

Promising Practices in Language Acquisition

For...immigrants to be successful, they must learn to speak English, improve their education and job skills, and understand the law and what is expected of them.”

—Michael E. Alpert, Chairman
Little Hoover Commission, Sacramento, California

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INTRODUCTION

For immigrants, learning the English language is an important pathway to integration, opening the door to new worlds and opportunities and expanding their contributions to U.S. society.

Although most immigrants arrive in the United States with limited English skills, they recognize the benefits of English proficiency and are highly motivated to learn. Increased English proficiency in immigrant families is highly correlated with economic and social well-being. It can lead to increased income for wage earners, greater school readiness for children, and improved intergenerational communications within immigrant families.¹ According to the 2000 Census, fluent English-speaking immigrants earn nearly double that of non-English speaking workers (see Figure 1) and have substantially lower unemployment rates.² While differences in educational background and immigration status contribute to this income gap, developing English fluency by itself generally leads to increased household income.³

From society's standpoint, helping immigrants learn English also has many other benefits. It facilitates the integration of newcomers into the local community, helps them become more economically productive, and allows them to participate more fully in and contribute to society.

Despite the large growth in the U.S. immigrant population and the benefits of promoting English proficiency, federal and state funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes has not kept pace. In many localities, immigrants face long waiting periods for enrollment. Massachusetts, for example, has more than 180,000 residents on waiting lists for ESL classes, with an average wait of six months to two years.⁴ Similar shortages of ESL courses exist in a number of other communities.⁵ The lack of funding for ESL also means that many classes are overcrowded and lack updated curriculum and equipment.



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1. Martinez, Tia Elena and Ted Wang. 2005. *Supporting English Language Acquisition: Opportunities for Foundations to Strengthen the Social and Economic Well-Being of Immigrant Families*. Sebastopol, CA: Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
2. Gonzalez, Libertad. 2004. *Nonparametric Bounds on the Returns to Language Skills*. IZA Discussion Paper No. 1098.
3. Mora, Maria. 2003. *An Overview of the Economics of Language in the U.S. Labor Market: Presentation Notes*. Denver, CO: American Economic Association Summer Minority Program.
4. Redell, Peter. 2005. "Study: ESL Funding Badly Needed." *MetroWest Daily News*, June 20.
5. Gozdziaik, Elzbieta and Susan F. Martin, eds. 2005. *Beyond the Gateway: Immigrants in a Changing America*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO FOUNDATIONS

Although foundations alone cannot fully address the growing demand for high-quality English programs, they can play several important roles in making such programs, particularly vocational ESL (VESL) and family literacy, more widely available to immigrants. Specifically, foundations can:

- Serve as a catalyst in bringing together different community institutions—government, community colleges, job-training programs, and nonprofit organizations—to develop high-quality English acquisition programs.
- Fund programs that integrate vocational or adult basic education within ESL or family-literacy classes.
- Leverage government funding for adult ESL and family-literacy programs by supporting supplemental wraparound services, such as job counseling, case management, and supportive social services.
- Support policy advocacy to make adult education and related services more responsive to the educational needs of limited English proficient (LEP) adults.

