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04.11.2010 9:00 pm

License restrictions try to solve a non-existent problem

By Editorial Board

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A sample Missouri drivers

license.

It's good to know that with all the other problems facing Missouri, two state representatives from St. Charles County are wasting public resources pushing bills to solve a problem that doesn't exist.

Each has zeroed in on the "menace" of legal immigrants driving on Missouri roads and highways.

Undocumented immigrants already are prohibited from getting drivers licences. But Republican Reps. Chuck Gatschenberger of Lake Saint Louis and Cynthia Davis of O'Fallon think that

doesn't ensure that every driver can read road signs and obey the law. Safety first, you know.

Mr. Gatschenberger's House Bill 2143 would require applicants to prove U.S. citizenship before obtaining a Missouri drivers license. He's also sponsoring H.B. 2139 and H.B. 2144, which would require license examinations to be administered only in English and bar the use of an interpreter.

Ms. Davis is sponsoring H.B. 1231, which carries similar English-only restrictions.

What kind of scofflaws might be caught in such a law-and-order dragnet?

Perhaps world-class athletes who ply their trades with the St. Louis Cardinals and St. Louis Blues or an elite foreign-born student studying medicine or the sciences at an area university.

Maybe a highly skilled surgeon or high-tech engineer with a start-up company.

Under the Gatchsenberger proposal, some of our region's most talented people would have to take public transit or catch a ride with a citizen-driver.

International companies like Monsanto, Emerson and Anheuser-Busch InBev that employ workers on H1-B visas would face a new obstacle in recruiting the best minds to Missouri. And if area civic and business leaders succeed in establishing a trade hub with China around Lambert Airport, what awaits the Chinese contingent that would settle here?

Absurdity alone is no guarantee that bad legislation won't pass. So consider some facts and context:

- Requiring citizenship to be able drive would face legal challenges for which no precedent is readily known. It's probably legal to limit drivers license exams to English only — several states already do it, and Missouri offers exams for commercial licenses only in English. But the ability to speak English is no guarantee of the ability to drive a car.
- Of the 349,286 drivers licenses issued in 2009, only 2.8 percent (9,962) were given after the tests were taken in a foreign language, mostly Spanish or Chinese. Missouri's projected immigrant population, while growing, was only 208,000 — 3.5 percent of the state population — in 2007.
- St. Louis long has been a major refugee resettlement area. Congress has authorized people fleeing war and strife in countries such as Bosnia, Vietnam, Somalia and Iraq to live and work in the United States. In fact, new arrivals must find a job in 90 days, which often requires getting a drivers license.

About one-tenth of the population of the city of St. Louis, now estimated at 350,000 people, arrived as refugees. They are the biggest growth segment of people moving to the city, according to Anna Crosslin, president and CEO of the International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis.

- A recent Post-Dispatch series on our future work force reported that the skills and entrepreneurial spirit of immigrants are critical to a growing economy.

Missouri needs to vanquish its image as hostile to newcomers and outsiders. Spiking these proposed pointless restrictions on legal immigrant drivers would be a good place to start.

Tags: chuck gatschenberger, Cynthia Davis, drivers licenses, immigrants, immigration, Missouri politics

reader comments

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23 Comments



kfoxc Clark April 13, 2010 at 8:56 UTC

You are correct about total immersion. But it still takes time. And, as an ESL instructor, can you tell me how long it took your students to achieve academic fluency?

And can you please tell me how people can get to their jobs or ESOL classes? Much of Missouri is rural or suburban with no mass transit.

These representatives are wanting to eliminate something that is in place without proposing an alternative solution.

What do you think should be done to help these people? In all the discussion, I have seen no proposals.

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Logus April 13, 2010 at 11:50 UTC

Many of my students were already quite fluent. My team and I had a whole range of students from elementary age to early thirties. I had the oldest and more adept class. Many of my students had already been studying English for a number of years. Out of 30 students I'd say half were 50% fluent – and most were high school aged – and 10-20% were very fluent. Of my two thirty year old students, one was maybe 75% fluent and the other maybe 50%. Only a handful really struggled and that I believe was due to two factors – they were farmer boys and they were not Han, thus second class citizens in their own country (I had a couple of Uyghurs and a Khazak). A Uyghur girl however was 80-90% fluent.

