

Español como una lengua nacional de los Estados Unidos

Spanish as a National Language of the United States

The United States should officially recognize Spanish as a second national language and mandate its use in public schools, both as a foreign language to be taught as well as a language of classroom instruction. Approximately 41.3 million Hispanics live in the United States, constituting almost half of the population in California, Texas, and New Mexico. One in ten Americans, or fully 75% of Hispanic Americans, speak Spanish in the home. In only forty-five years, Hispanics are expected to make up fully one-quarter of America. Currently, almost one fifth of U.S. middle- and high-schoolers are Hispanic, and Hispanics are entering the professional ranks in increasing numbers (aU.S. Census Bureau, 2005). The United States does almost \$2 billion worth of trade with Mexico every day and has trillions of dollars in foreign direct investment¹ there (Embassy, 2003). The United States' interaction with native Spanish-speakers, both via domestic immigration and transnational trade, requires that Americans become proficient in Spanish if they wish to remain productive members of U.S. society and economy. The integration and productivity of Hispanic immigrants requires that they can receive instruction in their native language while they are learning English. Given the stigma and opposition surrounding widespread use of Spanish, government action in this endeavor is warranted.

In common usage, the terms “official language” and “national language” are often conflated. They do not, however, mean the same thing. An official language is designated as such for political and legal purposes and generally must be made so via a bureaucratic act of government. National languages, on the other hand, often represent the primary languages of

¹ Foreign Direct Investment, as defined by the Bloomberg Financial Glossary (<http://www.bloomberg.com/analysis/glossary/bfglosa.htm>) is “[t]he acquisition abroad of physical assets such as plant and equipment, with operating control residing in the parent corporation.

particular identity groups such as Gaelic in Ireland but the term can also be used to indicate a language spoken by a large number of citizens within a country (Wikipedia, 2005). “Recognizing” (as the term is used here) a national language does not involve the force of law but does involve a public statement by the government that a given language is a widespread and valid means of communication in a country. Currently the United States does not, in fact, have an official language, but does have a national language. English is the most widely spoken language in the U.S. and all education (except for “special” education, such as English as a Second Language classes) occurs in English. Given the large influx of primarily Spanish-speaking immigrants into the U.S. and the sheer volume of American trade with Spanish-speaking countries, the most important issue at hand is ensuring that Hispanic citizens can receive adequate education while they are learning English, and ensuring that non-Hispanic students are linguistically equipped to fully participate in a diverse American society and economy.

Between July 1, 2003 and July 1, 2004, one out of every two legal immigrants to the United States was of Hispanic origin. In the past 15 years alone, the Hispanic population in America has doubled, and is expected to rise another 250% in the next forty-five years. One fifth of the American grade school population is Hispanic, a number that has tripled in little over 30 years (aU.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Clearly, Hispanics constitute a rapidly growing segment of American society. This fact must be recognized and adjusted for if the U.S. is to maintain cultural, political, and social unity. Ignoring that such a large percentage of the population primarily speaks another language can, in an education setting, create divisions while Spanish-speaking youth fall behind academically as they struggle to master both English and subject material, while their non-Hispanic counterparts can devote all of their time to the subject

material. If the U.S. government does not recognize Spanish as another official language and allow for substantial academic instruction in Spanish, many Hispanic citizens, especially those coming in the massive, continual waves of immigration, will not be able to take full advantage of the American educational system and will be academically hindered into the future by the academic instruction they missed while struggling to learn enough English to make it into English-only classrooms. Making Spanish a recognized language and allowing it to be used in classroom instruction, would greatly contribute to the increased learning and development of Hispanic students, as they work to master English and join so-called “mainstream” classes.

