Scaling Career-Aligned English Instruction for Workforce Growth

A Framework for State and Local Leaders



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Introduction:
An Opportunity for State & Local Workforces.

Local economies thrive when employers can access a skilled, future-ready workforce—yet communities across the country continue to face persistent labor shortages, widening skills gaps, and underutilized talent pools.

Among those untapped workers are adults with limited English skills—a high-potential talent pool often overlooked by traditional workforce programs. Nearly 1 in 10 working-age adults in the U.S. is limited English proficient,[1] yet only 2% are currently served by federally funded adult English programs.[2] Millions of workers, many with professional experience or postsecondary credentials, are unemployed or underemployed as a result of access gaps.[3] This represents a significant lost opportunity for these workers as well as employers, industries, and local economies that need them.

English skills are workforce skills. Mobile-first programs that integrate contextualized, workforce-aligned English instruction and career and technical skill development—what we call "English upskilling"—help workers advance into high-demand roles while increasing overall workforce readiness. By treating language skills as a core part of broader upskilling initiatives, English upskilling can deliver measurable economic and social benefits for communities. When workers gain the language and technical skills to fully participate in the economy, employers gain talented workers, communities remain vibrant, and everyone benefits from a more resilient workforce.

This playbook guides state and local leaders through practical strategies to scale English upskilling programs statewide. It provides:

- **A roadmap for action:** Step-by-step guidance on pilots, legislation, funding, and implementation to build scalable, high-impact programs.
- **Case studies and examples:** Insights from successful programs in states and local communities including Colorado, Maine, Michigan, New York, North Dakota, and Utah, plus Ventura County, California.
- **Actionable tips:** Guidance for designing programs, building coalitions, engaging employers, tracking outcome, and more.

By following this approach, states, counties, and local governments can expand access, increase workforce readiness, and deliver measurable economic and social benefits.



The Opportunity:
Why English Upskilling Matters

Over the last five years, immigrant workers, many of whom speak languages other than English, accounted for 88% of U.S. labor-force expansion.[4] States that fail to unlock this talent risk leaving key industries—healthcare, manufacturing, hospitality, logistics, and IT—understaffed.

The economic stakes are high: Unemployment and underemployment among English learners translates into an estimated $40 billion in lost wages and more than $10 billion in foregone tax revenue annually.[5] When workers gain English skills, local communities benefit from stronger labor-force participation, higher earnings, and increased economic activity. In fact, every $1 invested in English upskilling programs generates a $6 return for local economies.[6]

A Solution for Workforce Growth

English upskilling equips workers with language, digital skills, and job skills, preparing them for high-demand careers. Many workforce training programs are delivered in flexible, mobile-first formats—including smartphones, tablets, WhatsApp, SMS, and low-bandwidth web platforms—making them easy to deploy at scale across states and communities and accessible even to hard-to-reach populations, rural workers, and shift-based employees. Technology-enabled English learning solutions also expand overall capacity beyond traditional brick-and-mortar language programs, reducing waitlists and supporting hybrid learning options.

Many programs include wraparound support, such as multilingual onboarding and personalized coaching, and can be implemented standalone or embedded within existing workforce, adult education, or employer programs.

Benefits Across the System

WORKERS
Grow Skills and Advance Careers

- **Gain access** to sector-based training, apprenticeships, and credential programs
- **Build** English, digital, and communication **skills**
- 94% of workers enrolled in English upskilling improved confidence; 79% **achieve a career goal**[7]

EMPLOYERS
Strengthen Teams and Productivity

- Expand access to skilled, **job-ready talent**
- **Improve** retention, workplace safety, and operational efficiency
- 93% of workers **save time at work**; 84% will stay with their company because English is a benefit[8]

COMMUNITIES
Drive Economic Growth and Impact

- Build stronger **local talent** pipelines
- **Increase earnings,** tax revenue, and consumer spending
- States see up to **6x ROI** on English upskilling investments[9]

English as a Foundational Workforce Skill

English proficiency is not just a language skill—it is also a foundational workforce skill that drives career mobility, **economic competitiveness**, and growth.[10] By integrating career-aligned English instruction into workforce development initiatives, state and local governments can unlock the potential of multilingual workers, strengthen employer pipelines, and support broad economic expansion.



