

Briefing Book: English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Programs in Boston

One of the difficulties facing new immigrants coming to the United States is their familiarity with the English language. While some newcomers arrive from countries where English is the primary language, the vast majority of recent immigrants to the United States have come from Latin America and Asia; regions of the world where English is not the primary language. This presents a number of challenges for both foreign-born residents and community leaders in any city with a significant immigrant population.

Of course, familiarity with English is a critical part of most everyday interactions in the United States. Additionally, English language proficiency is an essential skill for full participation and mobility in the labor market. With immigrants expected to take on an important role in filling critical job vacancies created by the retirement of the Baby Boomer generation, English language skills of foreign-born residents are not only of importance to the worker, but also to the long term economic health of the region.

There are a number of different types of programs and services aimed at helping immigrants improve their English speaking skills. The most well-known set of programs are English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. Of the State-Administered Adult Education programs, English as a Second Language (ESL¹) courses are among the most popular. According to the U.S. Department of Education², approximately 44% of participants in State-Administered Adult Education programs in the United States during 2004-2005 were enrolled in an ESL course³. The proportion was even higher in Massachusetts, as 56% of participants in State-Administered Adult Education programs were enrolled in an ESL course⁴.

English language courses for non-native speakers are a very large and important part of adult education courses in the United States and, in particular, Massachusetts. That said, waitlists for ESOL classes in the Commonwealth and the city are quite large. Currently, there are over 13,000 students enrolled in ESOL courses in Massachusetts, but close to 15,000 individuals on DOE waitlists. The proportions are similar for Boston. There are close to 3,400 students enrolled in ESOL courses in Boston, with over 4,000 on DOE waitlists⁵. While there are a lot of people serviced by these programs, the capacity of the system clearly does not meet the demand. As the data show, more than half of the people interested in ESOL courses are forced on to waiting lists⁶.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the City of Boston both have a complicated network of state funded and non-state funded ESOL programs, including a growing number of “for profit” ESOL providers like the Harvest Institute and ESL Wizard. In addition, there are a number of organizations that provide English language assistance but are not specifically ESOL programs⁷. The most well-known and significant funder of ESOL in the Commonwealth is the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE). ESOL courses sponsored by the DOE are part of the larger Adult Basic Education (ABE) program. These services are all funded out of the DOE’s Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) division. However, there are a significant number of non-DOE funded ESOL providers, making it difficult to get a complete sketch of all the different ESOL outlets available to immigrants arriving to the region. Moreover, information on funding, enrollments, student progress, and program performance are not completely standardized across all the different ESOL providers in the Commonwealth. In short, due to the disconnected network of state funded and non-state funded ESOL programs, as well as the lack

¹ The terms ESOL and ESL are frequently used interchangeably in the literature regarding English language courses for non-native speakers. In this document, we will be using the term ESOL, except in cases when organizations specifically define their programs as ESL. In any event, both of these programs service the same community of interest.

² Data from the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE). For more details, please see <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/aedatatables.html>

³ Compared to 39% in Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses and 16% in Adult Secondary Education (ASE) courses.

⁴ Compared to 34% in ABE courses and 10% in ASE courses.

⁵ Massachusetts Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2009.

⁶ Due to the fact that there are a number of ESOL providers that are not funded by the DOE, the actual population of ESOL students and waitlists in the Commonwealth and city of Boston would be larger than these numbers.

⁷ These ESOL programs can range from language classes offered as part of larger social service organizations or very small community organizations that offer language classes as part of holistic assistance. An example would be a nonprofit organization helping immigrants with job training, finding housing, and language classes. These organizations may not show up on the ESOL “radar”, but do offer help to those who are unfamiliar with English.

of oversight for non-state funded and community-based social service organizations that provide language courses to immigrants, it is impossible to know precisely the total number of ESOL students in the Bay State, the length of waitlists, how ESOL programs and students are performing, and what the typical outcomes of ESOL courses are.

The most accessible and reliable data on ESOL programs are collected by the DOE. The DOE requires all programs receiving funding to report into the System for Managing Accountability and Results through Technology (SMARTT). SMARTT serves as the Commonwealth's online data source for all DOE funded ABE programs, including ESOL. Included in the data collected by the DOE in the SMARTT system are demographics, assessments of student performance, and various measures of learner gains. While DOE data do not include ESOL students from non- DOE funded and community-based social service organizations that provide language courses to immigrants, it does capture the majority of ESOL students in the Commonwealth. These data can give us a sense of what the ESOL population looks like in the City of Boston, as well as see how well ESOL students and providers in Boston meet performance benchmarks established by the DOE.

