

**LD 471, “Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Program to Expand Intensive English Language Learner Programs”**

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Good Morning, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee and Cultural Affairs. My name is James Myall and I am a Policy Analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy. MECEP supports LD 471 as a way to bolster our workforce, improve the economic outcomes of New Mainers, and ultimately strengthen our economy.

English-language skills are fundamental for New Mainers to thrive in their new homes, to contribute fully to their communities and to succeed in the workplace. Yet there are around 14,000 Mainers of working age (16-64 years old) who have limited English proficiency.<sup>1</sup> LD 471 would expand opportunities for these Mainers to rapidly improve their English language abilities by building on existing programs with a track record of success.

New Mainers are much more likely than US-born Mainers to be under-employed – working in jobs that don’t take full advantage of their skills – in part due to language barriers. MECEP’s previous research has found that around a third of Black immigrants in Maine with college degrees are working in non-college occupations – twice the rate of white, US-born Mainers.<sup>2</sup> Helping those New Mainers make the best use of their talents will increase their own wages and economic prospects, but also make our economy stronger and more productive.

Maine has an exceptionally strong labor market right now, with around two open jobs for every unemployed worker. This has increased opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged groups of all kinds, and made employers more willing to take a chance on non-traditional candidates or to offer training programs for new workers. And some larger employers in Maine are offering English language programs for their workers. But most small employers, who make up the majority of Maine employers, can’t afford to offer a program like this. LD 471 would allow all employers to benefit from a more educated workforce, and fill vacancies faster.

Maine employers want workers, and New Mainers want to work. LD 471 will solve both problems by helping to match employers to skilled workers.

Studies from similar programs elsewhere show that investment in language education pays off in other ways as well. A study of a Massachusetts program found that it increased annual earnings by \$2,400 and resulted in additional tax revenue that more than covered the cost of the program. It also raised civic participation, making participants who were US Citizens twice as likely to vote in elections.<sup>3</sup> We also know that when adults learn English it has positive spill-overs like helping their children succeed in school.<sup>4</sup>

LD 471 would represent a relatively small investment in helping New Mainers succeed in the new homes, which would pay itself back not just in helping these individuals, but in strengthening the economy, increasing state tax revenues, and building a stronger and more inclusive Maine. I urge you to vote “ought to pass.”

Thank you. I’m happy to take any questions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> US Census Bureau, American Community Survey data, 2019-2023, 5-year average via data.census.gov table S1601. Mainers aged 18-64 who speak English “less than very well.”

<sup>2</sup> James Myall, “State of Working Maine 2020,” *Maine Center for Economic Policy*. Nov 9, 2020. <https://www.mecep.org/maines-economy/report-state-of-working-maine-2020/>

<sup>3</sup> Heller, Blake H., and Kirsten Slungaard Mumma. 2023. "Immigrant Integration in the United States: The Role of Adult English Language Training." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 15 (3): 407–37. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20210336>

<sup>4</sup> Sterling C Llyod & Corey Mitchell, “English Fluency Among Parents: Why It Matters for Student Success.” *Education Week*. Jan 21, 2020. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/english-fluency-among-parents-why-it-matters-for-student-success/2020/01>