Tips for scaling English upskilling

- Treat contextualized, career-aligned English instruction as a core workforce strategy.
- Build broad coalitions of employers, educators, and community organizations.
- Design worker-centered programs that maximize digital access.
- Connect with workers in rural, remote, and underserved communities.
- Track outcomes to demonstrate impact and secure ongoing support.
- Embed English instruction in policy and workforce frameworks for sustainability.



Program and Policy Blueprints

Across the country, state and local governments are demonstrating that high-impact English upskilling programs can be implemented and scaled without reinventing existing systems. **The most successful efforts are anchored by four common pillars:**

- **Early pilots** that build evidence and momentum
- **Policy frameworks** that define English as a workforce skill
- Braided **funding strategies**
- I**mplementation models** designed to reach workers at scale.

Together, these pillars provide a flexible roadmap that communities can adapt to their unique workforce needs, governance structures, and political contexts.

PILLAR 1:
Coordinate Strategic Pilots

Strategic pilot programs are one of the most effective ways to launch and refine English upskilling initiatives before scaling them across states, counties, or communities. Pilots allow states to test delivery models, target high-need populations and sectors, and generate early evidence that builds confidence among policymakers, employers, and system partners.

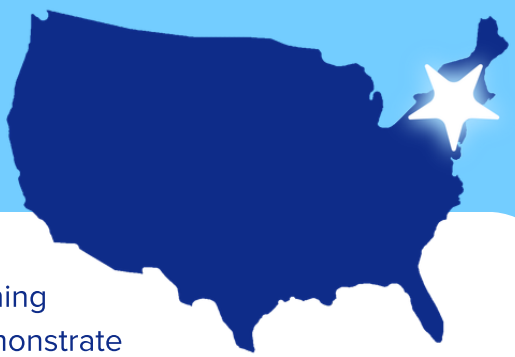
A well-designed pilot typically delivers career-aligned English instruction to a targeted group—such as workers in a high-demand industry, jobseekers served under the WIOA system,[11] or employees at a partner employer—and tracks outcomes tied to skill gains, credentials, employment, retention, and wages. These early results help state leaders refine approaches and lay the groundwork for broader adoption.



Tips for running a strategic pilot:

- **Identify high-need sectors and communities:** Use workforce and demographic data to target pilots where English upskilling can have the biggest impact, focusing on sectors with persistent labor shortages and populations with limited English skills.
- **Engage cross-sector partners early:** Involve employers, workforce boards, adult education providers, community and technical colleges, and community-based organizations from the start, and coordinate across agencies to build shared goals and strategies.
- **Set clear outcomes and metrics:** Decide which indicators —such as increases in skill gains, retention, or wages—you will track to measure success.
- **Start small and iterate:** Focus on a manageable cohort or region first, and use lessons learned to refine your approach before scaling.
- **Leverage pilots to plan for sustainability:** Use early successes to inform interagency coordination, long-term funding, and statewide rollout strategies.

SPOTLIGHT ON: New York



New York has been an early innovator in launching career-aligned English upskilling pilots that demonstrate the power of strategic partnerships. Employers such as Chobani and community institutions like the Queens Public Library have collaborated with English upskilling providers to offer online, contextualized instruction to frontline workers and job seekers alike.[12] These pilots improved on-the-job communication and worker retention, helping to build momentum for broader statewide investment.

Building on these early efforts, the New York State Office for New Americans now coordinates a portfolio of English upskilling and literacy learning initiatives in partnership with multiple providers, serving workers across industries and regions.[13] Programs emphasize accessibility, mobile-first delivery, and integration with other English language acquisition and workforce training services.

New York is also advancing sector-specific models through the Welcome Back Center at LaGuardia Community College, which supports internationally trained healthcare professionals in returning to clinical careers.[14] By blending industry training with contextualized English instruction, the program prepares participants for licensure and employment – an approach with strong potential for replication in other high-needed sectors.



"**New York City has an expressed need for bilingual and bi-cultural nurses,** so being able to provide English language coursework that is tailored to the healthcare field and the nursing board exams **has been critical** in supporting our students on their pathways towards re-credentialing,"

– John Hunt, LaGuardia's assistant dean for pre-college programs

SPOTLIGHT ON: North Dakota



The North Dakota Department of Commerce's Global Talent Office (GTO) has launched English upskilling pilot programs aligned with rural workforce needs and high-demand industries.[15] GTO secured 1,000 digital English learning accounts for employers and community organizations to access at no cost, expanding access for both incumbent workers and job seekers across the state.