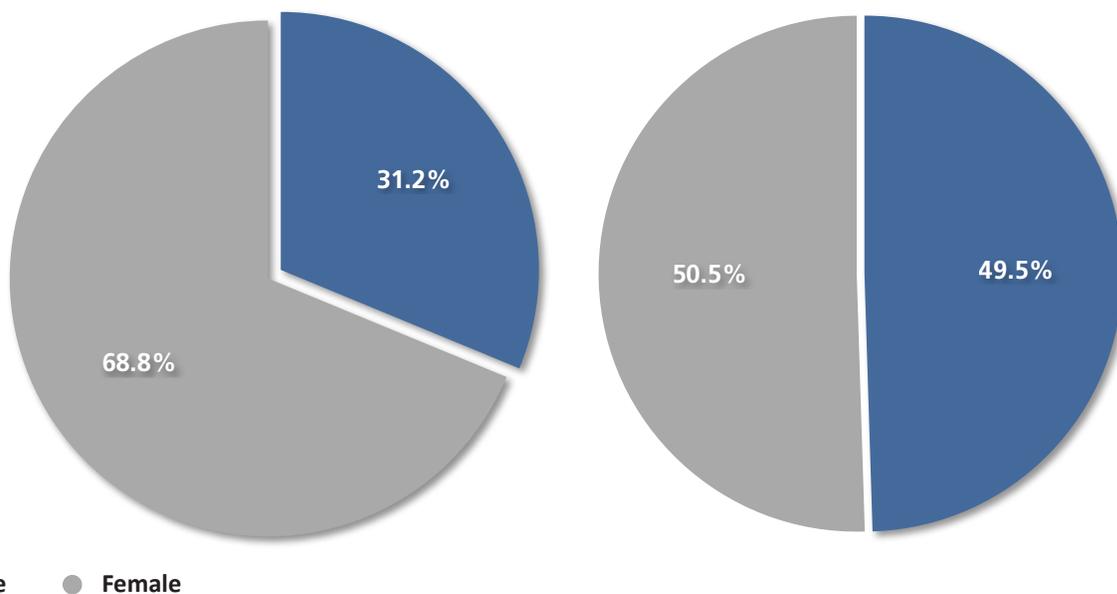
Demographics of ESOL in Boston

Gender and ESOL in Boston

Overall, we see some significant demographic differences between the population of ESOL students in DOE funded programs and the population of foreign-born residents in the City of Boston⁸. There were nearly 3,400 students enrolled in DOE funded ESOL classes in Boston during Fiscal Year 2009⁹. As **Figure 1** indicates, the vast majority of ESOL students in Boston are female (nearly 70%). In contrast, women make up only about 50% of the immigrant population in the city. Given that women make up a slight majority of the population at large, it is not surprising to see more women in ESOL courses. However, the proportion of women in

Figure 1:

Gender Breakdown



Source: Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2009; American Community Survey 2005-2007; BRA Research Division Analysis

⁸ For this analysis, we focused on Boston's foreign-born residents who are 19 years of age or older. Over 99.99% of ESOL students in DOE funded programs in Boston are 19 years of age and older. While Adult Basic Education programs (which includes ESOL) serve people 16 years of age and older, in practice people under the age of 19 are likely to still be enrolled in public schools and participating in English Language Learner (ELL) programs as a part of their school curriculum rather than state funded ESOL programs.

⁹ All data regarding ESOL students in DOE funded programs in Boston were provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education, Adult and Community Learning Services.

