

Adults who do not speak English well or at all are a substantial part of the Worcester population, and the classes and organizations that serve them struggle for resources. Making ESOL classes readily available to anyone is important for a number of unquantifiable reasons, but also for measureable economic reasons, making the issue a priority for further research and additional resources.

The State of ESOL in Worcester

As is the case in many cities, Worcester’s options for ESOL classes are split among different organizations with varying capabilities and target demographics. Unlike most cities, Worcester has brought together its ESOL providers and community members in a coalition called the ESOL Network to track data and coordinate efforts. This group, currently organized by a staff person from the Worcester Public Library, has collected a substantial amount of information about ESOL classes and students in Worcester.

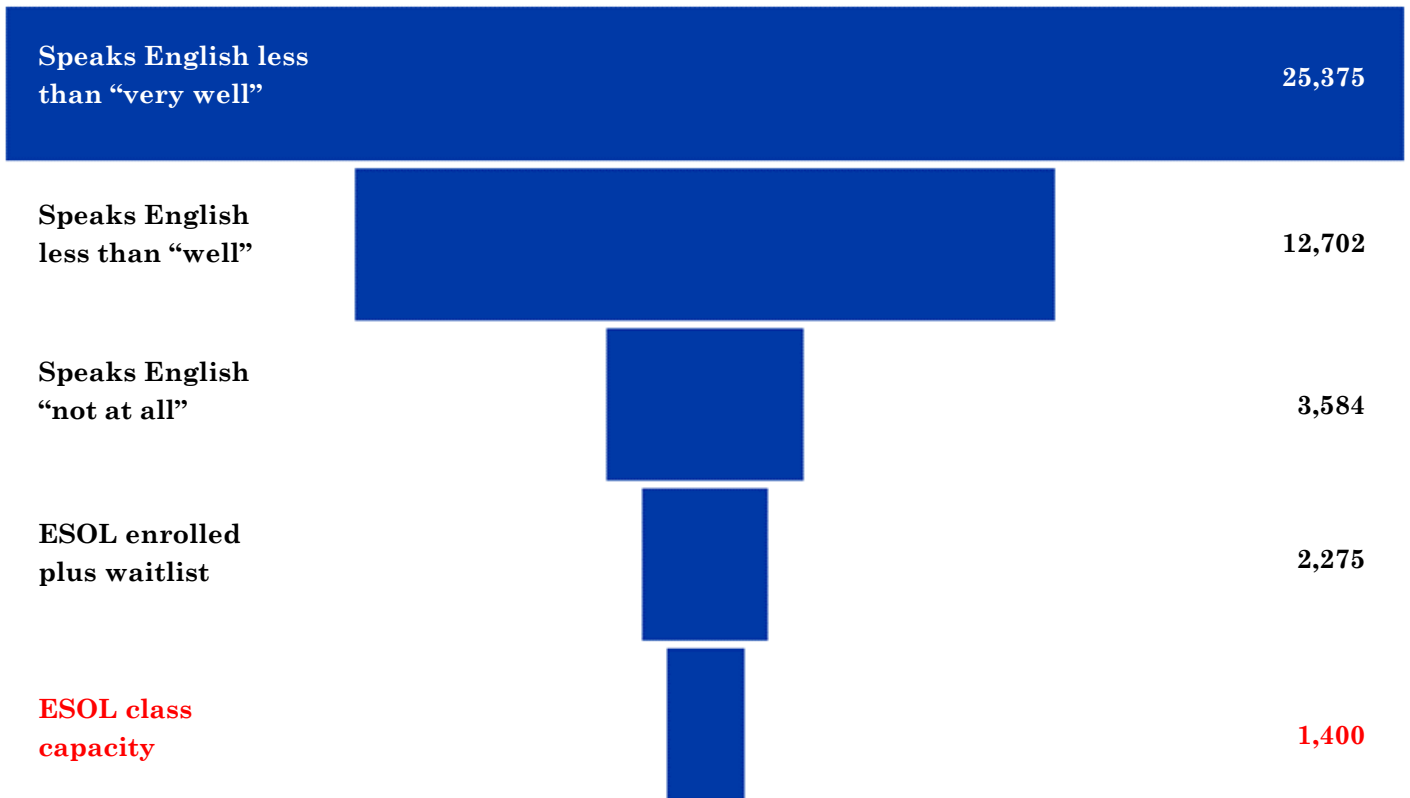
The pre-pandemic combined capacity of all classes in the ESOL Network was around 1,400. There are nearly 900 people signed up on various

waitlists, unable to get into a class. And waitlists are only a portion of the projected demand, since residents need to be aware of a class in order to attempt to enroll. U.S. Census Bureau figures show there are more than 10,000 Worcester residents over the age of 18 who self-identify as speaking English “not well” or “not at all,” and more than 25,000 who speak English less than “very well.” (see chart 1).