These pilots respond to persistent local workforce gaps in industries such as energy, agriculture, and advanced manufacturing. Through initiatives like the "Find the Good Life" workforce attraction campaign – which has engaged more than 5,000 job seekers and welcomed new residents to 20 communities – North Dakota is pairing workforce recruitment with skill-building strategies that support retention and long-term growth.[16]



"By removing language barriers, we're **unlocking the potential of thousands of workers** and helping employers build stronger, more resilient teams. This initiative is about **equity, opportunity, and economic growth,"**

– Katie Ralston Howe,
Commerce Deputy Commissioner
and Workforce Director

PILLAR 2:
Position English in Workforce Legislation

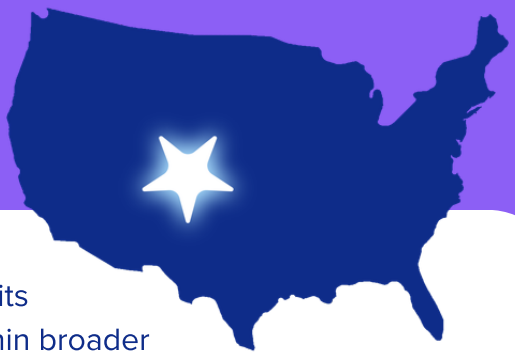
English upskilling programs achieve greater impact and scale when embedded into state and local workforce legislation. By recognizing spoken and written English skills—alongside foundational literacy and digital skills— as core workforce competencies, local governments can move programs from isolated pilots to at-scale initiatives, unlocking funding, aligning agencies, and signaling to employers that English upskilling is a priority investment.



Tips for positioning English upskilling in policy:

- **Define English as a workforce skill:** Establish English proficiency—alongside foundational literacy and digital skills—as a core component of sector-based pathways in industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, IT, and skilled trades. This integrated approach ensures English upskilling is systematically embedded in workforce programs and aligned with labor market demand, especially critical given that 92% of jobs require digital skills, yet just 1 in 3 workers, including 2 out of 3 adult English learners, lack these essential abilities.[17]
- **Coordinate across agencies:** Leverage legislation to ensure state and local labor, education, and immigrant integration offices work in a coordinated way to implement workforce English upskilling programs. Align program standards, establish shared data practices, and create mechanisms for ongoing collaboration so initiatives are consistent, efficient, and scalable across the state.
- **Plan for statewide reach:** Build legislative frameworks that allow pilots to scale across regions, sectors, and populations, moving programs from proof-of-concept to full implementation.
- **Secure sustainability:** Embedding English upskilling in state and local law demonstrates long-term commitment, making it easier to attract ongoing funding, private-sector partnerships, and broad stakeholder support.

SPOTLIGHT ON: Colorado



Colorado has integrated English upskilling into its workforce system by embedding programs within broader legislation rather than standalone bills.

In 2022, the state passed SB22-140, workforce legislation that expanded experiential work-based learning and intentionally included English instruction.[18] The legislation laid the foundation for the Virtual Career-Aligned English as a Second Language (VCESL) program, funded with federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars to deliver English upskilling at scale.[19]

VCESL launched in 2023 through the Colorado Office of New Americans, reaching 4,000 workers statewide.[20] Early data showed strong outcomes, supporting ongoing funding: 95% of participant improved their confidence using English at work; 90% improved their job skills; 86% achieved a career goal like a raise or promotion, and 88% improved their digital literacy skills.[21]

The program relaunched in 2025 under the Department of Labor and Employment, serving job seekers and incumbent workers through workforce centers across urban and rural communities.[22]

By codifying English upskilling in law, Colorado has ensured durable, sustainable support for workers in high-demand sectors such as healthcare.



"Many of our employees have **increased their English comprehension in a matter of months.** Communication has greatly improved across our organization"

– Alison Torres, HR business partner at Leiters Health, a Colorado-based employer that participated in the VCESL program to upskill their CNA workforce with healthcare-focused English and improved patient communication skills.

PILLAR 3:
Braid Multiple Funding Sources

Scaling English upskilling programs requires a strategic approach to funding. The current landscape is complex: Federal resources for adult education and workforce programs are increasingly limited, frozen, or subject to cuts, while state and local governments are setting their own priorities and eligibility rules. Programs cannot rely on a single source, so leaders combine federal, state, local, employer, and philanthropic resources to build flexible, sustainable initiatives. Coordinated funding expands access, reduces barriers, and supports long-term program growth.



