



# MASSACHUSETTS NEEDS AN ACTIONABLE STRATEGY TO EXPAND ESOL SERVICES

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## **About MassINC**

MassINC's mission is to make Massachusetts a place of civic vitality and inclusive economic opportunity by providing residents with the nonpartisan research, reporting, analysis, and civic engagement necessary to understand policy choices, inform decision-making, and hold the government accountable.

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Established in 1971, the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI) is a public service, research, and economic development arm of the University of Massachusetts. UMDI's mission is to advance equity and social justice, foster healthy communities, and support inclusive economies that alleviate poverty and promote opportunity. In collaboration with partner organizations and clients, UMDI carries out this mission through research, education and training, capacity building, and direct services to strengthen our collective impact. For more information, [www.donahue.umass.edu](http://www.donahue.umass.edu).

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# I. INTRODUCTION

In 2005, MassINC published *The Changing Face of Massachusetts*, a landmark study that captured the remarkable impact of immigrants on the state's economy at the dawn of the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> This report also highlighted an urgent need to expand access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services so that newcomers could contribute at their full potential to the commonwealth's social and economic vitality. Nearly two decades later, additional investment to increase access to ESOL is more critical than ever. For, while Massachusetts has developed many creative models to deliver these services, state and federal ESOL spending has not kept pace with the growth of our foreign-born population.

At last count, 480,000 working-age residents of Massachusetts had limited-English proficiency (LEP).<sup>2</sup> This remarkably high figure represents one-tenth of the commonwealth's workforce. In Gateway Cities—the economic hubs of regional economies across the commonwealth—close to 20 percent of working-age residents are LEP. And these 2022 census estimates likely undercount by a significant margin the actual number of LEP workers in Massachusetts today.<sup>3</sup> With pandemic travel restrictions lifted and a large flow of migrants seeking asylum, international migration reached historic highs over the past 18 months.

Redoubling efforts to help this growing legion of LEP workers build English skills will provide a powerful antidote to labor shortages, which pose an increasing threat to our economy and quality of life as low birth rates, early retirements, and domestic outmigration reduce the state's workforce. Increasing access to ESOL will also offer a sizeable contribution to local economic development in Boston, Gateway Cities, and other communities with large immigrant populations.

While the multifaceted benefits that the Commonwealth stands to gain by increasing investment in ESOL are well understood, Massachusetts lacks an actionable strategy to expand access to these services.<sup>4</sup> The need for a coherent and coordinated strategy is greater than ever. Pandemic-era innovations advanced the field considerably. Overnight, providers shifted to virtual learning and new instructional technologies. And the availability of significant federal recovery funds pushed the system to rapidly prototype and troubleshoot new programs, partnerships, and service models.

With revenue shortfalls increasing competition for the state's limited resources, the sector needs a plan to make a compelling case for increased state and federal investment to build upon and sustain these gains. A plan is also vital to furthering and cementing the system change necessary to fully adopt the new, better, and more cost-effective ways of delivering services revealed by pandemic-era experimentation, and to draw additional private investment into the system.

To inform such a plan, this policy brief identifies gaps in the state's ESOL delivery system. Then it describes the economic rationale for increasing public investment to close these gaps in greater detail. The brief concludes with recommendations pursuant to both the planning process and the content of a strategy to make high-quality ESOL services broadly available to LEP residents throughout the commonwealth.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- **State and federal funding for ESOL services isn't keeping pace with growth in Massachusetts's LEP population.** Over the last two decades, the state's adult LEP population grew by 50 percent. However, state ESOL funding per adult LEP resident fell 25 percent while federal ESOL funding to Massachusetts fell by 40 percent.
- **Many communities with growing immigrant populations have very limited capacity to provide ESOL services.** Everett, Fitchburg, Salem, and Westfield have no state-funded services. Revere has less than 1 instructional seat per 1,000 adult LEP residents. Springfield and Lynn are also extremely lacking with less than 10 seats per 1,000 LEP adults.
- **Vocational ESOL services are extremely lacking throughout the state.** By helping newcomers prepare for employment or gain the English skills required to excel in jobs that they currently hold, vocational ESOL is a critical tool to make the state's large immigrant workforce more productive. However, these services are very limited. There are just 5.4 vocational ESOL opportunities per 1,000 working-age LEP adults in Massachusetts, one-third of the state's capacity to provide general ESOL instruction.
- **Increasing access to ESOL will provide a substantial boost to local economies.** Helping each working-age LEP adult in Massachusetts increase their English language skills by one level of proficiency would generate \$3 billion in additional annual earnings. About half of these benefits would go to Gateway Cities and their regional economies, and the total economic impact would likely be double or more when multiplier effects are included.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop a statewide ESOL expansion strategy and identify a lead agency to guide its implementation.
2. Steadily increase investment in ESOL to bring capacity into alignment with the state's growing LEP population.
3. As resource levels rise, shift state funding to vocational ESOL programs.
4. Leverage community colleges to bring more federal resources into the ESOL delivery system.
5. Support regional collaboration and remove barriers to coordination among local service providers.
6. Build the ESOL educator workforce.
7. Improve data collection and support research and evaluation.

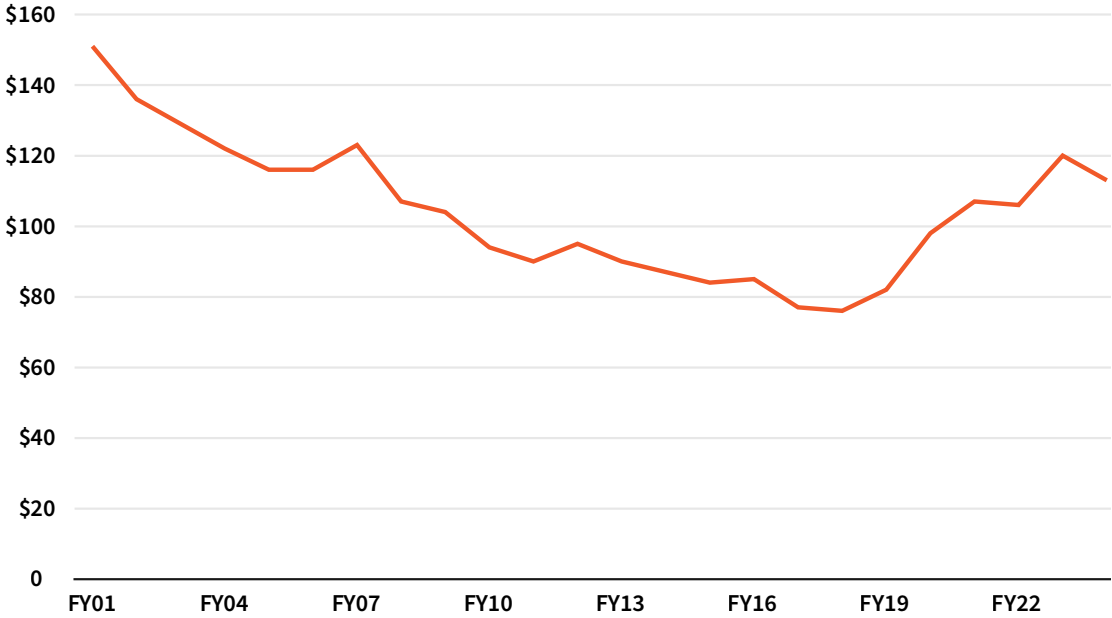
## II. EXPOSING THE GAPS IN THE STATE'S ESOL DELIVERY SYSTEM

Over the past two decades, the adult LEP population in Massachusetts grew by nearly 50 percent. This large flow of newcomers means ESOL is increasingly central to the economy and the common good. Services that build language skills for the workplace, and that help parents overcome language barriers so they can fully support their children in new and different environments, are especially vital. While leaders in the field are working valiantly to connect immigrants with these services, seven prominent patterns suggest the state's ESOL delivery system is struggling to meet growing needs:

**1. State and federal funding for ESOL services has increased in recent years, but resource levels have not kept pace with growth in Massachusetts's LEP population over the past two decades.** The state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) manages most publicly funded ESOL programs in Massachusetts. Its Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) unit deploys resources for public adult basic education (ABE) provided by both the state legislature and the federal government. This funding trended steadily downward for most of the past two decades on a per-LEP resident basis. Adjusting for inflation, the state's ABE line item jumped 62 percent between FY 2018 and FY 2024, and there was modest growth in federal ABE formula funds in recent years. However, these increases have not been sufficient to keep up with the large number of newcomers arriving over the past two decades. Per adult LEP resident, state spending is still roughly 25 percent below FY 2001 levels, and federal funding is 40 percent lower (**Figures 1A and 1B**).

