

Section 2. Adult Education and Workforce Development

from

All in for a Thriving Connecticut

Opportunities to Support Upward Mobility for the State's Immigrant Families

Margie McHugh
Julia Gelatt

September 2025

with Colleen Putzel-Kavanaugh
Katherine Habben
Jacob Hofstetter
Julie Sugarman



To read the full report, see:

www.migrationpolicy.org/research/connecticut-families

© 2025 Migration Policy Institute. All Rights Reserved.

Inquiries can be directed to communications@migrationpolicy.org.

2 Adult Education and Workforce Development

Adult skills programs in Connecticut play a critical role in promoting the integration and economic mobility of the state's immigrant population. As across the rest of the country, programs delivered via the state's adult education and workforce development systems aim to promote residents' career and educational success. Though linked with postsecondary institutions, adult skills programs primarily focus on adults (and in some cases, youth) who face serious barriers to their success such as lower levels of literacy or English proficiency, limited preparation for the workforce or marketable skills for high-wage jobs, and not possessing a high school diploma or equivalent. For immigrants and refugees, adult skills programs also deliver critical integration-related services such as English acquisition classes (also referred to as English for Speakers of Other Languages or ESOL), programs to help eligible individuals prepare for the naturalization process, courses on civics and integration, and workforce preparation or development activities specifically designed to speed the workforce integration of those born outside of the United States.

The Connecticut adult education system provides a range of services intended to promote the success of both immigrant and U.S.-born residents. Through this system, administered by the Connecticut State Department of Education, adult education providers deliver free literacy, numeracy, English acquisition, and civics/citizenship classes (among some other services) to adult learners.⁸ Instruction is also sometimes combined with workforce preparation activities intended to increase the career readiness or employability of participants. Programs are delivered primarily through school districts, though community-based organizations and libraries also serve as providers in parts of the state.⁹ Many local school districts also cooperate to develop regional adult education consortia that pool resources and serve broader swaths of the state.¹⁰

Between state and local sources, Connecticut reports a relatively large amount of funding in its adult education system compared to other states, valued at approximately \$40 million each program year between 2018 and 2022.¹¹ These resources are used for English instruction, citizenship courses, or courses to help participants earn a high school diploma or equivalent.¹² Federal adult education funding (provided under Title II of the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*, WIOA) is generally used by the state as a separate grant program to promote program enhancement activities and to deliver Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) programs, a combined English acquisition and workforce development program intended specifically for adult English Learners.¹³

8 Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), "[Adult Education Instructional Programs](#)," accessed May 22, 2025.

9 CSDE Bureau of Health/Nutrition, Family Services, and Adult Education, "[Adult Education Program Directory 2024-2025](#)," accessed May 22, 2025.

10 Author interview with Connecticut adult education provider, July 29, 2024.

11 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of 2018–22 data from National Reporting System for Adult Education, "[Table FFR 2: Federal Financial Report - Final](#)," accessed July 11, 2024. About half of this funding is provided directly by the state through a state adult education grant, while the other half is made up of local funding. For more details, see 2022 data from National Reporting System for Adult Education, "[Table FFR 4: Recipient Share Detail - Final](#)," accessed August 5, 2025.

12 Author interview with adult education advocate, August 5, 2024; CSDE, "[Adult Education Instructional Programs](#)."

13 Author interview with Connecticut adult education provider, July 29, 2024; CSDE, "[Program Enhancement Project \(PEP\) for Adult Education](#)" (Hartford: CSDE, 2023); CSDE, "[Program Enhancement Projects for Adult Education, RFP 817 - FY2024-2025](#)" (presentation for Bidders' Conference, February 2024); Jacob Hofstetter and Alexis Cherewka, *The IELCE Program: Understanding Its Design and Challenges in Meeting Immigrant Learners' Needs* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2022).

In the program year spanning 2023–24, the Department of Education reported serving 18,766 students, of whom 12,310 (66 percent) participated in ESOL programs and 283 (2 percent) participated in citizenship programs.¹⁴ In the same program year, the state’s IELCE programs served 497 participants.¹⁵ These data points indicate that a majority of participants in the state’s adult education programs are immigrants seeking to advance their English proficiency and integration. While these investments by the state are notable, they meet only 7 percent of the need for adult English instruction among the 285,000 adults in the state who have limited English proficiency.¹⁶

While these investments by the state are notable, they meet only 7 percent of the need for adult English instruction among the 285,000 adults in the state who have limited English proficiency.