Funding strategies to consider:

- **Tap federal resources:** Use WIOA Title II for adult education, OCTAE initiatives to improve adult learning, federal apprenticeship grants, and social service programs like SNAP and TANF. These programs can fund English upskilling while reducing employment barriers and preparing participants for work and career advancement.
- **Leverage state and local programs:** Draw on refugee resettlement programs, workforce development grants, health and social service initiatives, and postsecondary funding programs. .
- **Engage employers:** Encourage businesses to invest through tax credits, matching funds, or other incentives that combine public and private funding,making English learning accessible and integrated into standard workforce practices.
- **Partner with philanthropy and corporations:** Foundations, local philanthropic organizations, and corporate partners can provide seed funding or support program expansion, complementing public resources and helping scale English upskilling at the local or statewide level.

SPOTLIGHT ON: Michigan



Michigan has built a statewide English upskilling strategy powered by braided funding and strong cross-agency coordination.[23]

Through the Office of Global Michigan (OGM), the state combines federal refugee resettlement funds and workforce dollars to provide no-cost digital English learning accounts to adult education programs, enabling thousands of workers to access career-aligned English instruction.[24]

Simultaneously, the Michigan Global Talent Initiative (MGTI), led by Global Detroit, has leveraged dedicated state dollars to advance the state's "Sixty by 30" effort, ensuring that at least 60% of working-age adults earn a postsecondary credential by 2030.[25] MGTI provides 1,500-plus digital English learning accounts at no cost to employers, workforce boards, and community colleges, helping workers build language and job skills that support credential attainment.[26]

These coordinated investments are delivering measurable results: 100% of participants report improved English confidence, 95% report stronger job and digital skills, and 95% achieve a career goal such as a promotion or pay raise.

"Before I couldn't hear anything in English at all. Now I understand what my supervisor tells me—**my work is getting better because I understand the instructions.** Overall, it has truly changed my life."

– Food manufacturing worker



SPOTLIGHT ON: Utah



Utah uses a braided funding model to provide statewide job training paired with vocational English instruction tailored to high-demand sectors. The Utah Refugee Services Office (RSO) centralizes major funding streams—including TANF, WIOA, and federal refugee resettlement funds —within one department, enabling staff to assess eligibility across multiple programs and blend funds to meet individual needs.[27]

This coordinated approach expands access while aligning training with long-term employment and self-sufficiency goals. By approving programs that promote upward mobility, RSO maximizes limited resources and reduces administrative burden for providers. English upskilling is embedded throughout, strengthening literacy, workplace communication, and digital skills.

The Humanitarian Center and English Skills Learning Center exemplify this braided, coordinated model in action.

Launched in 2009, the Humanitarian Center is a partnership between local refugee service providers, the Utah Department of Workforce Services, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[28] The program delivers contextualized English and job training to 150 newly arrived refugees each year, focused on career pathways in health, transportation, and food service. In 2025, the English Skills Learning Center, in partnership with the Humanitarian Center, delivered over 1,900 hours of functional English instruction to more than 250 learners across six proficiency levels. Through a year-round cohort model, participants receive English instruction integrated with digital literacy, career exploration, soft-skills development and workplace readiness.



"English proficiency bridges the gap between displacement and success. When we combine language learning with technical training, we unlock the talent that **drives our communities forward and helps build long-term success, integration and self-sufficiency."**

– Mario Kljajo, Utah State Refugee Coordinator

PILLAR 4:
Implement for Scale and Impact

Beyond simply offering English programs, scaling English upskilling works best with a coordinated approach that ensures access, quality, and measurable workforce outcomes. State, county, and local governments face challenges like geographic spread, limited local capacity, and the need to align multiple agencies and funding streams. Integrating English into career pathways, apprenticeships, and employer programs, while connecting efforts to statewide workforce plans, helps expand reach, maintain quality, and deliver real benefits.