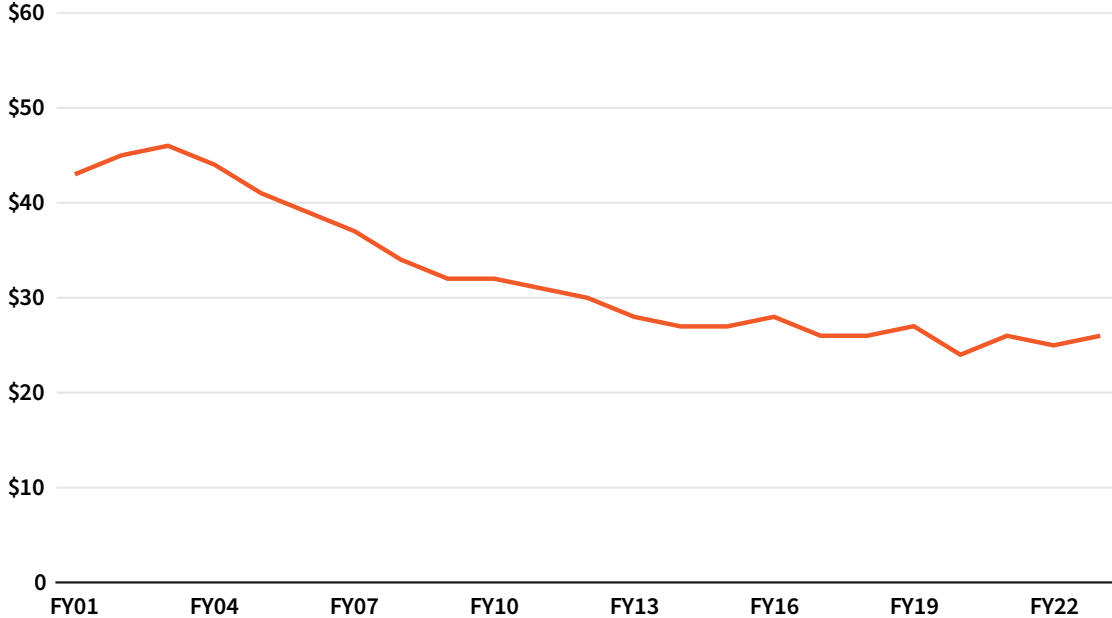
With migrants arriving in search of a better life, demand for these services is greater than ever, but so far state funding is not responding to this acute need. Resource levels fell between FY 2023 and FY 2024, and for FY 2025, both the governor's budget and the House budget propose another \$1 million reduction to the ABE appropriation. If the House of Representatives' recent bipartisan reauthorization of the federal workforce act is any indication, federal ABE funding is unlikely to increase significantly in the coming years.

**Figure 1A: Massachusetts state ABE spending per adult LEP resident (2024 dollars)**



Source: MA Budget and Policy Center, US Department of Education, and US Census Bureau

**Figure 1B: Massachusetts federal ABE spending per adult LEP resident (2024 dollars)**



Source: US Department of Education and US Census Bureau

**2. Many communities with growing immigrant populations have very limited capacity to provide ESOL services.** The DESE-funded system supports the vast majority of high-quality ESOL instruction in Massachusetts. These resources go to school districts, community colleges, and community-based organizations that provide robust services with professional educators, strong curricula, and accountability for student learning and progression. Community partners—including immigrant assistance groups, refugee resettlement agencies, community health centers, and one-stop career centers—refer LEP residents to local providers. With \$73 million available annually for ESOL instruction from a combination of state and federal funds, the DESE system has capacity to serve approximately 10,000 LEP students at any given time.<sup>5</sup> This amounts to just 16 instructional seats per 1,000 adult LEP residents.

Proximity to a provider is crucial for LEP residents. Many have limited access to transportation and struggle to find time for classes between work and childcare. And despite considerable effort to close the digital divide, access to computers and high-speed internet for online learning remains a formidable barrier. Resource limitations mean services are scarce in many communities with large and growing immigrant populations.

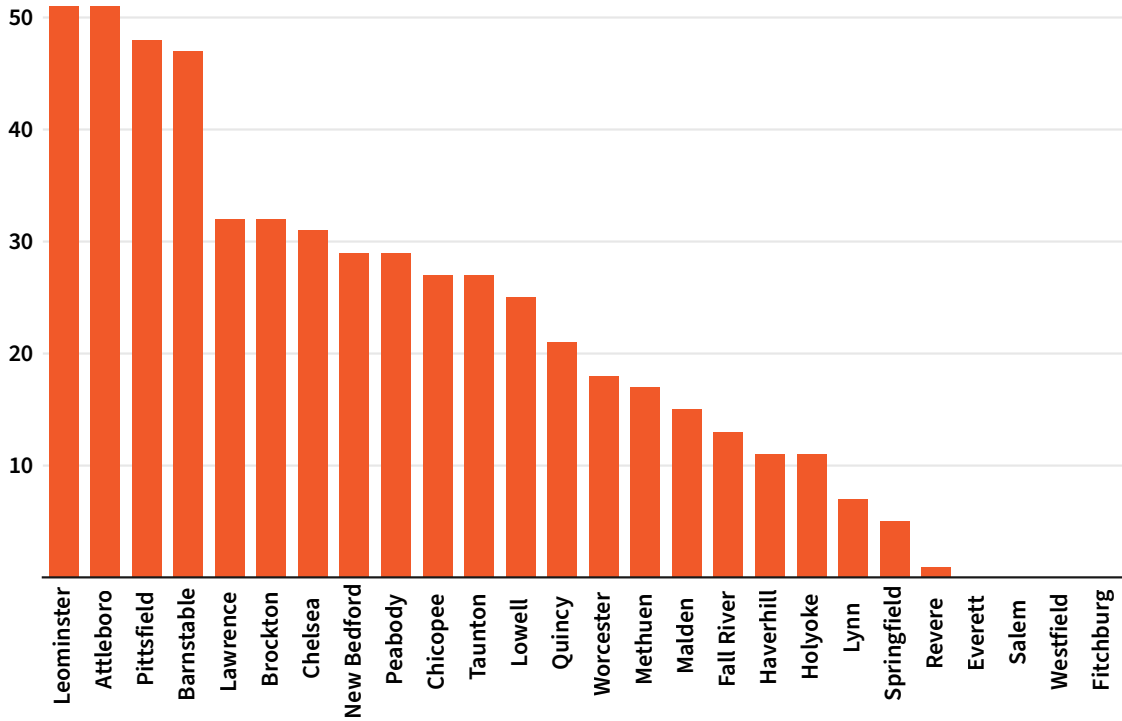
Four Gateway Cities—Everett, Fitchburg, Salem, and Westfield—have no DESE-funded ESOL providers. The absence of services in Everett is particularly concerning. That community is home to 13,500 LEP adults, who make up more than a third of the city’s adult population. And many Gateway Cities that do have DESE-funded providers are still woefully underserved. With just 15 seats for nearly 17,000 LEP adults (or 0.9 seats per 1,000), service levels are most inadequate in Revere. Springfield and Lynn are also extremely lacking in capacity, with less than 10 seats per 1,000 LEP adults. As depicted in **Figure 2**, service availability in Fall River, Haverhill, and Holyoke falls well below the state average.

Even relatively high-capacity communities have difficulty meeting the needs of their residents with current resource levels. Lawrence, Brockton, and Chelsea have roughly six times as many seats per LEP adult as Springfield, but they maintain a longer waitlist for services than Springfield and many other Gateway Cities with less capacity (**Figure 3**). In nearly all Gateway Cities, there are more students on the waitlist than seats available. While the waitlist data do include students seeking ABE seats, providers indicate that the vast majority are waiting for ESOL. Moreover, they generate these long waitlists without investing resources to market programs to newcomer populations that likely have limited awareness of their availability.

**3. The large number of Gateway City school districts with no resources to provide English instruction to parents and caregivers is another major gap in the state’s ESOL delivery system.** As noted in a recent report to the Board of Education, Gateway Cities have seen dramatic growth in their newcomer populations over the past two decades.<sup>6</sup> Ideally, school systems with high concentrations of families with limited English can serve parents in the evenings at the same schools their children attend during the day. Among the 12 Gateway City districts where more than one-quarter of students are not native English speakers (a proxy for LEP parents and caregivers), only six offer this service with DESE funding. The Everett, Revere, Lynn, and Malden school districts have among the highest concentrations of non-native English speakers, but they also lack DESE funding to provide ESOL services to parents and caregivers (**Figure 4**). Some school districts, like Lynn, may provide ESOL to parents for a fee. But these courses are likely unaffordable for many newcomers, especially those living in high-cost areas of the state.

