

Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy (MCAEL)

As if I am in deafness. That's how one Korean immigrant described the experience of living in Montgomery County in linguistic isolation - without the basic English skills to communicate with others in the community. Now an adult ESOL student attending a class targeting seniors and run by CCACC, the Chinese Culture and Community Service Center, he is eager to continue learning and ultimately pass the citizenship test. "Even if I am old," he writes in a letter praising the class, "I eagerly expect to speak English fluently in [the] near future after learning English with passion."

Throughout Montgomery County, this passion for learning is echoed by adult learners studying in more than 60 diverse programs that teach English literacy, develop new skills and confidence, and help immigrants overcome barriers and participate more fully in civic life. As a result, learners become better equipped to advance in the workplace, better advocates for their families' health, and more engaged in their children's education.

According to the 2006 American Community Survey, over 125,000 residents of Montgomery County – close to 14% of the population – report speaking English “less than very well.” Many are the parents of MCPS students, who face formidable challenges when parents are unable to support their learning. Adults with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) are often reliant on others – in many cases, their children – as interpreters, and are frequently unable to access resources outside of their communities. A recent study of immigrants in Los Angeles and New York City found that LEP families with children were nearly three times as likely to live in poverty as similar English-proficient immigrant families. LEP families were also twice as likely to report experiencing food insecurity and hunger.

Recognizing the importance of adult English literacy services as a critical community need and workforce development opportunity, the Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy (MCAEL) was formed in 2005. MCAEL works to coordinate and improve services; provide resources and technical assistance to expand capacity; and educate the community at large about the vital importance of literacy and adult ESOL. In 2007, MCAEL compiled the County's first-ever comprehensive directory of adult English language instruction programs, available electronically at www.mcael.org.

The challenge of learning English can be daunting; even in intensive programs, it is estimated that most students need at least 100 instructional hours to advance a single level. Facing many barriers – such as the need for transportation, child care, and low-cost classes – learners may become discouraged without the availability of convenient and relevant instruction. Programs offered on-site in schools or community centers, or which provide childcare, help to reduce barriers and create a sense of community.

One such program is run by the non-profit Montgomery Housing Partnership and is offered on-site to members of an apartment community. Recently, a student attending classes in the program thoughtfully reflected on how the experience changed their life.

“My son started second grade this year and I take him to school everyday. I can talk to his teacher and find out his progress in class. We pronounce together the new words and numbers that he learns in school and I just love the feeling that comes when you can share moments like this in your family. I still have a long way to go before I consider myself proficient in English but I know that I am getting better every time I go to class, and I know that this has made my life easier and productive in the United States. One hundred years from now people will still come to America and these programs will give them the opportunity to improve the quality of their lives, after all America is the land of opportunity.”

For more information how you can help **the *Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy***, please visit www.mcael.org.