As to how people work. Well, where there's a will and a need, there's a way no matter what the language barrier.

Not everything needs an alternative solution. Not everything needs a new proposal. Frankly I'm not paying too much attention to the issue. My very initial post was noting the irony of the article.

I guess basically my response would be for all these people, buck up and deal with it. Get some self-motivation. But I know that doesn't go over well with the social and fiscal liberal crowd who thinks that the government should fund all sorts of things, provide all sorts of things in perpetuity, no matter what the cost, debt and liability, etc.

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Ohdarn April 12, 2010 at 1:50 UTC

WEll, now I'm really confused. Isn't HB 2143 redundant if as you all say we already have to prove we are citizens to get driver's license?. So what's the beef? It's already law apparently.

Or we could do as they do in Texas and probably everywhere else. I have a friend that lives on the Laredo border. Her household help do not speak any English. I asked her how they got drivers licenses and she said they don't bother to get them. They drive without them. I am going to assume they probably also don't have insurance. Anyone here ever have their car totaled by someone uninsured? Well, I have. Twice now. State FArm was down right mean to me as a single mother at the time and the other company Progressive was very nice, but I was out my deductible. That is the other side of the coin never mentioned by feel-good libs, many people can barely afford cars and don't bother to get insurance.

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kfoxc Clark April 12, 2010 at 3:35 UTC

Offering immigrants the chance to get a license quickly mitigates the likelihood of them driving without a license and thus without insurance.

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Hot debate. What do you think?  4  4

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Logus April 12, 2010 at 10:34 UTC

Only problem is that there are a number of native born people who have zero language problems and still drive with no licence and worse, no insurance.

Making licensure easier to get won't necessarily negate or decrease the number of non-licensed or un-insured motorists no matter who they are.

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kfoxc Clark April 12, 2010 at 11:39 UTC

Have you ever tried to teach English to a speaker of another language? Our language is extremely difficult to teach. I know because I had to teach my daughter English after we adopted her when she was 11 years old. Not only did she have to learn an entirely new alphabet with new letter symbols, she had to make sense of all our crazy idioms and exceptions to the rules. She went from a very phonetic language to one whose phonics includes the letters "ph" for the "f" sound.

If our representatives are truly looking out for safety, why not help LEGAL immigrants by providing ESOL classes directed towards the driver manual, rules of the road, signage and driver safety? This would help them quickly get their licenses in order to become productive members of the community. We would also have to provide transportation for them to get to their ESOL classes for a certain period of time.

In the meantime, I would like to challenge Representatives Gatschenberger and Davis to begin studying another language which uses different letter symbols and see how long it takes them to achieve ACADEMIC fluency, which is completely different than the ability to speak a language, taking a sample driver's test in that language. Then and only then will I believe that they have a full enough understanding of this issue to be proposing bills.

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Hot debate. What do you think?  5  7

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Logus April 12, 2010 at 12:52 UTC



Have you ever tried to learn Chinese? It's also a very difficult language to learn. In some respects it's probably just as difficult as English.

Learning any language is difficult for many people. So what? Some legal immigrants never learned and some have. Certainly, were I to move to a foreign nation I'd make every effort to learn its primary language(s). English is the primary language spoken and used in the US. And for over two centuries the majority of immigrants, colonists and citizens have all learned how to speak and write American English without the help of classes.

Are ESL classes a good thing? Sure. But oh, yeah, I see, this is something else that the government should provide and pay for...

As an aside, did you learn your child's native language as you taught English? If you're calling on the legislators to learn a new language in the interest of fairness and getting a taste of what's involved, then surely you did the same with your child. If you did, great, but if you didn't, you're not being consistent in your argumentation.

