

A Rationale For Foreign Language Education
A Position Paper of The National Council of State Supervisors
of Foreign Languages (NCSSFL)

“We must acquire the ability to understand and be understood in the languages of the worldwide neighborhood.”

Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century, 1996

“Foreign language is crucial to our nation’s economic competitiveness and national security. Multilingualism enhances cognitive and social growth, competitiveness in the global marketplace (four out of five new jobs in the United States are created from foreign trade), national security, and understanding of diverse people and cultures. As we approach a new century where global communication will be essential for survival, we cannot afford the luxury of international ignorance...”

The United States Congress

Position Statement

The National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages, a professional association of leaders in the field of elementary and secondary foreign language education, endorses the inclusion of foreign language education in the school curriculum for all students, prekindergarten through grade twelve and beyond.

Learning to communicate in a foreign language has long been recognized as an essential ingredient of a liberal education. Professor Robert C. Mead, Jr., of the University of Connecticut at a meeting on March 15, 1969, expressed the following:

Since foreign language study is a key to the understanding of another way of life as well as the best means of ending one’s own cultural parochialism, and since better intercultural understanding is, in my opinion, a vital ingredient of a liberal education in today’s unquiet world, it follows that language study is an essential part of such a liberal education, and one which should not be denied to any student.

Communication in a Foreign Language is Basic Education

Significant studies and reports over the past twenty years have focused on the increasing need for students to be proficient in at least two languages.

- The National Commission on Excellence in Education published a report *A Nation at Risk* (1983) which ranked foreign language education at the same level as the “basic academic fields - English, mathematics, computer science, social studies, and the natural science” (pp. 25-26).
- The report, *Strength Through Wisdom*, from the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies,

states that learning to speak a second language is no longer reserved for the elite. Having a citizenry that is proficient in more

than one language is now a matter of the nation’s security.

- The College Board (1983) recommended expanding basic skills to include foreign language education for all students.
- The American Council on Education Commission on International Education in the document, *What we can’t say can hurt us: A call for foreign language competence by the year 2000* (1989) urged leaders of higher education to require competence in a foreign language as an admission requirement.
- The Goals 2000: Educate American Act states: “By the year 2000 all American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign language, civics and government, arts, history, and geography....”
- On September 15, 1999, Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley delivered his Annual Back-to-School Address, entitled, “Changing the American High School to Fit Modern Times.” Included in his remarks, Riley states, “Let me suggest one other way to raise standards. I believe that in this new economy every high school student should be close to fluent in a foreign language when he or she graduates. We should begin teaching foreign languages in our elementary schools, and then in middle schools and high schools. English is a beautiful language and every American student must be a master of it. English is surely a world language. But learning a foreign language exposes young people to new cultures and new horizons and helps them understand English better.”

- In 1996, the American Association of School Administrators identified knowledge of foreign languages as one of the most important skills that K-12 students will need to develop to prosper in the 21st century.

The Benefits of Learning a Foreign Language

Over the past twenty years much research has been conducted which documents the benefits of knowing how to communicate in more than one language. Kathleen Marcos, in her article entitled, “Second Language Learning: Everyone Can Benefit,” describes the personal, cognitive, academic, and societal benefits of second language learning. She cites several research studies that underscore the cognitive, academic, and societal benefits for students who learn a foreign language.

Cognitive Benefits - Children in foreign language programs have tended to demonstrate greater cognitive development, creativity, and divergent thinking than monolingual children. Several studies show that people who are competent in more than one language outscore those who are speakers of only one language on tests of verbal and nonverbal intelligence (Bruck, Lambert, and Tucker, 1974; Hakuta, 1986; Weatherford, 1986).

Other studies suggest that students who are learning another language show greater creativity at solving complex problems than their monolingual peers (Bamford and Mizokawa, 1991).

Recent research indicates that “the length of time students study a foreign language relates directly and positively to higher levels of cognitive and metacognitive processing” (Rosenbusch, 1995).

Academic Benefits - Studies also show that learning another language enhances the academic skills of students by increasing their abilities in reading, writing, and mathematics. In a 1994 report on the impact of magnet schools in the Kansas City Public Schools, it showed that students in the foreign language magnet schools had boosted achievement significantly (Eaton, 1994). It reported that students in the language magnet’s first kindergarten, starting in the program in 1988, had surpassed national averages in

all subjects by the time they reached fifth grade. And the foreign language students performed especially well in mathematics.

Similar studies with students in intensive second language programs show these students scoring as well as or better than their monolingual peers on standardized achievement tests in basic skills. In the Cincinnati Public Schools, 2,901 learners in grades K-8 are enrolled in the district's foreign language magnet schools. In 1994, the California Achievement Test was administered to all learners in grades K-8 and 10. A higher percentage of learners in the foreign language magnet schools was at or above the national norm in comparison with non-magnet learners in reading, language, and mathematics.

Children in Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia who were enrolled in the district's foreign language partial immersion program achieved higher test scores in English language arts than did their non-immersion peers.

