

Making English the Official Language

1. Read the articles about making English an official language.
2. Write down the pros and cons to the argument.
3. Be prepared to debate.

Should English be the Official Language?

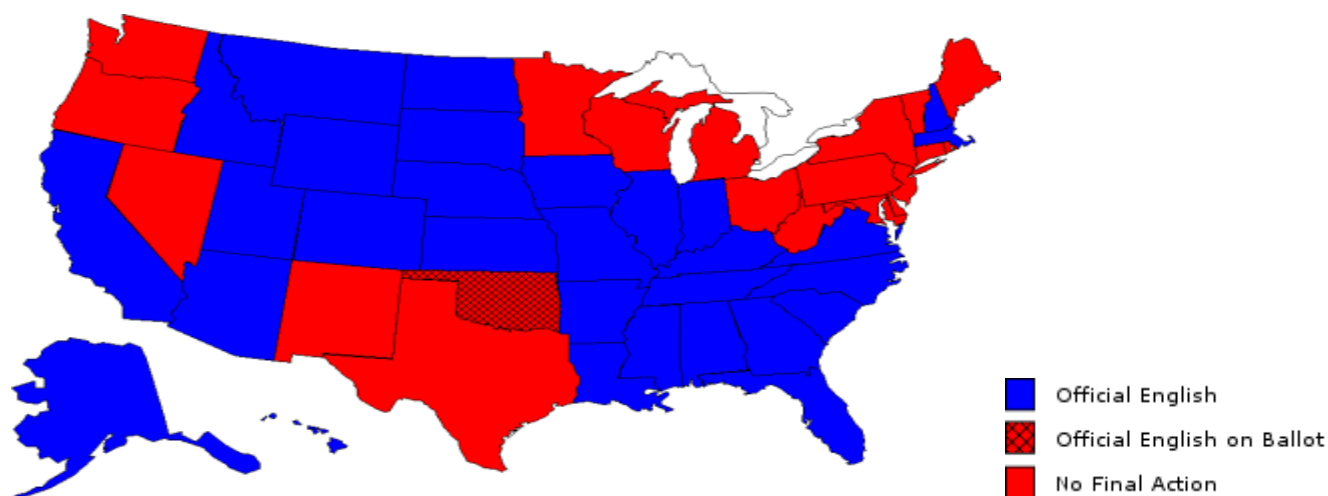
<http://www.us-english.org/view/298>

What is Official English?

Declaring English the official language means that official government business at all levels must be conducted solely in English. This includes all public documents, records, legislation and regulations, as well as hearings, official ceremonies and public meetings. Official English legislation contains common-sense exceptions permitting the use of languages other than English for such things as public health and safety services, judicial proceedings, foreign language instruction and the promotion of tourism. In 1996, U.S.ENGLISH was instrumental in passing H.R. 123, "The Bill Emerson English Language Empowerment Act of 1996." That bill, making English the official language of the U.S. government, passed in the House of Representatives with a bipartisan vote of 259-169. Unfortunately, the Senate did not act on the bill before the end of the session. Currently, U.S.ENGLISH is working with Rep. Steve King of Iowa to help pass an official English bill in the 110th Congress. H.R. 997 is pending in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Thirty states have some form of official English law. Most recently, Kansas and Idaho passed official English legislation in 2007. U.S.ENGLISH is currently working in several states to pass measures that will enact new official English bills or strengthen existing legislation.

States with Official English Laws



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| Alabama (1990) | Louisiana (1812) |
| Alaska (1998) | Massachusetts (1975) |
| Arizona (2006) | Mississippi (1987) |
| Arkansas (1987) | Missouri (1998 & 2008) |
| California (1986) | Montana (1995) |
| Colorado (1988) | Nebraska (1920) |
| Florida (1988) | New Hampshire (1995) |
| Georgia (1986 & 1996) | North Carolina (1987) |
| Hawaii (1978) | North Dakota (1987) |
| Idaho (2007) | South Carolina (1987) |
| Illinois (1969) | South Dakota (1995) |
| Indiana (1984) | Tennessee (1984) |
| Iowa (2002) | Utah (2000) |
| Kansas (2007) | Virginia (1981 & 1996) |
| Kentucky (1984) | Wyoming (1996) |

Oklahoma voters will decide whether to make English the official language of the state on November 2, 2010.

Why Is Official English Necessary?

