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OHIO LATINO AFFAIRS

Advise. Connect. Build.

Testimony of 1 May 2008 on House Bill 477

to the State Government & Elections Committee of the Ohio House of Representatives

Chairman Daniels, Vice Chair Hite, Ranking Minority Member Stewart, and members of the House Committee for State Government & Elections, my name is Ezra C. Escudero, and it is my honor to serve our state as Director of the Ohio Latino Affairs Commission. Ours is a small state agency with three statutory mandates:



1. To Advise the Governor, members of the General Assembly, and state Departments and agencies on issues facing Hispanic Ohioans
2. To Connect the different Latino communities across Ohio by providing information, fostering collaboration, and ensuring access
3. To Build the capacity of private sector and not-for-profit agencies to better address the needs of Hispanic Ohioans.

In our advisory capacity, our track record of proudly serving members of the General Assembly, Governors, Mayors, Police Chiefs, members of Congress, state and federal agencies is impeccable. It is in that capacity that I appear before you today to respectfully ask you to vote against House Bill 477.

The most important reason to vote against House Bill 477 is that it is completely unnecessary.

I bring with me two pie-charts. One depicts the percentage of Ohioans who only speak English per the US Census Bureau. The second depicts the percentage of documents, records, and official proceedings of the Ohio Latino Affairs Commission in English. You will find copies of these two pie charts in your packets.

Please take a moment to absorb the information conveyed by these charts.

These two charts beg for answers to the following questions:

- What is the need for English Only legislation in the State of Ohio, if such an overwhelming majority of Ohioans only speak English?
- If the Ohio Latino Affairs Commission - formerly known as the Commission on Spanish-speaking Affairs - already conducts all official business and maintains all official documents in English, and has done so for over 30 years, then what state agency is acting so out-of-line that it becomes necessary to codify the obvious?
- If there is no tangible result, or need, to enact House Bill 477, then is it not a purely symbolic act intended to send a message?

Let us take a look at the messages sent by House Bill 477.

What kind of message are we sending to our youth when it comes to the importance of learning foreign languages? We live in a global marketplace of goods, services, ideas, and jobs. Everyone from Governor Strickland, Speaker Husted, members of this legislative body and the United States Congress has talked about the urgent need to make sure our state is ready to compete in the global economy.

How can an Ohio company like Procter & Gamble hope to export its goods to China, if its executives cannot speak Chinese? More importantly, how can Ohioans hope to secure jobs with a global company like P&G if the jobs in high demand require multi-lingual skills?

According to the Ohio Department of Commerce, Mexico is Ohio's second largest trading partner. How can Whirlpool, Hobart, or Mettler-Toledo hope to sell appliances, scales, measuring and industrial equipment in Mexico if its sales representatives cannot speak Spanish? Again, how can Ohioans hope to secure jobs with these global companies if the jobs require even just bilingual skills?

Just two years ago, Ohio was in the running for a second major Honda factory. In the spring of 2006, the Ohio General Assembly was considering an English Only bill very similar to HB 477. Out of concern that we might be sending the wrong message to foreign investors like Honda, House Speaker Jon Husted said:

"We want to make sure we're not creating barriers for those types of situations ... if you have families coming from another country, in terms of management or the like, you want to make sure there are no unintended consequences for those families,"

The legislature eventually decided to kill that English Only bill.

Honda of America eventually decided to build that plant... in Indiana.

Well, we often speak of unintended consequences in the realm of public policy making. Every now and then, those consequences have a price-tag associated with them. In this



case, that price tag is a \$550 million dollar state-of-the-art manufacturing plant with over 2,000 jobs... for Hoosiers instead of Buckeyes.

Let us move beyond the messages sent by English Only legislation, and focus in on the potential of English Only to establish a dangerous limitation to service delivery by all city, local, county, and state agencies in Ohio. This English Only bill, and others before it, are:

- A potential threat to the civil and human rights of non English-speaking US citizens and other residents
- A perilous first step to abridging the citizen's right to vote, eroding other civil rights, fostering governmental interference in private activity and free commerce, and causing social disunity
- Considered by the community to be a discriminatory act against law-abiding Ohioans of Somali, Middle Eastern, Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, Ukrainian, Russian, Slovenian origin, as well as Latin American communities
- A wedge which does not foster better communication and collaboration, much less unity, between Ohio's diverse communities
- An unfunded mandate which, as currently written, highlights the importance of learning English through negative reinforcement to new Americans and other immigrants without providing any resources to aid such education



The denial of services to American citizens with limited English-language proficiency is already happening. Again - services such as health care, drivers licenses, and worker protections are being denied to American citizens. Puerto Ricans, many of whom speak Spanish as a first language, are Americans by birth. The Amish, many of whom speak Pennsylvania Dutch as a first language, are Americans by birth. Native Americans and American Indians, many of whom speak Navaho, Choctaw, and Mohegan, are Americans by birth.

