

D.C. LANGUAGE ACCESS COALITION

COLLABORATION, COMMUNITY, DIVERSITY, EQUALITY, EDUCATION,
INCLUSION, JUSTICE, PARTICIPATION, VOICE

Executive Committee

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June 17, 2008

Councilmember
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Dear Councilmember:

The D.C. Language Access Coalition (Coalition) is an alliance of community-based and civil rights organizations that advocate for language access in the District of Columbia (D.C.). We are writing to begin a dialogue with Council regarding (1) the difficulty with which English language learning can occur among adult immigrants; (2) the desire and efforts of immigrants to learn the English language; and (3) the limited availability of English As a Second Language (ESL) classes that are accessible to immigrants who want to learn English. The Coalition is grateful for Council's support and commitment to language access in D.C.

On February 11, 2008 at an oversight hearing for the Office of Latino Affairs, Councilmember Schwartz stated the following:

I want to thank you Ms. Perdomo for being very conscious of the need for everyone to be able to access government by having the languages they need spoken and interpreted for them, but we all must remember too that people who are here too have an obligation to learn the language of the country they have adopted. And we need to encourage that. I believe that there is a right to have government interpret for individuals, but I also think that there is a responsibility and an obligation for people who have chosen this land to learn the language of this land as well.

We know that Councilmember Schwartz is a stalwart supporter of the Language Access Act, understands that most English language learners (ELLs) desire to learn English, and recognizes the importance of the fair and equal treatment of language minorities in D.C. We write, however, out of concern that comments like the one above could be taken out of context and used by others who would seek to minimize the ongoing challenges ELLs face.

Our Coalition members have experienced, first-hand, the challenges of learning a new language, which is an especially enormous feat for adults, who acquire a second language very differently than children. Speakers of heritage languages that differ greatly from English in grammar, lexicon, and phonology (such as Vietnamese or Chinese) often find English language acquisition even more difficult. Sociological barriers also complicate English language acquisition for adult immigrants in our communities. Our clients often express a desire to learn English, but face burdensome time constraints, schedule conflicts and financial difficulties that make enrollment in English classes difficult. These difficulties often emerge from family obligations, overly taxing and unstable employment situations, and poverty.

MANY LANGUAGES – ONE VOICE – SO ALL CAN PARTICIPATE

Yet despite these challenges, research leaves little doubt that immigrants in D.C. are putting forward a great effort to learn the English language. The American Community Survey (2005) reported that 62% of those D.C. residents who speak a non-English language in the household report speaking English “very well” or “well.” Unfortunately, supply often lags behind demand in English language instruction. The National Center for Educational Statistics’ studies suggest that nearly 3 million adults in the United States were interested in learning English, but could not for a number of reasons including oversubscribed classes (Murguía & Muñoz, 2007). A 2007 study by the Migration Policy Institute echoes these findings, demonstrating that the need for English language instruction “dwarfs the scale and abilities of the current service system.” To illustrate this, we need only look to the Carlos Rosario International School, a hallmark of adult ESL education in the District, which itself has a waiting list of hundreds upon hundreds of applicants.

We at the D.C. Language Access Coalition urge politicians to resist describing immigrants as people with an obligation or little motivation to learn English. We encourage the Council to understand and appreciate the overwhelming desire of our immigrants to learn English and to undertake a true commitment to English language proficiency by supporting and funding ESL programs. It is important for the Council to appreciate that socio-economic barriers as well as insufficient ESL classes make it extremely difficult to assimilate and integrate into U.S. society. We urge the Council to take the necessary steps to improve adult immigrants’ access to English language instruction in D.C. and would be more than happy to meet in the future to discuss these topics further.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Deng-Pickett, Director
D.C. Language Access Coalition

Cc: Council Chair, Vincent Gray
Councilmember, Jack Evans
Councilmember, Carol Schwartz
Councilmember, David Catania
Councilmember, Phil Mendelson
Councilmember, Kwame Brown
Councilmember, Jim Graham
Councilmember, Mary Cheh
Councilmember, Muriel Bowser
Councilmember, Harry Thomas, Jr.
Councilmember, Tommy Wells
Councilmember, Yvette Alexander
Councilmember, Marion Barry
Director of the Office of Human Rights (OHR), Gustavo Velasquez
Director of Language Access at OHR, Aryan Rodriguez
Director of the Office of Asian Pacific Islander Affairs, Soo Hyun Koo
Director of the Office of African Affairs, Nebiat Solomon
Director of the Office of Latino Affairs, Mercedes Lemp
Chancellor Michelle Rhee