

Rep. Honda Introduces Legislation to Assist Immigrant Families

Written by Mike Honda
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Sen. Clinton hailed the “The Strengthening Communities through Education and Integration Act of 2008” as an important step toward helping bridge the gaps between coming to America and becoming part of the fabric of America. She noted that despite working hard and playing by the rules, many new Americans face significant obstacles to achieving success for themselves and their families, especially lack of English language skills.

“We all share a belief in stronger communities that make America more competitive in the world,” Senator Clinton said. “By investing in English language education, community support, and other important tools, this legislation will help new Americans become part of the American family.”

Honda and Clinton were joined by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX), and Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), and Henry Cuellar (D-TX) as the bill’s original co-sponsors. Honda said the importance of this bill is underscored by its bipartisan nature.

“As a country of immigrants we have always depended upon newcomers to fuel our progress,” said Honda. “Legislation that provides them educational tools is logical and good for our country. Instead of turning our backs on immigrants, we should open our arms and embrace them. Their success is America’s success, and we should invest in it through sound education policies such as this.”

The bill is divided into three components that support English literacy education; encourage businesses to support English literacy and other education; and empower local communities to design strategies that fit their individual realities. It will:

- Increase funding for the Department of Education’s successful Even Start Family Literacy Program and offers tax credits to English Language Learners to encourage focus on this important area. It also creates grants for English literacy and civics education programs and supports research on adult learning and literacy.
- Offer tax credits to employers who provide their workers with English literacy and GED training. Businesses can receive credits for 20 percent of the cost of the program, or up to \$1,000 per employee.
- Authorize grants for the formation of State New American Integration Councils consisting of leaders from the business, non-profit, religious, civic and philanthropic communities. These councils will be charged with developing and implementing comprehensive integration plans for immigrants in their local areas.

Sam Jammal, counsel and spokesman for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) said the integration process is often not a question of motivation, but opportunity. Jammal said this legislation recognizes English language acquisition as an education issue, not just an immigration topic.

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The number of English language learners in America's public school system – most of whom are native-born U.S. citizens – has nearly doubled in the last 15 years, and is expected to reach 25 percent of the public school population by 2025. Also, new immigrants represented at least two-thirds of the growth in the U.S. civilian labor force in the last three years, and experts project that between 2010 and 2030, immigrants will account for all of the growth in the domestic labor market.

“The immigrant community has always recognized that realizing their full economic and social potential of America requires English fluency in English, and today they are acquiring English faster than ever,” Jammal said. “We are encouraged that members of Congress are taking steps to help provide that opportunity.”

Karen K. Narasaki, from the Asian American Justice Center, said for the Asian American community, which has a high percentage of English learners, the benefits of this bill will be immense.

“More than a third of our population is limited in English proficient and a majority are foreign-born,” said Narasaki, president and executive director of AAJC. “Today, many Asian Americans are motivated to learn English because they want to gain their citizenship. They know that access to English language programs leads to increased self-sufficiency and better lives for their children.”

The legislation is supported by dozens of organizations, including MALDEF; the AAJC; the American Jewish Committee; the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; the Council of the Americas; and Immigration Works USA.

For a complete list of sponsors and supporters, please go to <http://honda.house.gov/legislation/2008/integration>