

## English Only

Once again, proponents of English Only legislation are in the forefront of current news stories. Recently, Sen. Robert Dole (R-KS) proposed English Only because he felt that “with all the divisive forces tearing at our country, we need the glue of language to help hold us together. Alternative language education should stop and English should be acknowledged once and for all as the official language of the United States.” Dole said, “Schools should provide the language classes our immigrants and their families need, as long as their purpose is the teaching of English...But we must stop the practice of multilingual education as a means of instilling ethnic pride or as therapy for low self-esteem or out of elitist guilt over a culture built on the traditions of the West.”

Dole is not alone in his condemnation of bilingual education. There are more than 180 co-sponsors of a bill sponsored by Bill Emerson (R-MO) and 17 co-sponsors of a bill sponsored by Sen. Richard C. Shelby (R-AL), which require all government business be conducted in English and all public documents be in English with exceptions for public health and safety services and some judicial proceedings. Some of the other seven bills currently before the 104th Congress would ban bilingual education and bilingual ballots. Additional sponsors of English Only include Sen. Richard G. Lugar, California governor Pete Wilson, and televangelist Patrick Buchanan.

According to National Education Association’s 1988 publication Official

English/English Only: More Than Meets the Eye, The English Language

Amendment is the wrong remedy for whatever of America’s social ills it tries to solve for five reasons:

- It ignores our country’s civil rights tradition.
- It fails to promote the integration of language-minority citizens into the American mainstream.
- It neglects the need for American merchants to communicate with foreign markets.
- It restricts the government’s ability to reach all citizens.
- It raises Constitutional concerns.

The English Only campaign is an attempt to disenfranchise minority citizens. It promotes divisiveness and hostility toward those whose first language is not English. Today, eight years later, the NEA still holds this position.

The Association supports the concept of English, plus, a program that promotes expanded opportunities for limited English proficient (LEP) individuals to learn English and for native English speakers to master second or multiple languages.

### NEA Resolution on English as the Official Language

The National Education recognizes the importance of an individual’s native language and culture and the need to promote and preserve them through instruction, public service announcements, and all other forms of communication.

The Association believes that, although English is the language of political and economic communication in the United States, efforts to legislate English as the official language disregard cultural pluralism, deprive those in need of education, social services, and employment; and must be challenged.

### **U.S. History: Language Inclusion**

In early American history, two languages often co-existed. The Continental Congress printed a number of documents, including the Articles of Confederation in German and English. An 1837 Pennsylvania law required school instruction in both German and English. In 1839, German-speaking, French-speaking, and Spanish-speaking parents in Ohio, Louisiana, and New Mexico used bilingual education. And California, which was officially bilingual for 30 years, printed its first state constitutional proceedings in both Spanish and English.

During the 1870s, however, new restrictive language laws began to appear. Even native-born, English-speaking Black Americans were affected by the Jim Crow laws which imposed literacy requirements for voting. On the West Coast, the Anti-Chinese Workingman's Party led California's second constitutional convention to ratify the state's first English Only provisions.

German-English bilingual schools were run in Ohio, Minnesota, and Maryland at the turn of the century. Norwegian, Italian, Czech, Dutch, and Polish were also used in bilingual instruction at the beginning of this century.

Success stories of turn-of-the-century immigrant relatives who learned English quickly through English immersion classes are the exception, not the rule. According to the National Association of Bilingual Education (NABE), in 1890, children of foreign-born parents were three times more likely to drop out of high school than white children of native-born Americans. Also, only 13 percent of 12-year-old children of foreign parents went to high school in New York City compared to 32 percent of white children with parents born in the United States.

During the 1920s, 20 midwestern states passed legislation that barred schools from teaching German. As a result of anti-German sentiment from WWI, the Nebraska Act of 1921 made English the official language of that state.

The courts were responsible for reversing this pattern of language restriction. In 1923, the U.S. Supreme Court nullified these restrictive laws in the case of *Meyer v. Nebraska*. The Court wrote, "The protection of the Constitution extends to all; to those who speak other languages as well as those born with English on the tongue." The Supreme Court, in *Lau v. Nichols*, ruled that instruction solely in English deprives students of an understanding of the curriculum and of an equal opportunity in education.

Language-minority citizens, particularly Hispanics, have long been excluded from participating in the electoral process because of English Only. In fact, in many parts of the country, this exclusion was aggravated by acts of

physical, economic, and political intimidation. Children were often punished for speaking Spanish in school.

In 1968, Congress sought new ways to educate language-minority youth and enacted the Bilingual Education Act. Bilingual services are necessary for adults as well, especially senior citizens. More and more immigrants are coming to this country with no knowledge of English. Unfortunately, as the demand for English instruction has increased, the resources available have decreased. People waiting in line for limited class seats do not need a Constitutional amendment to understand that English is important to learn.

### What Can Associations Do?

Provide training to enable selected staff to become resources to members on issues involving English Only.

- Participate in coalitions with outside organizations who share the Association position.
- Work with local school districts to select education employees who can provide English language tutoring for ESL students and adults.
- Include English Only and bilingual education discussions at national, state and local conferences.
- Work to establish training programs at the local school district level to address the subject of a second language.
- Work with parent and community groups to ensure that accurate

information on English Only and bilingual education is available.

- Develop public service announcements on the danger of an English Language Amendment and the value of multilingualism.
- Encourage members to write letters to Congress and to the editor arguing against English Only legislation.
- Work with the schools, parent and community groups, and other organizations to create cultural and language understanding in these areas.
- Develop a video on the success stories of bilingual education programs.
- Request assistance from NEA Human and Civil Rights.

### Resources

**American Civil Liberties Union**  
122 Maryland Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20002  
(202) 544-1681

**American Jewish Committee**  
2007 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037  
(202) 785-4200

**Center for Applied Linguistics**  
1118 22nd Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037  
(202) 429-9292

**English Plus Information Clearinghouse**  
227 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20003

**Japanese American Citizens League**  
1765 Sutter  
San Francisco, California 94115

**League of United Latin American  
Citizens (LULAC)**  
400 First Street, N.W. #721  
Washington, D.C. 20001  
(202) 408-0060

**Mexican American Legal Defense and  
Education Fund (MALDEF)**  
1430 K Street, N.W., #700  
Washington, D.C. 20006  
(202) 628-4074

**The National Association for  
Bilingual Education**  
1220 L Street, N.W., Suite 605  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
(202) 898-1829

**National Council of La Raza**  
1111 19th Street, N.W., Suite 1000  
Washington, D.C. 20036.  
(202) 785-1670

**National Democratic Council of  
Asian and Pacific Americans**  
1050 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W.  
6th Floor  
Washington, D.C. 20007

**National Immigration, Refugee, and  
Citizenship Forum**  
227 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington D.C. 20003  
(202) 544-0004

**National Puerto Rican Coalition, Inc.**  
1700 K Street N.W.  
Suite 500  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
(202) 223-3915