Connecticut’s public workforce development system is administered by the state’s Department of Labor.¹⁷ As mandated by federal law under Title I of WIOA, the state is divided into several local areas, each of which is governed by a local workforce development board that is responsible for overseeing the delivery of workforce development services and that is made up of key stakeholders such as employers and workforce training providers.¹⁸ As required by WIOA, each local area also includes at least one American Job Center, a centralized one-stop center where adults and youth can access or connect to a range of services for job seekers such as workforce preparation (career guidance and navigation, development of soft skills) and training for specific sectors or careers (including on-the-job training, apprenticeship programs, skills development programs). These services are delivered by a range of providers, including employers, technical schools, community colleges, American Job Centers themselves, community-based organizations, and other entities, with informational and job-search support comprising many of the services reported, and more intensive activities such as job training or apprenticeship programs generally serving fewer people due to their length, cost, and prerequisites. For example, in the program year spanning 2023–24, Connecticut served 2,634 adults through its WIOA Title I Adult program, which provides workforce preparation activities, skills training, and supportive services to eligible adults; 991 of these adults received training services.¹⁹ It is not possible to determine the immigrant share of those served via the state’s larger public workforce system or its adult program. While the state did report that 1,028 participants in its WIOA Adult program were in the broader category of “English Language Learners, Low Levels of Literacy, Cultural Barriers,”²⁰ English Learners can be native-born speakers of languages other than English (e.g., Spanish speakers from Puerto Rico) and “low levels of literacy” encompasses anyone served who lacked a high school diploma or equivalent, greatly reducing the figure’s value as a measure of nativity.

14 Connecticut State Department of Education, “[Statewide Profile Report for 2024](#)” (fact sheet, August 2024).

15 National Reporting System for Adult Education, “[Table 3: Participants by Program Type and Age](#),” accessed August 5, 2024.

16 MPI analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), pooled for 2019–23.

17 Although connected, this system is separate from postsecondary institutions such as community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities.

18 Connecticut Department of Labor, “[Workforce Development Boards](#),” updated May 2, 2023.

19 U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, “[Performance Data](#),” accessed August 4, 2025.

20 U.S. Department of Labor, “[Statewide Performance Report—Connecticut](#)” (WIOA Title I Adult Performance Report, Program Year 2023–2024).

Among Connecticut’s immigrants, there is a significant need for the services delivered by these adult skills programs. Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey indicates that many immigrants in Connecticut have foundational skills needs that will likely continue to hinder their economic mobility and affect their integration trajectories. As of 2019–23, the highest level of formal education for 18 percent of immigrants age 25 or older in Connecticut was less than a high school diploma or equivalent, compared to 6 percent of U.S.-born residents.²¹ A small but notable slice of foreign-born residents of the state had particularly low levels of formal education: 6 percent had less than a 5th grade level of schooling and 11 percent had less than a 9th grade level.

These education shortfalls were even greater for some groups of immigrants. Among foreign-born Latinos in the state, 30 percent had less than a high school diploma or equivalent and 20 percent had less than a 9th grade level of formal education.²² Similarly, 31 percent of low-income immigrant adults had less than a high school diploma or equivalent. Among all immigrants (age 5 and older), 38 percent had limited proficiency in English, meaning they reported speaking English less than “very well” in the American Community Survey (either “well,” “not well,” or “not at all”).

These skills gaps likely shape the types of jobs immigrants in Connecticut hold, as is explored further in Section 4 and Appendix A of this report. About half (47 percent) of immigrants age 16 and older were employed in low-skilled jobs as of 2019–23, compared to slightly more than one-third of U.S.-born adults (36 percent).²³ Among Latino immigrants, 66 percent were employed in such positions.²⁴

A. *Key Challenges in the Connecticut Adult Skills System*

Although seemingly well-positioned to address skill and educational barriers faced by the state’s immigrant residents, several key challenges hamper the Connecticut adult skills system’s ability to fully and adequately address these needs:

- ▶ **Connecticut’s adult education system has limited capacity to meet the English acquisition, literacy, and workforce preparation needs of the state’s immigrant population.** Adult education providers interviewed for this project all reported long waitlists for English acquisition courses, and most programs relied primarily on part-time instructors. Other programs operating outside of the formal adult education system (i.e., not as part of the K-12 system) relied extensively on volunteers to provide services. These programs, often managed by libraries or community organizations, also appeared to be serving a greater share of immigrants facing severe foundational skill barriers such as very limited English proficiency or low levels of formal education, illustrating a critical gap between

21 MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data

22 MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data. Latinos of any race are included in this “Latino” category.

