

Community Engagement Paper

The English Support Network

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I. Executive Summary

What is the English Support Network?

The English Support Network is a for the community, by the community organization that aims to help low proficiency English Speakers improve their speaking skills through English Classes. Through the use of volunteers, the program offers a free of cost service to those in need.

Why is the English Support Network needed?

There is an unexpectedly large rate of poor English proficiency in Washington State. As a largely English-speaking society, this can lead to a wide array of difficulties for those who are not fluent, including mental health issues due to feelings of isolation, as well as due to being unable to hold a job, complete menial tasks like grocery shopping, and contribute to day-to-day activities.

Why our English Classes?

A unique form of English classes, targeted to each individual user, provides the perfect solution to the problem of low English proficiency in Washington. Free, participant focused classes are structured similarly to informal tutoring sessions, and not only help users improve their English, but also help them increase their confidence and form meaningful relationships with others in their community.

Why is this important?

Increasing English proficiency in Washington communities provides a wide array of benefits. For one, it results in an overall happier community, as people can effectively communicate and connect with others – something that is vital to human health. Furthermore, it leads to more productivity, as more people are able to participate in job interviews and work in businesses when they can communicate in English.

Who is our target audience?

The English Support Network's target audience is immigrants, ages 18 and older, in the Sammamish/Redmond area who have low English proficiency. Since younger children already have access to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes readily available at their schools, the program focuses on older age groups, although younger learners are more than welcome to attend classes.

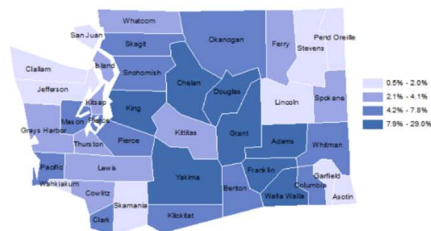
II. Problem

According to WTN data, the county with the largest percentage of low English-proficiency was Adams County, with 29.0% of the population reporting that they speak English less than “very well”, while Pend Oreille County reported the smallest percentage of the same, with 0.5% of the population reporting that they speak English less than “very well” (WTN). Furthermore, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020 American Community Survey 1-Year Experimental Estimates, about 39,977 Spanish-speaking households out of a total of 2,987,658 households in Washington report being a ‘limited English-speaking household, with another 66,179 households speaking a variety of other languages reporting poor English proficiency as well. Nationally, Washington State ranks 14th for percent of people 5 years and over who speak English less than "very well" (when ranking from largest to smallest percentage)’.

Washington is home to several major cities that are hubs for business, especially surrounding technology, playing host to business superpowers like Microsoft, Amazon, Facebook, Google, Apple, etc. This has attracted people from all over the world - about one in seven Washington residents is an immigrant, while another one in seven residents is a native-born U.S. citizen with at least one immigrant parent. In 2018, 1.1 million immigrants (foreign-born individuals) comprised 15 percent of the population, according to the American Immigration Council. The most common languages among this large immigrant population in Washington include Spanish, various Chinese languages (Cantonese, Mandarin, etc.), Vietnamese, Russian, Tagalog, and Korean (Language Network). While the increase in immigrants has been a huge step in diversifying the area’s culture, language barriers have hindered the formation of meaningful community connections among this large immigrant population.



Percent in households where English is spoken less than "very well"
Population Age 5 and Above, 2019



Poor English proficiency causes a plethora of problems, including difficulty completing routine tasks like grocery shopping but also in more prominent situations such as in completing the US citizenship exam or communicating with health professionals. Not being able to speak

English in an English-speaking society has several negative health impacts. In terms of physical health, it impedes a person's ability to communicate with medical professionals, so their physicians have a less accurate picture of the patient's pain level, symptoms, and other concerns. There is a positive correlation between limited literacy skills and chronic conditions, including diabetes and cancer. Non-English-speaking patients are particularly vulnerable as the barriers they encounter go beyond accessing effective health care. They also face communication and translation barriers, leading to additional expenditures on their part with costs of a translator, etc. In terms of social health, it can mean that a person may have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships and that they have difficulty contributing in social settings like parties or gatherings. Lastly, in terms of mental health, a lack of English-speaking skills can lead to increased feelings of isolation, increased stress due to difficulty communicating, and increased feelings of insufficiency because a person may have trouble contributing in their day to day lives. To solve this issue, fee-for-service English classes serve as a potential option, but these programs are often expensive, many charging upwards of \$15.00 per lesson and ranging from \$1,500.00 to \$20,000.00 for full courses. The prevalent lack of access, both financial and often transportation-wise, poses a problem to those with low proficiency.

III. Data Collection

To further analyze the need for the English Support Network, specifically in Sammamish, WA, a private study was conducted among a group of 108 students (ranging all ages, grade levels, genders, and races) at Eastlake High School. These students were presented a series of 5 questions to determine the prevalence of low English proficiency in the city.

