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Honors Contract Research Paper

### Should Students be Required to Learn a Secondary Language from Grades 1-12?

Former United States President Jimmy Carter once said, “We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams.” For over three-hundred years, America has been a place where others come to seek refuge, opportunity, and freedom. As a result of mass immigration over many decades, different cultures and languages are still present today. Although there is no official language of the United States, English is the most widely spoken throughout the nation and is taught as the primary language for every student in the United States education system (Burton). But as Jimmy Carter stated, the United States is a mosaic of different people who have brought over three-hundred different languages into the United States. Limiting students from learning a secondary language closes them off from experiencing new cultures, meeting new people, and even creates a barrier between students who do not consider English their native language. With regard to language diversity, the United States is one of the countries with the most language diversity, however, when it comes to teaching these languages to students, the United States is falling behind other countries such as Germany, Europe, Russia, and many more (Kat). In order to progress in education and to help benefit students who spend the majority of their lives in the education system, students in the United States should be required to learn a secondary language from grades 1-12.

To begin, learning a language goes beyond memorization and repetition, learning a language -with the intent to become fluent- is more likely if the language is learned at a young age. Teaching a language to children as young as first grade can prove extremely beneficial in the long run. The researchers at the Department of Health and Human Services at the NIDCD (National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders) claim that “the first three years of life” is when the brain undergoes major development and maturation, as a result, that is the most “intensive period for acquiring speech and language skills” (NIDCD). When it comes to learning any new material, especially a secondary or new language, the easier it is to soak up the information as young children and babies because their “brains are like sponges” and easily absorb new information (NIDCD).

During an in-class discussion, about twenty-six Merrimack College students were asked if they had experiences with learning a secondary language in elementary and high school. Only a handful of students claimed that they had learned a secondary language in elementary school starting from grade five up until high school. A few other students claimed that they had only begun learning a second language starting in high school, those who did claimed that they took between one or two years of their choice of a language. The issue here is that although the “ability to learn a new language... is strongest until the age of 18,” almost all of the students who did learn a secondary language after the critical years of development claimed they retained almost nothing of that language (Smith). In the group of Merrimack College students that were studied, one student claimed that she had learned Spanish as her first language from her parents, however, once she entered the American education system, she had been only taught English and had almost completely lost her ability to speak Spanish as a result. This shows the long-term effect of what introducing a new language does to children so early on in their lives.

Although the United States has found some ways to integrate a secondary language into the current curriculum, when compared to other nations, they are trailing way behind. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that “across Europe, students typically begin studying their first foreign language as a required school subject between the ages of 6 and 9” and more than twenty European countries even required their students to learn at least one year of an additional foreign language (Kat). It is important to keep in mind that the United States does not have a nationwide curriculum set in place and the states are left to decide what is included in the curriculum and what is left out. While many states barely enforce their students to learn one second or foreign language, countries all over the world -specifically in Europe- are requiring and encouraging students to learn beyond two foreign languages. Countries such as Germany, Norway, France, and Poland show over 90% of students studying a foreign language while the United States only shows 20% of students from grades k-12 studying a secondary language (Kat). Similar data also shows the percentage of students who learn a secondary language in individual states in America. The state with the highest percentage of students who learn a foreign language is New Jersey at 51%, 31% higher than the U.S average but 72% lower than the European average. In contrast, the state with the lowest percentage of students who learn a foreign language is New Mexico at 9%, 11% lower than the U.S average and 83% lower than the European average (Kat). In a country where almost three hundred languages are spoken every day, less than 20%, and in some cases less than 9%, of students get the chance to branch beyond learning English in schools.

It is easy to forget how crucial the role of language is in everyday life. Being able to understand any particular language is extremely important in order to communicate with others, even when it is something as simple as saying good morning or thank you. Throughout the

history of the United States, immigration has been the key factor in bringing in diversity from many different backgrounds and cultures, this includes language. In 2019, “more than 44.9 million immigrants” from all over the world lived in the United States (Hanna, Batalova). As previously mentioned, out of all the languages spoken all over the world, three-hundred of them are spoken throughout the United States every day (Yates). Of these three-hundred languages, the top three most spoken languages in the U.S include English, Spanish, and Mandarin Chinese (Babbel). Of these languages, English is the most widely spoken language in the U.S and is the language many immigrants learn upon their arrival in the country. It's important to remember that many of the people who do immigrate to the United States have learned some form English within their native country, whether it is from music or T.V or school. Oftentimes, the immigrants coming to the United States bring their children along with them and enroll them into the American education system. In 2017, “10.1% or 5.0 million students” in public school were considered ELL (English Language Learners) and over thirty-two states had more than 6% of ELL students in their classrooms (NCES). Many times, when schools are not prepared to teach ELL students, they are placed in classrooms with native English speaking students and have a difficult time learning lessons and communicating with the people around them. Although there are many different languages all over the world, if every student in the American school system was required to learn a secondary language, they would be one step closer to understanding a specific culture that may belong to one of their fellow classmates that are considered ELL.

Language is a bridge that allows people all over the world to communicate with each other. In a country like the United States, where languages and cultures are so diverse, knowing a second language can be extremely beneficial. Knowing a second language allows communication to widen between doctors and patients, teachers and students, and even children

and their family. Due to the present curriculum that consists of main subjects such as math or science, many schools across the country do not require students to take a secondary language. The schools that do the requirements are varied all throughout the nation and oftentimes are not prolonged. As mentioned above, in order for children to become fluent in a language, it is extremely beneficial to start learning as soon as possible while their brains are still developing. Requiring students to start learning a secondary language around first grade places students in that developmental window that allows them to learn a new language more easily. In addition, requiring students to continue learning their secondary language up until the end of their senior year, twelfth grade, gives students enough time to practice and become fluent in that language. Students should be given the option to choose between the main languages spoken in the U.S: Spanish, Mandarin, and French. Being fluent and being able to understand at least one of these major languages can propel students into having a more diverse and successful future.

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