Implementation strategies to consider:

- **Use a hub-and-spoke model:** Let a state agency—such as a department focused on education, labor, immigrant integration , or a state workforce board —provide central management and oversight, while local partners like career centers, community colleges, libraries, or community-based organizations deliver the program directly to workers.
- **Provide clear guidance and support:** Government agencies can issue clear program guidance to system partners that prioritizes proven supports like multilingual coaching and technical assistance. Connect partners to funding, resources, and best practices to ensure consistent, high-quality delivery.
- **Embed English in career pathways:** Integrate English into apprenticeships, credential and certification programs, and upskilling opportunities to link learning directly to workforce advancement.
- **Offer flexible, low-barrier access:** Incorporate mobile-first instruction, SMS, WhatsApp, phone, or low-bandwidth platforms so all workers can participate, regardless of schedule, transportation, or broadband access. Hybrid, distance learning, and technology-enabled models can also boost instructor capacity and reduce waitlists in traditional brick-and-mortar classroom English learning programs.
- **Track outcomes for improvement and scale:** Monitor English proficiency, credentialing, career mobility, retention, and ROI to inform program adjustments and sustainability.

SPOTLIGHT ON:
Ventura County, CA



In Ventura County, California, farmworkers sustain a $2 billion agricultural industry yet face major barriers to accessing English instruction and workforce training: long work hours, rural isolation, limited transportation, inconsistent internet access, and varying literacy levels. To reach this population at scale, the Workforce Development Board of Ventura County implemented a hub-and-spoke model, working through a local career center to offer a literacy learning solution that traveled with the workers.[29]

This low-barrier, high-access approach replaced classroom-based instruction with mobile-first microlearning and individualized coaching. Farmworkers accessed three-minute lessons in English, literacy, digital skills, and workforce readiness via phone call, text, WhatsApp, and web—no Wi-Fi, smartphone, or email required. Coaches provided culturally and linguistically responsive support, while the career center delivered trusted outreach and the Workforce Board ensured workforce alignment.

The model enrolled 164 farmworkers, achieving a 90% retention rate and 75% completion rate, far exceeding traditional benchmarks. Seventy percent gained new technology skills, with measurable learning gains and positive employment outcomes. This replicable partnership demonstrates how flexible, worker-centered design can dramatically increase participation and impact across rural and underserved communities.



SPOTLIGHT ON: Maine



Maine delivers high-impact English upskilling through coordinated efforts across state agencies, business groups, and the nonprofit sector, expanding access and strengthening workforce pipelines.[30]

The Maine Department of Education purchases English upskilling licenses in bulk and provides them at no cost to adult education providers statewide, increasing capacity for contextualized, workforce-focused English instruction.

Programs like Lewiston Adult Education then use these licenses to power an innovative pre-apprenticeship pathway for English learners pursuing Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) roles.[31] Developed in partnership with the Maine Department of Labor and the Maine Apprenticeship Program, the program combines English upskilling, digital literacy, workforce readiness, and industry certifications, delivering strong outcomes: 90% of participants improved their confidence using English, 85% improved their job skills, and 84% found employment as CNAs.

> "Having multilingual CNAs has been **a game-changer** for our organization,"
>
> – Monique Roy, an HR administrator with Central Maine Healthcare

Building on this success, the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, in collaboration with the New Mainers Resource Center and the Office of New Americans, launched an initiative offering no-cost English upskilling licenses directly to employers, helping small and mid-sized businesses strengthen hiring pipelines and retention.[32]





A High-Impact Workforce Strategy

Career-aligned English instruction is a cost-effective, scalable, and high-impact workforce strategy. It addresses employers' most pressing challenges to fill in-demand jobs by unlocking the potential of thousands of workers ready to contribute more fully to local economies.

Communities that embrace English upskilling see stronger talent pipelines, higher worker earnings, and measurable returns on investment. Workers with career-aligned English skills can more fully contribute to their communities, achieve economic success, and drive shared prosperity. Fully staffed workforces lead to real-world benefits: shorter healthcare waiting times, more resilient logistics and supply chains, improved customer service, and stronger local businesses.

The models exist, the need is clear, and the timing is right. By following the pillars in this playbook, states, counties, and local governments can build a workforce for the next decade of growth. More than language instruction, English upskilling is a workforce imperative, an economic catalyst, and a driver of inclusive growth.

To learn more about English upskilling approaches and resources for state and local workforce initiatives, visit EnGen's resource page: getengen.com/workforce

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- Maine State Chamber of Commerce
- Michigan Global Talent Initiative (MGTI)
- New Mainers Resource Center
- New York State Office for New Americans
- North Dakota Department of Commerce's Global Talent Office
- Office of Global Michigan
- Queens Public Library
- Utah Humanitarian Center
- Utah Refugee Services Office)
- Welcome Back Center at LaGuardia Community College
- Workforce Development Board of Ventura County

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ENGEN

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