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Elementary Foreign-Language Instruction on Descent



Claudio Scarpelli teaches Italian to a 3rd grade class at the Sayles School in Sprague, Conn. The one-school district is able to offer a foreign language with the help of a foundation associated with the Italian Embassy.
—Christopher Capozziello for *Education Week*

Cutbacks Expected to Continue in Recession

By [Mary Ann Zehr](#)

The United States lost ground over the past decade in the proportion of elementary schools that offer foreign-language lessons, following a decade during which those schools had increasingly launched such programs. And the decline is likely to continue as a number of districts consider cutting back their foreign-language programs at all levels because of the recession.

Robert Slater, the director of the National Security Education Program, which is housed in the U.S. Department of Defense, said it was troubling that elementary school foreign-language offerings are slipping nationwide, "because children learn second and third languages easier at that level."

"That's what the rest of the world does," he noted, implying that the United States will fall even further behind other nations in producing bilingual people if primary schools aren't engaged in the task.

The decline of foreign-language instruction at the elementary level could make it harder for the United States to create a pool of language specialists who can speak both English and those languages deemed critical to the

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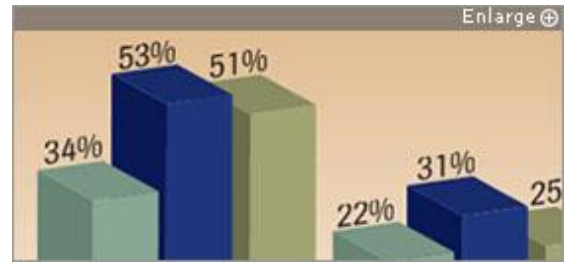
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Tongue-Tied

Fewer elementary schools are teaching a foreign language than they were a decade ago.

country's economic success or national security, such as Chinese and Arabic.

But, in fact, while fewer elementary schools overall are teaching foreign languages, Chinese and Arabic offerings at that level have increased slightly, while French and German classes have decreased over the past decade, according to preliminary results from a survey by the Washington-based Center for Applied Linguistics, which will be published in a report in the fall. Spanish is provided in 88 percent of the elementary schools that teach a foreign language.



SOURCE: Center for Applied Linguistics

Overall, one in four elementary schools offered foreign-language classes in 2008.

"A lot of schools are telling us [the decline] is for budget reasons," said Nancy C. Rhodes, the director of foreign-language education for the center. In addition, she said, "We had a specific question about the No Child Left Behind Act and whether it affected programs. Many said, yes, it's had a negative effect on their programs because they are under so much pressure to allocate time to math instruction and English-language arts."

The most significant decrease occurred in public elementary schools.

Ms. Rhodes said, however, that the percentage of U.S. secondary schools that provide foreign-language classes has stayed about the same over the past decade.

Crowded Curriculum

Officials of the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona had hoped to expand their school system's foreign-language offerings at the high school level. Instead, the school board rescinded a requirement in December that all high school students, starting with the class of 2012, must take two years of a foreign language, which the board had approved last March.

Maggie R. Shafer, the chief academic officer for the 56,800-student district, said the "very forward-thinking policy" was voided because of "budget considerations." She said the state had increased graduation requirements for math and science courses at the same time, and the school district couldn't afford to hire additional teachers for those subjects and for foreign languages. Arizona doesn't require students to take foreign-language courses.

The Springfield, Mass., district is among those that have greatly pared back foreign-language programs in its 32 elementary schools. About a decade ago, Spanish or French was offered in all elementary schools.

Azell M. Cavaan, the chief communications officer for the 25,000-student urban district, said the program was reduced because "there has been a shift in focus to math, science, and English-language arts." She didn't elaborate on whether the district was responding to provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act that require testing only of mathematics, science, and English-language arts.

In 2004, elementary schools in Springfield employed 25 foreign-language teachers; now, four are on board, said Ms. Cavaan. The number of foreign-language teachers in middle schools has decreased from 28 to 18 since then, though foreign-language offerings at the high school level have been maintained, she said.