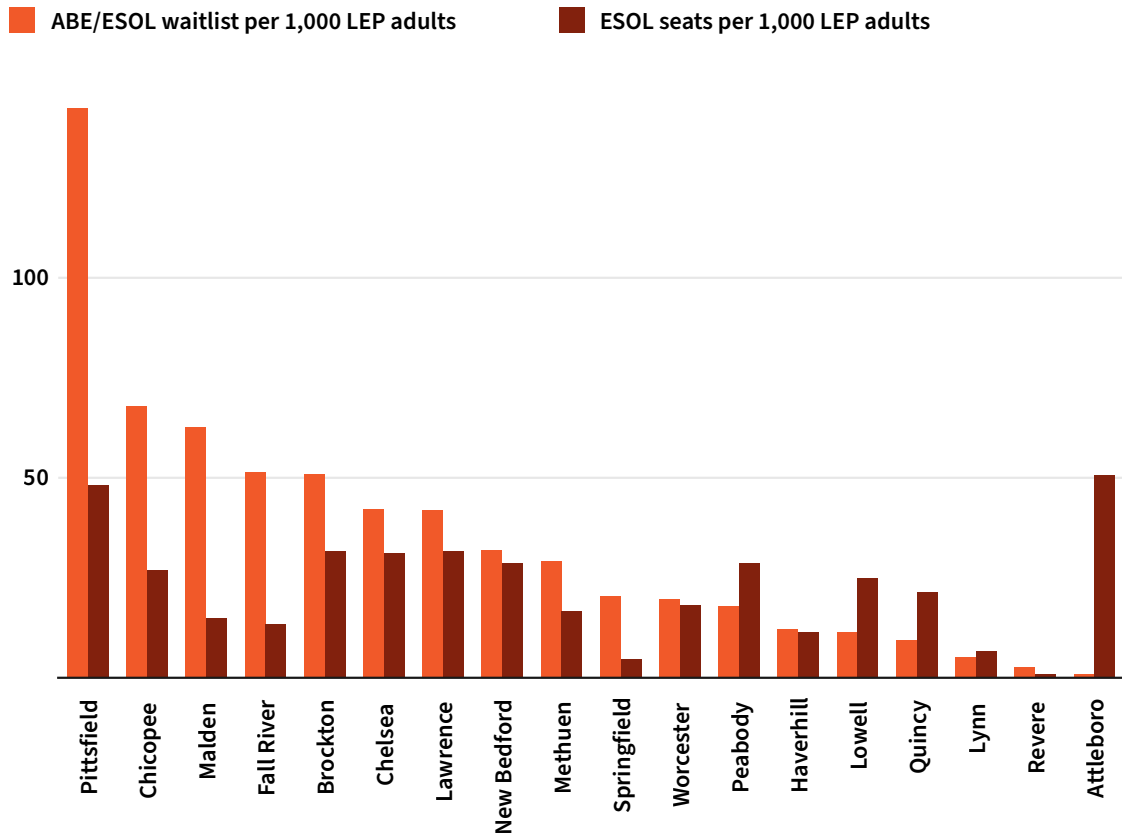


Figure 2: DESE-funded ESOL seats per 1,000 LEP adults in Massachusetts Gateway Cities



Source: MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and US Census Bureau

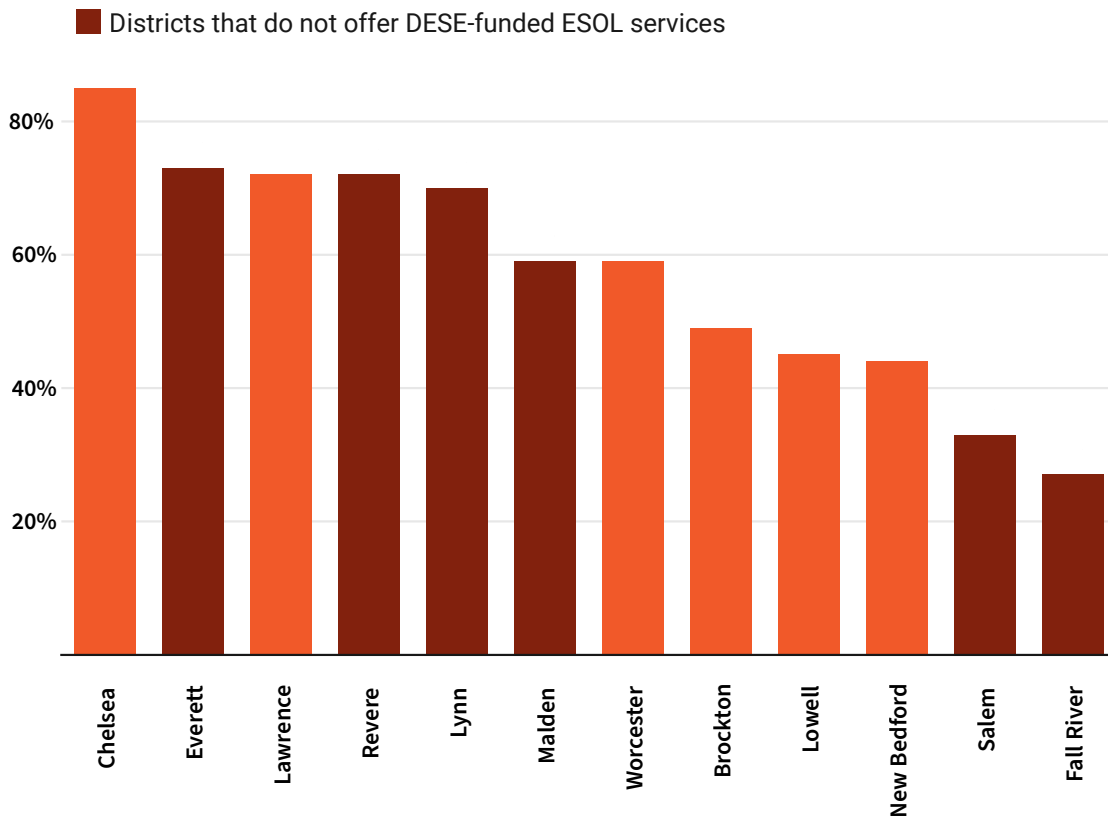
Figure 3: Waitlist vs. seats for DESE-funded ESOL per 1,000 LEP adults in Massachusetts Gateway Cities



Note: Waitlist data include both ABE and ESOL services

Source: Analysis of data from the MA Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

**Figure 4: First language not English students as a share of total enrollment, 2023-2024**



Source: Analysis of data from the MA Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

**4. Community colleges have lost significant capacity to provide ESOL instruction in recent years.** Currently, community colleges host about one-fifth of the DESE-funded instructional seats. However, a decade ago, community colleges also offered many for-credit courses through ESOL departments with specialized faculty. Low-income students could access financial aid to cover tuition and fees for these high-quality courses, bringing more federal dollars into the state's ESOL delivery system.

However, community colleges substantially reduced these course offerings over the past decade. Surveys administered by the Massachusetts ESOL Community College Association show approximately 3,500 students were enrolled in credit-bearing ESOL courses in the fall of 1997. In the Fall of 2018 (the time of the most recent survey with enrollment counts), fewer than 1,600 students took credit-bearing ESOL courses. While there may be some issues with comparability, responses to questions about staffing and course offerings on surveys conducted by the Massachusetts Association of Teachers of Speakers of Other Languages between 2014 and 2023 reveal a similar pattern of declining capacity across most community colleges.

As Massachusetts saw dramatic growth in its immigrant population, and the student bodies of these institutions became far more linguistically diverse, community colleges lost considerable capacity to contribute to the state's ESOL delivery system.<sup>7</sup> In part, this reduction appears to have been motivated by an interest in supporting student success. A handful of studies indicate that students who begin their community college studies with low-level English courses are less likely to graduate. Some students were stopping out because they exhausted federal financial aid on English classes and ran out of funds before they could complete required coursework for their degree program. Community colleges have been addressing this challenge by integrating ESOL into math and other subjects so that students can build their English skills while completing courses that enable them to make progress toward their chosen majors.<sup>8</sup>

While this approach benefits many students looking to gain other vocational skills at community colleges, it is not in the interest of students who are mainly interested in improving their English. But Massachusetts community colleges are in a bind because the US Department of Education no longer allows institutions to provide financial aid for students who lack basic English to enroll in other college courses. In the 2010s, the department took enforcement action and forced some colleges in Massachusetts to return federal funds awarded to students for lower-level English courses.

This policy reflects a bias in how we think about the development of English skills in the context of higher education. Native English speakers who study a foreign language receive credit toward a bachelor's degree even when they take classes at the most basic level. In contrast, ESOL is seen as “remedial” instruction, and students must take classes at the intermediate level or above to receive credit toward an associate degree. For many immigrants who come to the US with vocational skills, pursuing postsecondary coursework with a sharp focus on learning advanced English would be the most productive use of their time and provide large return on federal financial aid dollars.

**5. While pilot programs mounted with federal recovery funds demonstrate the potential of robust vocational ESOL models, Massachusetts will have difficulty expanding and sustaining these programs with current resource allocations.** Most immigrants seeking ESOL services report that their primary motivation is to increase their employment and earnings.<sup>9</sup> Massachusetts offers relatively few programs that combine ESOL and job training services to help them accomplish this aim.<sup>10</sup> Those that exist are primarily funded by small allocations from the Workforce Training Funds Program (WTFP) and DESE’s ABE line item.