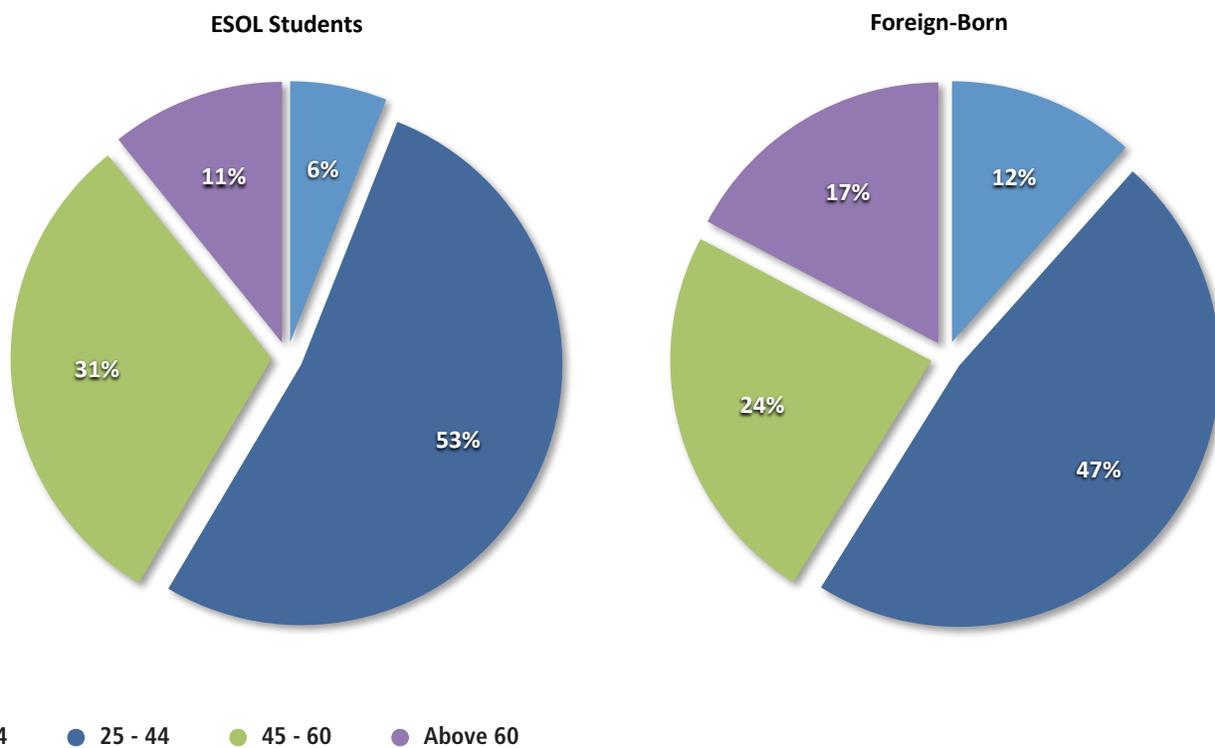
DOE funded ESOL courses is approaching three out of every four students. This raises the question as to exactly why women are enrolling in ESOL courses at a rate far beyond that of men. One possibility suggested by previous research is that female immigrants tend to have more positive views towards their receiving countries than their male counterparts. Some argue that this is due to the fact male immigrants typically experience downward mobility in the labor market, whereas female immigrants tend to experience upward mobility, some of which are earning wages for the first time¹⁰.

Age and ESOL in Boston

The age breakdown of Boston’s ESOL students in DOE funded courses is also different from the age breakdown of the foreign-born population in the city. As **Figure 2** shows, the 25-44 and the 45-60 age groups are the largest segments for both populations. While 25-60 year olds make up the majority of people in both groups, the proportion is larger in DOE funded ESOL programs as compared to the population of foreign-born residents at large (84% to 71%, respectively). These results are not surprising given that two of the most typically cited reasons for a person enrolling in ESOL programs is to enhance their labor market mobility and to improve communication with their children and their children’s teachers. Individuals in the 25-44 and 45-60 age groups would be the most active participants in the labor market and the ones most likely to have school aged children (particularly the 25-44 group). As a result, there is a great deal of motivation for individuals in these age groups to seek out English language classes.

Figure 2:

Age Breakdown



Source: Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2009; American Community Survey 2005-2007; BRA Research Division Analysis

¹⁰ See Guarnizo, Portest, and Haller 2003, Assimilation and Transnationalism: Determinants of Transnational Political Action among Contemporary Migrants.

