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Investing in Illinois's Immigrants: The Unmet Statewide Need for English Instruction

Immigrants living in Illinois are an integral part of our state's workforce and play a powerful role in driving our economy, yet their socioeconomic mobility has been drastically limited by state cutbacks in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Given that immigrants who speak English well earn twice as much on average as those with little or no English skills, English language proficiency is critical to boosting immigrants' earning power and moving them toward economic security. However, the nearly 1.8 million immigrants who call Illinois home and account for 17.4 percent of our state's workforce increasingly do not have the opportunity to attain English proficiency due to the inability of our state's underresourced adult education system to meet the growing demand for English instruction.

"Empty Promises: The Unmet Need for English Instruction Across Illinois," a [recent report](#) issued by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), details the inadequacies of English instruction in our state:

- Although more than 575,000 adults in Illinois speak English not well or not at all, programs funded by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) offered only 69,689 ESL slots in 2008—a 20 percent drop from the 87,448 slots offered in 2002.
- While demand for ESL instruction has increased, ICCB funding for ESL instruction has dropped from \$57.5 million in 2002 to \$54.9 million in 2008.
- Illinois spends only \$395 per year for each adult education student.
- Illinois adult education programs rely heavily on part-time and volunteer teachers. Of the 4,188 teachers in adult education programs, only 254 are full-time, and 958 are unpaid volunteers.
- Illinois ESL programs are not meeting the educational needs of immigrants: up to 20 percent of ESL students drop out within four weeks of starting classes, only 36 percent of ESL students gain at least one level in English proficiency each year, and only 8 percent of ESL students transition into college-level courses.

As immigrants fail to advance in English proficiency, they face greater barriers in moving beyond low-skill, low-paying jobs. ICIRR's report recognizes that one of the most important steps Illinois leadership can take to increase the effectiveness of English literacy initiatives and improve immigrants' job opportunities is to provide funding for partnerships between community-based organizations and community colleges. Due to their strong relationships with immigrant communities, community-level organizations are knowledgeable about immigrant students' needs and are thereby uniquely situated to close the literacy gap. These community organizations are at the forefront of designing innovative programs that bridge language and vocational studies in a way that promotes immigrants' abilities to secure meaningful employment and develop economic self-sufficiency. Enabling immigrants to transition from ESL to further education and into skilled jobs that pay a living wage is a key antipoverty measure and is essential to the viability of our nation's economy.

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