Declaring English the official language is essential and beneficial for the U.S. government and its citizens. Official English unites Americans, who speak more than 322 languages (2000, U.S. Census), by providing a common means of communication; it encourages immigrants to learn English in order to use government services and participate in the democratic process; and it defines a much-needed common sense language policy.

Official English promotes unity. Our national motto is *E pluribus unum*-out of many, one. Immigrants of many nationalities built our nation, but the "melting pot" melded us into one people. This long tradition of assimilation has always included the adoption of English as the common means of communication. Unfortunately, the proliferation of multilingual government sends the opposite message to non-English speakers: it is not necessary to learn English because the government will accommodate them in other languages. A study published by the U.S. Department of Labor found that immigrants are slower to learn English when they receive a lot of native language support. (*Monthly Labor Review*, December 1992.) Thus, multilingual government services actually encourage the growth of linguistic enclaves. This division of the United States into separate language groups contributes to racial and ethnic conflicts. Designating English as the official language will help reverse this harmful process.

Official English empowers immigrants. Immigrants will benefit from the elevation of English to official status. Instead of the mixed message government sends by making it possible to file tax returns, vote, become U.S. citizens and receive a host of other services in a variety of languages, immigrants will understand that they must know English to fully participate in the process of government. Providing multi-lingual services creates dependence on "linguistic welfare." Life without English proficiency in the United States is a life of low-skilled, low-paying jobs. Studies of Census data show that an immigrant's income rises about 30% as a result of learning English. Knowledge of English leads to the realization of the American dream of increased economic opportunity and the ability to become a more productive member of society, which benefits everyone.

Official English is common sense government. The designation of official English will eliminate the needless duplication of government services in multiple languages. It is not the responsibility of the government to provide services in the 322 different languages spoken in the United States. It is the responsibility of each individual to either learn English or to find a friend or family member to translate. The money formerly spent on multi-lingual services can instead provide immigrants with the assistance they really need-classes to teach them English.

Official English legislation recognizes the need for common sense exceptions permitting the use of other languages for emergency, safety and health services; judicial proceedings; foreign language instruction and tourism promotion. Of course, because official English is only a limitation on government, it does not affect the languages spoken in private businesses, religious services or private conversations.

Misconceptions About Official English

Let's clear up some misconceptions about Official English...

Can other languages be used in our day-to-day private lives?

Of course!

Can other languages be used by government officials in emergency situations or in the investigation of crimes?

Absolutely!

Can other languages be taught and promoted in our society?

We encourage it!

Can other languages be used by elected officials to communicate with constituents?

You bet!

Can non-English terms of art, names, phrases or expressions be used?

Certainly!

Can other languages be used for international trade, tourism and diplomacy?

Definitely!

So what's the fuss all about?

We don't know.

Official English benefits every resident of this wonderful melting pot called America. The melting pot works-because we have a common language. English is the key to opportunity in this country. It empowers immigrants and makes us truly united as a people. Common sense says that the government should teach people English rather than provide services in multiple languages. What would happen if our government had to provide services in all 322 languages spoken in the U.S.? Without a common language, how long would we remain the "United" States?

Viva la diferencia! That was the message behind the federal court decision that last week struck down Arizona's official English law. The measure, which was narrowly approved as a state constitutional amendment two years ago, required state and local governments to conduct their business in English. Although a state court had earlier upheld the provision, federal district Judge Paul Rosenblatt concluded that the law violated First Amendment guarantees. He ruled that the law forced government officials and employees "to curtail their free-speech rights" by impermissibly tying their tongues in their dealings with non-English-speaking constituents. Arizona Governor Rose Mofford, who criticized the law as "flawed from the beginning," promised not to appeal.

The decision was a personal victory for Maria-Kelly Yniguez, the state insurance-claims manager who, fearing retribution if she spoke Spanish to co-workers or claimants, originally filed the lawsuit. The court's action presents the official English movement with its first major judicial setback -- one that, opponents hope, may inspire other challenges elsewhere. Sixteen states have laws on their books designating English in some way as the official language.

Proponents of English legislation decried last week's decision. Said Yale Newman of the lobbying group called U.S. English: "These laws only aim to preserve English as a common language, to serve as a bridge across the language barriers that are present in our country."