The K-8 French and Spanish immersion schools in the Columbus, Ohio City School District are two of the top four elementary schools whose students pass all five sections of the state proficiency tests in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and citizenship.

Students who complete a long sequence of foreign language learning increase their academic skills in other subject areas.

In "Foreign Language Study and SAT-Verbal Scores," the authors found that learners who study a foreign language improve their scores on the verbal sections of standardized exams such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT) and that scores continue to climb with each additional year of language study (College Entrance Examination Board, 1992; Cooper, 1987).

Societal Benefits - People who communicate in at least two languages are an asset to the communities in which they live and work. Increasing numbers of jobs now require people who are capable of interacting with people who speak languages other than English and can adapt to a wide range of cultural backgrounds. In addition, the ability to communicate in a foreign language contributes to a student's overall achievement of personal and professional career goals.

Four out of five new jobs in the United States are created as a result of foreign trade.

Each year 200,000 Americans lose out on jobs with business because they do not know another language (The Tongue Tied American).

According to the Kiplinger Washington Editors (1996), the Hispanic share of the work force will increase by 25 percent by 2010. The Asian share will increase by 50 percent. Minorities will keep moving up the corporate ladder in the next 15 years. Managers who know how to deal with a diverse work force will have an advantage.

The telecommunications industry has provided us with the opportunity to communicate on a worldwide basis. To keep pace with this new global marketplace, our educational system must provide learners with the interactive linguistic and cultural skills for the day-to-day situations of employment both at home and around the world.

In summary, echoing the recommendations set forth in *Strength Through Wisdom*, the 1979 national study on foreign language and international studies commissioned by the President of the United States, the United States must have quality foreign language programs in our schools so that all students will graduate with the ability to interact linguistically and culturally with people from many countries. Students who are competent in at least two languages will dramatically increase the US capabilities in diplomacy, in world trade, and in human understanding.

-

In addition to the multiple benefits described above, students who learn a foreign language have the unique opportunity to understand the nature of themselves as young men and women and their relationship to the world about them. Such realization leads to a different approach to learning and growing and extends far beyond the language classroom. Perhaps the broadest and most important function of all foreign language study is to provide a more liberating educational experience for students -- the vocationally oriented as well as the college bound, the poor, as well as the middle-class and the rich. As students are given the opportunity to learn a foreign language, they have the unique opportunity to understand the nature of themselves as young men and women and their relationship to the world

about them, benefits which all of our students will need and will carry with them far beyond the language classroom.

References (These are in the order in which they occur in the rationale)

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL),
Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for

the 21st Century. Yonkers, NY: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Inc. 1996.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Reform*. Washington, D.C.: GPO,

1983.

A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, *Strength Through*

Wisdom, November, 1979.

College Board. *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*. New York, NY: College

Board, 1983.

The American Council on Education Commission on International Education. *What we can't say can hurt us: A call for foreign*

language competence by the year 2000, 1989.

Riley, Richard W. "Changing the American High School to Fit Modern Times." 1999.

Marcos, Kathleen, "Second Language Learning: Everyone Can Benefit." Eric Review K-12 Foreign Language Education, Vol. 6,

Issue 1, Fall 1998.

Bruck, M., W. E. Lambert, and R. Tucker, "Bilingual Schooling Through the Elementary Grades: The St. Lambert Project at Grade

Seven.” *Language Learning* 24 (2): 183-204, 1974.

Hakuta, K. *Cognitive Development of Bilingual Children*. Los Angeles: University of California, Center for Language Education

and Research, ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 278 260, 1986.

Weatherford, H.J. “Personal Benefits of Foreign Language Study.” *ERIC Digest*, Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on

Languages and

Draft - Rationale for Foreign Language - Page 7

Linguistics. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 276 305, 1986.

Bamford, K.W., and D. T. Mizokawa. “Additive-Bilingual (Immersion) Education: Cognitive and Language Development.”

Language Learning 41 (3): 413-429, 1991.

Rosenbusch, M. Language learners in the elementary school: Investing in the future. In R. Donato & R. Terry (Eds.). *Foreign*

language learning: The journey of a lifetime. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co. 1995.

Eaton, Susan. “Money, Choice and Equity in Kansas City,” Harvard Project on School Desegregation, Cambridge, MA, 1994.

Thomas, W.P., V.P. Collier, and M. Abbott, “Academic Achievement Through Japanese, Spanish, or French: The First Two

Years of Partial Immersion.” *Modern Language Journal* 77 (2): 170-180, 1993.

Cincinnati Public Schools, “Why Your Child Should Learn A Foreign Language,”

Bush, Bill, “Schools’ Ratings Put District in Emergency,” Columbus Dispatch, August 10, 1999.

College Entrance Examination Board. Profiles, College-Bound Seniors, New York: Author, ERIC Document Reproduction Service

No. ED 223 708, 1982.

Cooper, T.C. "Foreign Language Study and SAT-Verbal Scores." *Modern Language Journal* 71 (4): 381-387, 1987.

Simon, Neil. *The Tongue Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis*, 1980.