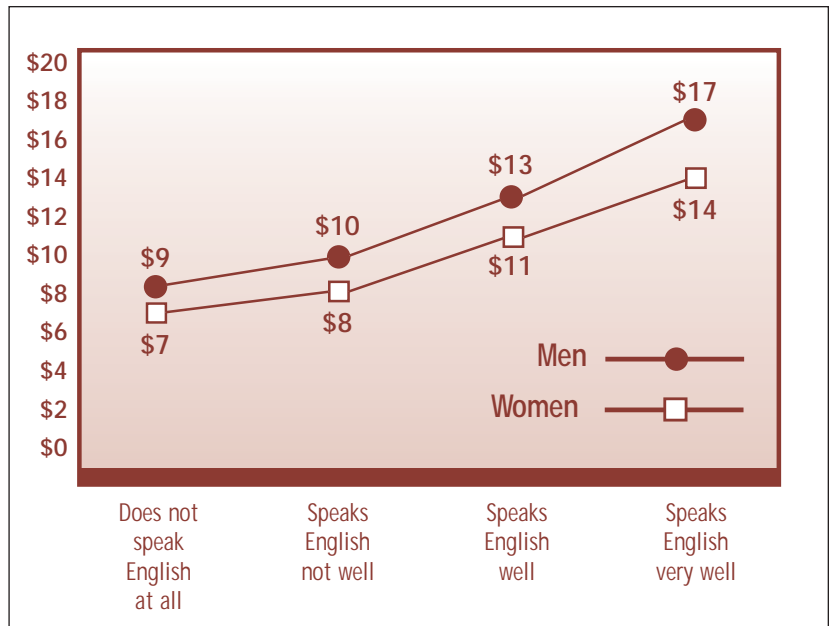


Figure 1: Hourly Wages of Immigration Workers by English Language Proficiency, 2000

INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

The non-economic benefits of English acquisition—potentially greater school readiness for the children of immigrants, increased parental participation in children's education, and improved parent-child relationships—are also important to the well-being of immigrant families and their integration into U.S. communities. Intergenerational family literacy programs can address multiple needs of immigrant families by improving the language skills of both immigrant parents and their children while helping parents learn how to support their children's educational development. Successful family literacy program for immigrant families usually have four key program components:

- **ESL and adult education as needed.** Depending on the educational needs of participants, family literacy programs for immigrants frequently provide both ESL and basic adult education instruction. Successful programs generally use participatory or learner-centered curriculum that draw upon parents' experiences. Just as in the VESL context, having state-of-the-art adult ESL materials and well-trained teachers is critical to the overall success in helping adults learn English.

- **Early childhood education.** While the parents are learning English and other subjects, family literacy programs also provide early childhood education to bolster the skills young children need to succeed in school. The primary focus is on developing literacy and language skills, while fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development.

- **Teach parents how to support the educational growth of their children.** This component helps parents increase language-related and educational activities with their kids. The curriculum usually includes topics such as parenting practices, nutrition, the importance of literacy learning for their children, information about the public school system, and community resources. Some programs also introduce parents to the U.S. school system, provide strategies for increasing parental participation in their children's education, and show

parents how to advocate effectively within public schools for their children's education needs.

- **Activities for parents and children to practice shared language learning.** Effective programs usually bring the adults and children together to participate in shared literacy and other educational activities, with the goal of increasing such behavior at home. By watching instructors model ways to support children's learning, parents learn how to interact with their children during everyday routines that enhance the development of literacy, cognitive, and social skills.

Research of family literacy programs suggests that high-quality programs are effective in increasing adult English proficiency and academic learning relative to stand-alone ESL or adult education programs.⁶ Similarly, these programs can also increase the cognitive and social development of children and help them be better prepared to learn in school.⁷ "The most impressive thing about family literacy," says Sharon Darling, President of the National Center for Family Literacy, "is that it strengthens a family and builds a learning team. We are not just changing one generation, but all that follow."

Although there are multiple government sources that support family literacy programs—e.g., Even Start, Head Start, and Title I funds—foundation support is important to these programs' success. As discussed above, funding for supplemental activities can increase program effectiveness by tailoring services to the needs of the target population. Even relatively small grants can help with professional development, publicity and outreach, and translation of documents. Such grants can also help create an inviting environment for newcomers and provide important wraparound services that address the full range of assistance needed by low-income families.

6. Hayes, Andrew. 2002. *High-Quality Family Literacy Programs: Adult Outcomes and Impacts*. Louisville, KY: National Center for Family Literacy.

7. Hayes, Andrew. 2001. *High-Quality Family Literacy Programs: Child Outcomes and Impacts*. Louisville, KY: National Center for Family Literacy.



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Educators have long urged that family literacy programs be extended to adolescents, government funding is limited to serving families with young children (usually up to age eight). As a leading literacy expert has observed, intergenerational programs with adolescents can also strengthen families by “encouraging the development of mutual languages between children and adults (including native languages for children), weaving oral history and culture stories into the fabric of educational work, and inviting children to learn from their community elders.”⁸ Without government funding to serve families with adolescent youths, foundation support in this area is especially important.

DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS

National Center for Family Literacy
Louisville, Kentucky
www.familit.org

The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) has been an important leader in the development of the family literacy model and helped create the four-component model described above. NCFL advocates for government policies to support literacy development, provides training and technical assistance to hundreds of local family literacy programs each year, conducts research and evaluation to identify effective family literacy programs, and offers professional development opportunities for practitioners. While NCFL’s work targets many communities, it operates a number of programs to help LEP immigrant families gain English literacy skills and make vital connections to their child’s education and school.

The Hispanic Family Learning Institute (Institute) was established by NCFL to expand and enhance family literacy services for the educational, social, and economic advancement of Latino and other immigrant families in need. It has received more than \$6 million of support from the Toyota Foundation since 2003, as well as leveraged federal and local funding.



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The Institute currently offers family literacy programs in approximately 30 sites across 10 cities.⁹ It combines NCFL’s extensive knowledge of program and curriculum development with local school districts and service-based agencies that have developed comprehensive programs to serve low-income Latino families. The results are well-run programs that bring about literacy and academic gains for both parents and children.

An example of this success can be seen in Providence, Rhode Island, one of the first cities in which the Institute worked. Providence was selected because of its fast-growing Latino population (which tripled between 1980 to 2000), a school district with a majority Latino student population, and a Latino population in which 30 percent of the adults have limited literacy skills. Like all of the Toyota program sites, the Providence project is a collaboration among NCFL, the local school district, and community organizations, with Dorcas Place Adult and Family Learning Center (www.dorcasplace.org) playing the lead role. Although the Toyota program provides each site with a three-year grant, both the school district and Dorcas Place are leveraging the grant with federal Title I funds as well as support from local foundations.

Dorcas Place oversees classroom instruction for 80 participating families in three elementary schools. The family literacy program uses NCFL’s four-pronged model that provides (1) literacy and adult education to the parents, (2) age-appropriate educational instruction for children, (3) instruction to parents on early childhood development, and (4) “parent and child together time” for parents to practice how to support their children’s development through various activities. While the organization has experience operating family literacy programs, its CEO, Dr. Brenda Dann-Messier, observed that the NCFL collaborative has been especially effective for several reasons:

- **Integrated Curriculum.** The curriculum for the parents’ and children’s classes is integrated so that both are studying similar subjects, and parents can immediately begin to support their children’s learning and development during class and at home.
- **Adult education curriculum.** While some family literacy programs focus primarily on children, NCFL’s curriculum draws on years of work in adult education and offers immigrant parents a strong curriculum for learning English as a second language.

8. Weinstein-Shr, Gail. Undated. “Learners’ Lives as Curriculum” in *Look at Even Start Newsletter*.

9. These include Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York, Providence, Chelsea, Denver, Detroit, Santa Paula, and Shelby County.

- **Professional Development.** NCFL provides training to all literacy staff funded by the Toyota program and brings them together regularly for conferences and meetings to discuss challenges and best practices.

- **Case Management and Wraparound Services.** All of the participants have a case manager who is responsible for ensuring that each family's situation is stable and its members are capable of using the literacy classes as a first step towards achieving other economic or educational goals. Participants, for example, have full access to all of Dorcas Place's vocational and educational services.¹⁰ The case manager also refers families to other agencies for health care and social services as the need arises. These services are supported by local grants and are critical to the program's success. "Without wraparound services and case management," says Dr. Dann-Messier, "even the best family literacy programs would have difficulty helping participants achieve their goals. These families need intensive and ongoing support."

- **Partnership between the school district and the community.** By holding the family literacy classes at their children's elementary school and having a school parent liaison staff member help support the participants, the program has also had the effect of making parents more comfortable with their children's schools. This, in turn, has led to increased parental participation in school activities and given parents the confidence to interact with teachers and administrators.

The total costs of the Providence program, including federal Title I funding and in-kind support from the school district and Dorcas Place, is approximately \$350,000 over three years, or an average of \$1,450 per family annually. The initial data from the first two years suggest that the program is both helping adults increase literacy skills and helping participating children, as rated by their teachers, perform better in school than comparable students.¹¹ This initial success suggests that family literacy programs hold great promise in providing the education and services that immigrant families need to thrive in their new communities.