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kfoxclark April 12, 2010 at 1:27 UTC

Yes, I did learn Russian in order to communicate with my daughter. I have a Master's Degree in Communication and studied with a private tutor as well as with CD's. I could read signs while in Russia and ask directions after 3 months of study. There is NO WAY I could have passed a test. I continued my studies for about 6 months after we adopted. I still could not have passed a test in Russian.

Think about your foreign language classes in high school. Did you become fluent? How long did it take to achieve ACADEMIC fluency? I took Spanish throughout junior high and high school and took advanced placement Spanish in college. At that point I could have passed a driver's test.

And yes, it would take additional taxpayer money in order to provide special classes and transportation. That's my point. We already have a solution that is currently in place.

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Logus April 12, 2010 at 10:49 UTC

As far as language goes, I think there are a number of factors in play, but the bottom line is capability and necessity.

Immersion is supposed to be one of the best ways to learn a language. Another good way is constant use – which correlates to immersion. ESL and ESOL are supposed to operate off of that by dealing moreso with conversational English. I had the privilege of teachign ESL for a summer many years ago in China.

No doubt as a communications major, you know the problems people have even speaking their native tongues. I've been told that people with a proclivity towards math usually tend to be fairly proficient in languages. Well, math and I never got along well.

I took French on and off for years in school (along with Latin in jr. high) and college. One of my biggest problems was a lack of immersion. A lack of need. Now, had my grandmother taught us all Cajun French and used it exclusively with us, I'd have learned it well and kept it. But she learned English at the end of a rod as a child and believed that her native tongue would not serve her children well.

So, instead, I know un petit peu en francais, mais, je n'ais parle en francais. And I've probably botched that.

I agree, learning another language is difficult, and I applaud you for your efforts and consistency, but I do not believe that it is something that our government should provide.

One other thing about my French. I got better as I got older. I appreciated it more and understood it more. I also found ways to use it here and there. And to that end I've picked up a smattering of words and phrases from a number of languages. Sometimes though, you make do. My parents and I traveled thru Western Europe for several months many, many moons ago and often only communicated by "sign language" with the Europeans.

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Tim Hogan April 12, 2010 at 11:34 UTC

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Jenny-O April 12, 2010 at 10:36 UTC

This seems kind of silly with the exception of being able to speak English. I'm a natural born citizen, have had my driver's license for 20 years, yet to renew I now have to take additional proof of who I am to get my license. I made my trip to renew a little simpler and just take my passport with me now to the bureau. Remember when you just took in your old license?? I don't think they should have to be citizens, but they sure better be able to prove they are here legally.

As far as speaking English is concerned, you should at least be able to read/write it. How can someone read road signs and follow traffic laws, instructions and signs if they cannot? Simple they can't. Then we have additional traffic issues because people can't figure out where they are going.

D. Walker—not everyone who lives in St. Charles county have misplaced pride. I've lived here for 27 years and have watched it grow and flourish. It is a low crime, nice area to live and grow up in. And that is not knocking St. Louis. A lot of us love St. Louis as well and spend a lot of time and money there. Faulting us for being rural instead of city is tiresome, as we choose to live here just as our St. Louisans choose to stay in the city. St. Louis is a great city don't make this a cross river issue.

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jkwerner@prodigy.net April 13, 2010 at 10:41 UTC

If this were truly an issue how do you explain how foreign visitors who speak little English get around? Or when most Americans travel abroad navigate in non-English speaking countries? If this was a sincere effort to make the roads safer and not an attack on immigrants they would seek to ban anyone foreigners from renting cars as well.

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A CENTRIST April 12, 2010 at 9:38 UTC

Logus – my sentiments too. Last week it was we needed Metro to attract outsiders to “invest” in St. Louis and now we need to give them driver’s licenses so they can drive their cars and not be forced to rely on pathetic public transportation to find a job. Go figure!

It is becoming more and more evident that the PD editorial page is becoming a caricature of itself.

