

TESTIMONY OF

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BEFORE THE

PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
STATE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

Hearing:

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This statement is to convey ProEnglish's support for passing H.B. 1506, which would make English the official language of Pennsylvania.

*"Language is perhaps the strongest, perhaps most enduring link which unites men."*

-Alexis de Tocqueville

Mr. Chairman and the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.B. 1506, which would make English the official language of government in the state of Pennsylvania.

My name is Robert Vandervoort and I am the Executive Director at ProEnglish, a national English language advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. ProEnglish was founded in 1993 with the mission to preserve English as the common, unifying language of our nation by making it the official language of all levels of government—local, state, and federal. I am here today to speak on behalf of our Pennsylvania members and over 100,000 active grassroots supporters in all 50 states.

When my Dutch ancestors came to this country, they learned English and assimilated. If my family had not learned English, they would not have succeeded in this country. Nor would it have occurred to my family that the government should be communicating with them in Dutch. They took it for granted that when you move to a new country, you learn its language and its customs. The assimilation that occurred within my family and so many others is part of what made America great. Learning English is part of America's Melting Pot tradition.

The fact is that official English laws help encourage assimilation among immigrants, which is the most welcoming thing we can do. The English language is one of the strongest and most durable ties that unite us as Americans. The Founders of our nation recognized this fact, which is why President George Washington, in 1795, signed a law passed by Congress requiring existing and future federal statutes of the United States to be published solely in English.

In 1811, President James Madison signed the Louisiana Enabling Act, which granted statehood to the largely French-speaking territory under the condition that the new state agree to conduct its official business in English. When Arizona was admitted into the Union in 1912, Congress passed a similar Enabling Act requiring that the state and local government conduct official business in English.

The Naturalization Act of 1906, which was signed by President Theodore Roosevelt, required naturalized U.S. citizens to demonstrate English language proficiency. President Theodore Roosevelt famously said about English, “We have one language here, and that is the English language, we intend to see that the [assimilation] crucible turns our people out as Americans.”

Contrary to what opponents claim, official English laws do not send an “unwelcoming” message to immigrants; rather, they convey the message that there are responsibilities, as well as rewards, that accompany the privilege of immigration to the U.S. and the choice to make Pennsylvania one’s home.

Official English laws also do not dissuade foreign companies from doing business in those states or within those counties, a common opposition claim. Foreign corporations don’t base potentially multi-billion dollar investment decisions on whether state or county governments publish documents and websites in dozens of languages or more. Instead, they are motivated by things like access to markets, tax rates, incentives, transportation infrastructure, and the availability of a skilled, English-literate workforce.

Making English the official language of Pennsylvania provides a powerful incentive for new immigrants to learn English. Multilingual government does not encourage immigrants to learn English. On the surface, it may seem like

the compassionate thing to do, but removing incentives to achieve English fluency only harms immigrants. English is the language of success in the United States, and Census data prove that those who speak English earn, on average, two to three times as much as those who don't.

The Lexington Institute, a Washington-based think tank, estimates that approximately \$65 billion a year in missed wages can be attributed to workers lacking English skills. The inability to speak English traps people in low-skilled, low wage jobs and keeps them heavily reliant on taxpayer-funded government programs.

The lack of English proficiency also contributes to the rise in costly government translation and interpreter services. Tax dollars currently used for this and to provide multilingual forms would be better spent teaching immigrants to learn English.

The vast majority of states in this country, 31 to be exact, have adopted English as the official language for government. The last state to do so was Oklahoma, which passed official English as a constitutional amendment by voter referendum in 2010. The voters in Oklahoma overwhelmingly voted for it by 76 percent.

An August 2014 Rasmussen poll found that 83 percent of Americans support making English the official language of the United States. A 2006 poll by Zogby found that 78 percent of Hispanics support making English the official language of government. This support cuts across all party, age, gender, ethnic, and religious lines. On almost no other issue will you find such widespread support.

Mr. Chairman, a 2006 poll by the Mason-Dixon polling group found that 77 percent of likely voters in Pennsylvania support making English the official language of the state. Also in 2006, then Mayor now Congressman Lou Barletta made English the official language for Hazelton, Pennsylvania. With ProEnglish's help, the town of Hazelton successfully defended their official English ordinance in court.

Official English does *not* mean "English-only," despite what opponents may say. English as the official language of Pennsylvania means that for the state to act officially (or with legal authority), it must communicate in English. It means that the language of record is the English language and that no one has a right to demand taxpayer-funded translation services or documents in any other language. It also means that unless the government has a compelling public interest for using another language, it will use the official language alone.

English as the official language of government is also the fairest thing we can do. With over 300 different languages spoken in this country, and over thirty different languages spoken in Pennsylvania alone, it would be nearly impossible for government to provide translation services in every language. It would also send the wrong message that learning English is not important when you come to this country.

Passing official English will help promote immigrants' successful integration into American life, expand economic opportunity, save taxpayer dollars, and set a good precedent for other states to follow. On behalf of our Pennsylvania members, I respectfully urge this legislature to pass this official English bill and continue America's Melting Pot tradition.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.