

# Memorandum

**Date:** February 12, 2008  
**To:** Professor John Bono  
**From:** Lindsey Zettl  
**Subject:** Foreign Language Education

*The purpose of this memo is to inform members of the local school districts in Allegheny County of the need for a foreign language program at the elementary school level.*

## Introduction

While children are gaining the foundations for their future education in elementary school, one principle subject is missing in the majority of elementary schools across the county: foreign language studies. Of all the times for individuals to learn a foreign language, the stage of the early elementary school years provides the most advantage for successful language acquisition. Therefore, it is imperative for school districts to take the initiative in implementing foreign language programs in our elementary schools, beginning with instruction at the kindergarten level.

## Issue

The value of knowing a foreign language in today's society cannot be underestimated. However, in our society it for the most part it is. With the continuous advances made in technology have made the world increasingly globalized in recent years. The spread of ideas and interactions between various cultures have become essential facets to the way we live. Yet, as aware as we are of our inclusion in this new global society, we have dismissed the concern for the existing communication barriers between us and our foreign neighbors. How can we expect to maintain a good relationship if we do not establish firm grounds for communication?

Among English-only speakers, the tendency is to think that acquiring a foreign language is unnecessary, therefore why go through the trouble to attain such knowledge. Many figure that they can just rely on the expectation that others with whom they interact will be able to speak English. This perspective stands as their illogical reasoning which is used to excuse them from the task of devoting attention to the important responsibility of learning a second language.

It has been a U.S. educational norm to only introduce foreign languages into the curriculum at the middle school level. However, at this stage in a child's cognitive development, acquiring a second language has become much more difficult. For many,

this natural difficulty with later language learning acts as a deterrent from the pursuit of attaining bilingual competence.

By not exposing students to foreign languages early, schools risk having students proceed through their education in a state of ignorance regarding the value of the languages and cultures of others outside of this country. Yet the most significant risk that the schools run in not implementing foreign language education early is the risk of allowing students to by-pass the years when language acquisition comes most naturally without capitalizing on this unique learning disposition.

Furthermore, if we do not capitalize on children's abilities at a young age, we will be faced with the probability that they will not be interested in pursuing language studies with the goal of attainment. This reluctance results from the challenges faced that conflict with the amount of time students have to pursue such study due to other pressing educational and social concerns, such as increased workloads and additional extracurricular activities.

## **Audience**

My audience will be the attendants of a school board meeting: supervisors, school board members, teachers, and parents. The benefits and the needs for foreign language programs at the elementary school level are already recognized by our national government. It is up to the administrators and parents at the local level to implement these programs.

As citizens of a global community this audience has the responsibility to make the effort to help our children learn to communicate with the rest of the world. Being able to understand and communicate with other nations will allow children of today to form stronger foreign relationships.

I recognize that many of the people present at the school board meeting will be skeptical about the benefits of implementing a foreign language program. They will be hesitant to accept the fact that children learn languages more efficiently than older learners. A major reason for why they would be resistant to this fact is that they have much at stake with the issue of whether to approve or deny the proposal for program implementation. To establish such a program requires a large amount of financial resources, thus it puts a burden on tax payers. Members of the school board will want to be sure that upon deciding to approve district funds for the elementary school foreign language programs that these programs are in fact needed and that they will have distinguishable payoffs, such as seeing the progress made by elementary school students in their foreign language studies.

## **Conclusion**

Our school districts need to take the initiative to create plans for implementing foreign language instruction in the elementary schools. These programs should begin during kindergarten and should be carried out throughout the students' primary and secondary educational career. In this manner, young individuals will be firmly set on their path to bilingualism.

To achieve this goal, a strong communication effort must first be made in order for members of the school districts and members of the community to be able to confront this issue effectively.



# **Why Should Foreign Language Education Be Introduced Early in Elementary School?**

## **Issues with Learning a Foreign Language**

Acquiring a foreign language becomes more difficult as an individual becomes older. For this reason, there is a necessity for children to begin learning a foreign language at an early age in order to become proficient in a second language.

The reason explaining the need for foreign language instruction to begin during early childhood is that there are noticeable differences between young children's abilities and those of older children. Young children are able to pick up languages rather easily because they are innately predisposed to language development skills. Adolescents and adults have multiple barriers in trying to attain foreign languages. Among the reasoning given to explain this fact is "[t]hose initiating language acquisition after puberty may be subject to an especially complex combination of influences from social, psychological and cognitive realms."<sup>1</sup>

For most students, exposure to foreign languages only occurs after they have entered into adolescence. The current average age for students to begin foreign language studies is the age of fourteen years old.<sup>2</sup> Schools are in need of adopting programs which allow students to start their foreign language education at the beginning of their educational careers.

## **Current Position of US Regarding Foreign Language Proficiency**

The United States falls well behind the rest of the world in bilingual or multilingual population. "A recent study of the European Union found that over half of its citizens reported that they speak a second language. In Britain, the percentage drops to 30%, and in the United States to 9%."<sup>3</sup>

One explanation for the United States' citizens' evasion of learning a foreign language comes from the fact that they rely on other nations' knowledge of English. This stance is supported by the idea that when traveling, "it is often possible to get by with English

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<sup>1</sup> Moyer, Alene. Age, Accent, and Experience in Second Language Acquisition: An Integrated Approach to Critical Period Inquiry. Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Tokuhama-Espinosa, Tracey. Living Languages: Multilingualism across the Lifespan. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Blake, Robert, and Claire Kramsch. "Guest Editors' Introduction." The Modern Language Journal 91 (2007): 247-249. 25 Jan. 2008.

alone, given that English is typically the language used for international business and tourism.”<sup>4</sup>

The problems of the small proportions of the US society, reflected in the figures of only 9% of the entire US population, with bilingual abilities is one which effects the US Nation as a whole; the problem surfaces unmistakably with the misunderstandings caused by barriers in communication with other nations in our current global society. President Bush acknowledged this problem when his plans were brought to public attention for improving foreign language education in the US. His plans included having children start in foreign language courses, being at the kindergarten level.

## **Globalization**

Globalization has presented citizens of all countries with the necessity of being bilingual or multilingual in order to communicate and participate in exchanges with each other.

In today’s society, bilingual or multilingual individuals have a priceless resource because they possess the key to communication with people from different areas of the world. Such communication enables the sharing of valuable ideas and knowledge, such as new discoveries and new technologies.

Individuals who acquire a foreign language early in their years of elementary school have the advantage of a greater ease in becoming proficient in another language, and therefore are able to use this skill in careers requiring international communication.

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<sup>4</sup> Leaver, Betty Lou, Madeline Ehrman, and Boris Shekhtman. Achieving Success in Second Language Acquisition. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.

