

National Association of State Boards of Education

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## Expanding and Aligning World Language Teaching

By Gary Colletti

**Although teachers and administrators often do not speak the same languages as their students, local parents, and community members, only one in five U.S. K-12 students is studying a world language or American Sign Language. In some states, less than 10 percent of students are studying world languages.<sup>1</sup>**

World language instruction suffers from several interrelated problems: Most states lack qualified bilingual and world language teachers and have for years. Student enrollment is optional, which creates staffing and program uncertainty from one year to the next. And the languages that schools offer often differ from those used in their communities or from the business community's needs for proficient bilingual speakers. As one would put it in Esperanto, "*Ŝtataj forumoj povas helpi al ponto de la lingva baro.*" That is, state boards can help bridge the language barrier.

There are many benefits to multilingualism. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages has identified how language learning supports academic achievement in other subjects, aids cognition, and affects attitudes and beliefs about language learning and other cultures.<sup>2</sup> In a globally connected, multilingual society, a well-rounded education that includes world language proficiency will equip U.S. students to participate in the global economy. Learning a second language also improves reasoning skills and deepens empathy.<sup>3</sup>

### TEACHER SHORTAGES

Yet quality teachers in world languages are not evenly distributed. There are ongoing shortages for world language teachers in 44 states and Washington, DC.<sup>4</sup> According to a 2017 American Academy of Sciences report,

this shortage could leave the nation at a competitive disadvantage.<sup>5</sup>

Adding to the challenge of finding qualified teachers are uncertain staffing needs due to the unpredictability in student enrollment. Every year, when students opt to change the language they study or add or drop language courses, it affects the number and type of language teachers needed. Unlike math, English, or the arts, where certifications cover many possible courses, this unpredictability causes many schools to scramble to meet student world language needs, forces last-minute changes, or makes schools hesitant to expand offerings.

A decline in supply does not necessarily indicate a decline in demand. Though high school enrollment varies from school to school, college graduate enrollments between 2009 and 2013 grew in American Sign Language (216.3 percent), Chinese (9.7 percent), Korean (86.6 percent), Portuguese (18.4 percent), and Russian (0.8 percent).<sup>6</sup> Colleges generally recommend that applicants have at least two years' study of a world language or be able to demonstrate an equivalent level of proficiency. Yet in one study, 60 percent of university graduates reported that their institution had no language requirement when they enrolled; the remaining 40 percent said a language requirement was in place.<sup>7</sup> Students who received good guidance in high school know to enroll in and stick with the same set of world languages classes. Others may find themselves shut out of opportunities.

Businesses often need employees who are fluent in another language—though not just any language. Spanish is by far the most spoken language other than English in the United States, so more members of the business and social services communities could benefit from learning it. The nation also

needs speakers of less commonly taught languages, and the U.S. State Department has identified several that are important for the economy and security.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, federal laws mandate provision of language access in the delivery of social services. Access to vital services, including health care, are limited not only by clients' inability to communicate in English but by the inability of service providers to communicate in their clients' native languages or to secure the services of those who can.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that Spanish is the most taught language other than English in schools, most states still have shortages of Spanish teachers.

### WHAT STATE BOARDS CAN DO

State boards can specify needed languages and reexamine teacher credentialing that can enable educators to fill shortages, especially in areas where large populations speak languages other than English. Delaware, for example, recently changed regulations to better specify knowledge, skills, and education requirements of world language teachers in order to improve workforce capacity.<sup>10</sup>

Several languages that the State Department identified as critical needs are offered in five or fewer high school programs in most states. For instance, 43 states have five or fewer high school programs offering Arabic. Forty-nine states offer five or fewer programs in Korean, and 43 states offer five or fewer schools in Russian.<sup>11</sup>

Some states already include undergraduate loan forgiveness as an incentive to teachers to fill gaps in critical shortage areas, and such pathways could be extended to potential multilingual teachers. State boards can encourage teacher preparation programs to create curricula designed specifically for heritage speakers and offer course credit in teacher programs for proficiency in a heritage language.

Conor P. Williams and colleagues suggest looking to schools' existing multilingual paraprofessionals to help bridge the language gap by encouraging them to become fully

**Table 1. High School Language Programs and Languages Spoken at Home**

| Critical Languages | Speakers, Age 5 and Older, Nationwide (Millions) | High School Language Programs Nationwide (Total) |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Spanish            | 37.46  | 8,177  |
| Chinese            | 2.9  | 1,144  |
| Portuguese         | 1.61   | 37   |
| French             | 1.25   | 3,343  |
| German             | 1.06   | 1,548  |
| Russian            | 0.88   | 147  |
| Hindi              | 0.64   | 19   |
| Japanese           | 0.45   | 433  |
| Arabic             | 0.4  | 161  |
| Korean             | 0.32   | 43   |
| Urdu               | 0.26   | 3  |

Source: American Community Survey, "Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over: 2009-2013" (Suitland, MD: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015); American Councils for International Education, "The National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report" (Washington, DC, 2017).

licensed teachers. State policymakers can "remove obstacles preventing multilingual paraprofessionals from becoming lead teachers," according to their report. The elegance of such "grow your own" approaches lies in the fact that a given school's needs for multilingual support are reflected in the community's language skills.