In 2006, the school district in Akron, Ohio, dropped a Japanese program in one of its elementary schools, the only primary school in the district that offered foreign languages, for financial reasons,

according to Karen Ingraham, a spokeswoman for the 2,300-student district. At the same time, it dropped French and Spanish programs in all its middle schools, but restored those this school year after the community passed a tax levy.

Administrators in districts that have provided foreign-language classes with the help of subsidies from foundations, state education agencies, or other entities say the recession is causing them to consider reducing or eliminating the programs for next school year because they can't run them with outside funds alone.

Marion County public schools and Nelson County schools in Kentucky are in that predicament. For three years, the two rural districts have partnered with a Chinese organization and their state education agency to hire visiting teachers from China to teach that country's language and culture. The statewide program, which 22 districts are participating in, has been restructured, requiring the school systems to pay the visiting teachers more next school year.

Roger L. Marcus, the superintendent of the Marion County district in Lebanon, Ky., said his school system has offered Chinese in grades K-12 for three years, reaching 1,500 to 1,800 of the district's 3,200 students each year.

"We were attempting to build a program from the elementary level up to the high school level with the intent of adding additional resources—before the resources started to dwindle," Mr. Marcus said. "State budget reductions over several years and the reduction in local revenues as a result of the economic recession leave us with little choice" but to cut Chinese next school year, he explained.

Embassy to the Rescue

The Chinese program in Nelson County, in Bardstown, Ky., is also likely to be reduced or eliminated next school year, said Janice O. Lantz, the district's superintendent. The Nelson County district, which has 4,850 students, received a \$45,000 state grant this school year to strengthen the program at the elementary level. Ms. Lantz said the district is hoping it might receive a similar grant next school year, which would permit it to support one visiting Chinese teacher. But she said the district will not have the funds to employ three Chinese teachers, as it has this year and last.

But the superintendent of a 355-student one-school district in Sprague, Conn., may have found a way to keep a teacher on board who has taught Italian for seven years at the K-8 Sayles School.

Ed Senesac, the superintendent, said he was able to implement the Italian program only with the help of small grants from a foundation associated with the Italian Embassy. But he figured for the 2009-10 school year, for which he didn't plan on getting a grant, he only had money to hire the Italian teacher three days a week. He called the foundation and was told he will get enough money to hire the teacher full time for another year.

Mr. Senesac says the Italian program has been "a shining star" in a small town with a low per-capita income. "We've had kids visit Italy; people from Italy have visited us. ... With all these budget cuts, we have to keep our eye on the fact that we have a responsibility to make sure these kids can compete in the international community 10 or 15 years from now."

Some Expansions

Despite the economic downturn, some districts are expanding foreign-language offerings.

In September, the 17,000-student Ann Arbor, Mich., district plans to launch a foreign-language program intended eventually to reach all elementary students. The district will start by offering Spanish to 3rd graders in its 21 elementary schools.

Liz Margolis, the director of communications, said the district struck a special agreement with the teachers' union that permits it to use student-teachers from the University of Michigan to teach the language classes, which will run two half-hour periods each week.

Donald Freeman, the director of teacher education at Michigan, said the partnership benefits the university, which provides the student-teachers at no cost to the district. It gives the institution "the ability to work in a closely sustained way in clinical settings to develop world languages, which isn't done well in many places."

A limited number of districts are benefiting from federal grants to expand programs. For several years now, the U.S. Department of Defense's Foreign Language Education Program has given grants of \$750,000 to \$1 million annually to each of two partnerships engaging the Portland, Ore., and the Dearborn, Mich., public schools to establish a K-16 pipeline for teaching Chinese or Arabic.

But mostly, says Ms. Rhodes of the Center for Applied Linguistics, the communities that are able to maintain robust foreign-language programs tend to be those in high-income areas. "All in all," she said, "in the United States, we still have a long way to go if we are just teaching foreign languages in high school, in getting the students up to a proficient level."