The questionnaire began with questions about the respondent and their language use. When asked if they, or one or more of their parents or legal guardians, were an immigrant (defined as a foreign-born resident of the US) in the first question, 67.5% (73 respondents) answered 'Yes'. Furthermore, in the second question, 56.5% (62 respondents) of participants responded that they speak a language other than English at home, with a significant portion responding that they speak Tamil (10% of the 62 respondents who reported speaking a language other than English at home). 100% of this group of people that responded that they speak a language other than English at home also responded 'Yes' to the first question asking if they and/or their families were immigrants, showing an important correlation between immigration status and speaking languages other than English.

Are you, or one of your parents/legal guardians an immigrant (a foreign-born resident of the US)?



Do you speak a language other than English at home?



Next, the survey analyzed low English proficiency more specifically. When asked if they, or anybody they know, is not fluent in English, 44 respondents, or 40.7% of participants responded yes. Of these 44 respondents, people reported knowing anywhere from 1 to 60 people who were not fluent in English (these numbers may be inexact however, as participants were encouraged to estimate if they were unsure of an exact number). This demonstrates that there is a large portion of the Sammamish community that is not fluent in English, again proving a need for the English Support Network.

Are you, or is anybody you know not fluent in English?



IV. Solution

A solution to this is a free, not-for-profit volunteer organization that offers services to teach English to those with low proficiency, called the English Support Network. The program would host weekly remote and in-person sessions where those looking to improve their English can practice speaking in a welcoming environment with like-minded peers. These classes would not only teach English but would additionally provide a safe setting that fosters friendships and connections among those who are typically more isolated due to language barriers by bringing together various immigrants and minority groups in the area. Sessions would be open to the public and would be led using the service of English fluent student and adult volunteers. The program would offer a variety of services, including citizenship exam preparation, health situation practice, and day-to-day conversation experience. The participant-focused aspect of the program would ensure that members benefit as much as possible from the time they offer – if a participant requires assistance in preparing for a job interview, the program would support them with that specifically.

The English Support Network plans to collaborate with various community organizations to maximize impact. Ongoing communication with Mr. Kannan Iyer at the VEDA Temple in Redmond, Washington, shows that there is a large need for the program's services among the temple's large Hindu community. VEDA has offered to serve as a location from which to host the program (after COVID-19 experts determine that it is safe to hold in-person sessions), as well as a financial sponsor willing to cover some program costs. Furthermore, after reaching out to the Sammamish Presbyterian Church in Sammamish, Washington, the English Support Network is communicating with the church's existing English as a Second Language (ESL) program head,

Ms. Gina Jones, of a potential collaboration to create a joint summer program for the Sammamish community

The success of the English Support Network can be measured by distributing surveys at the end of each month for participants to rate their comfort using English. Furthermore, volunteer teachers and assistants could also request more immediate feedback at the question-and-answer sessions at the end of each class. Volunteers can use this feedback to improve future sessions to best fit the needs of community members.

V. Significance

The English Support Network is significant in its ability to help improve overall community health and connectivity by addressing the needs of individuals. As more people can communicate effectively, there would likely be an improvement in overall mental health in the area, as feelings of isolation are decreased. Physical health is improved as people can better access healthcare. Emotional health would be mitigated through the formation of meaningful relationships in the classes. Economically, having a larger percentage of a population proficient in English equates to more economic productivity, as more people can more effectively participate in businesses and jobs. This subsequently means more products are made, more services are provided, etc. Furthermore, more people working correlates to more people paying taxes. This increases community funds for sectors like education, infrastructure, public transportation, and safety (police and fire departments), which, again, benefits the community overall.

VI. Reflection

This topic, low English proficiency rates in Washington State, was chosen because of the personal impact the issue has. As a group of students with immigrant parents, the experience of not being able to effectively communicate with family members is very relevant and present in day-to-day life. Complications in communicating with visiting grandparents and family members make it very difficult to personally form meaningful relationships. This was the main issue that the English Support Network aims to solve. In the process of developing the English Support network, the main challenge was acquiring financial support to get the program started. Communication with other community organizations was the main tool used to overcome this obstacle. By reaching out to the VEDA Temple in Redmond, Washington, as mentioned previously, a location to host meetings was decided, free of cost. Although some costs still remain, such as purchasing textbooks, many were reduced due to communication. Ms. Gina Jones from the Sammamish Presbyterian Church was the program's main help in learning how to effectively teach a class. By allowing the opportunity to sit in on her virtual English classes, Ms. Gina Jones provided a basic outline and a useful example of how to teach a class of members with low English proficiency. For example, she taught that using dramatic, frequent recognizable

hand signals and plenty of repetition was important to help others gain understanding of new vocabulary.

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