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More Adult English Training Is Urged

ESOL Parents Are Pivotal, Report Says

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Forty-one percent of Montgomery County students identified as having limited proficiency in English were born in the United States, and the county needs to find more efficient ways to help their parents, according to a report by the County Council's Office of Legislative Oversight.

The 100-page report found that more than 13,000 students — 9 percent of the total student population — are enrolled in the school system's English for Speakers of Other Languages program. That number represents an increase of 83 percent in the past decade. Countless others may speak English proficiently but have parents or guardians who do not.

By far the largest group of ESOL students are U.S. citizens, the report said.

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In most cases, the children are unable to speak English when they start school because their families speak another language

students, the largest group was from El Salvador, representing 11 percent of those enrolled in ESOL.

County Council President Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring) said the report's findings show that the county needs to provide more English classes for adults.

"If parents cannot communicate, parents cannot participate," he said. "... I look at this as an investment in our future workforce."

Parents interviewed by the Office of Legislative Oversight said that they want to learn English but are discouraged by the long waiting lists for adult ESOL classes provided by Montgomery College, nonprofits and churches.

Three years ago, schools Superintendent Jerry D. Weast proposed that the county designate a center for adult language classes and provide instruction at "odd hours" to accommodate the working schedules of many immigrant parents. Several council and school board members have supported the proposal, but Perez said the county is hobbled by a lack of funding from federal and state governments. He said that the federal government has cut adult education funding and that Maryland ranks 46th in the country in spending for adult classes.

In the legislative report, parents and community leaders said they were pleased with the variety of translation and outreach services that Montgomery schools provide, but they cited areas for improvement. In interviews with parents and community organizations, the authors of the report found that in emergencies or unplanned events, parents may experience delays in speaking with interpreters. Parents often rely on their children or neighbors to translate.

Many schools have only a handful of staff who are multilingual and some are not aware that school employees seeking to help parents have access to the Language Line, a private service that provides over-the-phone interpretation, 24 hours a day. Parents also said that once their children officially left the ESOL program, which is staffed by specialists and teachers who track the children and their families, the parents had difficulty assessing and understanding school services.

The report, presented to the council last week, recommended that the school system develop a policy that establishes consistency in how language assistance is offered and make more employees aware of the services available.

Although 35 percent of the county's ESOL students are concentrated in the Silver Spring and Wheaton areas, there are also increasing needs upcounty, where schools may be more unfamiliar with helping limited-English students and their families, the report said.

Another recommendation calls for schools to look into the cost and feasibility of increasing outreach and services to parents who have limited English skills. The report further suggested that the county and schools examine combining some of the services provided. For example, the county and schools have separate accounts to use the Language Line.

Michael Cohen, the school system's director of instructional programs, said officials are working on translating more forms and newsletters into several languages. He said schools are also trying to make sure that after an ESOL student leaves the program, contact is continued with the student and parents.

"Anytime you can provide greater access, it certainly makes a difference," Cohen said.

Spending on services for ESOL students and their parents has been steadily rising, and represents about 2 percent of the total schools budget. In fiscal 2006, Montgomery schools have budgeted $40.7 million for ESOL teachers and program expenses. Under federal law, the county is obligated to provide equal access to students and families who speak limited English.

The county's ESOL students speak more than 144 languages, with Spanish, French, Korean and Vietnamese the most common. Some are the children of diplomats or executives at multinational corporations temporarily stationed here. Others are refugees from war-torn countries and may not have attended school before arriving in the United States. Some students from African countries speak English but require additional instruction to improve proficiency because they do not speak standard American English.