

SENATE BILL REPORT

SJR 8209

As of November 2, 1995

Brief Description: Amending the Constitution to declare English as the official language of the state of Washington.

Sponsors: Senator Hochstatter.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Government Operations: 5/4/95.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

Staff: Rod McAulay (786-7754)

Background: There is no reference or designation in the State Constitution or in state statutes establishing English as an official language of the state. The Transitional Bilingual Instruction Act, however, was adopted in 1979. In enacting that statute, the Legislature made a finding that transitional bilingual education was required to meet the needs of children who come from homes where the primary language is other than English. It calls for a system of instruction to enable pupils to achieve competency in English.

The earliest known tongues spoken in what is now Washington State were Chimakum, Quileute, Makah, and the coastal Salish dialects in the west and the languages spoken by the Okanogan, Yakima, Cayuse, Nez Perce, and Flathead peoples in the east. A trading language known as Chinook Jargon evolved for communication between tribes and with Europeans and U.S. citizens when they arrived.

Early European visitors included Russian, Spanish and French speakers as well as English speakers from Upper Canada and the United States. While the vast majority of the early caucasian settlers in Washington territory were English speaking, there were also French speakers in the Cowlitz valley and later, large groups of Scandinavians speaking Norwegian, Swedish and Finish who came to work in the timber and fishing industries. Although many Chinese were run out of the state during the anti-Chinese riots in the 1880's, there has been a Chinese speaking community in the state for over 100 years.

Most recently, there has been an increase among Spanish speaking people throughout the state, as well as an increase in Russian speakers and southeast Asian language groups, including Vietnamese and Cambodians. While there is a great diversity of non-English speaking peoples in Washington State, the use of English has increased at a substantial rate throughout the world. All air traffic control is done in English. English is the current language of scientific research, commerce, and diplomacy (displacing French). In many non-English-speaking nations, such as Japan and Germany, English language study is required in the schools.

There is concern that constitutional status as an official language is needed to preserve, protect, strengthen and perpetuate the English language. Twenty-one states have adopted statutes or constitutional amendments designating English as the official language of the state.

Summary of Bill: The state Constitution is amended to add an article providing that English is the official language of the state. The Legislature must enforce the article by appropriate legislation and must take all steps necessary to ensure that the English language and the role it has played as the common language of the state are preserved, protected, strengthened, and perpetuated. The Legislature shall make no law which diminishes or ignores the English language or the role it has played as the common language of the state. Any person resident or doing business in the state has standing to sue to enforce the article subject to any limitations which may be imposed by statute.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: The resolution is effective when it has been approved by a two-thirds majority of each house of the Legislature. The constitutional amendment must receive a favorable vote of a majority of those voting on the amendment at the next general election and becomes effective when the election results are certified.