Reaping the Benefits of Multilingualism and Language Ability

In today's global society, the ability to speak more than one language is a valuable asset. Americans fluent in languages other than English enhance our economic competitiveness abroad, improve global communication, help to maintain our political and security interests, and promote tolerance and intercultural awareness (Pratt, 2002; Solomos, 2002).

Research has found a positive link between proficiency in more than one language and cognitive and academic skills (Armstrong & Rogers, 1997; Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Cummins, 1992; Hakuta, 1986). Some studies indicate that individuals who learn a second language are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not (Bamford & Mizokawa, 1991; Cummins, 1992).

Standardized test results show that students who have focused on foreign language studies routinely achieve among the highest scores in all subjects tested (The SAT College Board, 2002).

Although the opportunities for learning languages may vary depending on where we live in the United States, there are many ways that we can encourage the study of languages in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our communities.

“The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.”

Ezra Pound, The ABC of Reading

The Need for a Multilingual Society

The United States has a critical need for individuals who are proficient in languages other than English and who can work in the fields of:

- international diplomacy, foreign relations, and trade
- business, marketing, media, and public relations
- national security and defense
- interpreting and translating
- law
- engineering
- education
- medical and health professions
- environmental professions
- service professions
- community development

Proficiency in more than one language benefits individuals and the country as a whole.

Parents, teachers, administrators, policymakers, business leaders, and labor leaders can take action to make the vision of a multilingual society a reality.
Travel and study
Align
Invite
Plan
What Teachers Can Do
Talk with other parents
Have an exchange student
Enjoy
Speak positively
Use a language
Expose
Enroll
What Parents Can Do
Promoting Multilingualism
What School Administrators Can Do
If your school or district does not have a language program
Develop a rationale for establishing a program by reading research and other professional literature on the benefits of second language learning. Work with district administrators and the school board to establish a steering committee made up of parents, language teachers, district administrators, and business and community members to investigate the feasibility of establishing a program. Learn about different types of language programs to determine the most appropriate one for your school or district. Generate community support for language programs at PTA meetings and teacher conferences. Invite community leaders, business representatives, teachers, and administrators to district-wide planning meetings.
What School Administrators Can Do
If your school or district already has a language program
Ensure that all students have opportunities to study languages and to gain high levels of proficiency. Provide opportunities for students who already speak languages other than English to develop advanced skills in those languages. Hire teachers who are proficient in the languages they teach. Provide resources and professional development for language teachers. Create opportunities for collaboration among language teachers. Purchase language materials for school and district libraries. Devote sufficient time to the study of languages (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1998). Help to create well-articulated course sequences. Hold career days to provide information about jobs that require skills in more than one language. Use student and community resources to strengthen the program through tutoring, international fairs, cross-cultural exchanges, and guest speakers.
What Policymakers Can Do
Budget financial resources to establish and improve second language programs in schools, districts, or states. Maintain ongoing professional development for second language teachers. Establish policies that promote the study of second languages at all levels by all students and that respect the diversity of students in your community and state. Support research on the effectiveness of various program models and instructional practices. Advocate for the establishment of standards for student and teacher language performance at local, state, and national levels.
References
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