Commonwealth Corporation, the state’s quasi-public workforce development agency, administers WTFP. Companies in Massachusetts pay approximately \$20 million annually into the fund with an \$8.40 payroll tax per employee. While eligible businesses can apply for incumbent worker training grants for any workplace skill, the awards for ESOL are extremely modest (relative to the number of firms with large LEP workforces) despite the fact that ESOL is a stated priority and belongs to the most-funded award category. Between July 2022 and May 2024, just over \$3 million from the fund went to these grants. For customized training—which is the largest WTFP grant program, the maximum award is just \$200,000. On average, companies receive approximately \$2,300 per participant. Even with this relatively low cost per student, WTFP only reaches about 1,600 LEP adults. And many regions have very limited capacity. In the Franklin-Hampshire region, just one company received a grant, which it used to train only eight students. Similarly, just one grant went to Bristol County to serve 51 students. Three companies in the Merrimack Valley received grants to support a total of 55 students (**Figure 5**).

DESE operates two other variants of vocational ESOL that are a critical component of the delivery system because they provide much-needed preemployment services: One is MassSTEP, which integrates ESOL with job training in high-demand occupations such as home health aides, food handlers, and commercial drivers. In FY 2023, this program received approximately \$1 million for 136 seats. Pay for Performance is the second vocational ESOL program funded through DESE. This evidence-based model developed by Jewish Vocational Services provides participants with free ESOL instruction coupled with career coaching and support. In FY 2023, DESE budgeted roughly \$3 million for this initiative from the ABE line item. These resources funded 860 seats at \$3,500 per participant (see p. 14).

Between Commonwealth Corporation and DESE, Massachusetts invests roughly \$5.5 million annually in vocational ESOL. The combined 2,610 seats amount to just 5.4 vocational ESOL opportunities per 1,000 working-age LEP adults in Massachusetts. To some degree, this figure underestimates vocational ESOL activity. Some employers underwrite the cost of providing ESOL to their employees without public funding, often through contracts with experienced training partners, such as English for New Bostonians or Jewish Vocational Services.

However, these efforts skew heavily toward large employers in the Greater Boston area. In this sense, the geographic disparities in vocational ESOL access are likely larger than those portrayed in Figure 5.

Commonwealth Corporation is working to build greater capacity with resources from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). By significantly increasing grant sizes, they have been able to demonstrate that it is possible to engage multiple partners to provide students with robust career, ESOL, and support services integrated into one program (see p. 19). With ARPA funds dwindling, Massachusetts will have difficulty expanding and sustaining these programs without greater funding for ESOL and/or a shift in the state’s ESOL resource allocation toward vocational models.

**Figure 5: WTFP vocational ESOL services grants, July 2022 - May 2024**

Region	Number of Grants Awarded	Number of Employers Served	Total Dollars Awarded	Total ESOL Participants
Boston	14	16	\$4000,652	328
Bristol	1	1	\$1000,800	51
Brockton	1	1	\$100,040	20
Cape & Islands	5	2	\$101,200	72
Central MA	9	8	\$472,950	264
Franklin/Hampshire	1	1	\$22,500	8
Greater Lowell	2	2	\$157,180	127
Hampden	1	3	\$149,000	58
Merrimack Valley	3	3	\$92,640	55
Metro North	31	23	\$865,494	355
Metro South/West	19	12	\$408,038	174
North Shore	4	4	\$168,100	83
South Shore	2	2	\$52,900	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>\$3,091,493</b>	<b>1,614</b>

Source: Commonwealth Corporation

**6. Resources to provide virtual ESOL services remain relatively limited.** Since 2002, World Education’s Innovating Digital Education in Adult Learning (IDEAL) Consortium has helped ABE programs across the country develop innovative digital learning programs by offering professional development, providing technical support, and facilitating peer learning. DESE has been an active member of the IDEAL consortium for many years.

In 2022, DESE launched the MassLinks Virtual School. Mount Wachusett Community College operates the program to serve adult ABE students across the state. For its first year, MassLinks received \$1 million to operate 250 seats.<sup>11</sup> A new RFP suggests DESE plans to triple funding to \$3 million in FY 2025 to support a minimum of 500 learners, but this would still represent just 4 percent of the state’s ABE spending and a small fraction of the state’s growing LEP adult population. While all virtual instruction certainly has its limitations, this mode merits far greater investment given its potential to expand reach and generate cost-effective learning gains for many students.

**7. Massachusetts lacks a coordinated strategy to improve and expand the delivery of ESOL services.** Perhaps the largest gap in the state’s ESOL delivery system is the lack of a coordinated strategy. By all accounts, the ACLS division at DESE has done an excellent job procuring high-quality services, instituting robust accountability systems, and helping the field innovate. But ACLS is nested within a K-12 education agency, with leadership and a board focused on the outcomes of children. The agency does not have a strategy to improve the reach of ESOL services in response to growing needs. Nor does it have a mandate to produce such a plan.

DESE is also not structured to evaluate the need for vocational ESOL versus traditional ESOL and balance resources accordingly. While state ABE funding has risen dramatically in recent years, DESE has not sought to disproportionately allocate these new resources toward vocational ESOL programs.

The lack of a comprehensive strategy in the commonwealth is even more apparent from a review of workforce development plans, both regionally and statewide (see Appendix). With the exception of the Berkshires and Cape Cod, the majority of federally mandated regional workforce development plans (last updated in 2020) describe a need to offer more ESOL services generally. However, these plans provide very few specifics on regional needs or initiatives, resource allocations, or goals. The same is true for the recently completed state workforce development plan.

With governance of the ESOL delivery system divided between education and workforce agencies, there is no organizing mechanism for coordination and planning to cost-effectively expand services to LEP residents throughout the state. Moreover, interviews with leaders in the field suggest that disincentives created by current financing and accountability structures inhibit planning and coordination across the delivery system.

## LESSONS FROM ENGLISH FOR ADVANCEMENT

Created and led by Jewish Vocational Services, English for Advancement (EFA) provides contextualized English instruction, career coaching, and job placement assistance. The English component focuses on teaching job-search-relevant vocabulary and grammar, helping students gain the skills necessary to contact employers and interview for open positions. Some instructional units also provide more specialized English for common career fields such as health care, childcare, and construction. Another innovation in this model is giving career coaching to all students. Coaches play dual roles: they develop relationships with local companies that hire employees with basic English skills, and they also help students prepare for employment. By leveraging their relationships with employers, coaches are able to assist students in the job search. With the ability to provide both instruction and coaching virtually, EFA can serve students in communities across the state.

Because EFA is focused on labor market outcomes, these services are only available to job seekers (unemployed workers or those in search of better jobs) who are authorized to work in the US. This means the program must screen all entrants. At the same time, the program prioritizes employment, so participants generally exit as soon as they acquire than upon rather than upon reaching higher levels of proficiency in English. Under the performance-based contract, JVS is compensated based on students' persistence in education and employment outcomes, and it receives additional funds when participants land jobs with above-average wages.

Of nearly 800 study participants who enrolled in a randomized control trial conducted between 2016 and 2019, participants earned \$3,500 more in wages than those assigned to the control group. The gains were twice as large (\$7,100) among those who were unemployed prior to entering the program.<sup>25</sup> Pre-pandemic outcomes verify that EFA is a highly effective intervention to move non-native English speakers into the labor market and position them for career advancement.<sup>26</sup>

The EFA model recognizes that employment is a priority for many ESOL students. Building more advanced English skills is a long journey for these workers, and they must prioritize employment that allows them to meet their basic needs in the interim.

## EARLY LESSONS FROM THE MOST RECENT WAVE OF NEWCOMERS

Influxes of refugees are as old as the Commonwealth itself, but the size and diversity of national origins represented in the most recent wave of newcomers has tested our systems, bringing about an unprecedented coordinated response from state government. With leadership from the Office for Refugees and Immigrants (ORI), ACLS, Commonwealth Corporation, and MassHire, newcomers are receiving vocational ESOL at shelter sites. The state is leveraging digital equity investment and technology to pilot hybrid services.

With its various occupational tracks, some newcomers are utilizing the Burlington English online learning platform to build their language and work readiness skills in preparation for employment. Most are also receiving weekly in-person instruction from English for New Bostonians (ENB). And the state is procuring coaching and career services to make its approach truly comprehensive.

Burlington English provides real-time data on persistence and progression, which ORI's command center and ENB regularly monitor. Reports from the field suggest this hybrid approach is far from perfect, but it is scaling and innovating rapidly, and agencies are gaining valuable experience working collaboratively to quickly meet the needs of diverse and changing populations. This represents the sense of mission and urgency that Massachusetts must infuse throughout its ESOL delivery system.

