



Michigan Council of Teachers of English

Statement on Official English Laws

While the Michigan Council of Teachers of English affirms the necessity of all children becoming fluent in written and spoken English, in light of what follows, the Council can not support any legislation or constitutional amendments which mandate an official governmental language or which cut federal or state funding of bilingual education. Such legislation, while sometimes well intentioned, “is a reminder of a history of prejudice toward speakers of foreign tongues” (U.S. News and World Report, September 25, 1995, 42) as it serves to educationally disadvantage large groups of Michigan’s school children and their families and may come to degrade their home languages. As language is a critical part of a speaker’s identity, any denigration of that language tends to denigrate its speaker. Legislation such as proposed H.R. 123 potentially places both non-English speaking children and their parents at risk as it may be used as a means of denying them educational equity as well as legal, medical, political, and social services

Further, the Council affirms the National Language Policy developed by the Conference on College Composition and Communication for the National Council of Teachers of English:

1. To provide resources to enable native and non-native speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English, the language of wider communication;
2. To support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in the mother tongue will not be lost;
3. To foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language.

BACKGROUND: In response to the increased immigration of non-English speaking peoples into the United States, in the past 9 years, 13 states have enacted legislation making English the official language of government in those states which brings the total of states with such legislation to 22. English-Only groups, the foremost of which is U.S. English, lobby state and national legislators and place advertisements in national news magazines to advance their cause. A recent ad in U.S. News and World Report (October 2, 1995, 60) features “U.S. English The Language of Equal Opportunity” and “Should our government operate in a foreign language?” as bold captions. U.S. English Chair Mauro E. Mujica, assures readers that U.S. English leads “at the forefront of legislation on a state by state level and works to garner support for H.R. 123, a bill before the United States Congress which not only declares English the official government language in the U.S. but also demands that governmental affairs be conducted in English only and cuts off federal funding for bilingual education. Government, asserts U.S. English, should “not waste money and energy providing services in foreign languages” (60).

Just what sorts of services and educational programs are at risk as English-Only legislation is enacted? Declaring English the official language of government would ensure that all voting materials, all driver's licensing examinations and reading matter, all citizenship acquisition procedures would be conducted only in English. Federal funding for bilingual educational programs would cease (60). Should the federal government enact an Official English law, Mujica states that common sense services such as 911 emergency service would not be in danger. However, U.S. English printed materials disseminated in a large number of states have in one or more states targeted the elimination of all versions of the following but those in English:

- 911 services
- Voting materials and ballots
- Bilingual education
- School materials, teacher parent conferences, report cards
- Translators between doctor and patient at public hospitals
- Driver's license materials and testing
- Street signs, public site signs
- General advertising, billboards, menus, business signs
- Directory assistance
- Court translators and legal services
- Public housing information (Daniels 1990, 6)

At risk are the constitutional rights of non-English speaking minorities, equal access to education, equal access to work in an environment free of discrimination, and equal access to legal, medical, and social agencies. Insisting that non-English speaking children be schooled immediately and only in English ensures unnecessary academic failure as it violates proven best teaching practices. When confronted with the possibility of greater numbers of non-English speaking children receiving inequitable educations or opting out of the educational system entirely in the absence of bilingual education, U.S. English has stated, "If our society can't afford some scholastic failure, then we can't afford immigration" (in Daniels 7). Since states such as California, Colorado, Florida, and Texas have enacted English-Only laws, incidents like the following have occurred:

In Florida, U.S. English has called for the termination of 17 employees who translate between doctors and patients and for the elimination of pre- and post-natal and post-surgical informational materials written in languages other than English. In Colorado, a bus driver ordered Hispanic children to stop speaking in Spanish when on the bus; in Denver, a restaurant worker was fired for translating a menu into Spanish for a Spanish-speaking customer. In Texas, Spanish-language radio stations have become the subject of FCC petitions. In a California city, court translators were forbidden to use Spanish in personal conversations (Daniels 5-7).

Groups like U.S. English find considerable support among current political and public figures. This past summer, a Texas District Court Judge, Samuel Kiser, scolded Martha Laureano for speaking to her five-year-old child in Spanish and compared her speaking to her child in Spanish to child abuse (The Ann Arbor News, August 30, 1995, A6). The Judge admonished, "you're abusing that child and relegating her to the position of housemaid. Now get this straight, you start speaking English to this child because if she don't do good in school, then I can remove her

because it's not in her best interest to be ignorant. The child will only hear English" (A6). Later, the judge apologized to the housekeeping profession but not to the mother or the child even though his demands that the mother speak to the child only in English are clearly unconstitutional. On September 4, 1995, at an American Legion convention, Presidential hopeful Bob Dole "endorsed making English the nation's official language" (The Ann Arbor News, September 5, 1995, A1). Representative Bill Emerson (R-MO) has collected 180 co-sponsors of his proposed Official English national legislation; Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL) has signed on 18 co-sponsors of his Senate version of Official English legislation. And President Bill Clinton, as Governor of Arkansas, made his state the ninth in the nation to pass Official English legislation in 1987.

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