

English requirement in immigration reform will test underfunded ESL system



Liz Goodwin, Yahoo! News The Ticket - 23 hrs ago



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has catapulted to the top of the to-do lists of both Republicans and Democrats, even as both sides continue to bicker over details. President Barack Obama and a bipartisan group of senators are eager to pass an immigration bill this year, with their main points of disagreement, deliberated in public and in private, centering around topics like border security, guest-worker programs and how long undocumented immigrants should have to wait before gaining citizenship.



There's one issue, however, both sides agree on: The nation's 11 million illegal immigrants will need to know

Students at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan speak into headsets as they practice their English. (Liz Goodwin/Yahoo ...

English before they can earn permanent legal status, commonly referred to as a green card. And therein lies a barely discussed problem with the potential to overwhelm states and put up a barrier to immigrants who want to legalize: The nation's English as a Second Language system may not be up to the task.

Those familiar with the issue say the woefully underfunded adult ESL system would face challenges that could stretch it to its breaking point. They include the influx of millions of new students, a severe lack of clarity around funding, and the need for more flexible learning situations, as many immigrants—who often work several jobs—will find it difficult to attend classes.

The current ESL system is "cobbled together with toothpicks and Band-Aids," said Paul Musselman, the president of Carnegie Speech, a virtual learning company that makes language software.

It would be "insane" to require illegal immigrants to learn English, added Leslie Robbins, the executive director of Riverside Language Program in Manhattan, which teaches legal immigrants intensive English courses. For one, she noted, the system is already overloaded. "There's not enough funding currently to deal with the numbers of people who both need and want English-language instruction," she said.

And Margie McHugh, an expert on immigrant integration issues at the Migration Policy Institute think tank, noted that "the idea that somehow the system could accommodate 11 million new people is beyond anyone's imagination."

McHugh estimated that, without schooling, about 55 percent of undocumented immigrants wouldn't be able to pass the English portion of the U.S. citizenship test—which requires someone to understand English phrases when spoken to slowly