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Immigration Minister Jason Kenney and citizenship Judge Suzanne Pinel help young Alejandro Hicks cut a Canadian flag cake at an immigration ceremony in Ottawa last year. Kenney is calling for stronger language requirements for citizenship.

Minister seeks language requirement for citizens

Training a complex issue: critics

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CALGARY HERALD

Federal minister Jason Kenney says immigrants should be able to speak either English or French before seeking Canadian citizenship.

The immigration minister's calls for stricter language requirements come as the federal government is looking for ways to improve its programs.

"Someone who has been here 15 years and can't speak English or French is basically locking themselves out of the vast majority of jobs and is isolating themselves socially. That's a tragedy," Kenney said after speaking at an immigration conference in Calgary on Friday. "I think we should look at ways where we can increase the requirements for linguistic competencies for immigrants and citizens."

ing Canadian citizens who can't speak either French or English — despite rules in place requiring competence in either official language.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the premiers are working together on a framework that could create a "straightforward pathway" to foreign credential recognition, Kenney said.

The government is also shifting its focus away from promoting diversity to encouraging more integration of new Canadians.

"What we need is to be relaxed about our diversity, see it as a great strength, but also focus on the things that unite us as Canadians," Kenney said.

While many immigration groups are pleased work is being done to help foreign-trained workers have their credentials recognized, some expressed concern about Kenney's musing on additional language rules.

"I would like to know what he defines as a working knowledge of the language," said Isabel Gibbins, dean of English as a

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JASON KENNEY

"You can have a working knowledge that enables you to go shopping and talk to a doctor, but if you want to be an engineer or a doctor yourself you need to have a much higher level of language training," she said.

With countries competing for skilled workers, Gibbins fears imposing more language requirements on immigrants will make Canada a less attractive destination.

Calgary Immigrant Educational Society executive director Salim Sindhu said having some language requirements for professionals such as doctors, engineers or lawyers would be reasonable, given the nature of their work.

But placing those same language rules on family members

be unacceptable.

"My mother never went to school, but she is still my mother. If I want to sponsor her, I am the principal applicant so I should be the one to learn the language," said Sindhu, who moved here from Pakistan in 1974.

Kenney noted the government provides free language training to those who want it.

The cost of an English class isn't the only barrier many immigrants — especially women — face to language training, said New Democratic immigration critic Olivia Chow.

"A big part of it is, when they get into the country, we no longer provide language classes with child care and transportation and a bit of income support. Women are often stuck in the house. Someone has to take care of the kids," Chow said.

Any comprehensive language training program must provide other types of support such as income, child care or transportation to be effective, Chow said.