**Family Literacy Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando (FLAME)
Chicago, Illinois**
www.uic.edu/educ/flame

Based in Chicago, FLAME (Family Literacy: Learning, Improving, Educating) operates a two-year, family literacy program that (1) promotes the literacy and civic skills of LEP parents and (2) improves the home literacy environments of their young children. FLAME activities are conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the participant's level of English proficiency, but they are supplemented by participatory ESL courses. The program has three basic modules:

1. **Parents as Teachers** consists of 14 bimonthly classes, attended by both parents and children, that teach parents about book sharing, book selection, libraries, the alphabet, songs and games, math, home literacy centers, and community literacy. Parents also learn how to provide homework help, visit their child's classroom, interact with teachers, and speak with administrators to ensure their child's needs are addressed.

2. **Parents as Learners** consists of biweekly ESL classes and activities aimed at improving literacy skills. For example, parents may write stories or develop books for their children. Parents can also attend basic skills or GED classes.

3. **Parents as Leaders** offers a three-day summer leadership institute to increase parents' awareness of existing community services and to empower them to advocate for their children in school settings. The training curriculum includes how to recognize effective school programs, the importance of parent-teacher relationships, and the role of advocacy, as well as an overview of bilingual education, immigration law, and parents' rights.

As families participate in the FLAME program, their children demonstrate significant gains in cognitive development, pre-literacy and literacy skills, and vocabulary development in both Spanish and English. Results further indicated that parents became more comfortable teaching their children at home and also became more proficient in English as shown by significant gains in the Language Assessment Scales.



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Approximately two-thirds of the parents complete the first year and return for the second. The cost for providing the program is approximately \$500 per family per year.

Although begun in Chicago, FLAME has been successfully adopted by 29 organizations that serve 54 sites in California, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, South Carolina, Texas, and British Columbia (Canada). While Spanish-speaking families make up most of the participants in FLAME's programs, the model has also been used in other immigrant and African-American communities. Materials produced by FLAME staff in Spanish and English have been translated into Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese by other organizations.

10. Dorcas Place has a staff of over 40 employees who offer a wide range of literacy, workplace training, college preparatory, and employment services to low-income adults.

11. National Center for Family Literacy. 2005. *Teacher Report on Student Performance, Year 2: The Results*. Louisville, KY: National Center for Family Literacy.

VOCATIONAL ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

VESL courses provide instruction on English vocabulary commonly used in the workplace while helping newcomers become better prepared to work in jobs that require English proficiency. The courses vary depending on the target population, but most promising programs share several characteristics:

- **Teach English vocabulary used in the workplace.** All programs teach general workplace English, and a growing number of occupation-specific courses also teach specialized vocabulary to help immigrants become better prepared for certain types of jobs. Examples of occupation-specific programs include those in the construction, nursing, food services, and child care sectors.

- **Teach basic computer and soft skills.** In addition to English instruction, many programs teach participants about job search and interview skills, customs and norms in the U.S. workplace, and how to communicate effectively with co-workers. As computer skills become increasingly required even in entry-level positions, high-quality programs also try to help participants become familiar with basic computer software programs.

- **Provide basic adult education as needed to supplement English instruction.** An estimated 32 percent of adults enrolled in ESL programs lack literacy skills in their native language.¹² For these individuals, increased English

verbal proficiency without improvement in basic literacy and math skills is unlikely to lead to better jobs. As illustrated by the El Paso program described below, literacy programs can be combined with adult education to help participants learn other skills as they become proficient in English.

- **Provide job counseling and placement services.** Research indicates that even after immigrants develop English skills, they often continue to work in low-wage jobs in part because they do not know how to find and apply for mainstream employment.¹³ Many VESL programs have responded by providing participants with employment counseling and placement services to help them find and retain better paying jobs.

