-91. By 1995, that number dropped to 20,000, then rebounded to 26,000 between 1996 and 1999.

The bulk of the city's adult En-

glish courses are funded through the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative, a program run by the city and state.

Jerry Cammarata, commissioner of the city Department of Youth and Community Development — which oversees the city's involvement in the literacy program — said the city has done the opposite of what the coalition's study says.

From fiscal year 2000-01, the adult literacy program has increased by 5%, bringing its total to \$6.5 million. Before that, its budget had moderately increased by 3%, Cammarata said.

"We are certainly not lower, we are higher than last year," he said. "One would think if we're getting the increase, they [community-based organizations] are getting the increase as well."

A 1992 study of the literacy skills of people in New York State found that more than half of foreign-born adult New Yorkers were at the lowest end of the literacy scale. The coalition analyzed that statistic, along with numbers in the 1990 census and changes in the immigrant population, to estimate that about 1 million foreign-born adults in the city speak English poorly — if at all.

"I have lived in this country for 15 years, but I can't understand the people, and I cannot explain what I want or need," said Maria Sanchez, 37, a native of Colombia who has waited for a slot at the Marymount Community College Institute for Immigrant Concerns for nearly four months. "That's my problem."

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