

Testimony in Support of LD 471

An Act to Establish a Pilot Program to Expand Intensive English Language Learner Programs

Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Maine State Legislature

March 3, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Dr. Kate Points; I earned my doctorate in Linguistics and wrote my Master's thesis on language acquisition. I am currently a Program Specialist with the New Mainers Resource Center (NMRC) in Portland. I am submitting testimony in support of LD 471.

At NMRC, we work with internationally trained professionals who are ESOL "Level 5" and higher. The CASAS test, which is used to determine an individual's English mastery, defines six proficiency levels that educational programs then use for class placement. Level 5 is considered upper intermediate fluency- some complex sentence structure, use of several verb tenses, control of multiple types of sentence structure- in practice, this is enough to have a conversation without the need for external translation assistance, but still not quite "fluent" in English. Level 5 is likely sufficient to work in an entry level professional role for someone with experience. For jobs like a cashier at a grocery store or similar customer service roles, students probably need to be Level 4- basic subject-verb sentence structure, some paragraphs in writing.

NMRC maintains offices in Lewiston and Bangor, as well as Portland- all are affiliated with adult education. Across the state of Maine, Adult Education provides free, high quality English Language instruction to anybody who seeks it. Each adult education program is part of their local school system, and are subject to local school budgets. We all wish our school budgets were expanded, and adult education programs could expand their classes in a range of ways. The reality is, budgets are stretched thin. Portland Adult Education, the largest adult education program in the state, offers six levels of ESOL classes; there are morning, afternoon, and evening classes; in person and remote. All with a waitlist. In fact, there are over 1,000 names on the waitlist just to take the placement test, before they can be added to the class waitlist. Many of the other adult education programs in greater Portland are also restricted to a waitlist. How can someone, who is motivated to learn English and enter a job training program, expect to reach even a basic level of proficiency if they are on a waitlist?

To contribute meaningfully to our state's economy, to support themselves and build a life in the US, most New Americans need to learn English. But they can't learn from the waitlist. The state needs more English classes. Intensive English Language programs, like the programs proposed in LD 471, will allow New Americans opportunities to increase their proficiency, especially before they're eligible to apply for work authorization. We know that higher English fluency will ultimately lead to better job opportunities for New Americans, and a stronger workforce for Maine. More opportunities for English Language learning benefit everyone, and we are in support of this proposed legislation.