ABOUT BUILDING SKILLS PARTNERSHIP

A SHARED VISION FOR IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION THROUGH WORKPLACE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

ADVANCE VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM EVALUATION

BSP was founded with the vision of creating an equitable playing field for California’s working families to succeed in their careers and educational endeavors.

Building Skills Partnership (BSP) was born out of the Justice for Janitors movement that helped hundreds of immigrant janitors achieve a more just way of living and working. BSP partnered with responsible businesses and employers to pilot its first workplace training which focused on Vocational English language acquisition. These efforts evolved to officially incorporating as a nonprofit 501 (c)(3) in 2007. Since then, BSP has expanded to seven major cities across California and broadened its programming to fully address the unique barriers immigrant janitors and their children face in realizing the benefits of social, civic, and economic integration. Today, BSP represents a unique partnership between over 75 janitorial employers, over 40 commercial building owners, the Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA-GLA), the Service Employees International Union–United Service Workers West (SEIU-USWW), and the broader community. With collaboration and a comprehensive approach to programming, BSP continues to strive to create an equitable future for working families to build a better life.

Our Mission

Building Skills Partnership (BSP) is a statewide nonprofit whose mission is to improve the quality of life for low-wage property service workers and their families by increasing their skills, access to education, and opportunities for career and community advancement.
ABOUT THIS REPORT

This evaluation was funded by the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. It offers analysis of quantitative and qualitative data created in the process of an independent evaluation of the Building Service Partnership’s Advance Vocational ESL Program. The ADVANCE program is an intensive vocational ESL and job skills program that meets the needs of the industry for a skillful workforce as well as for individual’s needs for basic English applied to their professional goals. The Program offers vocational English language skills training to janitorial workers throughout the state of California, funded by SEIU employer contributions and by public and private grants.
KEY FINDINGS

Close to 400 janitors and other immigrant workers graduate each year from Building Skills Partnership’s (BSP) intensive, six-month ADVANCE program, blending a Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL) curriculum with job skills instruction. BSP has developed a consistent and holistic vision for improving a worker’s quality of life through its unique model of workplace English language training. Therefore, the criteria for measuring success can be summarized by the degree to which the quantitative and qualitative data meet three convergent spheres of individual growth for BSP’s participants: CAREER SUCCESS, COMMUNITY INTEGRATION and gains in INDIVIDUAL CONFIDENCE.

Career

Workers seeking a more regular work schedule, better working conditions and more engagement with a community of coworkers are often interested in leaving the night shift for the day shift. English language training through the ADVANCE program provides instruction tailored to match the everyday needs of the workplace, offering workers the ability to achieve the change in shift and more.

- As of late 2017, 35% of participants in the ADVANCE program who responded to the participant survey reported that they have made the shift from the night shift to the day shift.

Community

Beyond achieving career gains, the ADVANCE program provides the necessary English skills for janitors to engage in the activities of the workplace that spawn meaningful interactions and enduring relationships. Below is a chart describing the percentage of workers who achieved improved communication with clients at their worksite before and after participating in the ADVANCE program.

Confidence

In order to effectively integrate into their communities, workers need to both develop language skills and greater confidence. The ADVANCE program provides the space, time, and opportunity to develop a sense of certainty that they can communicate effectively in a different language.
Despite the variety of potential avenues for growth, the frequency and availability of advancement opportunities is limited by the very structure of the janitorial industry. Janitors’ workplaces are fragmented into multiple companies working side-by-side in the same building, but with invisible walls between companies that limit mobility.

Despite their structural challenges, workers agree that learning English is often the first step to achieve greater career success. Workers define career success as the ability to achieve the following:

- Transition from a night shift to a day shift position.
- Become a “lead,” a role with generic supervisory responsibilities over a small team of janitors, serving as an intermediary between the janitorial staff and their formal supervisors and managers.
- Transition into a lateral role within the property service worker industry, as a security professional, or utility worker.

Of those who responded to our survey, 22% (q11b) of ADVANCE program participants reported earning a promotion in the last two years. Six of these respondents are now day porters, and one is now a utility worker (tab q16 q11b). Within limits, janitors are are routinely reaching their defined goals of career success with the and the ADVANCE program training appears to be helping them achieve it.

