

# Graduating Globally Competitive Workers

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In March 2012, the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations released its "U.S. Education Reform and National Security" report calling attention to a distressing truth that many people have known for years: American students are lagging behind their international peers. This report laid out the implications in stark terms with a sense of urgency reminiscent of President Obama's 2011 State of the Union Address, in which he called for the U.S. to "out-educate" the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup>

"Too many young people are not employable in an increasingly high-skilled and global economy," notes the report, a problem exacerbated by the fact that competition on an international stage is fierce — and U.S. students are, more and more, competing with foreign talent for American jobs. A 2011 survey of U.S. business executives revealed that foreign nationals have an advantage in competing for international jobs,<sup>2</sup> while a 2011 Forbes Insights survey found that 1 in 3 responding American firms would be more likely to fill more or significantly more key positions with foreigners over the next two years.<sup>3</sup>

The report also highlights a troubling statistic that will become a bigger problem as the world gets smaller: "Although the United States is a nation of immigrants, roughly 8 in 10 Americans speak only English and a decreasing number of schools are teaching foreign languages." Compare this to the fact that 200 million children in China are studying English, and every educated child in India learns English.<sup>4</sup>

To ensure our students are graduating with the employable skills needed to enter the global workforce — and to ensure the U.S. continues to remain competitive in the global economy — we need to be implementing an



effective language learning program throughout the K-20 education system. This Center for Digital Education white paper explains why an effective language learning program is critical to give our students a competitive edge when they graduate. In addition, the paper highlights practical strategies for K-12 and higher education institutions looking to implement language learning programs.

### Language Learning on the Decline: The Implications

To further understand educational priorities and challenges in preparing students for a global economy, the Center for Digital Education recently surveyed over 100 leaders in K-12 and over 100 in higher education. These leaders were asked whether training in a second language and multiculturalism was needed to remain globally competitive. An overly resounding 97 percent of K-12 and 96 percent of higher education respondents agreed with the statement. (See other reasons why educators say language learning is important in the graph on page 4.) Lack of support is clearly not the issue.

But the fact remains that the focus on language learning has steadily been declining in the U.S. school system over the last decade. According to the article “American’s Foreign Language Deficit” in *Forbes*, “the percentage of public and private elementary schools offering foreign language instruction decreased from 31 to 25 percent from 1997 to 2008.” The decrease in foreign language courses is largely due to education budget cuts, a trend that has continued as the economy has weakened.<sup>5</sup>

At the higher education level, the Center for Digital Education survey found that only 28 percent of responding higher education institutions, mostly public two- and four-year colleges, require a foreign language course for graduation. And for those institutions that do require foreign language, there has been a reduction in the number of languages offered on campus as colleges eliminate instructional offerings in “less popular” languages.<sup>6</sup>

This lack of emphasis on language learning in the K-20 education system has two main implications for students. The first is that they may not have the necessary skills needed to enter the workforce, and the second is that it will be more difficult for them to compete for jobs in the U.S. and abroad.

### Employable Skills Disadvantage

The first implication is that it will be more difficult for students to develop the necessary workforce skills. In the Center for Digital Education’s survey, respondents from K-12, higher education and the private sector were asked what the most important skills were for students to have when entering the workforce. All three groups were in agreement that at the top of this list should be critical thinking, problem solving, oral and written communication, and collaboration skills. However, when asked whether the education system was actually preparing students with these much-needed skills, 62 percent of respondents from the private sector said K-12 schools and districts were not and 47 percent said colleges and universities were not.

## The Advantages of Language Learning: Now and in the Future

Students who study languages other than their native language will benefit throughout their education and have a significant advantage when they enter the workforce. Language learning:

- **Improves primary language proficiency.** By increasing proficiency with a new language, students improve proficiency with their primary languages.
- **Enhances “brain fitness.”** Studies have shown that language learning enhances cognitive abilities and gives students a certain level of brain fitness. Catherine Porter, former president of the Modern Language Association, states, “Demands that the language-learning process makes on the brain ... make the brain more flexible and incite it to discover new patterns — and thus to create and maintain more circuits.”<sup>7</sup>
- **Makes students more desirable job candidates.** Twenty-seven percent of companies responding to the Center for Digital Education survey said that knowing a foreign language improves a student’s chance of being hired.
- **Opens opportunities for higher-paying jobs.** Of the private sector respondents that placed a premium on candidates with language skills in the Center for Digital Education survey, 41 percent said that those candidates are paid at least 11 percent more than their counterparts.

