

APPENDIX F

"A Case for Foreign Languages: The Glastonbury Language Program"

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“A Case For Foreign Languages The Glastonbury Language Program”

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Since the 1950s in Glastonbury, Connecticut, all students have studied at least one foreign language beginning in elementary school. Although there have been many national revolutions within language pedagogy since this program was established, the course offerings in Glastonbury are nearly the same ones that were in place in 1957, when the program began.

All second, third, fourth, and fifth grade students study Spanish, and in grade six, they can add the study of French. In grade seven, students may add the study of Russian and in grade nine, the study of Latin. Recently instituted is the opportunity to begin Japanese in kindergarten at a magnet school operated with East Hartford, Connecticut. At Glastonbury High School, Japanese is also offered through two-way interactive television with area high schools and Manchester Community-Technical College.

Over the last 40 years, the students who graduated from Glastonbury High School have gone on to prominent positions in society. Many report that the special opportunity they had in the Glastonbury public school system afforded them entree to a knowledge about other people, as well as interesting vocations and avocations that they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to select. Former graduates work in every sector of business and industry. Some have been drawn to the diplomatic and intelligence communities, and still others have served in the Armed Services. In the last 10 years, students of Russian have had a unique opportunity to use their skills in many joint ventures in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

How is it that this community has sustained and grown an excellent foreign language program since 1957? In many ways, Glastonbury is an average community. Its population is just under 28,000, its income level is middle class, average class size is 21, and average per-pupil expenditure is \$6,423. Only 1% of its students is identified as “gifted and talented.” The following report, adapted and reprinted with permission from the Council for Basic Education (Brown, 1995), explores the answer to this question.

Why a Long Sequence of Study?

What are the *essential elements* that the public must perceive in order for them to support a language program over such a long period of time? Conversations with townspeople and qualitative research with students and graduates indicate that the single greatest ingredient for maintaining the supportive attitude about the language program is that students who graduate from the program are able to use their language knowledge in later life. Success breeds success. The momentum to maintain the language program and expand it has come from a community whose children and grandchildren have returned to Glastonbury, talking about the tremendous preparation they had in the program to think, read, write, and speak in another language.

Why is it that Glastonbury students can speak and use a language while students from some other school districts find that they really can't? It isn't as simple as the airline magazines would have one believe. Just by playing a tape recorder under the bed at night, one is not going to miraculously absorb Serbo-Croatian or even French. The United States Foreign Service and Department of State have 25 years of research on the length of time it takes Americans to become proficient in another language. The ability to function beyond the tourist level in a language—to be able to communicate with a business partner or to negotiate a contract—takes thousands of hours of contact in French or Spanish and four to five times that much time in Russian, Mandarin, Japanese, or Arabic. It is no wonder that the average high school students who have had only about 200 contact hours (usually in a European language) can't say much by the time they graduate from high school.

Students graduating from schools where they *do* have the opportunity to study a language over a long period of time recognize that their skills have gotten better and better as they have studied the language. Although they might reflect on their elementary experience as being simplistic, they can say with some certainty that without that experience, they would have had no foundation upon which to build in junior and senior high school. When Glastonbury students go on to college, many place into third year courses and some place out of the undergraduate language sequence altogether. These are not all academically remarkable students. These are students who have had the opportunity to cultivate and nurture their language skills in a sequential fashion beginning in primary school.

"Studying Russian in grammar school was more than just another class for me. Literally my entire life has been shaped by that study. To highlight a few of the direct results: I spent a month in Ukraine, USSR, where I made friends with whom I still keep in touch. Four years later, I became interested in Georgetown University because of their Russian program and was accepted because of the experience I had already acquired in the language. I have spent the last nine months studying in Russia and have an internship at TIME magazine in Moscow."

Erin Doyle
Graduate of Glastonbury High School

Obstacles

If this approach to language learning has worked so well in Glastonbury, why aren't other districts doing the same? Some districts and some states are working to expand programs into the early grades. However, interviews with language supervisors, principals, and school superintendents seem to indicate that there are major obstacles: in particular, staffing, teacher training, and articulation—sequential planning from level to level. When the middle school or the high school teachers are not trained properly to receive elementary youngsters with a strong foreign language base, these students are thrust into classrooms where the teachers cannot build upon their students' knowledge, resulting in frustration and failure on both sides.

Also, some elementary students go into middle school and high school programs where they are in classes with beginning language students. Teachers teach to the beginning level and the students who have developed a strong language base in the elementary and middle grades are left to sit and become turned off.

