

<https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/udocumented-esl-student-courses-texas-waco-church-programs-english-second-language>

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By Sarah Asch September 29, 2025 10:15

(format slightly adapted. Permission to post granted by Laura Rice, Managing Producer [Texas Standard](#))

Love your neighbor as yourself': Texas churches expand English programs for immigrant students

Churches are seeing increased enrollment after a federal policy went into effect limiting which students government-funded programs can serve.



Lorianne Willett / Texas Standard

Mahyar Hosseini, a student from Iran, sits in an ESL course at Columbus Avenue Baptist Church in Waco on Sept. 18, 2025.

On a Thursday morning, dozens of people gathered in Columbus Avenue Baptist Church in Waco. They were not there to worship, but to learn English.

Mahyar Hosseini is an engineer from Iran, and on that particular day, he learned the difference between the words “wonder” and “wander.” He’s in the U.S. while his wife works toward her Ph.D. in chemistry at Baylor University.

“It’s a good opportunity,” he said. “Especially when you come to the U.S., you don’t know how to speak English.”

He heard about the church program from a friend.

(photo deleted for space)

“I joined her and after that I’m bringing a lot of people after me,” he said.

Hosseini and his family are Muslim, but he said that doesn't matter. The church program is open to everyone who wants to learn.

Several church officials told the Texas Standard that they have been providing English programs for decades.

But after [new restrictions limited the students that federally funded programs could serve](#) based on immigration status, they've been expanding to help people who used to get this instruction elsewhere.

Paula Marshall is the director of the ESL program at the Columbus Avenue Baptist Church.

"The doors blew off on the first day," she said. "And we do understand that it's because we have two other programs in town that can no longer accept undocumented people."

Marshall said enrollment was at 105 people in early September, compared to 84 at the beginning of last school year.

In contrast, McLennan Community College across town saw their ESL enrollment drop from 181 last fall to 40 this year.



Lorianne Willett / Texas Standard

Kathy Dillow teaches Adult ESL students in the Advanced Lit and Comp class at Columbus Avenue Baptist Church in Waco on Sept. 18, 2025.

Margarita Machado-Casas is the president of the [National Association of Bilingual Education](#). She said federally funded programs have seen a drop in enrollment across the country — and part of the reason might be fear of scrutiny over immigration status.

"Even people who are eligible may not choose to enroll out of fear that their family members could be exposed to immigration enforcement," she said. "(Or) out of protection to their own community members, which is what we're hearing."

It's unclear how many churches provide ESL programs in Texas. But Matthew Johnston said attendance is up across the state. Johnston is the executive director of [Literacy ConneXus](#), a nonprofit that helps churches with literacy programs.

"I spoke with a ministry partner from a church up in Plano," he said. "And they have doubled their enrollment over what they had expected."

Literacy ConneXus has tripled the number of teacher trainings they've led since mid-July, when the new Trump administration policy was announced.

Jim Witt, an associate pastor at the First Baptist Church in Garland, a suburb of Dallas, said his church has also seen increased enrollment in ESL classes.

Witt said although many churches are in traditionally conservative places, which are the support base for Trump's immigration policies, that doesn't influence his ministry work.

"Part of following Jesus is trying to demonstrate his love to people," he said. "And one of the ways we demonstrate that love is by ministries like ESL."

Paula Marshall in Waco said her focus is making sure people know the church is a safe place to learn.

"We have reminded all of our volunteers and our security people that man the doors that the law has been that we are private property," she said. "We don't need to allow anybody on campus unless they have a warrant signed by a judge."



Lorianne Willett / Texas Standard

Phyllis Merritt leads a worship period ahead of ESL courses at Columbus Avenue Baptist Church in Waco. The lesson of the day was about Genesis 1:1, and students read aloud parts of the scripture.

At Waco's Columbus Avenue Baptist Church, Phyllis Merritt said they have ESL students from 17 countries this year.

"I enjoy meeting people from all over the world. I enjoy what they have taught me," she said. "To me, it is my calling. God said 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

For students, this program offers community and a place to learn. And Marshall said they plan to keep doing so, as long as students are showing up.

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