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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.

While Official English legislation declares English as the language of government, it also makes common sense exceptions permitting the use of languages other than English for such things as public health and safety services, judicial proceedings (although actual trials would be conducted in English), foreign language instruction and the promotion of tourism.

Private business is not affected by Official English legislation. Official English legislation does not infringe upon individual rights, nor does it prevent immigrants from preserving their cultural heritage and language in their personal lives. It does, however, encourage immigrants to learn English in order to fully participate in society. A study published by the U.S. Department of Labor found that immigrants learn English more quickly when they have less native language support. Official English urges that funds formerly spent providing government services in multiple languages go toward supporting programs that teach English to non-English speaking immigrants.

In August of 1996, U.S. English was instrumental in getting H.R. 123, the Bill Emerson English Language Empowerment Act of 1996, passed through the House of Representatives by a bipartisan vote of 259-169. Unfortunately, the Senate did not act on the bill before the end of the session. Similarly, in May of 2006, U.S. English worked closely with Senator Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma to introduce an amendment to the Senate's immigration bill to make English the official language of the United States. The amendment passed the Senate with a 62-35 vote but was not considered in the House before the end of the session.

Thirty-one states currently have some form of Official English law. Most recently, Oklahoma, Kansas, Idaho, Arizona, Iowa and Missouri passed Official English legislation. U.S. English continues its work in several other states to urge the introduction of Official English. We also lobby Congress in support of H.R. 997, the English Language Unity Act—a bill that would make English the official language of the United States.