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LD 471

As a longtime volunteer teacher of English conversation to recent immigrants at Lewiston Adult Education I strongly support this bill.

Maine needs skilled workers, especially in the health field, but also in other industries. My students - all prime working age – are almost uniformly highly educated professionals. I do not remember a single one who did not finish high school, and most of them have at least some college. They are nurses, doctors, ultrasound technicians, accountants, economists, engineers, data analysts, technicians, lawyers and business people. The principal thing holding them back and keeping them stuck in entry level jobs is their uneven command of English. A program that offered them intensive study in an academically challenging environment would be a godsend for many of them.

One of the best things about this proposal is that students in this pilot program are paid to study English full-time so they can concentrate on it and more rapidly get their English to the level they need to contribute their skills to the Maine economy. Most of my students at the moment are asylum seekers waiting the required 150 days for their work permits. As soon as they find jobs, which they desperately need simply to remain housed and fed, coming to class becomes exponentially more difficult for them, particularly because a lot of the jobs they get have unpredictable scheduling so that planning becomes near impossible. There is some government support through Fedcap for New Mainers who go to classes, but my sense is that most people receiving that support still need to work, which dilutes their study of English.

Learning a new language as an adult is a daunting task. I can't tell you how many times I have been asked whether there is some kind of more intensive program to speed up this difficult process. This bill offers the most motivated and competent New Mainers exactly this experience.

The students I have met in the years I have taught at Lewiston Adult Ed are the people who have had the energy and the enterprise to start a new life in a forbiddingly different and often bewildering place, whether as refugees or asylum seekers. Immigrant energy and ambition has long been one of the drivers of American culture; the pilot program proposed in this bill goes some way to ensuring that that remains the case in Maine, as well as supporting the Maine companies desperately in need of staff.