ENGLISH AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR FARMWORKERS

**Motivation, Education and Training, Inc. and El Paso Community College
El Paso, Texas**
www.metinc.org

This collaborative program provides literacy and job training to former farmworkers interested in working in the construction trades or retail businesses. The program targets Spanish-speaking individuals who have limited English skills and little or no formal schooling. The eight-week, 40-hour-per-week program provides participants with Spanish-language GED and computer skills instruction followed by 20 weeks of VESL and vocational training in either construction or retail sales. Basic-skills classes are taught bilingually, while vocational skills are taught primarily in English. Participants receive stipends while enrolled in training and have access to medical care, housing and other social services. Upon graduation, participants are placed with a local employer who provides continuing on-the-job training for an additional 12



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12. Fitzgerald, N.B. 1995. *ESL Instruction in Adult Education: Findings from a National Evaluation*. ERIC Digest. Washington, DC: National Center for ESL Literacy Education.

13. Martinez and Wang, 2005.



weeks. Ninety-six percent of participants complete the training, and eighty-four percent were still employed six months after completing the program with wages ranging from \$6.50 to \$9.75. The program is funded through a combination of federal and private foundation grants, with the latter used to support accompanying social services. The total cost of training, support services, stipends, and job placement and retention services is approximately \$11,000-13,000 per participant. This model has been replicated in Louisiana, North Dakota, and Minnesota.

LANGUAGE TRAINING FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

English Center for International Women
Oakland, California
www.eciw.org

The Career Advancement Program (CAP), offered by the English Center for International Women in Oakland, California, integrates English acquisition, computer literacy, and career readiness into a program designed for newcomers, women and men, who have completed high school or have comparable skills. Participants receive approximately 20 hours of classroom instruction per week, typically for a 32-week period. The program offers six sessions each year, during which students can advance to a higher-level class. The program provides instruction in grammar, reading/writing, speaking/listening, vocabulary development, and idioms and pronun-

ciation. Students also are required to take accompanying career readiness and computer education classes. As an affiliate of Oakland's workforce development system, the Center operates a One Stop office that provides vocational counseling, internship and job placement services to complement its intensive English program. The average class size is only 13 students, which allows participants to receive greater attention from instructors and more opportunities to interact with other class members. As of 2006, the program had 109 students, with approximately 44 percent Latino, 39 percent Asian, and 17 percent European.

Yearly tuition for the program is \$8,480, but because most students are low-income, most of the funding comes from government workforce development funds or federal financial aid programs. In addition, CAP receives a grant from the American Express Foundation to support its computer and financial literacy training components.

Eighty-four percent of CAP's 2005 graduates found jobs or continued their education at a higher education institution. Typical job placements include office administrative work, home-health care and food services jobs, or program assistant positions in schools, businesses, or local service agencies. Participation in CAP helps graduates achieve significant wage gains. The average hourly wage for 2005 graduates was \$10.70 per hour, which was 35 percent higher than what participants earned before they enrolled in CAP.



ADVANCED ENGLISH AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR HEALTH CARE CAREERS

International Institute of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota
www.iimn.org

Even after immigrants learn enough English to go about their daily lives, they often need additional language training to be successful in the workplace. Growing numbers of adult educational providers are offering advanced, industry-specific VESL courses to address this need. An example is the Medical Careers Project, operated by the International Institute of Minnesota. The Project provides three language and vocational training programs to help newcomers secure entry-level positions and opportunities for career advancement in the state's fast-growing health care field.

- **Nursing Assistant Training Program.** The Institute offers four programs to prepare newcomers to become either a nursing assistant or home health aide. Participants attend six hours of classes each day in programs that range from six to eleven weeks, depending on a participant's English level and any previous work experience in the health care field. Students are screened to ensure that they can speak, read, and write basic English prior to beginning the program, so that the course can focus on intensive English instruction on medical vocabulary, along with state-mandated instruction for nursing assistants, life skills, and workplace cultural issues.

Participants also receive support services as well as job counseling and placement services throughout the program. The Institute works with the local refugee and immigrant communities, and more than 95 percent of the students in this program are from Africa—primarily Ethiopia, Somalia, Liberia and Nigeria.