All this adds up to a bill which will ultimately encourage costly litigation and further straining limited resources.

Just to reflect for a moment on our nation's history... can you imagine if an English Only mandate had discouraged the preservation of indigenous languages, then think of all the lives that would have been lost during World War II without the help of Navaho Code Talkers? Their language enabled un-decodable messages to be transmitted, thereby contributing to America's victory in the Pacific.

The evidence is undeniable. There is no need for English Only legislation like House Bill 477. State agencies are already in compliance with its proposals, and the vast majority of Ohioans only speak English. The threat of costly litigation, denial of rights and services, and the threat of limiting economic opportunities for our state are all quantifiable. The benefit of HB 477 is not quantifiable because it simply does not exist.

My conversations with State Representative Courtney Combs began in 2004 about an English Only proposal similar to this. We have had some difficult conversations. We both overcame some biases and predispositions in order to build greater understanding between us. After it all, we both agreed that English language instruction is an important and worthy endeavor that serves as a proactive and productive way to promote English without empty and mean-spirited symbolism.

Hopefully we will have an opportunity to explore a real solution to a real problem. Our school districts do not have enough ESL teachers to help the children of immigrants to learn English. Nor do our school districts have enough foreign language instructors to help Ohioans learn a second language and get our youth ready for the global marketplace. Our agency has already begun workshops to help community organizations across Ohio increase their capacity to offer English classes and other programs that help integrate and assimilate our newest Americans.

But until then, I respectfully ask the honorable members of this committee to vote against the passage of House Bill 477.

I thank you for your time and I stand ready for your questions.

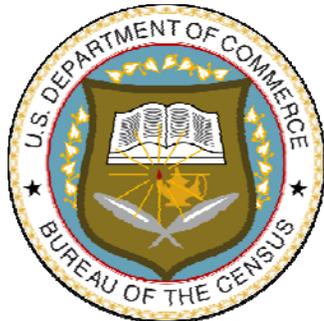
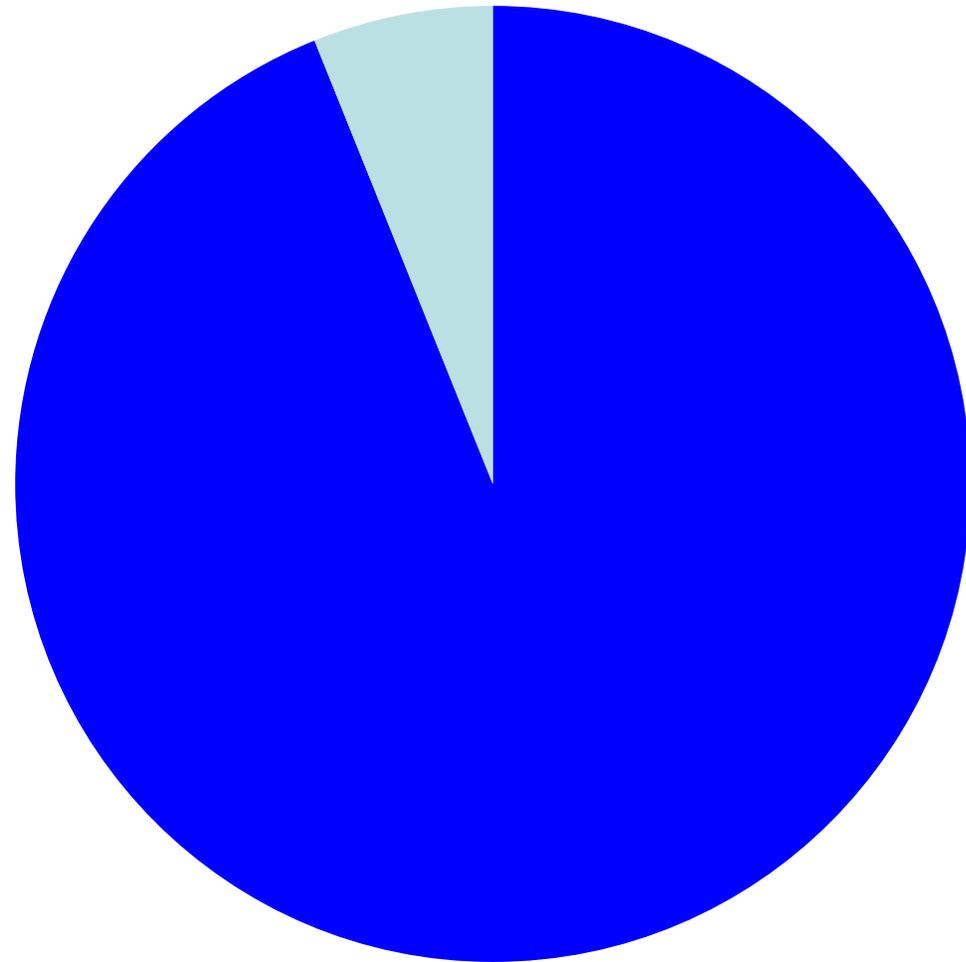
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Submitted on 1 May 2008
by Ezra C. Escudero, Director
Ohio Latino Affairs Commission



