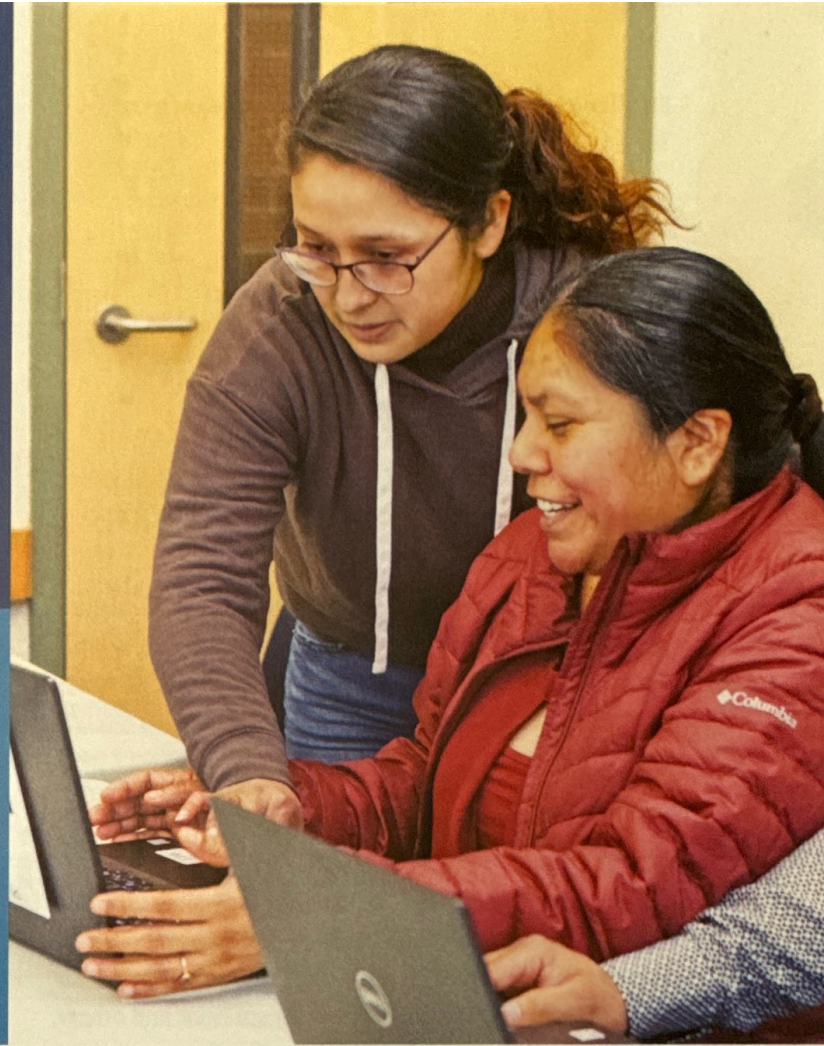


FALL 2025

The Next Chapter



An instructor and student work together at a digital skills class for Spanish speakers at the Delridge Branch. (Photo by Leo Carmona)

A commitment to expand access and empower immigrants and refugees

"There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration." – **ANDREW CARNEGIE**

Libraries are essential to an educated, democratic society. Andrew Carnegie recognized that fact in the early 20th century. He funded the establishment of thousands of public libraries around the country, including six in Seattle, to expand free access to knowledge.

Now, the Carnegie Corporation of New York has recognized the role of libraries in addressing a critical demand in 2025. This summer, Carnegie announced a major new grant to expand welcoming education programs for immigrants and refugees.

The Foundation is proud to be one of 11 recipients, part of Carnegie's "Libraries as Pillars of Education and Democracy"

initiative. The \$450,000 in funding will nearly double the number of English language learning programs at our library over the next two years.

"Carnegie's renewed investment in public libraries is very timely," said SPL Chief Librarian Tom Fay. "We can help respond to an urgent need for more programs that empower Seattle's immigrants and refugees to pursue their goals and fully participate in our city's economic and social life."

The grant will expand existing donor-supported programs. Classes will be more frequent and take place at more library locations. Programs include:

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- **English Conversation Circles** – drop-in programs for practicing conversational skills.
- **Leveled English Classes** – structured courses for learners at different skill levels.
- **Adult Education Tutoring** – personalized 1-on-1 instruction in ESOL and basic skills.
- **Digital Skills Classes** – advancing technological literacy in several languages.

The additional funding will make classes more accessible in other ways. Features will include laptops for digital skills learners, hybrid class formats, and free onsite childcare.

Improving access at this moment is vital, said Janet Arbogast, community programs manager at Literacy Source. The organization is a longtime library partner on English Conversation Circles and more.

“For adult learners, the biggest issue is ease of access, regardless of your level of English or your immigration status or anything else,” Arbogast said.

Unfortunately, barriers to access for language learners are on the rise. Demand for classes has increased as Seattle area’s foreign-born population continues to grow. But funding, whether for providers like Literacy Source, community colleges, and others, has not kept up. The result is long waiting lists for prospective learners. Other common barriers include cost, transportation, and discomfort or distrust.

The program expansion takes aim at each of these barriers. It will add more free classes, at more times and locations, at more levels of learning, and at trusted places where people feel safe.

English Conversation Circles are a perfect example, said Sarah Garcia, an instructor with the program. Instead of figuring out how to sign up for a limited spot in a costly course, people can stop by a library branch to practice their language skills. Conversation Circles are open to anyone, including people who may not qualify for other courses.

“It’s great for students to be able to drop in and have easy access to conversations that build comfort and confidence,” Garcia said. “Week by week you see the confidence, the vocabulary, and the friendships building.”

While at the classes, students get to know people from other countries of origin and learn about other library programs. “It’s a great way to link people to the community,” Garcia said.

The variety of library offerings is crucial, said Arbogast. Not every language learner is ready to hold a conversation in English with a stranger. Offering more formal classes at different levels, as well as individual tutoring options, will help meet more people’s needs.

In order to fulfill their mission as “cradles of democracy,” libraries must be able to provide free knowledge for everyone. The demand—and the barriers—for knowledge serving immigrants and refugees are high. But the commitment is stronger than ever. ■



A display at the South Park Branch captures the library's welcoming spirit (Photo by Will Livesley-O'Neill)