In 2004 alone, \$244 trillion dollars crossed the U.S./Mexico border in imports and exports, the majority being U.S. imports of Mexican goods (Embassy, 2005). In the past ten years, the U.S. has consistently maintained a negative trade balance with Mexico hovering in the area of \$30 billion dollars. This means that the U.S. routinely buys \$30 billion more in goods from Mexico than it sells to it (bU.S. Census Bureau, 2005). As of 2001, American foreign direct investment- that is, the amount of money that American-owned companies have invested in Mexico in various ways designed to serve their business interests- totaled over \$20 trillion (Embassy, 2003). Clearly, the United States has an enormous financial stake and interaction with Mexico. If the U.S. recognized Spanish as a second American language with the same value as English and mandated its instruction in schools side by side with English grammar classes, future Americans would much more equipped to efficiently and productively interact with Mexico. Although the U.S. also engages in extensive economic activity with nations such as Japan and China, the fact that America shares an almost completely open border with Mexico due to NAFTA, promoting the instruction of Spanish to non-Hispanic youth indeed serves a compelling American interest. These children will grow up into business executives and politicians, and will

be able to advance American economic interests much more effectively if they can communicate in the native tongue of one of our largest trading partners.

Many opponents of recognizing Spanish as a national language cite ensuing deterioration of “American” culture as a reason to maintain English as the U.S.’s one and only language. It is interesting, however, that the United States was founded as a haven for persecuted “outsiders” (Protestants escaping religious oppression in England) and was based upon the model of a “melting pot” in which all peoples harmoniously come together to form one united nation. The fact that America was founded upon the principle that its citizenship would be comprised of many people of different backgrounds, however, speaks to the logical requirement to accept Hispanics as full-fledged Americans and recognize the huge number of Americans for whom Spanish is their first language. Further acceptance and integration of Hispanics cannot weaken American culture; it can only strengthen it by further promoting the ideals of inclusion and diversity that the United States was founded upon.

To address the issue of cultural corruption resulting from multiple officially recognized languages, the Americans need only look at other so-called “first world” countries. Ireland and New Zealand have two official languages, Switzerland and Belgium have three, and Austria and Spain have four, yet all six nations have managed to maintain prestigious places in the world system (Central, 2005). Furthermore, these are countries where there are multiple *official* languages, which would imply an even greater public recognition and integration than would go along with merely recognizing something as a national language, something that does not require the force of law. These examples serve to counter English-only proponents’ claims that with the recognition of Spanish as an official language comes negative cultural, social, and economic consequences.

Many Americans oppose bilingual education in the face of the startling statistic that only five percent of students utilizing it “graduate” to English-only schooling in English (Lasken, 1997). This could largely be due to the lack of formalized English instruction in these classrooms, as the article cites. Increasing formal English instruction could greatly raise the rate of “graduation” into English-only classrooms and address these opponents’ concerns. However, by officially recognizing Spanish as a valid national language, students might also become proficient in English more quickly because their English-speaking peers would also be learning Spanish, facilitating increased bilingual interaction between the two. If the stigma of being a primarily Spanish-speaking citizen were lessened, such students may more readily interact with native English speakers and more easily learn English. Current bilingual education likely fails because native Spanish speakers must be instructed on subject matter in Spanish in order to keep up with their peers, while receiving little instruction on English, and then be thrust into an English only environment where Spanish is heavily stigmatized. Lessening this stigma by recognizing Spanish as a widespread national language would ease the transition into English-only classrooms and would allow Spanish to be spoken here as well, thus raising the rate of students who become truly proficient in both English and Spanish.

The federal government must recognize Spanish as a national language, both as a foreign language to be taught in schools as well as a language in which to offer classroom instruction. The huge influx of Hispanic immigrants necessitates this, if they are to become fully integrated, educated, and productive members of American society. From an economic perspective, Hispanic professionals comprise a growing segment of the U.S. domestic economy. Internationally, the U.S. conducts trillions of dollars in business with Mexico. Mandated public instruction of Spanish will equip Americans to conduct business in Hispanics’ native language,

facilitating and increasing the productivity of American economic interactions. Thus, officially recognizing Spanish as a national language and mandating its presence in the educational system is necessary for cultural, economic, and practical reasons.

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