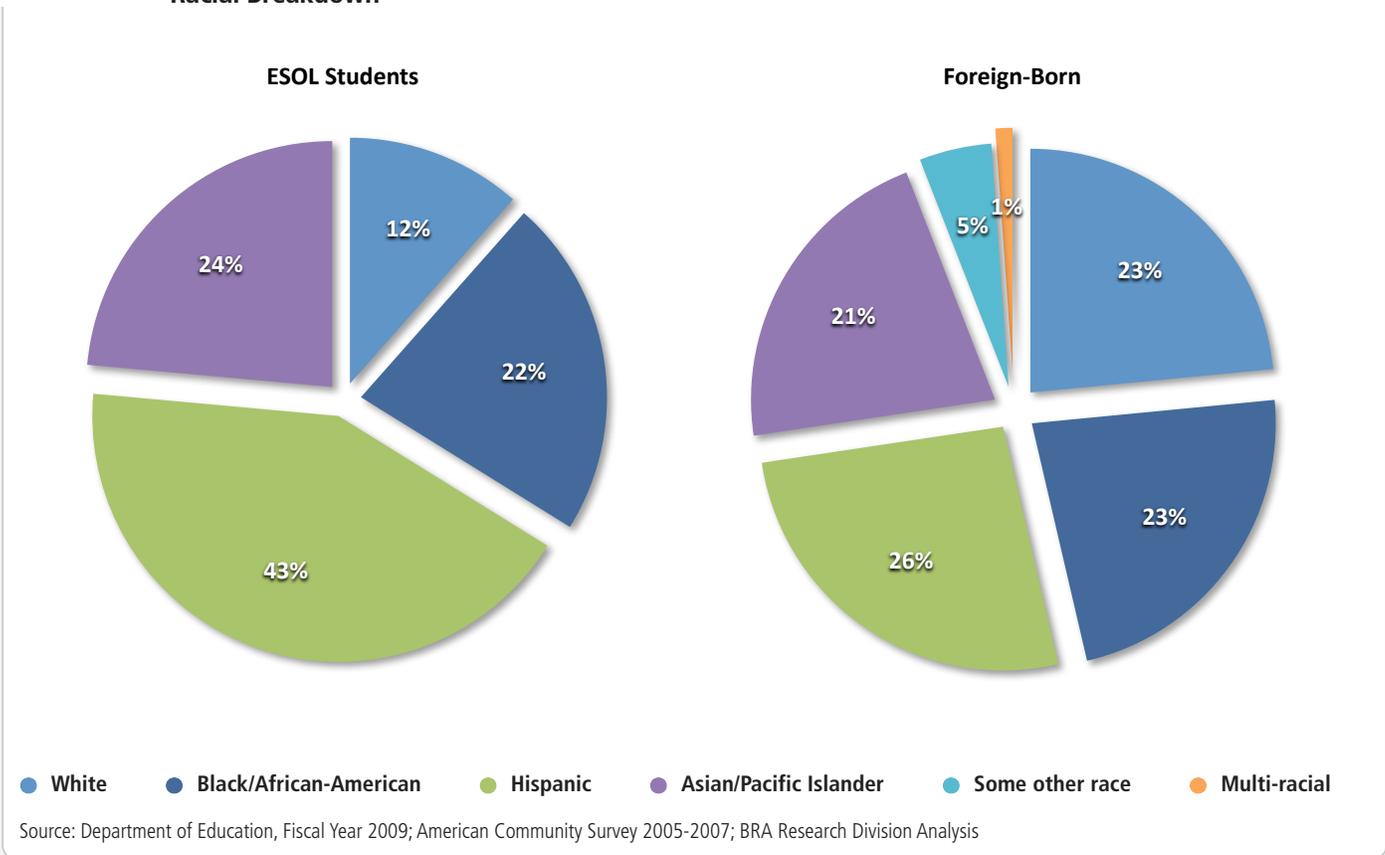
Race and ESOL in Boston

We noticed substantial differences in the racial and ethnic makeup of Boston’s ESOL students in DOE funded courses as compared to the population of foreign-born residents in Boston at large. As **Figure 3** shows, Hispanic/Latinos and Asians make up a larger proportion of the ESOL students in DOE funded courses than in the overall population of foreign-born residents in the city.

As noted in the Demographics briefing, changes in federal immigration policy in the 1960s lead to large increases in the number of immigrants locally and nationally, as well as significant changes in the regions of the globe newcomers were migrating from. With the bulk of recent immigration coming from Latin American and Asian countries, one would expect to see individuals from these racial and ethnic backgrounds making up the majority of ESOL students.