# III. PRIORITIZING ESOL EXPANSION

Massachusetts faces many pressing challenges. To make the case for focusing resources and energy on efforts to improve the ESOL delivery system, one must place these investments in the context of the state’s looming workforce shortage, the significant local and regional economic benefits, and the potential impact of the next wave of industrial change.

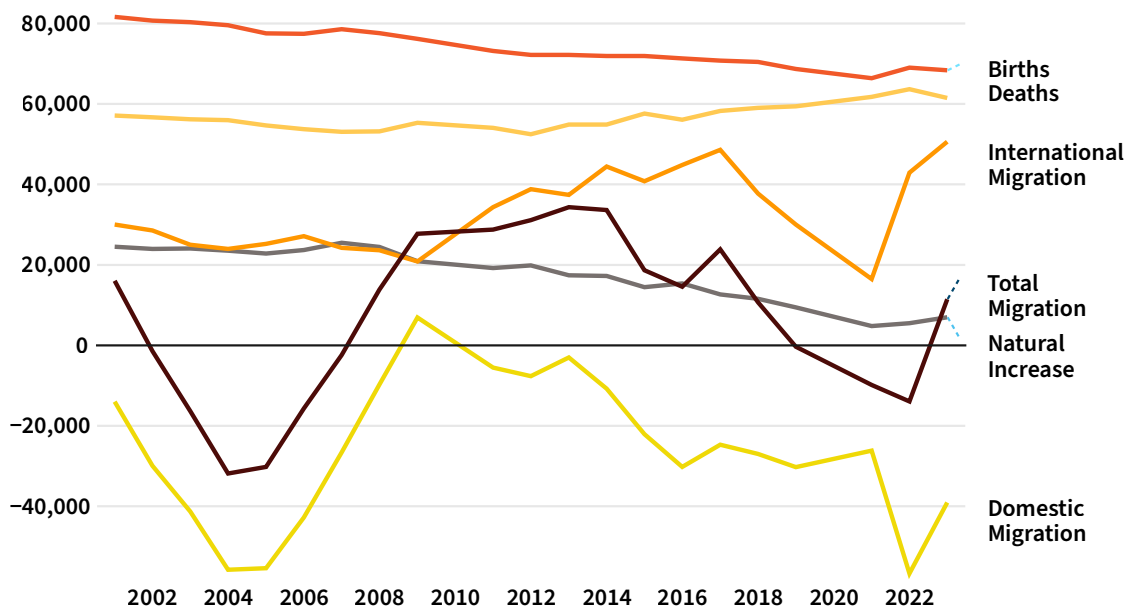
## The Looming Workforce Shortage

Massachusetts is already heavily reliant on immigration. Between 1990 and 2020, foreign-born residents accounted for more than three quarters (77 percent) of the growth in the state’s workforce. In the future, the state’s economy will be even more dependent on newcomers. Between 2020 and 2040, the Massachusetts population age 65 and older will grow by more than 33 percent. Replacing these workers and supporting them in retirement will require a large infusion of new people qualified to fill these jobs. Unfortunately, the most recent projections suggest the state’s working-age population will fall by 4 percent over the next two decades.<sup>13</sup>

If Massachusetts positions itself as an attractive destination for immigrants and provides ESOL and other services to fully incorporate them into the workforce, the commonwealth could avoid painful labor shortages and their economic consequences. Since 2020, Massachusetts has posted the second highest net international migration rate among US states.<sup>14</sup> In 2023, Massachusetts gained 51,000 residents from immigration, the largest number on record (Figure 6).

High levels of immigration today add to the state’s future workforce because fertility rates for foreign-born women in Massachusetts are 50 percent higher than those of native-born residents.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, ESOL services produce significant intergenerational benefits for labor productivity by helping immigrant parents increase their earnings and wellbeing, putting their children on a firmer path to success.

**Figure 6: Estimated components of Massachusetts population change, 2000-2023**



Source: UMass Donahue Institute analysis of data from US Census Bureau

## The Local and Regional Economic Development Benefits

Massachusetts need not wait a generation to realize the productivity benefits of ESOL. A large body of research shows that improving English language skills allows workers to participate in the labor force more fully, increasing the output of regional economies and contributing to local economic development.<sup>16</sup>

This is most evident in the sizeable earnings gains attached to English language acquisition. On average, earnings for workers in Massachusetts rise by approximately 24 percent for each step up in English proficiency when controlling for educational attainment (**Figure 7**). LEP residents with higher education enjoy the largest earnings gains as their English improves. This is consistent with studies nationally, which find college-educated immigrants with limited English are twice as likely to work in unskilled jobs as those who are English-proficient.<sup>17</sup> However, those with lower educational attainment also see large earnings gains as their English skills increase. A substantial share of earnings growth for those with less education comes from increased employment; on average, moving up a level in English proficiency provides 11 percent more hours of work each week in Massachusetts.<sup>18</sup>

Based on these figures, we estimate that helping each working-age LEP adult in Massachusetts increase their English language skills by one level of proficiency would generate \$3 billion in additional annual earnings. The economic benefits would be especially large for Gateway Cities and their regional economies. Together, workers living in Gateway Cities would earn \$1.5 billion more. The local economies in Lowell, Lynn, and Springfield would each gain more than \$100 million annually. With residents moving up just one level in English proficiency, Lawrence and Worcester would see their economies grow by more than \$150 million. And these impact estimates do not include a multiplier. The economic impact of ESOL on Gateway City economies would likely be twice as large when factoring in the direct, indirect, and induced effects of these earnings gains.<sup>19</sup>

The earnings gains that come from higher English proficiency in the workforce translate into large returns on state investment in ESOL services. A 2019 Boston Foundation report estimated that vocational-based English language programs would generate positive returns for taxpayers within 5 years.<sup>20</sup> And this study's estimation method was extremely conservative. It did not include non-monetary gains (such as improvements in health) or intergenerational effects. As noted above, immigrants are much more likely to be parenting children. Currently more than 60,000 school-age children in Massachusetts live in linguistically isolated households, and over half of them reside in Gateway Cities.<sup>21</sup>

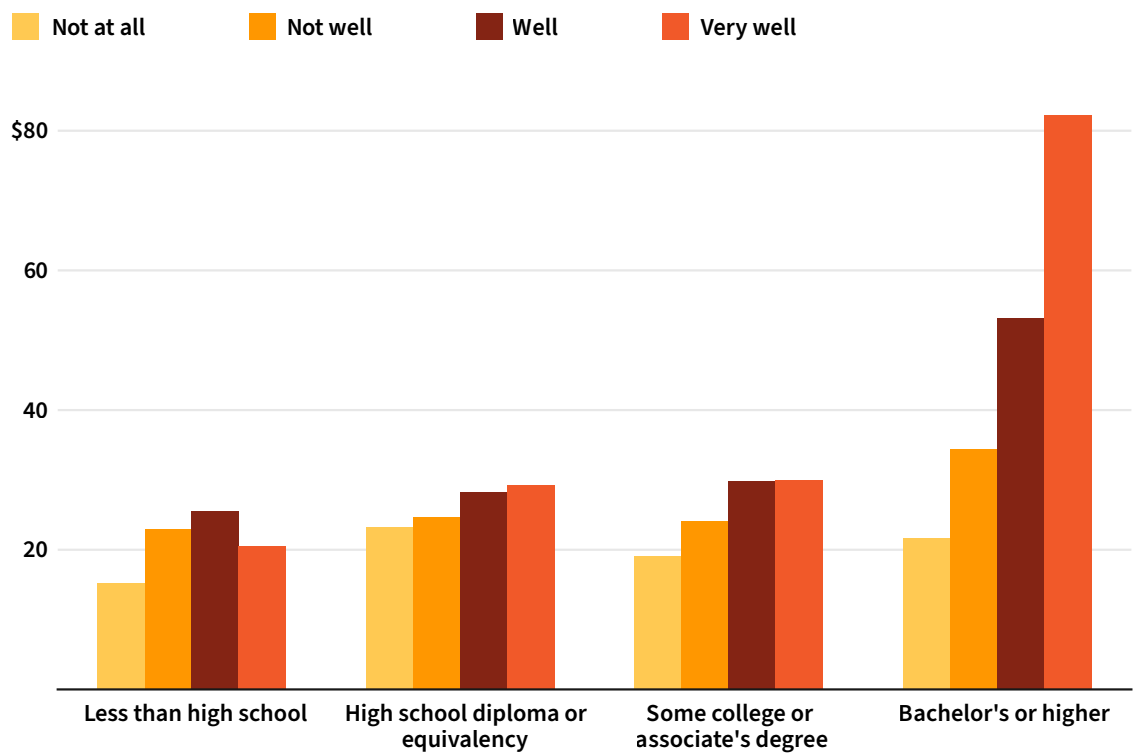
## An Approaching Wave of Industrial Change

The fiscal benefits of state investments in ESOL should be even higher in the future because the returns on English skills are likely to rise. Occupations requiring the most English are projected to grow from 30 to 37 percent of all jobs in Massachusetts over the next 10 years (**Figure 8**).<sup>22</sup> Job postings asking for English language skills suggest that this trend is already unfolding. Between 2017 and 2022, the number of job postings requiring candidates to possess strong English skills increased threefold (**Figure 9**).