23 MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data. The MPI methodology for job skill classification draws on the U.S. Department of Labor’s online database of occupational profiles, O*NET, which classifies occupations by educational requirements, among other criteria, segmenting them into “job zones.” Based on this categorization, MPI assigns jobs to three skill levels: High-skilled jobs require at least a bachelor’s degree, such as medical doctors and scientists (job zones 4 and 5). Middle-skilled jobs require some postsecondary education or training (i.e., an associate degree or long-term on-the-job training or vocational training); these include registered nurses, electricians, and teacher assistants (job zone 3). Low-skilled jobs require a high school degree or less, and little to moderate on-the-job training, such as home health aides, construction laborers, and drivers (job zones 1 and 2).

24 MPI analysis of pooled 2019–23 ACS data.

the state's adult skills programs and those most in need of services. In the formal system, adult education programs were also sometimes constrained by being administered through K-12 schools, whose primary focus was supporting the success of school-age children rather than adults.²⁵

- ▶ **The state's public workforce development and adult education systems face barriers to addressing skills issues affecting immigrant adults.** Despite having ample job openings and many immigrants interested in filling those positions, Connecticut's public workforce development system does not appear to be taking intentional or widespread steps to help immigrants address barriers to employment such as limited digital literacy or professional English skills. These challenges appear to be linked to barriers to serving those with limited levels of English proficiency in traditional workforce development programs, an issue that exists across the country.²⁶ Bridging such gaps could help immigrants fill critical workforce openings.
- ▶ **Connecticut has limited levels of integration between its adult education and public workforce development systems, limiting collaboration to address the economic success of immigrants in the state.** Adult education programs offer an entryway to immigrants seeking to build skills and increase their employability, while workforce development providers can offer connections to employers as well as opportunities for more formalized training for specific industries or positions. Yet interviews conducted for this project indicated that the potential synergy between these systems has not been fully realized across the state due to the limited capacity of the adult education system and the barriers workforce development providers face in serving immigrants.²⁷ A lack of state policymaker attention to the potential of these systems (and especially the adult education system) to accomplish these goals also appears to contribute to this challenge.
- ▶ **Policy and funding changes at the federal level threaten to disrupt which immigrants are eligible for adult skills programs and the reliability of federal support for existing programs.** In July 2025, the Trump administration released guidance extending across federal agencies, including the Departments of Labor and Education, laying out new immigration-status-related restrictions for accessing federal programs.²⁸ If fully implemented, these changes would restrict access to federally supported adult education programs to "qualified aliens" (as defined under federal law) and limit access to all WIOA Title I workforce programs solely to those with employment authorization (a requirement that has, for the most part, been in place for years).²⁹ These changes would particularly affect adult education programs, placing new restrictions on access to services such as English instruction, while also creating significant challenges for resource-constrained programs that will need to create systems to determine, verify, and report each students' immigration status. Beyond these restrictions, the Trump administration has proposed reducing the amount of federal funding for adult

25 Author interview with Connecticut adult education advocate, August 5, 2024.

26 Hofstetter and Cherewka, *The IELCE Program*.

27 Author interview with local workforce development provider, July 12, 2024; author interview with Connecticut adult education advocate, August 5, 2024; author interview with local adult education provider, July 29, 2024.

28 U.S. Department of Education, "Clarification of Federal Public Benefits under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act," *Federal Register* 90, no. 131 (2025): 30896; Memorandum from Lori Fraizer Bearden, Acting Assistant Secretary, Department of Labor, *Training and Employment Guidance Letter No. 10-23*, July 10, 2025.

29 U.S. Department of Education, "Clarification of Federal Public Benefits"; Michigan Office for New Americans, "How Do I Know If an Immigrant or Refugee Is Eligible for WIOA Title I Services?" (fact sheet, 2020).

education to zero in its budget proposal for fiscal year 2026.³⁰ Potential reductions in federal adult education funding for Connecticut would likely have the largest impact on the IELCE program, which provides workforce-focused integration support and is almost entirely supported by federal dollars.

Despite these new and existing challenges, Connecticut’s adult skills programs, particularly adult education programs, have a strong record of serving immigrants, supporting both their integration and workforce mobility. Challenges in the system appear to be linked more to structural and capacity issues rather than the quality of services being delivered by local providers. The impact of federal policy and funding changes on the state’s adult skills programs will depend on the manner in which many of these policies are implemented by the Trump administration as well as the level of support the state continues to provide to these systems.