Figure 3:

Racial Breakdown

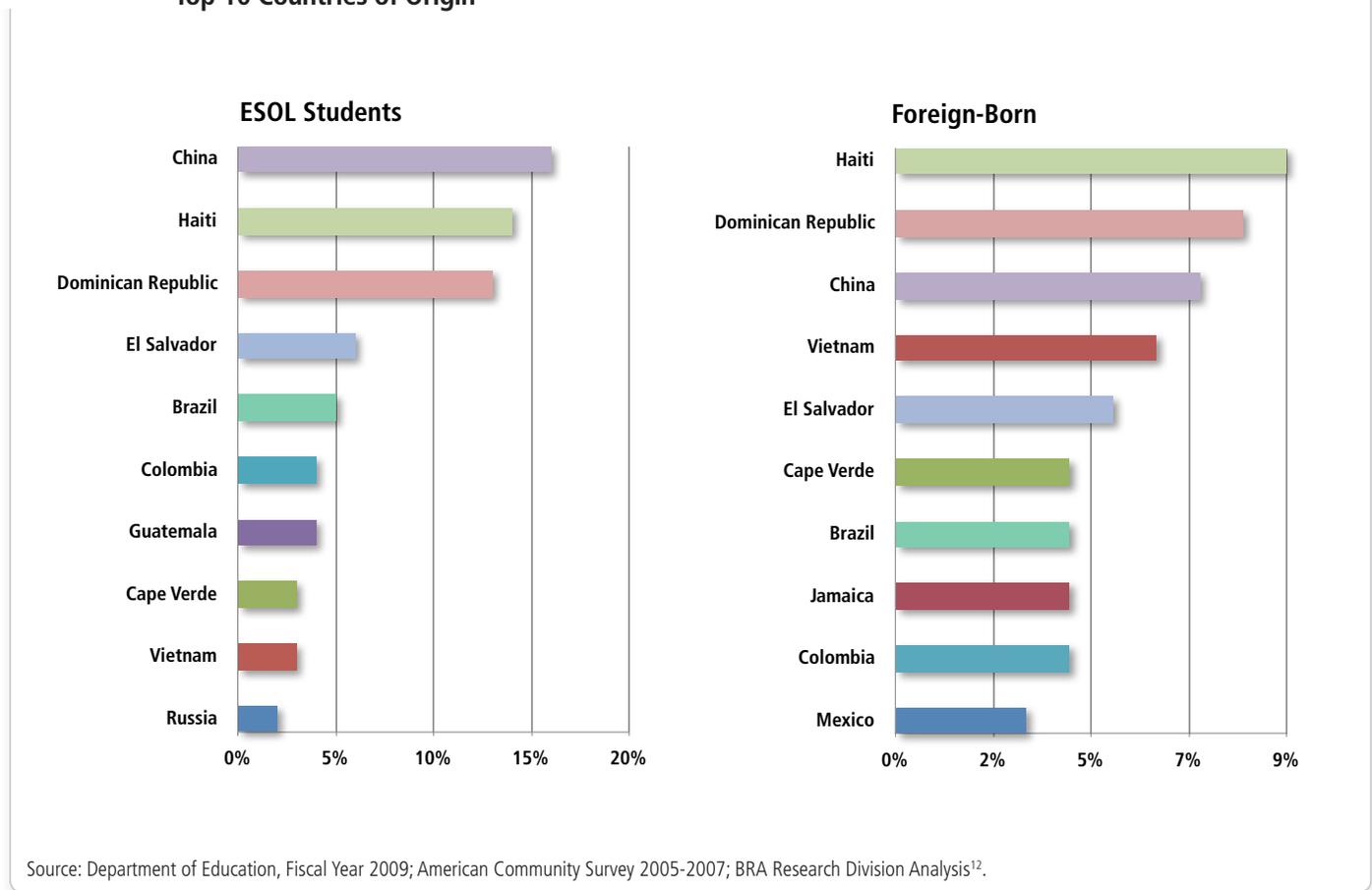


Countries of Origin and ESOL in Boston

In looking at the countries of origin with the highest representation in Boston’s DOE funded ESOL courses and the population of foreign-born residents in Boston, we see some slight variations (see **Figure 4**). The top three countries of origin are the same, but are in different orders. Each of the top three countries of origin in Boston’s ESOL student population make up a larger proportion of the ESOL population than they do in the foreign-born population. Other than that, the top ten countries of origin stay fairly consistent between the population at large and the population of ESOL students. The main difference is that Guatemala and Russia are in the top ten countries of origin for ESOL students, while Jamaica and Mexico are in the top ten for Boston’s foreign born population. The fact that Jamaica falls out of the top ten is not surprising given that English is spoken in both countries, making it unlikely that people originating from Jamaica would be enrolling in ESOL courses¹¹.

