

A Call to Action for World Languages

We who involved in the education of second language learners are amused by this joke:
What do you call a person who knows 3 languages? **Trilingual**
What do you call a person who knows 2 languages? **Bilingual**.

But what do you call someone who knows only one language? **American**.

The irony found within this joke being that the United States is a multicultural society, yet the world perceives Americans as mono-linguistic.

According to the European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture, 52.7 % of Europeans speak two languages fluently. By contrast, only 9.3 % of Americans speak their own and another language fluently.

The Rhode Island Foreign Language Association (RIFLA) is concerned that World Language programs are in danger throughout Rhode Island. We are concerned about a recent trend in the reduction of World Language classes from the public school curriculum. World language programs in middle schools and high schools have been eliminated, reducing the number of students prepared for advanced language study. This begins a pattern that, over a short time span, leads to elimination of these programs altogether.

In order to get an overview of World Languages in the state, a poll was taken at the RIFLA 2006 Fall Conference. While there was some positive feedback about the status of language programs, an alarming 33% of respondents indicated a reduction of programs and/or outright elimination of language programs in various communities. Especially disturbing is the reduction or absence of middle school programs that prepare students for more rigorous high school courses. French is particularly in danger of being eliminated according to the poll. Also disturbing was the discovery that elementary language programs in public schools are practically non-existent, despite research that shows younger students' greater success for language acquisition. Considering these facts, are we really preparing our students for the ever-expanding global market, or will we be left behind?

RIFLA members are very concerned that reductions in language programs are occurring with neither the approval, nor the knowledge of the public. Part of the reason that languages are in danger is that the RI Department of Education (RIDE) has not made World Languages a state requirement for graduation, as are English/Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, Technology and Fine Arts. According to the new RI Department of Education graduation requirements, students must show proficiency in these core subjects with a heavy emphasis on "applied learning". The Applied Learning Standards are oral communication, research, problem solving, reflection/evaluation, and critical thinking. The irony here being that in order to learn a second or subsequent language, a student must apply all of the Applied Learning Standards-- yet, world languages are often neglected within Rhode Island schools.

In today's world the need for greater understanding of other cultures and the knowledge of a second language are greater than ever. Through the study of world languages your child will be able to communicate with and better understand a much larger group of people in the world. In addition, the ability to speak a second or third language will help children understand their own language better.

Here are several good reasons for the continuing advanced study of World Languages:

- ❖ Improvement of SAT, GRE, MCAT, LSAT scores
- ❖ Improvement of analytic and interpretive capacities
- ❖ Creation of job advantages in a global economy
- ❖ Preservation of or fostering a country's image as a cultured nation
- ❖ Contribution to achievement of national goals such as economic development
- ❖ Preparation of students for global understanding and living in a multicultural, multilingual world

Please note the following from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Website:

The Federal government has made a significant commitment to bolstering language education initiatives in the United States. At a State Dept. briefing on January 5, the President announced plans for an initial investment of \$114 million to expand some programs and start some others, all with an eye to strengthening American national security. Part of the plan will involve language learning for children as early as kindergarten, while other parts will expand opportunities for postsecondary study.

In tandem with the above statement, the full senate passed a resolution on February 17 designating 2005 as The Year of Languages. This year the ACTFL initiative is called "Discover Languages; Discover the World".

With support like this from the federal level, all communities should not let World Languages get squeezed out of course offerings at either the middle or high schools in Rhode Island! We invite you to join us in "Discovering Languages" and assisting in the effort to keep language instruction in your schools.

For more information on the importance of World Languages and what you can do to help promote them in our schools, please visit our website at rifla.org.

Sincerely,

The Advocacy Committee, RIFLA