These policies may require changes to statewide teacher licensure rules. Others are built within existing alternative teacher certification programs and policies. Some begin with educators who already have bachelor's degrees, while others group paraprofessionals into cohorts that begin at a similar level of educational attainment and progress together towards the credentialing they need to advance professionally.<sup>12</sup>

State boards can explore a language map produced by the Modern Language Association to see what languages are spoken in their states by county.<sup>13</sup> In comparing these data with the American Councils for International Education's survey on K-12 enrollment in world languages, gaps emerge between spoken and taught languages (see also table 1).

Boards can also gather useful data regarding how their school districts respond to shortages of language teachers. Eleven states have

foreign language graduation requirements, though some are reexamining them. Sixteen have no such requirements, and twenty-four have graduation requirements that may be fulfilled by a few subjects, one of which is foreign languages.

NASBE's State Board Insight database reveals that state boards have been revisiting how their states support world language instruction. Alabama, Alaska, Colorado, and Kansas have recently discussed courses of language study. Tennessee revised world language

standards to focus on what students can do with what they know about a language. New K-8 and high school standards have been adopted, and the state also added American Sign Language as a world language that fulfills graduation requirements. Arizona and Louisiana explored the qualifications for language immersion endorsements. Georgia recommended adoption of the Georgia Standards of Excellence for World Language—Less Commonly Taught Language, which will subsequently be added to the State-Funded List of K-8 Subjects and 9-12 Courses.

Boards are also paying attention to schools' capacities for fielding multiple language offerings. North Carolina approved changing the general licensure policy to indicate on K-12 teacher licenses which language(s) a teacher is qualified to teach. There are now 13 possible language indications. Indiana approved standardized assessments for its Certificate of Multilingual Proficiency.

## CONCLUSION

Multilingualism has immediate and long-term benefits for students, their communities, and the nation. The United States is not an English-only nation. More than 20 percent of Americans speak a language other than English at home, and that trend is projected to increase.<sup>14</sup> This shift requires more Americans to speak languages other than English so that all communities can receive needed legal, social, and civil services.

State boards have the power to bridge the divide between English-only and non-English speakers by promoting policies to increase world language workforce capacity and better align language programs to communities and national need. Fostering world language development can help students experience well-rounded education now and mitigate the language barriers of tomorrow.

*Gary Colletti is a policy associate at NASBE.*

## NOTES

1 American Councils for International Education et al., "2017 National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey" (Washington, DC: ACIE, June 2017).

2 American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, "What the Research Shows," webpage (Alexandria, VA: ACTFL, n.d.).

3 Commission on Language Learning, "America's Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century" (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2017).

4 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, "Teacher Shortage Areas Nationwide Listing 1990–1991 through 2017–2018," May 2017, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/pol/teacheshortageareasreport2017.pdf>.

5 Commission on Language Learning, "America's Languages."

6 David Goldberg et al., "Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2013" web publication (New York: Modern Language Association, 2015), [https://apps.mla.org/pdf/2013\\_enrollment\\_survey.pdf](https://apps.mla.org/pdf/2013_enrollment_survey.pdf).

7 W. Russell Neuman, "Undergraduate Foreign Language Requirements Aren't Particularly Effective," *Inside Higher Ed* (May 18, 2017).

8 Top-needed languages are Arabic, Azerbaijani, Bengali, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Mandarin, Persian, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Swahili/Kiswahili, Turkish, and Urdu.

9 Commission on Language Learning, "America's Languages."

10 Delaware State Board of Education, meeting minutes, May 2018; 14 Delaware Code, Sections 1203 & 1205(b), 14 DE Admin. Code 1565.

11 ACIE, "K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey."

12 Conor P. Williams et al., "Multilingual Paraprofessionals" (Washington, DC: New America, June 2016).

13 Modern Language Association, MLA Language Map Data Center, website, [https://apps.mla.org/map\\_main](https://apps.mla.org/map_main).

14 Hyon B. Shin and Jennifer M. Ortman, "Language Projections: 2010 to 2020," paper presented at the Federal Forecasters Conference, Washington, DC, April 21, 2011.