Figure 4:

Top 10 Countries of Origin



In short, we see that when compared to the population of foreign-born residents in the City of Boston, the population of ESOL students in DOE funded programs is quite different. Females are overrepresented in DOE funded ESOL programs in the city. The population of ESOL students is centered more in the 25-60 age group than in the population of foreign-born residents at large. Lastly, people from Latin America and Asia make up a larger proportion of ESOL students than they do in the population of foreign-born residents.

¹¹ Puerto Rico is among the top 10 home locations for ESOL students in Boston, but people from Puerto Rico are not “foreign-born”. In order to stay consistent in comparison, they were removed from the top 10 in this analysis. They are still included in the total number of ESOL students, however.

¹² Note that the top ten countries of origin among the foreign-born is slightly different from the demographics briefing. Since the DOE population is essentially limited to adults 19 years of age and older, we focused on the same age group within the foreign-born population for all comparisons between the ESOL population and the foreign-born population. As a result, the order of the top ten is slightly different, though the countries in the top ten remained the same.

One of the most important questions that arise when researching ESOL programs is *how well are ESOL programs doing in teaching English to non-native speakers*. Simply put—are students in ESOL programs learning English? While on the surface this question appears to be straight forward, getting reliable data turns out to be a very complicated matter. First, it is difficult to precisely define what it means to have “improved English language skills”. There are, of course, various components to language literacy, including reading and writing, speaking, mathematical ability, and familiarity with social and cultural practices. As a result, when we discuss the evaluation of language learning, it is important to consider what aspects of literacy are actually being evaluated¹³. It would be extremely difficult to develop performance measure that can accurately capture and evaluate all of these dimensions of language literacy.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 requires all states to collect and submit data on student performance measures and outcomes to the National Reporting System (NRS) for adult basic education programs funded by the WIA. This was done with the goal of establishing accountability for programs receiving federal funding for adult education. However, on a national scale there is no standardized method for assessing the quality of ESOL program performance and student progress. Each state has their own procedures in place for evaluating programs and student performance. As Van Duzer and Berdan state in their overview of assessments used in adult ESOL programs, “The lack of a consistent assessment system across states and across programs within states had impeded the documentation and reporting of results to state and federal stakeholders”¹⁴. In short, without federally established standardized methods for assessing program performance it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to compare ESOL programs across different states¹⁵.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in Massachusetts any program receiving funding from the Department of Education (DOE) is required to report into the System for Managing Accountability and Results through Technology (SMARTT). Programs that do not receive funding from the DOE and/or community-based social service organizations that provide language courses to immigrants are not required to keep this type of data on ESOL student progress and program performance. While some programs unaffiliated with the DOE keep information on their students, the quality of this data is inconsistent.

The most systematic and reliable data regarding the ESOL system in Massachusetts and Boston is the information collected by the Massachusetts Department of Education’s Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS). In particular, the DOE collects data on ESOL attendance, average attended classroom hours, the percentage of students taking pre and post tests, learner gains on standardized testing, and students progress through the NRS Educational Functioning Levels. For each of these measures, the DOE has established benchmarks for determining which programs are performing at the *Advanced*, *Meets Standard*, *Needs Improvement*, and *Remedial Action* levels. Using these assessments and benchmarks, we can get a sense of how well students in Boston’s DOE funded ESOL courses are learning English and how they compare to the state’s averages¹⁶.

¹³ Carol H. Van Duzer and Robert Berdan. 1999. Review of Adult Learning and Literacy. “Perspectives on Assessment in Adult ESOL Instruction”.