While it is difficult to predict the future, automation and AI are advancing at a rapid pace, and worker shortages are increasing competitive pressures to find substitutes for labor. This is likely to further increase the share of jobs in Massachusetts that require advanced English skills.<sup>23</sup> Automation makes workers more productive and improves our standard of living. But in the past, these benefits have not been distributed equally; technological advances have contributed significantly to widening inequality.<sup>24</sup> As a growing share of Massachusetts residents lack English proficiency, mitigating the challenge to reduce inequality and its destabilizing effects is another strong argument for prioritizing efforts to strengthen and expand the state's ESOL delivery system.

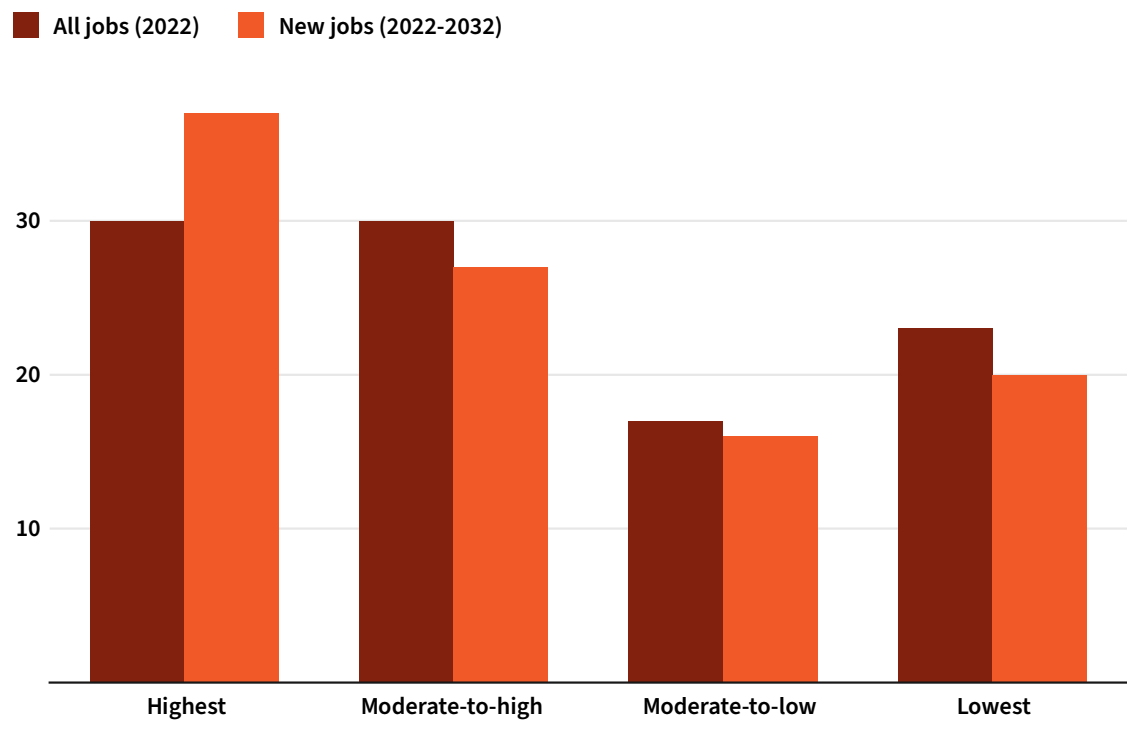


**Figure 7: Total personal earnings in Massachusetts by English proficiency and educational attainment**



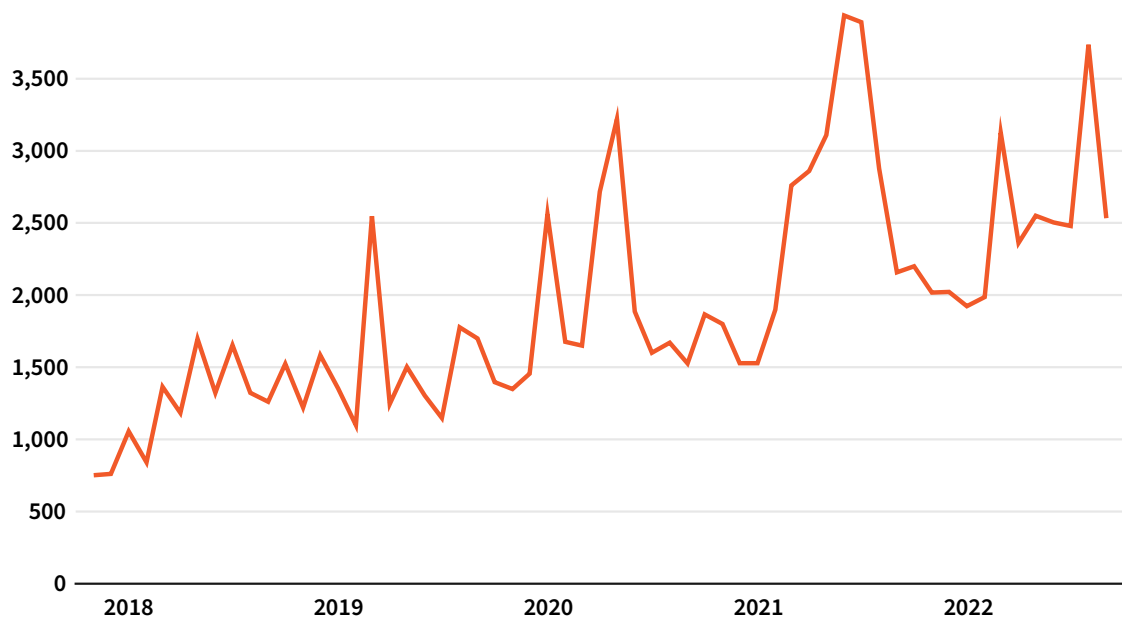
Source: Analysis of 2021 ACS PUMS, 5-year sample; population ages 18 to 64

**Figure 8: Percent of jobs by English language skills requirement, 2022-2032**



Source: Lightcast occupations data, O\*NET Basic Skills descriptions

**Figure 9: Unique job postings requiring English language skills for Massachusetts**



Massachusetts-only job postings with English language skill requirements listed (posts requiring master- or doctorate-level education excluded)

Source: Lightcast, Q4 2022 Dataset

## ARPA RESOURCES DEMONSTRATE THE POTENTIAL OF MORE ROBUST VOCATIONAL ESOL OFFERINGS

Innovative new efforts by Commonwealth Corporation show employers and training providers are eager to partner to better serve immigrants looking for help building their English and vocational skills simultaneously. Prior to ARPA, Commonwealth Corporation capped WCTF grants at \$500,000 over three years following legislative requirements. With more resources available by braiding ARPA and state dollars, the agency was able to more than double maximum grant sizes. Programs can now include multiple employer partners, and students receive more tutoring and job placement support. Programs have also been able to purchase and integrate learning management software, such as Burlington English and EnGen. These tools give students access to career-themed virtual ESOL instruction.

The new partnership between Catholic Charities' El Centro del Cardenal and Benjamin Franklin Cummings Institute of Technology is an example of what is now possible. Together, they are providing immigrants with training for careers in IT services. Participating employers include Logically (an IT security services firm with offices in Lawrence), Onward (a Boston-area IT company), the City of Boston, and MassRobotics. In addition to learning English skills for work in IT, students receive a CompTIA certification that prepares them for entry level help desk jobs. The 1-month training aims to serve 54 students at a cost of \$15,000 per participant.

Similarly, MassHire Merrimack Valley has joined forces with Greater Lawrence Technical School to offer an enhanced training and placement program for immigrants seeking careers in advanced manufacturing. Employer partners include Boyd Corp, Helfrich Brothers, and Momentum. In addition to learning English skills for the workplace, students receive CNC machine operator certification. The 6-month training program will enroll 45 students at a cost of \$19,000 per participant.

In the Pioneer Valley, UMass Amherst is collaborating with the Partnership for Worker Education, other local colleges, and school districts to prepare students for employment in the culinary industry. The project will give LEP adults contextualized ESOL and provide them with opportunities to earn ServeSafe and other culinary and dietary certifications. Particular emphasis will be placed on providing students with access to career ladders to advance in the industry. The 8-month training program aims to serve 110 students at cost of \$12,700 per participant.

While these programs cost significantly more than traditional ESOL, the more robust offerings and greater scale they represent could produce far better labor market outcomes and larger return on public investment. Careful evaluation is necessary to determine whether this approach provides sufficient ROI. Should these efforts prove successful, Commonwealth Corporation will need resources to build on the considerable work that went into creating these deep partnerships.