Between 1990 and 2005, the program enrolled 1,147 students, 91 percent of whom graduated. Ninety-eight percent of these graduates were certified as nursing assistants or home health aides. The average wage of 2005 program graduates was approximately \$10.75 per hour, representing a 22 percent increase over their earnings before they enrolled in the training. Graduates are encouraged to pursue further study through the Institute's other medical career programs once they have been employed for over six months.

- **Academic Skills for Medical Career.** This 10-week ESL preparatory program is designed to help immigrants in nursing assistant or other entry-level positions develop their reading, writing, grammar, listening, and computer skills so that they can enroll in technical college programs and advance to more skilled positions, such as becoming a technician or nurse. Students spend four hours per day in this intensive ESL course to improve their English and studying skills. This course is offered at four English levels to 140 students at any one time.

- **Medical Career Advancement Program.** This program helps immigrants create a career path by helping them develop an educational plan, identify financial resources (including part-time jobs), provide referrals to tutoring and academic support programs, and offer job counseling and placement services when they complete their education.



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Between 2002 and 2005, 84 out of 141 students enrolled in the program successfully upgraded their jobs, with approximately 60 becoming either a Registered or Licensed Practical Nurse.

The Institute's Medical Careers Project is primarily supported by grants from the local United Way, refugee resettlement programs, and a number of local foundations, including The McKnight Foundation, The Phillips Foundation, F.R. Bigelow Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation, and The St. Paul Foundation. "Foundation grants have been essential," says Michael Donahue, Director of the Nursing Assistant Training Program. "They allowed us to offer not just VESL classes but to create a career ladder program that helps immigrant and refugees enter the field, improve their English skills, and grow their careers through additional education."

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY TO INCREASE RESOURCES

In addition to supporting English acquisition programs, foundations can also help immigrant organizations bring more resources to this area through policy advocacy and reform. Observers have long noted that one reason why ESL courses are consistently underfunded is that the constituency benefiting from these programs—LEP immigrants—has little political power, and their needs are often invisible to or not relevant for policymakers. Immigrant advocates can highlight the importance of providing high-quality English acquisition programs, pointing out that such programs help integrate newcomers socially and economically and that they will ultimately benefit society as a whole, for example, through increased earnings.

LANGUAGE AND VOCATIONAL RESOURCES FOR LEP IMMIGRANTS

Collaboration to Support Laid-Off Garment Workers *San Francisco, California*

International and local economic forces caused more than half of the 400+ garment factories in the Bay Area to close between 1998 and 2004, resulting in thousands of workers losing their jobs. The overwhelming majority of the laid-off workers were LEP immigrant women with limited vocational skills.



© Garment Worker Center

While both the federal and state governments provide dislocated workers with special benefits and re-training programs, these programs were severely underutilized by the laid-off garment workers because few were aware of their rights, and there were only a small number of training programs suited for their language and vocational needs.

With support from the Levi Strauss Foundation, two immigrant advocacy groups—Chinese for Affirmative Action/Center for Asian American Advocacy and Chinese Progressive Association—teamed up with local labor unions and the community college to advocate that state and local government agencies develop a coordinated program to serve garment workers who lost their jobs due to plant closures. They advocated for:

- Closer coordination between state and local government agencies responsible for administering dislocated workers programs to ensure that laid-off garment workers are informed of and can participate in the full range of re-training and income support programs.
- Reduced language barriers through translations of documents, bilingual staffing, and culturally competent administration of employment programs for this target population.
- The development of ESL and re-training programs specifically designed to help make this population employable in other industries.

