

ELA Busy in Puerto Rico

by Rosario Fajardo

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO
If Puerto Rico wants to become the 51st state of the union, it must “embrace” English as the language of the local and federal governments, business and the education system, stateside members of English Language Advocates said.

“We want the people of Puerto Rico to express their feelings in the plebiscite, but as interested observers we see a campaign of deceit by the statehood movement regarding language,” said Leo Sorensen, chairman of the organization. “If Puerto Ricans want to become a state, they must learn English.”

Rosario Fajardo is a staff writer with The San Juan (PR) Star. This article is reprinted with permission from the edition of December 7, 1998. The photo is by Carlos Anguita.

The issue of whether Puerto Rico will have to step up the teaching of English if it were to become a state is one of the many under discussion in the campaign for the December 13 plebiscite.

Puerto Ricans should not lose their Spanish, but the reality of life is that English is the most dominant language in the world, Sorensen said. No matter what Puerto Rico decides, it will have to become bilingual, “with English rapidly gaining prominence in their culture,” he said.

Otherwise, he said Puerto Rico would be left behind in the race for economic development and progress.

At the same time, a predominantly Spanish-language state will be divisive to the nation and may lead to further linguistic and racial lines, he said, adding that a scenario similar to the separatist movement in Quebec, Canada could occur.

English Language Advocates is a non-profit organization, based in Arlington, Virginia, which is dedicated to defending the English

language. The organization has an estimated 50,000 “supporters.”

The organization is not affiliated with either the English Only or the English First movements in the United States, but officials said it has helped pass the controversial laws making English the official language in 25 states, which advocates of multi-culturalism view as ethnocentric and exclusionary.

The organization also has no formal position on Puerto Rico’s status question, Sorensen said, other than the English-language requirement for statehood.

Sorensen said he and two other members of his organization are currently in Puerto Rico “to learn what is going on” and have scheduled meetings with members of the New Progressive, Popular Democratic and Puerto Rican Independence parties.

Despite repeated phone calls, NPP Rep. Leonides Díaz Urbina, who heads the statehood plebiscite campaign, could not be reached for comment last week.