

The Home/School Connection:
Collaborating to Promote Best Practice in World Language Education
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“Critical Languages” in the United States

"Learning somebody else's language is a kind gesture, and a gesture of interest. It is a fundamental way to reach out to somebody and say, 'I care about you'. I want you to know that I'm interested in not only how you talk but how you live." --- President Bush

Dear Parents,

You may have been hearing in the news about “critical languages” and wondered what that meant. The languages deemed “critical” have changed over the course of the history of the United States, often influenced by the events of the time. After the launch of Sputnik, Russian was a “critical language”, though fewer programs exist today. The 1990’s saw a significant increase in Spanish instruction within elementary programs (Rhodes & Branaman). This coincided with a dramatic increase in the Spanish speaking population in the United States.

Since 2006, the “critical languages” include Chinese, Russian, Japanese Arabic, Korean, and the Indic, Turkic, and Persian language families. This current group of “critical languages” was chosen by the government based on the number of people speaking the language, the official status and political importance of the language, and the historical and academic interest in the language. Over the last three years, many second language programs in these languages have begun using federal funding through the National Security Language Initiative.

National Security Language Initiative (NSLI)

In January 2006, President Bush announced the National Security Language Initiative, a plan to dramatically increase the number of Americans learning, speaking, and teaching “critical need” foreign languages. This effort is coordinated by the White House, with new programs and resources to expand U.S. “critical” foreign language education beginning in kindergarten and continuing through elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education and into the workforce.

This initiative was developed because “foreign language skills are essential for engaging foreign governments and peoples, especially in critical world regions, and for promoting understanding, conveying respect for other cultures, and encouraging reform. These skills are also fundamental to the economic competitiveness and security interests of the Nation.” (About NSLI)

The three broad goals of the National Security Language Initiative are:

1. Increase the number of Americans mastering critical need languages and starting learning at an earlier age.
2. Increase the number of advanced level speakers of foreign languages with an emphasis on mastery of critical languages.

- Increase the number of teachers of critical need languages and provide resources for them.

“Critical Languages” and Your Child

NNELL believes that all elementary school students should have access to high quality, ongoing and systematic world language instruction. This instruction can be in any language because children will develop important skills when learning any language.

It is important for parents to remember that “while the National Security Language Initiative focuses on languages currently critical for national security, there is a critical need for all languages. Strong language skills are needed domestically, as well as for interacting with the rest of the world in commerce, diplomacy, and peace-keeping, and scientific and cultural exchange. A quality, world class education requires that foreign languages be a core academic subject for all students offering varied instructional models with multiple entry points throughout the curriculum sequence.” (NJCL/NCLIS)

Conclusion

Though Chinese and Arabic are now deemed “critical languages”, history demonstrates that the “critical languages” of

today may not be the “critical languages” of tomorrow. Learning any language is a valuable and life changing experience. It opens doors to new opportunities and learning that is not possible except when studying another language. Learning one language often leads to learning another language, so if your child is not currently enrolled in a program which is deemed a “critical language” a strong foundation can still be built for which to learn other languages later in life.

“National Security Language Initiative.” U.S. Department of Education. 2009. ED.Gov About Initiatives 11 Feb.2009 <http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/competitiveness/nsli/index.html>

Rhodes & Barnaman. “Foreign Language Instruction in the United States: A National Survey of Elementary and Secondary School” Center for Applied Linguistics. 13 Feb. 2009. <http://www.cal.org/topics/fl/flsurvey97execsummary.pdf>

“A Response to the National Security Language Initiative by the Language Profession.” JNCL NCLIS Press Room. 11 Feb. 2009. <http://www.languagepolicy.org/pressroom/>

NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today. We would love to hear from you!

The Home/School Connection flier is full of tips and resources that can be found at www.nnell.org. Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students’ backpacks. Send suggestions/comments to Tammy Dann, Political Action and Advocacy Chair: trdann@q.com