¹⁴ Carol H. Van Duzer and Robert Berdan. 1999. Review of Adult Learning and Literacy. “Perspectives on Assessment in Adult ESOL Instruction”.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion on the various standardized assessment used in ESOL programs, please see Carol H. Van Duzer and Robert Berdan. 1999. Review of Adult Learning and Literacy. “Perspectives on Assessment in Adult ESOL Instruction”.

¹⁶ DOE systematically excludes some ESOL students from each performance measure. The reasons vary from measure to measure, but they typically have to do with either how long the student was in the program or the level of English knowledge they had entering the program. See http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/pawg/fy09fc340_345_359.pdf for information on exclusions and performance standards for each variable.

In **Figures 5 and 6**, we see the attendance percentages and average attended hours for DOE funded ESOL programs in Boston and in Massachusetts. The DOE's standards for these variables are whether students attending between 66% and 76% of planned hours and whether students attend between 130-159 hours on average during the Fiscal Year.

Figure 5:

Student Attendance Percent

Student Attendance Percent	Boston	State
Planned Hours	514,849	1,952,090.33
Attended Hours	399,564	1,518,692.49
Attended Percentage	78%	78%

Source: Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2009

Figure 6:

Average Attended Hours for Students

Average Attended Hours for Students	Boston	State
Rates Based Hours	422,399.50	1,629,204.55
Non-Rates Based Hours	18,805.25	67,999
Match Hours	24,487.75	37,530.75
Total Hours	465,692.50	1,734,734.30
Avg. Attended Hours	137	133

Source: Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2009

Overall, during Fiscal Year 2009, both the city and the Commonwealth's DOE funded ESOL students exceeded the benchmark for attendance percentage and met the DOE standard for average attended hours. On average, students in Boston attend more planned hours than is typical at the state level.

Figure 7 examines the total number of students who are administered pre and post tests in DOE funded ESOL programs. The DOE’s Adult and Community Learning Services division identifies this variable as important in promoting student retention with the goal of achieving significant learner gains. The DOE’s established standard for this variable is that between 66% and 76% of eligible students receive both a pre and post test. In short, the pre and post test variable measures the proportion of students who stayed in programs long enough to be administered a post-test.

Figure 7: Percentage of Students Taking Pre and Post Tests

Percentage of Students Taking Pre and Post Tests	Boston	State
Total Students	3,371	12,848
# Pretest Only	925	2,854
# Pre and Post	2,446	9,994
Prepost Percentage	73%	78%

Source: Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2009

On average, ESOL students in the city met the benchmark for pre and post testing. Students in the Commonwealth, overall, exceed the performance benchmark, scoring in the *Advanced* category during Fiscal Year 2009. While these data are very encouraging, they do tell us a larger proportion of students in Boston are dropping out of ESOL programs than at the state level. While ESOL providers in Boston are meeting the state standard in student retention, they are performing significantly below the state average.

Figure 8 explores learner gains in DOE funded ESOL programs. *Learner gains* examines meaningful or average student progress on one of five assessments: the *Massachusetts Adult Proficiency Test (MAPT)*, the *Testing of Adult Basic Education (TABE) Literacy and Language exams*, the *Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP)*, and the *Basic English Skills Test (BEST) Plus*. The DOE’s established standard for this variable is that between 35% and 49% of eligible students achieved meaningful or average learner gains on the test used as the student’s primary assessment.

Figure 8: Percentage of Students Achieving Learner Gains

Percentage of Students Achieving Learner Gains	Boston	State
Total Students	3,281	12,559
Students With Gain	1,240	5,652
Gain Percent	2,446	9,994
Gain Percentage	38%	45%

Source: Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2009

Again, both the city and Commonwealth met the benchmark established by the DOE. However, the proportion of Boston’s DOE funded ESOL students that met the standard was closer to the *Needs Improvement* category line (34%). This is a critical issue when evaluating ESOL programs in the city and Commonwealth. While there are a number of important educational and social issues that ESOL providers need to contend with, the acquisition of English language skills is obviously the main objective. The data show that ESOL providers, in general, are successful in helping students reach language skill gains. That said, there is obviously room for improvement in this category. Of the 31 DOE funded ESOL programs in Boston reporting data on learner gains, nine failed to meet the benchmark, including one program where only four of their 45 students made meaningful or average progress on learner gains.

