

Sonoma County Pilots Intensive English-Only Program

A pilot program to improve English skills and open new economic, vocational and career opportunities for 16 enrolled students began in Sonoma County August 20, 2018. The collaborative effort will provide individualized support for ten students through Job Link, Sonoma County's One-Stop Career Center, and for six students through Community Action Partnership Sonoma County. Santa Rosa Junior College's Contract Education Department will be teaching the Intensive English-Only Program, which runs 12 weeks, four days a week, four hours daily.

Community and government agencies collaborated to offer this program to improve English skills in an intensive "English-only" class setting. The collaborative is able to offer childcare and transportation assistance, and other personalized support to aid them in participating. The SF Foundation and Tipping Point provided grants to support participants who are not Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Eligible. The local Hispanic Chamber of Commerce purchased kindles for each participant so they can improve English skills at an accelerated rate using Burlington Software.

The curriculum prepares participants for Sonoma County's in-demand career clusters, with a curriculum customized to meet each individual's vocational goal. Many students in the course want to improve their English skills as a pre-requisite for vocational training programs, ranging from Certified Nurse Assistants and Medical Assistants to Heavy Equipment Operators. Sonoma County Job Link Employment and Training Counselors will guide students in identifying short-term career goals and long-term goals. After the pilot is completed, Sonoma County Job Link will support eligible participants' work toward vocational certificates through Individual Training Accounts, contingent on students' new ability to participate in regular English-only classroom settings.

The primary program goal is improve the participant's English skills by one grade level, as assessed by a CASAS test. A secondary goal is that each participant increases their wages by 10% above their employment prior to the pilot.

Intensive case management is embedded into the program, with frequent participant and instructor check-ins to monitor progression and address challenges to learning.

The pilot participants report that they are enjoying the program and support from the instructor. If the program is successful, we hope to offer the curriculum in other Sonoma County locations.

"We are really excited to support this creative solution to an urgent workforce need. That it sprung organically from a diverse group of stakeholders and came to fruition through a true public-private partnership is particularly wonderful." - Katie Greaves, Director, Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board

Participant story

Born in the U.S., Itzel Lopez and her family moved back to Mexico when she was a few months old. She completed high school in Mexico, but could not continue post-secondary education. She states that opportunity for higher education in Mexico is limited. Her dream to pursue a better life influenced her decision to leave her family and move to Sonoma County three years ago. Soon after, her parents divorced and she put her educational dream aside to financially support her mother and siblings in Mexico. She supported herself and them for two years through full time at McDonald's. She learned some English through work, but needs more proficiency to pursue her career goal, becoming a Clinical Medical Assistant. She is grateful for the pilot, which has given her hope of improving her English language skills in a short period of time, so she can start a training program.

Edwin was born in Mexico. He came to the US in 2007 at the age of 13. He graduated from high school, receiving his diploma in 2012 from Piner High School. After high school, he worked cooking in kitchens in various local restaurants evenings and in construction during the days. Edwin returned to Mexico in 2012 as he had lost his residency. He studied culinary in Mexico with the goal of becoming a chef. He finished the culinary program one year later and worked for Bimbo Bakeries. Edwin got his residency back in 2015 and moved back to Sonoma County, returning to work in construction with his brother and cooking in local restaurants. Edwin was most recently employed with Mac Thin Films, until being terminated in 7/18. Edwin is motivated to learn English because he feels embarrassed that he did not take advantage of the learning opportunities while he was in school, citing being distracted by friends and not having encouraging influential role models. Edwin is now the father of a 5 month old daughter. He feels the responsibility of having to provide for his family and understands that in order to be able to move forward to join the Labor Union, he must be more proficient in English. Edwin is extremely motivated to complete the ELL program and use his English proficiency to be accepted into the Labors Union.