How do you write an editorial leaving out relevant facts (as usual) and print a cartoon using the words “or confuse with the facts”? Until I saw the typically necessary heading “Official Tea Party Flag” heading, I thought this was a cartoon about the PD Editorial staff. Ha!

How did you fail to mention that with real unemployment hovering around 17% nationally, the Dept. of Homeland Security in 2009 issued 1,130,818 Green Cards to foreign nationals? That number represents the fourth highest number of cards issued in a one-year period. Why are we trying so hard to attract more unemployed people to the U.S. when we clearly have a large number already here? Am I missing something? Should we give them a home and buy them a car too while Americans go begging for food, jobs, and shelter?

You’re right, there is just no substitute for facts and common sense.

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young1forevr April 12, 2010 at 9:21 UTC

I really don’t think it’s too much to ask that people who want to drive on our roadways can read English. Them speaking English or being a full citizen doesn’t matter as much. If they can’t read English then they will have no idea what the huge electronic MODOT signs are trying to warn them about. Many of the signs the road crews use are not the “symbols” that we are used to seeing in the driving test. They are actually words in English. This is exactly why I do not drive in foreign countries if I can’t read their language.

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Well-loved. Like or Dislike:  14  3

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AnnfromArk April 12, 2010 at 8:32 UTC

Having been born in this state and still having to prove I was a citizen when I last renewed my driver’s license per our previous boy governor’s at a whims added law I can’t see where this is

any worse. And if you are a female who has been married and divorced and remarried it gets even worse unless you have a passport. Lucky for me I did and was able to forgo all the birth certificate, marriage certificate, divorce decree, and then another marriage certificate along with a few bills sent to my home to prove I really lived here. Keep in mind this was after I had been licensed in the state of Missouri for years at the same address. So if I, being a citizen had to prove it why shouldn't anyone else?

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Nick Kasoff April 12, 2010 at 11:41 UTC

Actually, the identification requirements weren't imposed by Governor Blunt. They are federal requirements imposed by the Real ID Act of 2005.

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Nick Kasoff April 12, 2010 at 8:25 UTC

> But the ability to speak English is no guarantee of the ability to drive a car.

Nor is it a guarantee of the ability to write a coherent editorial for this paper. But it is certainly a prerequisite.

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thiatt_II April 12, 2010 at 7:55 UTC

I can see requiring citizenship or a visa as well as only giving the tests in English only. More foreigners would get visas and become legal in this country.

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mike69 April 12, 2010 at 7:24 UTC

I'd say we're doing pretty well on this side of the river. Less crime, higher graduation rates. Next you'll stick your noses into what the meetings are about in Billy Joe Bob's barn

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Hot debate. What do you think?  11  11

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D. Walker April 12, 2010 at 9:52 UTC

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Logus April 12, 2010 at 10:30 UTC

D Walker you actually touch on something that is known. The ebb and flow of regional demographics and transition from urban to suburban sprawl to rural regions and back again. As cities decay people spread out to the suburbs, then they spread out a bit further and eventually they shift back in.

The key to all of this though is re-growth in the city and core suburban regions in commerce and industry. The question is then, is that occurring anywhere around here and will it for the foreseeable future? Not likely for the very near future. And I think we will continue to see growth in St. Charles and elsewhere outside the beltway.

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mike69 April 12, 2010 at 11:07 UTC

Walker, I see you missed the sarcasm. But I'd have a lot more thumbs up if I hadn't put in the part about Billy Joe Bob's barn. It's a secret.

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Logus April 11, 2010 at 11:55 UTC

This may be a duplicate, I didn't see my post come up.

Think of the silver lining, all of you who voted for Prop A and love Metro. You should be supportive of this measure because it'd mean more people would have to ride Metro. I thought that's what y'all are all about?! Getting more people to use Metro. Clean up the environment, less traffic and all that jazz. You people confuse me with your contradictive analyses. You want more people driving in the Metro area and you want more people in the area. So... does that mean that you want to see more cars on the road here and not an exponential rise in Metro use to coincide with the continued influx of immigrants and residents?

Silver linings people. 😊

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