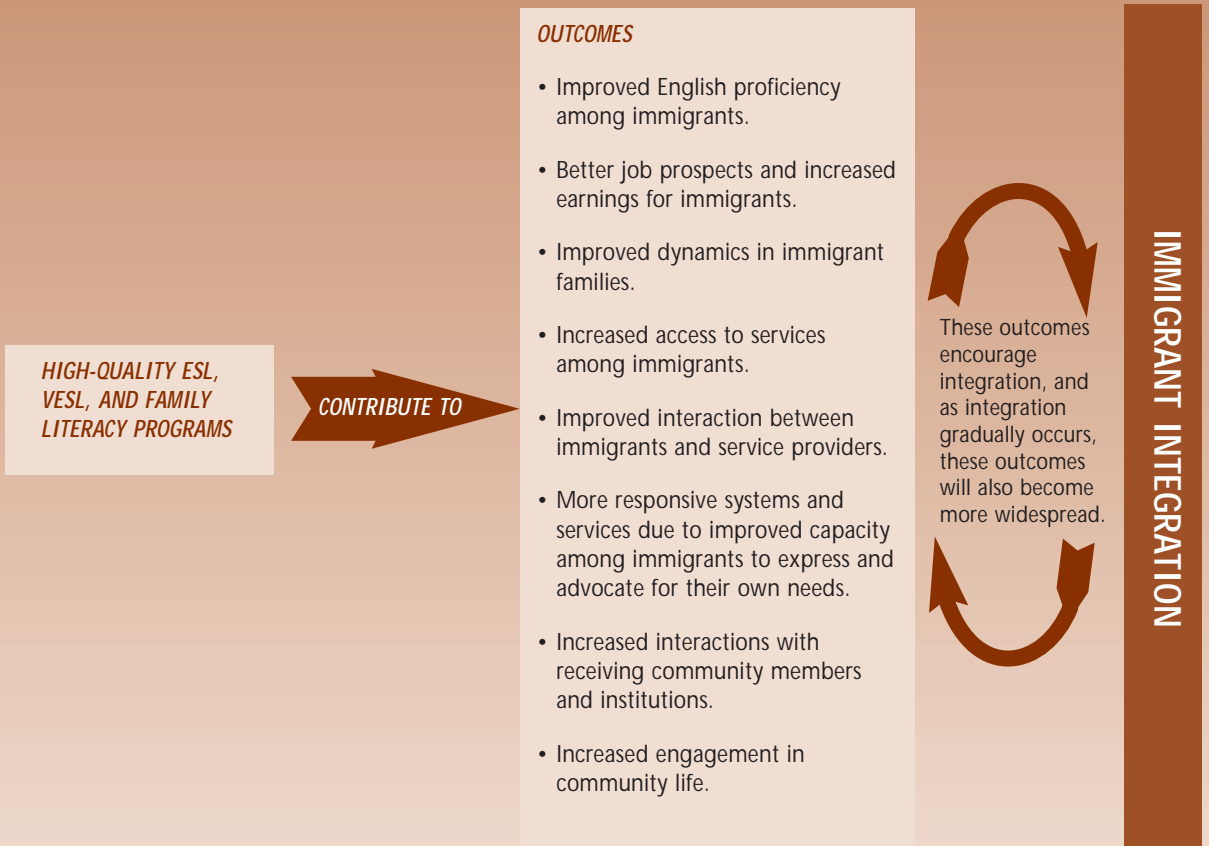
Using existing sources of public funding, the local and state government agencies responsible for serving dislocated workers agreed in 2005 to create a \$1.15 million Garment Worker Re-Training Initiative to provide 100 LEP, dislocated garment workers with up to 18 months of unemployment insurance and income support, intensive VESL, options for

vocational skills training in five industries,¹⁴ re-employment services, transportation, and child care funds. City College of San Francisco provides VESL and vocational training, while Chinese for Affirmative Action, Chinese Progressive Association, and the San Francisco Labor Council offers case management and job placement services to participants. In connecting community and labor organizations already serving dislocated garment

workers with the training expertise of the local community college, this project could be a model for other localities facing similar challenges in serving displaced immigrant workers. Its success in creating a program with existing workforce and adult education funds demonstrates that advocacy at the state and local levels is important to providing LEP immigrants with access to high-quality VESL programs.

EVALUATING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PROGRAMS

As the figure below illustrates, high-quality English acquisition programs can lead to outcomes that facilitate the social, economic, and civic integration of LEP newcomers. Foundations seeking to evaluate such programs can develop a wide range of indicators to measure progress against these outcomes.



14. These industries include hospitality, health care, early childhood development, horticulture and gardening, and janitorial and housekeeping.