Percentage of Ohioans who ONLY speak English

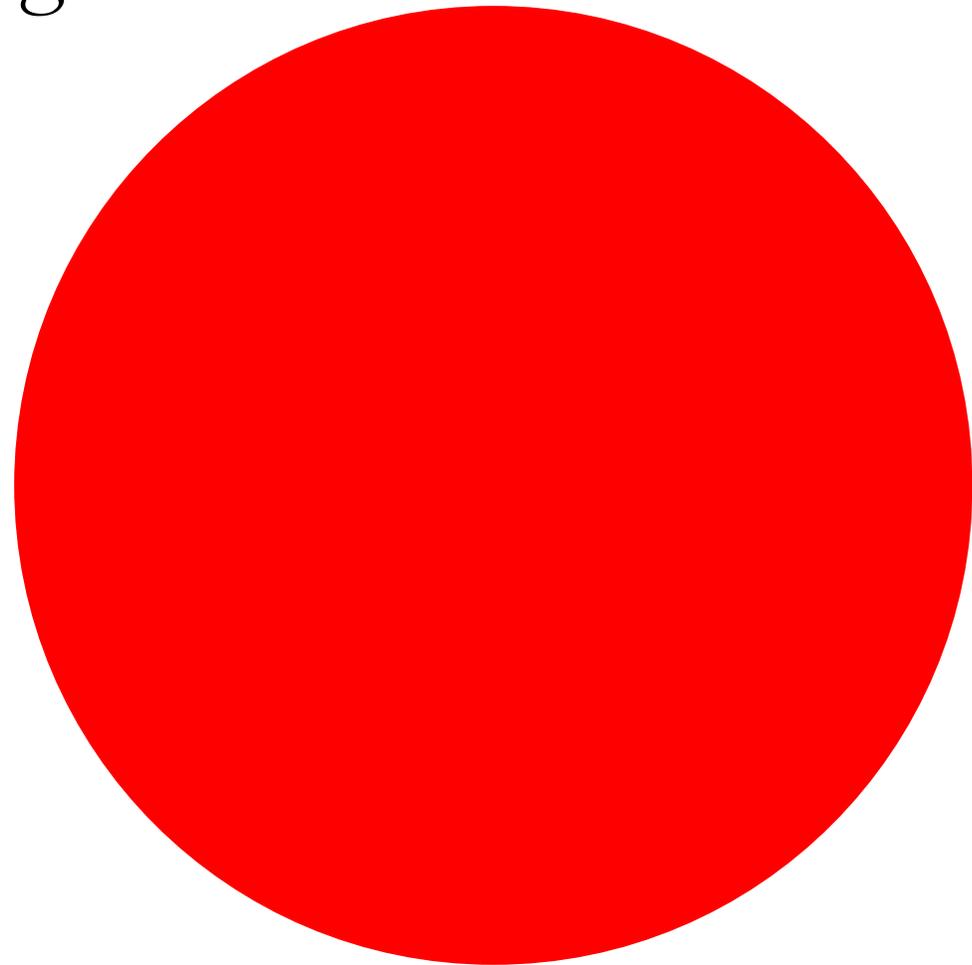
■ 93.9%



Source: United States Census Bureau, 2000 Census

Percent of the Official Records of the Ohio Latino Affairs Commission published in English

■ 100.0%



Source: Ohio Latino Affairs Commission