Essential Elements for Success

In many school districts, curriculum supervisors, especially for foreign languages, do not exist. Language study, rare in the elementary grades, does not get the attention that it needs from elementary school principals, most of whom have never studied a foreign language. For the last 40 years the Glastonbury program had the unique and consistent oversight of a foreign language curriculum director from the elementary grades to grade twelve.

In an effort to be more interdisciplinary and to encourage more site-based management, the curriculum director has formed partnerships with the administrators in the district's schools. This results in the oversight of the language program being carried out by a team. The language program director and the elementary principal hire,

supervise, and evaluate teachers. This partnership has resulted in a stronger language program at the elementary level, because the curriculum director has a thorough understanding of how to hire and supervise language teachers and the elementary principals have a greater knowledge of the needs of each school.

Another important element of the Glastonbury elementary and middle school program is that the language teachers in the elementary grades are solicited on the basis of both their language competence *and* their understanding of the broader curriculum at the elementary levels. Elementary teachers in Glastonbury are a combination of elementary classroom teacher and foreign language teacher. Because they feel comfortable in the elementary school environment, they form good relationships with the other classroom teachers and serve as general resources to the broader elementary school curriculum, especially in social studies. Glastonbury's elementary language teachers teach an average of 10 classes a day in the elementary grades. They are usually assigned to only one school, so they become part of the total school staff, as opposed to just being itinerant teachers who don't have a chance to build relationships or rapport in the school.

Another pillar of the Glastonbury curriculum has been coordination of the program in grades two through twelve. Language teachers from all grade levels meet monthly to discuss district-wide events and priorities. The curriculum is reviewed with cross representation from all levels of language instruction that includes community members, classroom teachers, and administrators from other disciplines. All textbook selection and curriculum design is undertaken by teachers representing elementary, middle, and high school. Most recently, in an effort to ensure that the curriculum is being implemented along national, state, and local curriculum guidelines, the teachers have been writing collaborative departmental examinations for grades five through twelve.

In 1996 the teachers created a common scoring mechanism for grading student examinations. In these exams, students listened to native speakers in real life situations, read articles from authentic sources, and wrote a response to a real life event or activity. The teacher conducted speaking interviews with students at all levels.

Also, teachers exchanged students and tapes in order to assess speaking skills and to ensure a common grading standard. Prior to and following testing, teachers met to make sure the test represented appropriate skill levels and that themes used at one level were not repeated at another.

This type of planning ensures that students will move from level to level and build on skills rather than just repeat low level skills at every stage of instruction. The testing will also provide the students with a match between what the curriculum promised and what they actually learned.

All curriculum documents developed for each grade level are shared at parent open houses and with students at the beginning of every school year. Teachers explain to students that the skills they will be learning and the topics that will be addressed are not necessarily the same skills and topics reflected in their textbook—the textbook is only one tool to meet the system-wide goals. If students move into the more advanced levels of language, no single textbook can provide them with all they need to become more proficient speakers of the language.

By sharing the curriculum and testing at the end of every level with the students, parents, and all the teachers, it is hoped that the program will be well-articulated and that students can see their own progress. To help students see the great progress they have made from the elementary school through the high school, portfolio assessment, which includes long-term documentation of student work through projects, videos, audio tapes, and writing samples, is being developed. In the near future, student samples may be kept in an electronic portfolio, and students will be able to present these portfolios for placement at the college and university level in addition to—or in place of—taking the college placement test. College placement tests are generally not based upon what students know and are able to do in schools; they are devised by college level professors with very little experience at the K-12 level. It is hoped that, by presenting these professors with a K-12 portfolio, the college level language sequences will be designed to further students' mastery of a language and not drearily repeat low level material that they have already mastered.

In addition to a communication-oriented curriculum, Glastonbury students have the opportunity to participate in a number of challenging exchange programs. Through the United States Information Agency and the State of Connecticut, Russian language students annually travel to Russia for a three-week stay at a sister school. In 1995 three teachers from other disciplines – history, English and the school media specialist – accompanied the Russian language teacher on the exchange program to St. Petersburg. Through these collaborative endeavors, students are able to benefit from the expertise of teachers outside the language department and the language teachers are appreciated for the depth and breadth of their knowledge.

Interdisciplinary Focus

In Glastonbury, the study of language and culture is not confined to the language program. Recently, the foreign language curriculum director served on the review committee of the K-12 social studies curriculum; in turn, the social studies curriculum director served on the review committee of the language program. As a result, the foreign language curriculum topics are organized so that they parallel topics being presented in social studies.