## THE PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE DEMONSTRATES THE PROS AND CONS OF ONLINE LEARNING FOR ESOL STUDENTS

Online learning has long been seen as an opportunity to increase access to courses for adult students, who have more difficulty fitting education in alongside work and family responsibilities. In addition to greater access, online learning may offer other advantages. Technology helps instructors differentiate content and pacing according to students' needs. This can be especially beneficial in ESOL settings, where students often vary widely in terms of both their English skills and their native language literacy levels.<sup>27</sup> Technology also supports greater self-direction, which can improve motivation and learning outcomes. This is particularly true for adults, who generally approach education with a more refined understanding of what they need to gain and how they learn best. Online learning platforms can also increase interaction among both teachers and fellow students; greater interaction is also linked to improved outcomes.<sup>28</sup> Finally, online learning technology affords opportunities to “gamify” instruction, making coursework more fun to complete.

While online learning has many clear potential benefits, researchers have also cataloged a host of challenges that make it difficult for ABE programs to deliver on the promise of online learning. Foremost is ensuring that students have access to reliable internet and computing devices and possess the digital literacy skills needed to participate in online courses. And while online learning can increase interaction, often online learning programs are structured in a manner that decreases interaction and makes it harder to establish trust between students, instructors, and advisors. Trust and relationships are particularly vital for adult students working to acquire a new language in a foreign country.

Quantitative research examining how these tradeoffs balance out in adult education is very limited. One rigorous study found lower persistence in blended online courses. However, this was more than offset by both the initial enrollment gains and the higher performance of students who eventually completed these courses.<sup>29</sup> Advances in technology and online instructional practices over the past few years likely tip the scales further in favor of online learning.

The unprecedented disruption experienced by ESOL programs during the pandemic led to innovative responses that have transformed the delivery of instruction and other services. With considerable leadership and support from DESE and ACLS, ESOL providers pivoted their in-person activities to fully-remote formats practically overnight. Federal data show that in Massachusetts, the number of adults participating in ESOL distance education grew from just 178 in 2017 to 10,475 in 2021. Several reports document the challenges faced by ABE/ESOL programs and adult learners, due in large part to limitations in technology and training, as well as to variation in instructors' levels of online teaching expertise.<sup>30</sup> Many programs also struggled with acute staffing shortages as ESOL instructors retired early or left the profession for new jobs. Students saw their needs mushroom as they struggled with their own pandemic-related crises, underlining the reality that adult learners often rely on ABE providers for more than academics.

Like educators in all sectors, ESOL providers rose to the challenge, finding creative strategies to deliver support services for students while also continuing instruction by adopting new tools such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Google Classroom. ABE providers in Massachusetts report many successes with integrating technology into ESOL instruction. Programs saw how offering online learning improved access for many students by helping them overcome transportation and childcare barriers. Consistent with the pre-pandemic research findings, programs exploited opportunities presented by online learning to customize and differentiate instruction to better fit student needs. One program found that expanding their capacity for online learning also allowed them to seek instructors outside their local geography, which broadened their employee pool and resulted in more diverse and qualified instructors.

# IV. TOWARD AN ACTIONABLE ESOL EXPANSION STRATEGY

With international migration rising and the state's worker shortage poised to become increasingly painful, the case for expanding access to ESOL services has never been stronger. The state's current fiscal constraints certainly present a challenge, but Massachusetts can overcome this barrier with a compelling strategy that capitalizes on technology and brings more federal funding into the delivery system. To spur both creative thinking and timely action along these lines, we offer the following recommendations:

As this analysis demonstrates, early-stage capital to launch and sustain these efforts in a manner that will produce strong and equitable outcomes is the one missing ingredient. To address this gap and help communities complete the recipe for success, we offer the following recommendations for the Massachusetts Legislature and the Healey-Driscoll administration:

## **1. Develop a statewide ESOL expansion strategy and identify a lead agency to guide its implementation.**

From educators and economists to doctors and business owners, leaders in the community have long elevated ESOL as a critical issue for the commonwealth. Given the stakes now, it is imperative that Massachusetts have a transparent, cross-agency strategy to meet growing needs. A formal ESOL expansion plan is also essential at this crossroads because the untapped possibilities of virtual learning necessitate transformational change in service delivery. Programs must operate in fully remote, hybrid, and in-person modes; provide one-on-one coaching and support; and leverage a range of technologies and partnership structures.<sup>31</sup> As the Massachusetts Broadband Institute invests a trove of federal resources to close the digital divide, a well-crafted plan will help ensure that this one-time expense meets the needs of both ESOL students and providers.

The Healey-Driscoll administration should assign a lead agency to develop a detailed and multifaceted ESOL expansion plan responsive to these challenges and opportunities. The administration should also task the lead agency with monitoring the implementation of this plan, including guiding data collection and evaluation.

DESE certainly has the tools and staff capacity to perform this function. However, Commonwealth Corporation might also make a strong choice. The quasi-public workforce development organization specializes in building partnerships to provide employment services to underserved residents across industries and geographies. This know-how makes Commonwealth Corporation ideally suited to guide cross-agency efforts to ensure that the state's large and diverse LEP population has on-demand access to ESOL services, including a set of far more robust vocational ESOL offerings.

## **2. Steadily increase investment in ESOL to bring capacity into alignment with the state's growing LEP population.**

The success of an expansion strategy is heavily contingent on drawing additional resources into the system. With a clear plan, stakeholders will be far better positioned to make the case for providing additional state resources to expand ESOL to the most underserved areas and populations.

The plan should also position stakeholders to advocate for greater federal investment in the ESOL delivery system. The steady decline in federal funding for ABE over the past two decades has shifted even more of these costs to the state. In FY 2023, the state funded 82 percent of these services. The federal government only provides Massachusetts with about \$10 million annually for adult ESOL programs, whereas the commonwealth spends

more than \$45 million on these services each year. Massachusetts is heavily subsidizing the federal government's return on investment, given the larger share of income taxes collected by the federal government, as well as the larger share of social services funded by the federal government (as well as the cost savings from avoided services generated by ESOL). Moreover, the state and its ESOL providers incur significant federal compliance costs in return for relatively modest federal funding.

Advocates need not wait for a plan to raise this issue with the state's federal delegation. In April, the House reauthorized the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Accounting for inflation, the House bill would maintain funding for state ABE programs at essentially the same levels through 2030.<sup>32</sup>

**3. As resource levels rise, shift state funding to vocational ESOL programs.** To receive federal ABE funds, Massachusetts must provide a 25 percent match to the DESE-funded system. This amounts to roughly \$3.5 million annually. The state is currently providing ABE funding to DESE at nearly 20 times the level necessary to meet the federal match requirements, and at the same time, it is undersourcing vocational ESOL programs. As recommended by the Center for Law and Social Policy, if accounted for separately, state ESOL funds can support career pathway efforts, avoiding highly burdensome federal regulations that limit flexibility and undervalue labor market outcomes.<sup>33</sup>

Allocating more resources for general English instruction is absolutely critical to help immigrants advance in the workforce. However, vocational ESOL is an acute need as a growing number of migrants arrive in our high-cost state with very little money. Massachusetts must ensure that the ESOL delivery system has more resources for programs that prioritize helping immigrants gain employment.

A well-conceived state ESOL strategy that includes shifting the balance of public resources toward pre-employment and incumbent worker vocational ESOL programs would have the added benefit of drawing more private sector investment into the delivery system. With additional state support, intermediaries like Jewish Vocational Services and English for New Bostonians could conduct more outreach to companies that rely on immigrant workers. In addition to offering instruction, these providers can help employers: a) identify the English language skills that workers require to perform well in their current roles and advance over time, b) assess the needs of individual employees, and c) develop evaluation protocols to measure return on investment in vocational ESOL.

This technical assistance is critical to boosting employer participation, which remains a significant barrier. Most companies are accustomed to much more discrete and time-limited training modules, upgrading worker skills over a few days or several weeks at most. This is a sharp contrast with the lengthy and prolonged investment in ESOL necessary for English proficiency gains. Few employers have sufficient knowledge of the sustained coordination among instructors and supervisors that is required for successful delivery of workplace ESOL. By growing this category of state investment, the field will be far better positioned to significantly increase employer engagement.

**4. Leverage community colleges to bring more federal resources into the ESOL delivery system.** While Congress may be slow to authorize additional state ABE formula funds, Massachusetts can draw more federal financial aid dollars to support ABE instruction. Finding ways to convert the vocational ESOL programs created with ARPA grants into true degree programs that meet federal financial aid requirements is one strategy. Another approach is to create an associate degree in English for speakers of other languages. Just as a native English speaker can advance their career by earning a bachelor of arts in Spanish, many immigrants could realize large labor market benefits from a program focused intensively on building English skills for the workplace. These earnings gains would produce strong returns on state investment if federal financial aid covers most instructional expenses.

