

EDITORIALS



Mandarin? Si

The more languages we know, the better we are

Owasso High School announced last week that it will introduce a Chinese language program when school begins this fall. Good for Owasso. The more languages we can speak the better off the country will be.

Owasso, of course, isn't the only school teaching Mandarin, as well as other foreign languages. In fact, 44 schools across the state offer Mandarin, serving 7,300 students.

It is encouraging to know that our state school system recognizes the importance of learning a second language. And Mandarin, as difficult as it might be to master, is a good language to learn.

After all, there are 1.3 billion Chinese in a country that is ever increasing its presence in the world economically. With the debt China holds from the U.S., Mandarin might come in handy some day when applying for a mortgage or bank loan.

I was fortunate enough to get to travel to China a few years ago with an educational group sponsored by the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa. I was amazed by the number of middle and high school students who could speak at least some English.

That is why it so good to see Oklahoma students getting at least an introduction to a foreign language. And that is why the English-only question that will be on the ballot is so discouraging.

Elements of the English-only movement are under the impression that Hispanics moving here will not learn or do not want to learn English. Therefore, they intend to make learning the



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language even more difficult. By forcing all state correspondence to be written in English only, it makes learning a difficult language even more difficult.

The argument is that if all state signs, brochures, etc. are written in English, Hispanics will learn English quicker. I think just the opposite will happen. Seeing signs, for instance, in both English and Spanish helps with word association. I'm no expert, but it makes sense at least to me.

Although the English-only bill will not ban teaching a foreign language, it sends a message that Oklahoma is not open to change. It says that we still hold to the notion that everyone should learn our language rather than us meeting them half-way.

The English-only question, like its close cousin House Bill 1804, is nothing more than another way to punish Hispanics, legal and illegal. They are quite simply politically motivated issues designed to capture votes at the expense of a minority.

Spanish, like Mandarin, is becoming more important by the day. Hispanics are the fastest growing minority in the country. And that scares a lot of folks.

But history is our guide. Every ethnic group that has come to this country has assimilated. Second- and third-generation Americans speak English. Not because some law forced them to, but because they know that the key to success in America is speaking the language.

Hispanics are no different. Parents and grandparents might not fully master the English language, but their children and grandchildren will. Passing restrictive laws is not the answer. And like it or not, the Hispanics are not going away. America, even with its current economic problems, is still the land of opportunity. And to make the most of that opportunity, learning the English language is imperative.

Although it falls on deaf ears, I'll say this again: I do understand the meaning of illegal. I know that we have a problem with illegal immigration and understand that something needs to be done. But I'll say again that it is a federal issue not a state one. Passing onerous laws will not solve the problem, it will only make it worse.

The schools such as Owasso and the many others across this county and state are to be commended for recognizing the importance of a second language, especially those that will come in very handy in a global economy.

If only some of our so-called state leaders could be as open minded.

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Jumping the shark

BY ANDREW COHEN

Confirmation hearings for Supreme Court justices jumped the shark a generation ago. Everyone knows it. But no one does anything about it.

The senators make their windy speeches, vote the way they already have determined they will vote and ask questions they know the nominee cannot and will not answer. The hearings have become torpid exercises in political preening, virtually devoid of any substance.

Here are five ways that the White House, Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and ranking member Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., can try to impose a new order to the proceedings without taking away the Senate's important "advise and consent" role.

- Invite, cajole and beg former Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to appear before the committee as a witness to discuss and debunk the myth of "judicial activism." Let the nation hear from O'Connor just how silly and misunderstood (and overused) that phrase has become. Since retiring from the bench in 2006, O'Connor has been a forceful critic against the label. Let her make her case before a worldwide audience, and then let committee conservatives try to tag her as a hack and a liberal.
- Invite a panel of distinguished judges, "liberal" and "conservative," to discuss



Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor meets with Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Fla., not shown, on Tuesday in Washington.
HARRY HAMBURG/Associated Press

the extent to which federal appeals court judges are required consistently to "make policy" when they interpret ambiguous statutory language given to them by lawmakers who practice the art of compromise at the expense of clarity. One federal trial judge told me: "Every time I see the term 'reasonable' in an appellate opinion, I receive the message: 'Here, you fix it.'" Let those sorts of witnesses share the truth with the American people.

- Demand of Sonia Sotomayor, when she appears for the first hearing July 13, that she eschew the "Ginsburg rule" — refusing to answer questions on cases or controversies she might have to resolve as a justice. She should

answer such questions and perhaps even offer her personal views about certain legal standards and doctrines. She can do this without guaranteeing that she'll vote a certain way in a certain case. And the approach would be far more candid than the one employed by John G. Roberts Jr., who invoked "Ginsburg" and has since voted universally in favor of business over consumers, employers over employees, executive branch power and law-enforcement goals.

- Require all committee members to be physically in the room during the hearing unless there is a pending vote — and make sure there are no pending votes. It is the height of arrogance and

cynicism when the senators make their speeches to the nominees and then bail out of the room, leaving the rostrum more than half-empty. During the last round of Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., was seen doing a crossword puzzle.