In the elementary grades, the new history-social studies framework emphasizes particular world areas at different grade levels. The elementary school Spanish teachers correlate the thematic topics they present with the topics presented in social studies at approximately the same time of year. Second graders, for example, study Mexico in their social studies curriculum and the Spanish teachers focuses on the country of Mexico for the entire second grade. In grade six, when world geography becomes the primary focus of the social studies curriculum, students in French and Spanish look at the entire world, with special emphasis on areas where the languages are spoken. In grade seven, students in French, Spanish, and Russian study the role of their respective countries in coordination with the time period being studied in world history.

The same happens in the study of U.S. history: in grades eight and ten, where U.S. history is the focus, the role of immigrants in the development of the history of the U.S. is emphasized for the entire year. At the high school level, foreign language teachers emphasize culture and history topics about Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe in their study of French, Spanish, and Russian. Certainly, the study of Latin is correlated with the study of the ancient world at the high school level. Unfortunately, teachers are rarely given common planning time across disciplines, although this would be a natural outgrowth of the braiding of the two curricular areas.

Similar efforts at curriculum “meshing” are going on with other disciplines. Through these types of connections and the interdisciplinary focus on exchange programs, students begin to see the need to apply other content in their learning of a language. They realize that if they are to be proficient speakers of the language, they must have some meaningful information to communicate with people in communities both at home and abroad.

I think there is a strong impact of learning a second language on learning in general. I am ashamed to say as a former Special Education teacher that I would not have thought about the impact of foreign language because my students traditionally and regrettably would not have taken a foreign language. We have several students right now who are mainstreamed into Spanish but who have substantial special education needs. One has Aspergers' syndrome, a form of autism. When he entered school he didn't talk at all. We thought perhaps he was mute. He has been taking Spanish, since the third grade, and one of the first people he ever spoke to was Ida Shea, his Spanish teacher. Today he participates actively in Spanish class.

Patricia DaSilva
Principal, Buttonball Lane School, 1995

Community Commitment

As important as curricular understanding and unification are both within the foreign language program and across disciplines, it is also vital to communicate to the public that these activities are occurring in the schools so that the public continues to be an advocate for language programs. We invite parents of elementary students to participate in classes during National Foreign Language Week. During these special lessons, classrooms are jammed with parents and grandparents who are delighted to see young children speaking and using the language. Additionally, all elementary school newsletters contain a weekly column on what is happening in the language classroom. Because many parents have not studied a language at the elementary grades, they are not sure what is possible, so our elementary teachers keep them apprised of classroom activities and ways of working with their children at home to use the language.

For students who are new to the district, a parent packet of material, including an audio tape, is made available so that parents can help their child enter the curriculum.

In grades six through twelve, information is provided through school newsletters and two local newspapers that serve the community. The language teachers have an annual goal of publicizing the activities that involve students.

Parents as Advocates

As mentioned, parents are invited to Foreign Language week celebrations that draw crowds of between 500-800 people. Students from every level perform at these events so parents can see the potential progression of their child's skills throughout the grades.

Throughout the school year, parents and community members serve as representatives on curriculum studies and on the development of school policies that relate to the language program, such as a recently-adopted International Travel Policy.

Furthermore, parent orientation creates many advocates for the language program by involving parents in the preparation for exchange programs and their children's travel abroad. While their children are gone, parents learn about the cross-cultural and linguistic issues that arise in foreign travel and how they can be dealt with in a positive manner.

While it is important that our students travel abroad, it is also very important that we bring students from other countries to stay with families in Glastonbury. Annually, we host foreign exchange students, as well as students from both of our official exchange schools in the former Soviet Union and Morelia, Mexico. These host parents serve as advocates of the program long after their children have graduated from our high school.

Conclusion

Certainly, the language program has been supported by the parent community over the years. However, support is neither certain nor automatic. The teachers and the curriculum director continually work to maintain a high level of community involvement. From the parent open houses to community-wide international celebrations, something is always taking place that involves students and their families.

Students also organize a number of events. After-school clubs in grades six through twelve, language contest, and immersion experiences are all partially planned by students. As the students continue to love learning languages, they convince others that it is important to study hard and do well in their language classes.

Finally, the success of the program is testimony to the outstanding program staff, who love languages themselves, and who know how learning a language can change one's life forever.

Reference

S. Soper (Ed.). (1995). The case for foreign languages. The Glastonbury language program [entire issue]. *Perspective, Council for Basic Education* 7 (2).

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