ESOL Impacts

English proficiency is a requirement to attain many jobs or progress in certain careers, even as some industries struggled to recruit workers before the pandemic. Workers who speak English well make up to 135 percent more in wages than

Chart 1: Indicators of ESOL Demand in Worcester



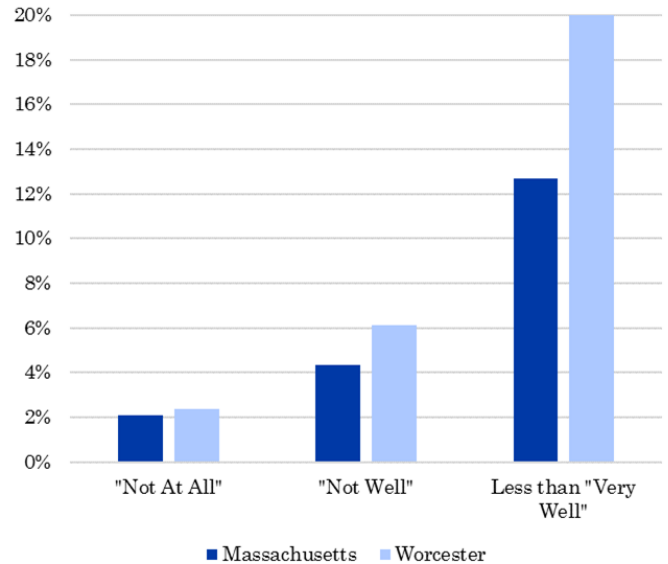
non-English speaking workers. For that reason, some ESOL programs are focused on job training and workforce development.

A study of 700 ESOL students conducted as part of a Northeastern University/Boston Foundation report found that an investment of \$1.75 million in ESOL education yielded a return on investment of around \$8.2 million. This return came in both direct benefits like increased employment and wage gains for the participants, as well as indirect community benefits like increased taxes paid on those wages and avoided Medicaid costs because of workplace health insurance gains.

ESOL Challenges

A 2019 assessment of Worcester’s ESOL programs identified five areas of focus for potential additional grant money—curriculum/materials, transportation assistance, teacher/volunteer training, childcare and expanded hours/locations. These needs reflect the challenges of fitting adult classes into people’s busy lives. A proposal from the ESOL Network and Worcester Public Schools—one of the city’s largest ESOL providers—estimated the cost of an 800-student class expansion at nearly \$280,000 per year (see table 1).

Chart 2: Percent of Residents Aged 18+ Who Speak English ...



Source: 2018 5-year American Community Survey

A migration to online solutions during the pandemic is not feasible for many current and potential students. There are more than 8,500 “linguistically isolated” households in Worcester, where no adult speaks English “very well.” Around 30 percent of these households do not have an internet subscription (compared to nearly 20 percent of total city households).

Staff Costs	Cost per hour	Hours per week		Annual Cost		
Instructors	\$30	7	x 40 weeks	\$8,400	x 20 classes	\$168,000
Advising	\$30	10		\$12,000		\$12,000
Clerical Support	\$25	4		\$4,000		\$4,000
Site Administrator	\$40	5		\$8,000	x 4 schools	\$32,000
Custodial Overtime	\$30	6		\$7,200	x 4 schools	\$28,800
Student Costs	Cost per student					
Supplies	\$40				x 800 students	\$32,000
Total Cost:						\$276,800

Source: Created by John McGovern and Jen Brunelle, Worcester Public Schools

While the ESOL Network has made strides in unifying the disparate providers that offer classes, the basic problem of too few slots for the number of Worcesterites who could benefit can only be resolved with additional funding.