

State-run English classes swamped with students Influx of immigrants increases demand

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution

May 11, 1993, Tuesday

Copyright 1993 The Atlanta Constitution

Section: STATE NEWS; Section A; Page 1

Length: 800 words

Byline: By Elizabeth Kurylo STAFF WRITER

Body

When Gail Johnson hangs the red, white and green Mexican windsock in front of her Cobb County kindergarten class, the kids know it's time to speak Spanish.

Later, after lunch and a nap, the American flag windsock replaces the Mexican one, and they converse in English. Occasionally, the windsocks are ignored, and both languages pop out at once.

"Muy bien! Perfecto, chica!" Ms. Johnson says as a pig-tailed girl correctly names a color in Spanish.

The 22 kindergartners, and another first-grade class at Argyle Elementary School in Smyrna - where 20 percent of the students speak Spanish - are in the state's only two-way bilingual classes.

But recent census figures show there is a growing need for this type of education across Georgia. In the past decade, a tremendous influx of immigrants has caused the state's non-English speaking population to jump by 112 percent - from 134,000 to 285,000.

Even though only 4.8 percent of Georgians don't speak English, the increase was the largest of any state, according to a U.S. Census report released last month. Nationwide, 14 percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home.

In the past five years, the number of students enrolled in state- funded English classes has nearly quadrupled in Georgia. Last fall, 7,375 were in these classes, said Beth Arnow, coordinator of migrant and English programs for the state Department of Education. In addition, state-sponsored language programs for adults are overwhelmed.

The lack of opportunity for immigrants to learn English, and for native Georgians to learn other languages, complicates the workings of everything from classrooms and offices to hospitals and jails.

The state's leading foreign language is Spanish, spoken in the homes of 33,415 residents, including 7,184 who speak English poorly or not at all, according to the census report.

In all, 115 non-English languages are spoken in Georgia homes.

Despite this explosive growth, the state is "in the infant stage of welcoming people," according to Maritza Keen, director of the Latin American Association.

"In over 90 percent of county and state offices, there is no one that is language or culture sensitive," said Ms. Keen, whose agency served 11,000 Hispanics last year. "The first thing we hear from people is, 'If I do it for you, I have to do it for another group.' "

State-run English classes swamped with students Influx of immigrants increases demand

She also is concerned about an effort in the state Legislature to make English the official language, which she fears may lead to discrimination against foreigners.

The Georgia bill's sponsor, Sen. Mike Crotts (R-Conyers), said it was a cost-saving measure for the state. "The purpose is to eliminate additional tax dollars on the citizens of this state by having to print the government documents and ballots in five or six different languages," the Republican legislator said Monday.

Even though it was defeated this year, Mr. Crotts said the latest Census figures support his argument, and he plans to introduce the legislation again.

Ms. Keen said she would fight it again.

"I'm meeting with people right now to stop this," said Ms. Keen. "It's not just the Hispanic community. This can hinder international business."

Despite the problems, Ms. Keen is optimistic that things will improve, especially as the 1996 Olympics draw near.

"I see this as a process," she said. "I think that the leadership here in Atlanta is beginning to see that these immigrant communities are not going to go away."

"These days, you go to about any school in town and there is an English program," she said.

In addition, thousands of adults take state-funded English classes at local churches, schools and community centers across Georgia. But demand for the classes is much greater than supply.

"We're not even scratching the surface," said Fannie Parris, dean of adult education at Gwinnett Tech, which offers 11 English classes per day and still can't meet the need.

The situation is similar in DeKalb, the state's most ethnically diverse county, where more than 7,000 non-English speakers take English classes.

"The demand for English classes and programs far exceeds our ability to fund them," said Mike Richardson, vice president of DeKalb's adult education programs. "I bet I'm missing close to an additional 4,000 a year, easily."

He had to cut back English programs at apartment complexes that had been set up to reach homebound mothers who couldn't get to classes.

Police and hospitals are adjusting to non-English speakers as well, providing interpreters and a few bilingual officers. Since 1985, St. Joseph's Hospital has provided a special office for Spanish-speakers. And for the past five years, a task force of local and state police officers has worked to improve relations between police and immigrants.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH931500070

Subject: PRIMARY SCHOOLS (90%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (90%); STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS (90%); LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES (89%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (89%); ARTS & HUMANITIES EDUCATION (78%); MUNICIPAL FINANCE (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS (78%); BILINGUAL EDUCATION (78%); MULTILINGUALISM (77%); FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION (77%); IMMIGRATION (73%)

Industry: PRIMARY SCHOOLS (90%)

State-run English classes swamped with students Influx of immigrants increases demand

Geographic: GEORGIA, USA (94%); MEXICO (92%); UNITED STATES (79%); LATIN AMERICA (58%)

Load-Date: May 30, 1993

End of Document