Lastly, **Figure 9** examines DOE funded ESOL student progress on the NRS Educational Functioning Levels (EFL). EFL standards are negotiated with each state’s DOE and are used to determine program effectiveness. There are eleven EFL levels. While the NRS collects data on all states, each state selects the tests it will administer. In Massachusetts, 33% of students need to complete at least one EFL to meet the benchmark.

Figure 9: Percent of Students Completing an EFL

Percent of Students Completing an EFL	Boston	State
Total Students	3,479	13,198
Number Completed Level	1,272	5,521
Percentage	37%	42%

Source: Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2009

Both the City of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, on average, met the DOE benchmark. The percentage of ESOL students completing at least one EFL level during Fiscal Year 2009 in Boston was lower than the Commonwealth average. While Boston’s DOE funded ESOL students met the benchmark overall, the percentage was somewhat close to the cut off line. Thirteen of the 33 ESOL programs in Boston failed to meet the standard, with another two not having a single student advancing an educational functioning level.

In summary, when looking at the performance measures maintained by the Massachusetts DOE regarding ESOL student and program performance, there are reasons for both optimism and caution. First, at both the state and city level, students in DOE funded ESOL programs met or exceeded performance benchmarks in attendance, average attended hours, pre and post test percentages, learner gains, and NRS Educational Functioning Level completion. That said, the proportion of students meeting performance standard in Boston’s DOE funded ESOL programs was typically lower than the state averages.

Conclusions

Newcomers to the United States face a number of critical challenges, but the acquisition of English language skills may be the most important. Improved English language skills can be the key to a greater level of social integration, as well as serve as a gateway for pursuing more education, obtaining better employment, and being a stronger part of the region's economic growth. With the impending retirement of the Baby Boomer generation, immigrants are expected to take on an increasingly important role in the region's economic future. With this, the availability of ESOL programs is important to both newcomers, as well as the overall health of the local economy.

That said, locally the supply of ESOL courses does not come close to meeting the demand. More than half of the individuals interested in DOE funded ESOL courses in the Commonwealth and the City of Boston are on waitlists. In reality, both of these numbers are higher too, as DOE data do include program counts and waitlists for non-DOE funded ESOL providers or community-based social service organizations that provide language courses for immigrants^{17,18}.

We also looked at the performance benchmarks established by the DOE for ESOL courses and compared how well programs in the City of Boston did at meeting these standards, as well as how well they did comparative to the state averages. Overall, both the City of Boston and the Commonwealth as a whole did well on the DOE established benchmarks for ESOL students and program performance. At both the state and city level, students in DOE funded ESOL programs met or exceeded performance benchmark standards in attendance, average attended hours, pre and post test percentages, learner gains, and NRS Educational Functioning Level completion.

While this is encouraging information and should be a source of pride for the DOE's Adult and Community Learning Services, there are some areas of concern. The proportion of students meeting performance standards in Boston's DOE funded ESOL programs was typically lower than the state averages. While overall, ESOL providers in Boston are meeting state standards, they should be alert to these trends and strive to meet the state averages in such measures as *Learner Gains* and *Pre and Post Testing*.

Lastly, further research needs to be done in this topic area to get a full picture of the ESOL system and to understanding the full range of outcomes related to English language learning. In an ideal world, it would be possible compare across DOE funded, non-DOE funded, and community-based social service providers to get a sense of how all ESOL students are performing. As the system exists today, it is impossible to even know how many ESOL students there are in Boston, let alone know how well the system as a whole is performing in teaching newcomers English, advancing their participation in the labor market, and improving their integration into American society.

¹⁷ Estimates of total number of ESOL programs and students in Boston vary. The DOE reports 33 DOE funded ESOL programs in the city. The Mayor's Office of New Bostonians estimates that there are currently 75 ESOL program providers in the city (DOE funded, non-DOE funded, and community-based organizations). In 2003, Navin Associates conducted research for the Office of Jobs and Community Services and concluded there were over 4,700 ESOL slots in Boston, but conceded the number was "inexact". In short, while the DOE data do not capture everyone in ESOL, it is the most reliable source of data.

¹⁸ There is little coordination between non-DOE funded programs, so it is impossible to get an accurate count of waitlists in non-DOE funded programs. The DOE's waitlist is an unduplicated count, meaning no one is counted twice. This is not necessarily the practice at non-DOE funded program. For example, a person may put themselves on waitlists in multiple places, hence artificially driving up the waitlist.



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