B. Recommendations

These findings suggest that the state could leverage its adult education and workforce development systems to offer more effective support for integration and access to career pathways for immigrants in the following ways:

- ▶ **Expanding the capacity of adult education providers to address the unmet English learning needs of immigrant adults.** Despite English proficiency being a key driver of integration and economic mobility among immigrants, the adult education system in Connecticut clearly faces capacity constraints in serving adult English Learners. The state should seek to increase flexibility, technical assistance, and where possible, the resources provided to local service providers that are positioned to expand their capacity to offer English and digital literacy instruction to learners of all levels. Providing greater flexibility for programs to develop contextualized English and digital literacy programming as well as resources to hire more instructors would be particularly helpful in expanding program capacities to promote students’ integration and career success.
- ▶ **Encouraging greater inclusion of immigrants in the public workforce development system.** The state should seek to promote greater access to federal- and state-funded workforce programs for eligible immigrant and refugee adults. Through technical assistance efforts, programmatic requirements, and initiatives, the state could foster more consistent cooperation between adult education and workforce development providers in addressing the career and educational needs of local immigrant communities. In particular, both the Governor’s Workforce Council and the statewide Office of Workforce Strategy should consider how to build stronger alignment between the services adult skills programs offer, the characteristics of immigrant adults seeking employment, and the skills needs of employers seeking workers.
- ▶ **Linking K-12 system priorities with the unmet learning needs of parents.** Despite many adult education programs being delivered through school districts, there appear to be relatively few efforts to leverage adult learning programs to support the success of K-12 students. By developing parent-focused educational programs or seeking greater collaboration between adult education and K-12

³⁰ John Fensterwald, Diana Lambert, Emma Gallegos, and Zaidée Stavely, “Trump’s Budget Would Abolish Funding for English Learners, Adult Ed, Teacher Recruitment,” EdSource, May 6, 2025.

programs in school districts, local stakeholders could improve services' ability to meet the learning and integration needs of parents while also supporting the success of their children in K-12 schools.

- ▶ **Supporting adult skills systems and local providers in navigating federal policy and funding changes.** State officials should work with system stakeholders to explore several looming challenges: implementation of immigration-status-related restrictions on program services, ways the state might ensure that compliance with federal requirements does not result in new operating costs for local programs, and should federal program funds be reduced, how the state might reduce its federal funds match and create a separate funding stream for adult education that does not carry immigration-status-related restrictions. In addition, given that Congress and the Trump administration may seek to combine WIOA funding streams into a block grant, policymakers should engage with local adult skills providers to strategize around how the state could navigate such a change and how potential new flexibility in federal funds could be leveraged to better support communities of learners across the state. On a broader level, state policymakers and leaders should seek to cultivate greater nimbleness in Connecticut's adult skills systems by analyzing how current funding streams and the administration of programs can be reshaped to better navigate the present moment and empower providers to meet community needs, including the integration needs of immigrants.

In closing, several areas merit further research, given the central role adult skills programs play in supporting the integration trajectories of immigrants and their families as well as the major policy and funding changes on the horizon. These areas include efforts to map and draw lessons from the nature and extent of service coordination between local adult education and workforce development providers in the state, and specific service designs used for adults with basic education and skill needs, including those who are immigrants and refugees. This information would be extremely useful, given expected shifts in federal funding for adult skills programming and the possibility that the state's workforce development strategies may be rethought after the 2026 gubernatorial election is decided. State officials, system stakeholders, and others may also wish to explore more fully the impacts of Connecticut's approach of delivering most of its adult education programming through school districts, particularly how this strategy affects programs' leeway and capacity to equitably serve key segments of the adult learner population, including working adults. This information would be particularly useful because although it is evident more capacity is needed to serve adult English Learners, there does not appear to be wide agreement among system stakeholders on what strategies would be most effective in addressing unmet demands. Finally, understanding the extent to which school districts leverage or wish to better leverage adult education programs to address the learning needs of parents with children in their K-12 schools, particularly elementary schools, would be useful should the state find itself with more leeway to conduct programs that do not need to meet federal employment-focused performance indicators.

Several areas merit further research, given the central role adult skills programs play in supporting the integration trajectories of immigrants and their families as well as the major policy and funding changes on the horizon.