

EXPLORING THE SHIFTS: EARLY-LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRAINING IN CALGARY

The English Language Learning (ELL) field is seeing a lot of newness. Revised federal policies surrounding immigration to Canada and support for English language learning are shifting the ELL landscape. On May 20th, Calgary Learns convened a dozen people involved with the earliest levels of language instruction—half were funders, half service providers. Together we explored how the changes are affecting the ELL environment and, in particular, how they may impact newcomers' access to foundational levels of language learning.

Chief among the changes is the removal of a 1200 hour limit on free-of-charge language instruction (LINC) funded by Citizenship and Immigration. This is a welcome change that helps new immigrants gain the language training they need. However as a result, fee-based ELL programs are seeing a decrease in enrollment. Some early level ELL programs have closed. One concern is that, since the federal programs are only for permanent residents, learners at the earliest levels who already have their citizenship may now have fewer options to learn English.

Here is some of our discussion:

1. **Difficulty understanding level of need for early levels of ELL:** Calgary's Immigrant Language & Vocational Assessment Referral Center (ILVARC) has transitioned to a new service delivery model that gives priority to timely language assessments. The new model also provides newcomers with increased flexibility in where they enroll for English classes. In the new model, ILVARC no longer refers learners directly to LINC providers, as they had until recently. Nor does the Centre track who ends up in which program. Therefore each providers' waitlists are growing fast (particularly in CLB 2, 3 & 4), with an unknown amount duplication of names among the lists.
2. **Connection to citizenship preparation:** Early-level language learners often have the goal of gaining citizenship and must now demonstrate adequate language achievement to do so. Unlimited language instruction, at least in some cases, may cause permanent residents to delay applying for citizenship until they have taken all the language training they want and need.
3. **Uncapping of LINC hours:** LINC seats at the early levels are filling with learners who struggle to progress. Providers are seeing learners return several years after having exhausted their LINC hours. Many of these learners have not improved in their language skills in the meantime. Childcare seats are in shorter supply than LINC seats since the 1200 hour LINC cap was lifted.
4. **Support for struggling learners:** The ELL field needs more understanding of the kinds of challenges facing learners who do not progress. Struggling learners appear all through the early levels. More options for learning and intervention are needed in order to serve these learners.

Several questions remain unanswered regarding how the changes may interact to create new challenges and opportunities. In many ways it is too soon to tell. With the growing waitlists at the early levels of LINC and the reduction in non-LINC alternatives, Calgary Learns is particularly concerned that ELL learners at the early levels may not be able to find the help they need. The group that met May 20th hopes to reconvene in a year to revisit these questions. In the meantime, as we prepare for 2016 we ask those of you in immigrant serving roles to be aware of the current situation as you plan future programming.