

War of Words

by Deepa Ayer

In November of 1998, the majority of Alaskan voters approved an initiative making English the official state language. In this, Alaska is not alone. To date, 25 states across the country, including Montana and Wyoming in the Northwest, have passed similar measures.

In these states, English is officially the only language that can be used in communicating with government employees or elected officials, in providing basic government-sponsored health and social services, or in public documents. The result? People whose English is limited may experience great difficulty in conducting everyday business such as taking a driver's test, receiving health care, or communicating with law enforcement personnel.

Backers of English-only laws claim they help immigrants become proficient in English faster. Yet studies show that immigrants make every attempt to master English. In fact, immigrants today are learning English — and losing their native languages — at a faster pace than immigrants earlier in this century. It is increasingly common for the children of immigrants to be monolingual English speakers, and demand for English as a Second Language classes surpasses availability.

Outlook for 1999

More English-only initiatives are likely to be debated locally and nationally in 1999.

On the federal level as well, interest in declaring English to be the official language of the country is gaining. In the 104th Congress, a bill entitled "The English Language Empowerment Act," passed in the House of Representatives, but failed in the Senate.

On the strength of that legislation, several similar bills were proposed during the recent 105th congressional session, although none passed. Also, bills introduced in the 105th Congress contained provisions to repeal parts of the Voting Rights Act guaranteeing some linguistic minorities bilingual voting assistance, and that would have repealed the Bilingual Education Act which allocates federal funds for bilingual ed.

Bilingual ed challenged

Indeed, bilingual education is likely to face more direct attacks. The success of Proposition 227 in California has already sparked similar measures. Arizona may face an anti-bilingual education initiative on the ballot in 2000. And during the last congressional session, the House of Representatives passed "The English Fluency Act," that would have limited federal funding for bilingual education programs and forced students into mainstream classrooms after just two years of language assistance.

Fortunately, the bill was not considered in the Senate.

During the next session, Congress is expected to consider the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provides federal funds for various programs, including bilingual education. Given the current political climate, these programs are looking vulnerable.

However, not all the news is bad. Recently the courts, many of which are scrutinizing the impact of English-only laws, have offered some refuge. In 1998, the Arizona State Supreme Court declared that state's English-only law unconstitutional. The United States Supreme Court recently declined to review that case, leaving the state court decision intact. And a federal court in Alabama recently overturned that state's English-only law because it required that driving tests had to be given only in English.

Despite these decisions, it is all too likely that English-only initiatives will continue to be proposed across the country this year. 🇺🇸

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Impact Visuals

Momentum is building at the federal level to declare English the official language of the nation.