

PROPOSAL FOR THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
TO OPPOSE PENDING LEGISLATION WHICH WOULD
DESIGNATE ENGLISH AS THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
OF THE UNITED STATES

I. BACKGROUND / RATIONALE

In the report of the Cultural Minorities Task Force of the National Commission on Library and Information Services (NCLIS), one of the recommendations to NCLIS was to urge libraries to remove the various barriers to information and services, and to reverse the effects of access to information in the native tongue of some cultural minorities. This recommendation was supported by NCLIS and is supported by the ALA President's Commission on Library Services to Minorities.

"Official language" legislation has already been proposed. The first in a series of Senate subcommittee hearings to discuss a constitutional amendment to accomplish this was held in Washington, D.C. on June 12, 1984. Proponents of the amendment sponsored by Senator Walter Huddleston (D-Ky.) said that without it the United States will become a nation of fragmented groups. Other proponents, such as former Senator S.I. Hayakawa, feel that the amendment should be a conduit for the elimination of bilingual education programs and bilingual ballots. Indiana was the first state to pass such a law, effective in September of 1984, although there have been attempts to pass similar laws in California and Florida.

The U.S. has never had an official language. Time has shown that our society is a cultural mosaic. Historically, probably no other country in the world has received as many language minority groups as the United States. Indeed, the very strength and success of this country is attributed to the many contributors of cultural minorities. Proponents of "official language" legislation would like to have us believe that not having an official language would hamper the integration of language minority groups into American society. This reasoning is patently wrong, since language minorities are the first to realize the importance of learning English to surviving in American society. The end result of "official language" legislation would, in fact, have the opposite effect. It would create a polarized society -- those who speak the "official" language, and those who speak the "unofficial" one.

According to Rep. Baltazar Corrada (D-Puerto Rico), an opponent of the ammendment, "in order to survive in the world community, the United States must make a continued effort to shed its provincialism, to become more able to deal with the cultures and languages of other countries, to recognize that English is not intrinsically superior to any other languages."

As library and information professionals, we urge opposition to any bill that would create apartheid by language which would open the door to discrimination against language minorities. We should work towards guaranteeing equal access to information for all people in the United States regardless of language. Language minorities must not be deprived of the information that they need.

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