

International Diversity in the Washington Area

An influx of immigrants and refugees from around the world in the 1990s has given the greater Washington area a rich international diversity. General insights into the number and location of new residents from foreign countries can be obtained from public school enrollment reports because the Federal Bilingual Education Act requires that schools report the number of students enrolled each year who cannot participate in the regular curriculum because they have limited English proficiency (LEP)¹.

In the 1998 school year, over 41,000 students in the Washington area's public schools were reported to have limited English proficiency or about 6 percent of total student enrollment. Fairfax County had the greatest number of limited English students, with over 12,000, but Arlington County, with over 22 percent of its enrollment, had the highest percentage. On the low side, Calvert, Charles, Frederick, Loudoun, and Stafford counties reported one percent or less of their student en-

Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Enrollments Washington Area 1998				
	LEP Enrollment	Total Enrollment	Percent LEP	Languages Represented
District of Columbia	8,286	74,731	11.1%	109
Alexandria	1,395	10,868	12.8%	38
Arlington Co.	4,078	18,490	22.1%	61
Fairfax Co.	12,213	150,504	8.1%	58
Falls Church	116	1,451	8.0%	22
Loudoun Co.	250	26,091	1.0%	21
Pr. William Co.	1,942	59,687	3.3%	42
Stafford Co.	155	18,989	0.8%	25
Northern Virginia	20,149	286,080	7.0%	
Calvert Co.	19	14,931	0.1%	8
Charles Co.	96	22,263	0.4%	19
Frederick Co.	156	35,462	0.4%	21
Montgomery Co.	7,987	127,852	6.2%	120
Pr. George's Co.	4,745	127,399	3.7%	69
Suburban Maryland	13,003	327,907	4.0%	
Washington Area	41,438	688,718	6.0%	

¹Limited English proficient is the federal legal term for students who were not born in the U.S. or whose native language is not English and who cannot participate effectively in the regular curriculum because they have difficulty speaking, understanding, reading, and writing English.

rollments speaking limited English. Almost half of all limited English speaking students in the Washington area were enrolled in Northern Virginia, less than a third were in Suburban Maryland, and only one in five was in the District.

In contrast, the City of Baltimore had only 564 students with limited English proficiency in 1998 compared to 8,286 in the District. In fact, the entire Baltimore area had only 3,530 limited English speaking students in 1998 while the Maryland suburbs of the District had 13,003 such students. Moreover, according to 1998 reports, 75.2 percent of all limited English proficiency students in Virginia were enrolled in Northern Virginia.

Students who speak Spanish constitute almost 60 percent of the total limited English

speaking students in the Washington area, but there is a great diversity of other languages spoken. For example, 120 different languages were represented by students in Montgomery County and 109 languages in the District in 1998. There is also some sorting out of students from different countries among jurisdictions. In Fairfax County, less than half of the limited English speaking students speak Spanish, but over half of the greater Washington area's Korean speaking students and almost half of all Vietnamese speaking students are located in Fairfax County.

Over three years, from 1995 to 1998, there was a 12.6 percent or 4,643 increase in limited English proficiency students in the Washington area. The largest increase in limited English speaking students (1,514) and the largest percentage increase (47 percent) oc-

Top Ten Languages Spoken by Limited English Proficiency Students Washington Area 1998					
	Number of Students			Total	Percent of Area Total
	District of Columbia	Northern Virginia	Suburban Maryland		
Spanish	5,745	11,136	7,290	24,171	58.3%
Vietnamese	391	1,156	580	2,127	5.1%
Korean	25	1,102	486	1,613	3.9%
Chinese	120	494	475	1,089	2.6%
Urdu	20	976	79	1,075	2.6%
Arabic	96	689	131	916	2.2%
Farsi	18	746	107	871	2.1%
French	150	131	482	763	1.8%
Amharic	178	332	234	744	1.8%
Tagalog	90	172	170	432	1.0%
All Other	1,453	3,215	2,969	7,637	18.4%
Total	8,286	20,149	13,003	41,438	100.0%

curred in Prince George's County from 1995 to 1998. Despite this surge, Prince George's County still has a low percentage of total enrollment with limited English compared to Arlington, Fairfax, and Montgomery counties and the City of Alexandria.

The recent increase in enrollments, however, undoubtedly understates the actual influx of immigrants and refugees into the greater Washington jurisdictions between 1995-1998 because the number is a net enrollment change. The number of new limited English speaking students enrolled each year is offset by students who achieve English proficiency, graduate, or leave school. The enrollment reports also do not provide data on students who come from English speaking countries or those who have been here long enough to gain a proficiency in English.

Information about the backgrounds of limited English student families is not available, but it seems likely that many of them are from families of recent immigrants with relatively low incomes. To the extent the children reflect low income families, the 2000 Census will probably show an increased percentage of the Washington area's low-income population in the suburbs. This may account for the large and growing number of students in free and reduced-price school lunch programs in suburban school systems.

The immigrants have benefited the area's economy by increasing the labor and the consumer pool, especially in the suburbs. At the same time, however, the new residents challenge area businesses and governments to provide services that meet immigrant needs.

Source: Maryland and Virginia Departments of Education and the D.C. Office of Bilingual Education.

**Limited English Proficiency Enrollments
1995-1998 Percent Change**

