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Voices

English-only on the cheap

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As the immigration debate grows increasingly tense, the issue of “English-only” legislation simmers in the background. English hasn’t been declared the official language of the United States yet, but if state trends are any indication, it’ll get there. So far, 28 states have adopted such legislation and 12 have it pending, such as Oklahoma, where Native Americans have voiced opposition recently. Though the aim is to standardize government documents and encourage assimilation, for Native Americans it echoes past language restrictions intended to wipe out their heritage.

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for English classes. Supporters of what’s euphemistically known as the “pro-English” cause are unenthusiastic when it comes to the educational needs of immigrants, whose poor English supposedly inspired calls for this legislation in the first place.

Such legislation also fails to facilitate the English education of immigrants, another group struggling to find its place in this country. English-only advocates are sending the confusing message that immigrants had better learn English (as if they were somehow unaware of this necessity), yet don’t follow through with enough funding to meet the growing demand

If English-only advocates were truly concerned about improving communication between native and nonnative speakers, they’d push for more publicly funded classes. As reported by Fernanda Santos in *The New York Times* in late February, government-funded classes across the country have waiting lists ranging from a few months to several years, and many are overcrowded.

Because each state is free to determine how much it allocates for English instruction, some opt to do it on the cheap. Two that spent the minimum in 2003, Nebraska and South Dakota, also happen to be two of the 28 states that passed English-only statutes and amendments. Kansas, Texas and Oklahoma (soon to be the 29th) also ranked among the lowest in spending.

Since the alleged purpose of English-only legislation is to encourage the assimilation of the 10.3 million foreign-born U.S. residents over 16 whose English is substandard, why don’t lawmakers see to it that they have the opportunity to learn the language? And while they’re at it, they may want to mull over why 80 percent of students who have limited English proficiency are those born in the U.S. to immigrant parents. If English-only is the way they want it, the onus is on state governments to create educational programs to realize their vision of a “unified country” in which everyone can speak English.

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