“English is a sign of progression and opportunities, [and also] people working in the day may get paid a little more. Without that English, it’s very hard to promote them further on.”

- [Employer 180126_002 – 11:46]
To engage in the activities and life of the workplace, janitors need English skills. When janitorial employers invest in increasing the English levels of their workers, employees can effectively integrate into workplaces in an additive way. For most clients and employers, this means employees need the combination of basic English proficiency and customer service skills. Janitors themselves acknowledge that without an ability to both understand and respond using English, they have developed coping strategies for maintaining distance and of disengaging from the clients.

ADVANCE program instructors take the time to teach participants how to engage positively with clients. Janitors need basic English for common workplace interactions such as “giving directions, asking a favor, requesting supplies, introducing yourself.”

There are also more critical scenarios where the safety and wellbeing of janitors and their clients sometimes could be threatened if the janitors are unable to communicate those concerns effectively.

This makes it clear that English language skills are necessary for instrumental reasons – in situations of immediate urgency. For basic job security, Janitors need to be able to meet the reporting expectations in situations of crises that would be expected of all members of the workplace community. Employers see value in workers creating more community and better communication between his employees. He attributes these positive changes to their involvement in BSP’s ADVANCE program.

For the contractors, there is a very practical need for those communication skills and for the people whose offices our workers clean – the communication skills benefit everyone involved. It really makes the janitors, who are otherwise like ghosts in the building a much more interactive part of the community.
The ADVANCE program provides English language learners more than instruction in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation to become proficient communicators in English; it helps students develop a sense of certainty in their ability to communicate effectively in a different language.

ADVANCE instructors recognize that building confidence is key to language learning and that it is a gradual process that cannot be forced. Courses begin with instructor assessments of student language proficiency and confidence levels.

[At graduation] I can see the dynamics. I can see the student standing up, look at the instructor, feeling the confidence and the support that - it's okay, it's a safe environment, you're not going to be put in a bad situation where people are going to throw tomatoes at you, just because you mispronounced a word. I can see how that is very positive.

[Employer 180112_001 – 33:25].

Students are afforded the space and time to experience and acclimate to the language in a gradual manner, ranging from a silent period to interaction with monolingual English-speaking volunteers. Instructor teaching is designed to promote a dignified learning environment for adult learners. Many workers experience learners through tactics like negotiating over anxiety over formal language instruction. ADVANCE instructors engage workers as adult adult learners through tactics like negotiating over the content of instruction.

Part of ESL is called the silent period, where a person, when they're first being thrown into a language, they need time to just observe it. And not be pushed to speak it. So, I respected the silent period. They were lower level students. Slowly they started participating with a partner, then larger group, now they participate with me or the whole class.

- [Instructor 171118_002 – 32:42]
Recommendations

What started as a pilot program in 2010 has now grown into a statewide nonprofit organization recognized as an unparalleled immigrant integration model, nationally. As BSP continues to grow, it recognizes that its effectiveness can be increased through an effort to more systematically collect and use data generated to make decisions about how to enhance its programs and impact. Evaluation results suggest the following strategies will improve the ADVANCE program’s effectiveness and better demonstrate its impact:

1. **Implement Formative Assessments**

   BSP has struggled to find ‘off-the-shelf’ data measurement tools that fit the needs of their unique curriculum and student population. The formative assessment process occurs throughout a course term, captures data snapshots quickly, and pegs progress measures to key goals for student performance along the way. Using a performance assessment of language skills based on the instructional unit objectives, will provide instructors and staff in student progress toward meeting curriculum standards.

2. **Expand efforts to incorporate digital literacy**

   BSP will deepen and expand digital literacy instruction to match changing industry workplace demands for janitors. While updating the curriculum to include new technological lesson plans will work for some, instructors will need to teach students at all learning levels. Professional development opportunities will help address these instructors challenges.

3. **Systematically retain and refer students who have achieved a certain level of English**

   A number of students who were able to participate in Advance training may not continue training elsewhere after they have mastered the Advance curriculum. BSP is considering tools to adopt a case management approach and a systematic process of referrals to other English language learning opportunities.