Creative thinking around new community college degree programs designed specifically for LEP residents would complement MassReconnect. With the Healey-Driscoll administration's leadership crafting this initiative, Massachusetts took a bold step to help underemployed adults fill the state's growing workforce needs. MassReconnect makes community college free for residents 25 years of age or older who lack postsecondary degrees. LEP students represent nearly 20 percent of those eligible. Community college programs that are catered to their needs and interests will help ensure that MassReconnect delivers on its full potential.

In contemplating such an approach, it is imperative to recognize that the DESE-funded system does not offer advanced English. As such, Pell grants may be the only way that many students will be able to afford this instruction. For students focused on developing strong English skills, a seamless and accelerated community college program would fill a large void in the current system. These programs must be carefully structured to ensure that they enroll students with vocational skills who would be most cost-effectively served with college coursework that focuses on English acquisition. At the same time, the incentive structure must not penalize community colleges if students stop out prior to completing the degree requirements because their English has improved to a level that allows them to find employment that makes full use of their vocational skills.

**5. Support regional collaboration and grassroots capacity.** With the exception of Boston, Holyoke, and Lawrence, most cities and regions lack a formal web of partnerships to seamlessly connect residents with a range of ESOL services and supports (see box p. 24). The movement to cost-effectively scale ESOL by leveraging new pay-for-success and online learning models increases the need for collaborative delivery systems.<sup>34</sup> Providers will require a great deal of sophistication to operate in this environment. At the same time, it is critical that we preserve and enhance the capacity of small community-based organizations who bring a wealth of cultural capital and trusted relationships. Clarifying roles will help ensure that we do not lose critical components of the ESOL delivery system in our quest to gain greater efficiency.

The longstanding leadership of English for New Bostonians shows that backbone organizations are also central to the health of regional ESOL delivery systems. These groups can provide centralized capacity to braid public and private funding, provide technical assistance to the field, and lead research evaluation efforts. With the immigrant population rising in every region of the state, we need more backbone organizations that are capable of providing this coordinating function.

**6. Build the ESOL educator workforce.** ABE providers are struggling with the same acute workforce challenges that are being seen throughout education and other industries. ACLS is working hard to help train more instructors. They recently contracted with English for New Bostonians to develop a new, 130-hour Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) certificate course and, with an emphasis on training former ESOL students and other immigrants.

The field also needs more instructors with deeper adult education training. In many cases, immigrants with postsecondary degrees from their native countries are eligible for federal financial aid to receive a second bachelor's degree in education. The Department of Higher Education should work with education preparation programs to conduct outreach to multilingual immigrants with bachelor's degrees to increase awareness of this valuable but little-known opportunity to receive postsecondary training in the US.

**7. Improve data collection and support research and evaluation.** ABE data systems are underdeveloped compared to other education databases in Massachusetts. Efforts to improve data collection should begin with improvements to waitlist reporting. At present, the system does not differentiate between students seeking ABE or ESOL services. There is also no information on wait-listed students' proficiency levels, or on how long students must wait for services before receiving them. As Massachusetts moves toward greater use of hybrid

and virtual learning, it is especially important to collect data on students' preferred and actual course-taking modes. This information will enable rigorous evaluation of virtual, hybrid, and in-person modes for instruction, coaching, and support; the influence of varying combinations of these modes on learning and labor market outcomes; and the relative cost-effectiveness of these new delivery models.

## BOSTON, HOLYOKE AND LAWRENCE LEAD THE WAY ON CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Boston, Holyoke, and Lawrence offer models for cross-sector collaboration. These cities have made progress aligning public and private-sector organizations to build a delivery system that gives residents access to comprehensive services.

In Boston, English for New Bostonians (ENB) was created in 2001 by the Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement (in collaboration with the city's Office of Workforce Development, local foundations, and immigrant leaders) to coordinate and expand Boston's ESOL system. Each year, ENB supports over 20 ESOL providers serving roughly 1,000 adult learners. ENB customizes curricula, enables online and hybrid learning, trains teachers, and evaluates outcomes to ensure accountability and high-caliber programming. By elevating immigrant voices, ENB has played a vital role helping public and private sector leaders better understand how they can work together to position newcomers for success.

In Lawrence, the effort began with an ESOL taskforce convened by the city. Known as the Learn English in Lawrence Network, the group has two primary goals: to quantify the need for ESOL services and to enhance access to open seats among the roughly 20 ESOL providers in the city. To help the network carry out these tasks, the city has hired an ESOL coordinator. The coordinator has helped to create and manage a master waitlist. Instead of signing up for multiple programs, residents can now register for classes at one site and receive access to the first open seat that becomes available. The master list also gives the city a clearer understanding of demand for ESOL courses, and how well the delivery system is meeting resident needs.

Through a grant from World Education's Transforming Immigrant Digital Equity program, Holyoke Community College (HCC) has spearheaded efforts to increase collaboration among ESOL providers in its region—which includes the Gateway Cities of Chicopee, Holyoke, Springfield and Westfield. Area ESOL providers and other organizations that support immigrants and refugees come together to co-develop strategies to help overcome the digital divide and give residents more access to high-quality ESOL instruction and support.



# APPENDIX: REGIONAL LABOR MARKET BLUEPRINTS ANALYSIS

In the 2017, the Commonwealth’s seven Workforce Skills Cabinet (WSC) regions were tasked with coordinating strategic workforce priorities, activities, and performance metrics for years 2018-2022 into Regional Labor Market Blueprints. Regions then submitted updates in 2020. A review of the Blueprints and the updates was conducted to assess the extent to which ESL services were integrated into WSC regional plans. Findings from that review are included in this table.

Workforce Skills Cabinet Planning Region	Demographic Trends	Keyword Mentions in Needs, Opportunities, and Challenges	Keyword Mentions in Goals, Strategies, 2020 Update Opportunities, and Challenges
<b>Limited or no mention of ESOL efforts in Goals or Strategies</b>			
<b>Berkshire</b>	Projected growth in Hispanic population	No mentions	No mentions
<b>Cape Cod and the Islands</b>	Small shift in racial and ethnic diversity	No mentions	No mentions
<b>Northeast</b>	Hispanic and Asian populations projected to grow over next five years	“Tremendous opportunities for collaboration between employers and workforce development partners”	Resource inventory focused on education and training opportunities for priority industries
<b>Frequent mention of ESOL efforts in Goals and/or Strategies</b>			
<b>Pioneer Valley</b>	Larger Hispanic populations are concentrated in Springfield and Holyoke and the number of people identifying as White, Hispanic projected to increase over next five years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top 3 labor supply challenges include potential limited public resources for education and training for the new immigrants driving increases in labor supply</li> <li>• Language barriers mentioned among obstacles associated with region’s unemployed and under-employed population</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase participation of ELLs and immigrants, in career pathway pro</li> <li>• Increase number of ESOL training programs for immigrants and ELLs.</li> <li>• Partner institutions’ commitme support programs and services for immigrants</li> <li>• Increase DESE programs for those with language barriers to enter the labor market</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Keywords used to search Regional Labor Market Blueprints: English, immigrants, limited English proficiency, ESL. ELL: English Language Learner  
WSU: Worcester State University, QCC: Quincy Community College.

Workforce Skills Cabinet Planning Region	Demographic Trends	Keyword Mentions in Needs, Opportunities, and Challenges	Keyword Mentions in Goals, Strategies, 2020 Update Opportunities, and Challenges
<b>Frequent mention of ESOL efforts in Goals and/or Strategies</b>			
<b>Greater Boston</b>	Increasing diversity and growth in foreign-born workers, calling for increased demand for culturally appropriate training and services for immigrants	Accommodating foreign-born through streamlining transference of foreign credentials and providing ESOL is among top 3 labor supply challenges over next five years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longer term goals include increasing number of seats in ESOL classes</li> <li>• Partners are committed to increasing access to ESOL for adult learners</li> </ul>
<b>Southeast</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased diversity over the past decade, with growing Black, Asian and Hispanic populations</li> <li>• More than 85,000 individuals within region 18 years and over are LEP</li> <li>• Future modest population growth driven by partly by international in-migration</li> </ul>	The significant number of residents requiring language or basic skills remediation was among top 3 labor supply challenges over next 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping available ABE/ESOL course offerings within the region</li> <li>• Increasing the capacity of non-English speaking employees through training</li> <li>• Increasing capacity of ABE/ESOL trainings by 10% of baseline</li> <li>• Commitment to contextualizing services for non-English language speakers</li> </ul>
<b>Central Mass</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiencing growth of immigrant and refugee population</li> <li>• immigrants can fill supply gap also present with more potential barriers including lack of English language proficiency (and education and skills)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing share of workforce needing English skills among their top labor challenges over next 5 years.</li> <li>• Long waiting list for ESOL classes</li> <li>• New Americans among top 3 labor/supply opportunities in next 5 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase “contextualized ABE and ESOL programming for high priority industries.” (cited as “accomplished” is 2020 Update)</li> <li>• Pipelines for ESOL in WSU, QCC</li> </ul>

# NOTES

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