Advocates of language pluralism counter that English-only laws are thinly veiled and discriminatory anti-immigrant measures. "((They)) are not intended to help bring people in, or to teach them English, but to keep them out," maintains Martha Jimenez of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. "They prevent people from having meaningful access to the government to which they pay their taxes." Furthermore, say the pluralists, such laws are unnecessary: in the U.S. no one is more aware of the social, political and economic importance of learning English than those who cannot speak it.

As educators working to assist students of all ages and language backgrounds in the acquisition of English, the members of NYS TESOL are concerned about the growing movement to make English the only official language in American life. In recent years, well-funded, highly organized groups such as US English, a Washington-based lobbying organization which claims more than 600,000 members, have worked to promote the adoption of legislation and policies declaring English the official language of the United States. At present, 18 states have official English laws on the books. As of the spring of 1995, no fewer than seven pieces of legislation had been introduced in the 104th Congress which propose to make English the only official language of the United States. By implication or by direct mandate, such policies would aim to eliminate both multilingualism and bilingual education from American society. Ironically, this restriction of social, economic and educational opportunity is being proposed at a time when multilingualism is highly valued in the world marketplace.

Our Position:

As teachers of English to speakers of other languages, we do not advocate the silencing of any languages in the name of English. NYS TESOL opposes all measures which seek to declare English the only official language of the United States. At best, these measures are unnecessary; neither history nor recent research justifies such an extraordinary intrusion into the private life of the individual or such governmental restriction of valuable linguistic and cultural resources. At their worst, however, we find official English proposals to be exclusionary, divisive, and based on erroneous assumptions.

- Policies declaring English the only official language of the United States would deny a vast array of social, economic, political and educational opportunities to citizens and others simply because of their language status. For example, under HR 1005, sponsored by Rep. Peter King (R) of Seaford, NY, adults who are learning English would be effectively barred from participation in the electoral process through a repeal of the bilingual assistance requirements of the Voting Rights Act. The same proposed legislation would also probably reduce funding for programs which teach English to speakers of other languages. These reductions would effectively limit language minority children to learning only that which is immediately comprehensible to them in English, while directing them away from the proven cognitive and practical advantages of bilingualism.
- While many of the proponents of English-only policies cite the economic advantages of learning English, restricting the use of other languages in the social, cultural, and educational life of US citizens and residents would ultimately result in unintended and unfortunate consequences for the US economy. It makes little sense to promote monolingualism at a time when multilingualism is becoming an economic imperative. Trade agreements such as NAFTA and GATT formalize the growing trend toward export-driven economies, and the ability to communicate in the global marketplace is a skill US

business can ill-afford to neglect. Speakers of languages other than English represent a valuable economic resource that would be wasted or even destroyed by policies promoting English only.

- Official English measures devalue the use of all languages other than English. Such an attack on the diverse languages and cultures which have always been present in American society serves to fuel division among us; to diminish pride of origin and of self; and, ultimately, to leave our nation deprived of the many valuable linguistic, economic, and cultural resources which a multilingual, English-speaking citizenry represents. We believe, along with TESOL, in the "right of all individuals to preserve and foster their linguistic and cultural origins" (TESOL Resolution on Language Rights, 1987). As an organizational member of the State Council on Languages (SCOL), NYS TESOL supports the notion that both education and public policy should encourage "two languages for everyone." For students who are learning English, it only makes sense that their native language be maintained during and after their acquisition of English.
- Much of the thinking used to support the establishment of English as the only official language of the United States is misinformed. For example, many "English only" arguments are based on an assumption that the maintenance of native languages decreases motivation and opportunity to learn English. Statistics refute this assumption. In New York State in 1990, for example, 69,000 adults were enrolled in ESOL classes with thousands more on waiting lists. Unfortunately, most official English proposals do very little to support the acquisition of English by those who want to learn; instead, they promote a return to the "sink or swim" mentality, or recommend a "transitional" program of English instruction which would fall woefully short of realistically addressing students' language learning needs.
- Similarly, proponents of official English rely heavily on attacks on bilingual education to make their case. They establish a misleading distinction between programs which promote the acquisition of English by speakers of other languages and the development and maintenance of *two* languages (one of which is English) through bilingual education. Bilingual programs, by definition, include ESOL as an essential component. Although the official English movement often dismisses all research showing the positive cognitive and academic results of bilingual education, much of this research demonstrates that students who have a strong academic and linguistic foundation in their native language have many advantages in the acquisition of English.