

CIELO Project/Radio Ranch
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English as a Second Language Program (ESL)

History and Description

The CIELO Project is the Olympia Latino Center for Integral Education. CIELO's mission is to be a force for justice in the Latino Community. One of CIELO's most successful programs is the ESL program. CIELO's ESL program provides free classes to English language learners in the Thurston County. Our philosophy is to provide meaningful, relevant and student-centered English language learning. We employ popular education, anti-oppression curriculum and participatory practices to use English language learning as a tool to build access, ignite empowerment and create community.

The ESL Program began in 1999 when a small group of Evergreen students saw a need in Olympia for free English language classes for the Spanish speaking community. In the spring of '99 the first session was held at the United Churches downtown. The following summer the project moved to CIELO's Radio Ranch. In 2001 CIELO's ESL program partnered with the Thurston County Literacy Network (TLN) to receive our first funding – the EL Civics grant- The EL Civics grant is a federal grant for ESL classes that focus on working with students to build access and participation in local community and larger society. This partnership was created with the stated goal to move CIELO to more financial self-sufficiency. Successfully, in 2004 CIELO became an autonomous recipient of the EL Civics grant. Our grant provides funding for three part time staff: one Program Coordinator, one Curriculum Coordinator and one Child Care Provider. As of July 2009, CIELO's ESL program lost it's EL/Civics grant, yet with the support and action of grass-roots fund-raising, we continue to provide ESL instruction at no cost to immigrant adult learners.

The program is driven by students, powered by volunteer teachers and supported by our three staff members. Classes are held on Tuesday and Thursday nights from 6:30 pm to 8.30 p.m. Free childcare is provided to increase accessibility to parents. Classes run in four sessions around the year. We serve around 200 students per year, with an average of over 70 students attending at least one class per quarter. We have between 25 and 30 students a night. Students come from many different countries in Latin America, with most coming from Mexico. We also have students from other places like Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, China, and West Africa. In addition, for the winter, 2008 quarter, we initiated a pilot ESL class off site, at a local Latino grocery store on the Westside of Olympia and in fall, of 09, at Evergreen Vista Apartments. To create curriculum we use student-centered themes. The curriculum also includes guest presentations by service providers to share information about resources available to students. We have partnered with the United Communities AIDS Network to provide workshops on HIV/AIDS and sexual health, as well as with the Northwest Immigrants Rights Project to deliver workshops on immigrants' rights.

Students travel from surrounding areas to attend classes at CIELO because of our relaxed and accessible atmosphere. Students have said that they like coming to CIELO because they can communicate with staff in their native language, because they meet people who believe in them, connect with other students and because they can learn new skills in an inviting atmosphere. Students speak of CIELO as a second home and a lifeline that connects them to community, opportunity and hope.

Volunteers and interns make a six-month commitment and typically donate between 3 and 10 hours each week. The CIELO ESL program accumulated 2,066 hours of volunteer work in 08-09. Many volunteers stay with the program for several years. Teachers often speak of their work at CIELO as one of the best activities in their lives, and describe their time teaching as engaging, inspiring, challenging and fun.

Thank you for your interest in volunteering!