



BY BARRIE MAGUIRE

Why We Must Fund English Classes

Some state officials have made a public show of bellyaching about how some immigrants lack English skills. Maybe it's time for them to put their money where their mouths are.

In Montgomery County and across Maryland, the need for adult classes in English as a second language (ESL) and for literacy services in general has become critical. During the past decade, Montgomery County has become one of the most diverse and populous counties in Maryland, with about 900,000 residents. In this same decade, the number of immigrant families residing in the county has increased dramatically. These immigrants hail from 173 countries and speak 135 languages.

Most recent immigrants are eager to learn English. As a consequence, Montgomery County teaches English to about 23,800 students a year and usually has a waiting list for classes that tops 2,000.

Given this demand, many of the county's English-language programs need teachers, curriculum development, space, child care, materials and other resources.

As chair of the Adult ESL Task Force, I have worked with Montgomery College, Montgomery County Public Schools, business leaders, nonprofits, community activists and philanthropic organizations to develop a plan for increasing the quantity and quality of adult ESL programs in the county.

In March 2004 the Montgomery County Council adopted the recommendations of the task force, which included the formation of a nonprofit organization to work on increasing the capacity of services in the county and coordinating resources.

While Maryland has a reputation for having a well-educated workforce, close to a million Maryland residents need basic skills, GED classes or ESL classes.

This is a statewide challenge. In Montgomery County, the focus is on ESL. In Allegany County, assisting displaced workers in acquiring new job skills is the priority.

Maryland is the short leg of the three-legged financial stool that adult education requires — federal, local and state resources. It ranks 46th nationally for the level of state resources it commits to adult education, and in 2001 it was at the bottom of the list of East Coast states with an average expenditure of \$45 a student.

Further, states such as California, Virginia and Iowa have developed comprehensive plans to address issues of demand, quality and accountability in adult education. Clearly, Maryland can do better.

To make matters worse, on the federal level, President Bush's proposed budget includes a 70 percent reduction in adult education funding.

Maryland House Bill 529 would give tax credits to businesses that provide their employees with adult literacy services. This is a critical step in strengthening Maryland businesses and in creating a universe of possibilities for adult learners. This bill would allow businesses to offer adult literacy services at work or in an educational or community setting.

Another bill — backed by Del. Sheila E. Hixson (D-Montgomery) and Sen. P.J. Hogan (D-Montgomery) — would direct the governor to increase adult education funding by a modest \$1.5 million next year. Despite a recommendation by state School Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick to do just that, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. has refused to include this money this year — while adding \$1.3 million to the budget for horse breeders.

I've got nothing against horses, but where are our priorities? It's past time for the state to adequately fund adult education.

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the Montgomery County Council.*

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