- Dramatically limit the time each senator receives for on-camera speechmaking while the nominee is in the chair. We all know what each senator thinks — their tribunes issue copies of the speeches and post them online. Yes, the worst place to be in the world is between a senator and a camera. But at some point, the posturing ought to end. The senators on the committee should be required to ask questions the same way lawyers do in court. Save the speeches for the end of the process.

In a perfect world, confirmation hearings would be an invaluable exercise in constitutional democracy and a wonderful lesson for students of law, politics and governance. Instead, they have become unworthy of the nobility of their place in our system of separation of powers. Someone needs to fix that. And it might as well be these guys, at this time, with this nominee, in these circumstances.

Andrew Cohen, CBS News' chief legal analyst and legal editor, wrote this column for the Los Angeles Times.

Zap! Pow(er)!

Before the comics, think about smarter electricity

Demand for electricity isn't the same at every hour of the day; why should the price be the same?

Officials at American Electrical Power-Public Service Company of Oklahoma are working on a high-tech energy efficiency plan that would include asking the Oklahoma Corporation Commission for permission to charge different rates at different times in the day — "variable rate pricing" in utility jargon.

It's one of those highly detailed utility-bureaucracy policy discussions that make the eyes of newspaper column readers roll back into their head as they reach for the comics section, but which are incredibly important.

Don't reach for the comics yet.

What we're talking about here is a plan that would use market forces — prices — to discourage some activities — for example, turning on your electric dryer at 4 p.m. on the hottest day of the year — and encourage their use other times, later on that same night, for example.

Your clothes still get dry and you save money in the process, but something else doesn't happen, and that's the important part.

AEP-PSO doesn't set a new record in electrical demand every summer.

And therefore it doesn't build more generating facilities.

And therefore it doesn't ask for higher rates to pay for those generating facilities that don't get built and we don't have to breathe the emissions that unbuilt generators don't end up putting in the air.

It's about cheaper energy and cleaner air.

Smarter electricity: Last month the state started the process of dividing up more than \$42 million in federal stimulus money designated for energy efficiency. It was one of those quietly important moments that will determine a great deal about the way we will live for the next decade.

Included in the package was a proposed \$7 million loan to AEP-PSO that would accelerate a program that was included in the company's recent rate case. Ratepayers would pay off the loan at a rate of about \$2 million a year, money they were set to pay under the rate hike anyway. With the loan we get the benefits faster.

What are the benefits? There are three.

Two of them are incredibly complicated electrical engineering moves that make me want to reach for the comics.

Let's deal with them in the fewest words possible. First, the company would re-engineer electrical lines so that they would be able to automatically reroute around line breaks and restore service to customers faster during storms. Second, the company would make further improvements to electrical lines so that the company would have more complete information about precisely how much power is being used by customers. That allows the company to send a more tailored amount of energy down the lines, saving wasted energy and meaning the company wouldn't have to produce as much electricity in the first place.

In summary: Electrical services would be cheaper, more reliable and more ecological.

But the really sexy stuff is in the third part of the program.

Imagine if your electric appliances could start telling you ways to save money. It's already happening in Texas and a lot of other places.

It happens with a smart



Wayne Greene
Editorial Writer

AEP-PSO has to build its entire system on the basis on a few days in July when air conditioners drive electrical use through the roof.

meter — essentially an electronic monitor of your electrical use — inside your home. The monitor tells you at any time how much power you are using and how much you are paying for it. If you turn on a new electrical device, it tells you right away how much your bill is going up because of the gadget.

New high-end electrical appliances have technology that allows them to take information from the monitors. So, when you turn the dryer on, it would tell you how much it would cost to operate.

And that's what the program would pay for.

Smarter policy: To take that technology from gewgaw to powerful money saver — and ecology saver — you have to have variable pricing.

If AEP-PSO is charging twice as much for electricity during the afternoons as it is at night and in the morning, the smart meter can not only tell you how much it will cost you to turn on the dryer, but how much you can save by waiting a few hours.

Why charge twice as much by day as by night? It's not about making more money for the electric company. They make the same either way. It's about the demand half of supply and demand.

AEP-PSO has to have generating and transmission capacity equivalent to the highest demand it has to deal with all year. The company has to build its entire system on the basis on a few days in July when air conditioners drive electrical use through the roof.

It's as if you had to keep the pantry stocked 365 days a year as if Thanksgiving were tomorrow.

Lower that peak demand — decide you don't have to have yams AND mashed potatoes — and you accomplish all sorts of good things.

Smart meters and variable prices use market forces to accomplish public policy with a regulated monopoly.

The power plant doesn't get built.

The air stays clean. Your electric bill stays low.

Corporation Commissioner Bob Anthony, the last best friend consumers have on the state's usually forgotten but incredibly powerful rate-setting panel, says he's ready to push for variable pricing.

"I think it's an effective thing," Anthony told me in a telephone interview.

This isn't experimental stuff. Other states are already doing it, and it's working.

"Behavior is being changed. There are several states that are being more aggressive about this."

Smart meters and smart pricing are smart policy. They would save our wallets and our lungs.

Now you can go to the comics.

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