It has generally been thought that improving students' proficiencies in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) would also improve 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills like the ones described above. In fact, much focus has been placed on STEM in recent years, funneling funding away from other areas of investment like language learning.

Although STEM improvement is important for our future, research is starting to show that language learning can not only provide students with these desirable workforce skills, but can also improve students' learning in areas like STEM. Therese Sullivan Caccavale, president of the National Network for Early Language Learning (NELL), states that "foreign language learning is much more a cognitive problem solving activity than a linguistic activity, overall. Studies have shown repeatedly that foreign language learning increases critical thinking skills, creativity and flexibility of mind in young children. Students who are learning a foreign language

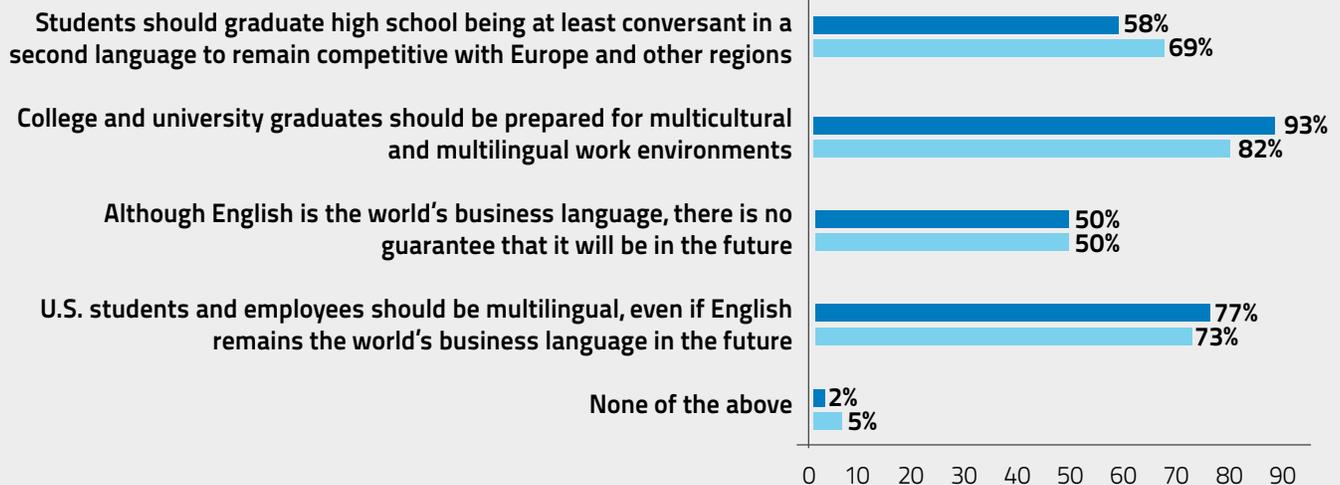
out-score their non-foreign language learning peers in the verbal and, surprisingly to some, the math sections of standardized tests."<sup>8</sup>

### Competitive Workforce Disadvantage

The second implication is that students in other countries will have more of an advantage when competing for U.S. jobs. In a 2010 speech, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan noted that 53 percent of Europeans (and increasing numbers in other parts of the world) can converse in a second language. In comparison, only 18 percent of Americans report speaking a language other than our official tongue. Bilingual and multilingual students from these other countries will have a competitive advantage due to the fact that they can not only compete for jobs in their own country, but can also compete for jobs in the U.S. This advantage is heightened in today's world where modern technology makes it easy to work remotely.

## Educators on the Importance of Language Learning

■ HED ■ K12



Source: Center for Digital Education Research Survey, October 2012

As the 2012 Council on Foreign Relations report about U.S. education reform pointed out, “While the United States invests more in K-12 public education than many other developed countries, its students are ill prepared to compete with their global peers.”<sup>9</sup>

How can language learning help? Language learning can be the key to preparing students with the employable skills desired by the workforce, improving learning in focus areas like STEM and making our students more globally competitive.

### Online Immersive Language Learning: A Practical Solution for Educators

Despite educators’ views on the importance of language learning and the advantages it can bring students, challenges stand in the way of allowing schools to invest in effective programs. Of these challenges, funding and limited staff rank at the top (find additional barriers in the graph to the right).

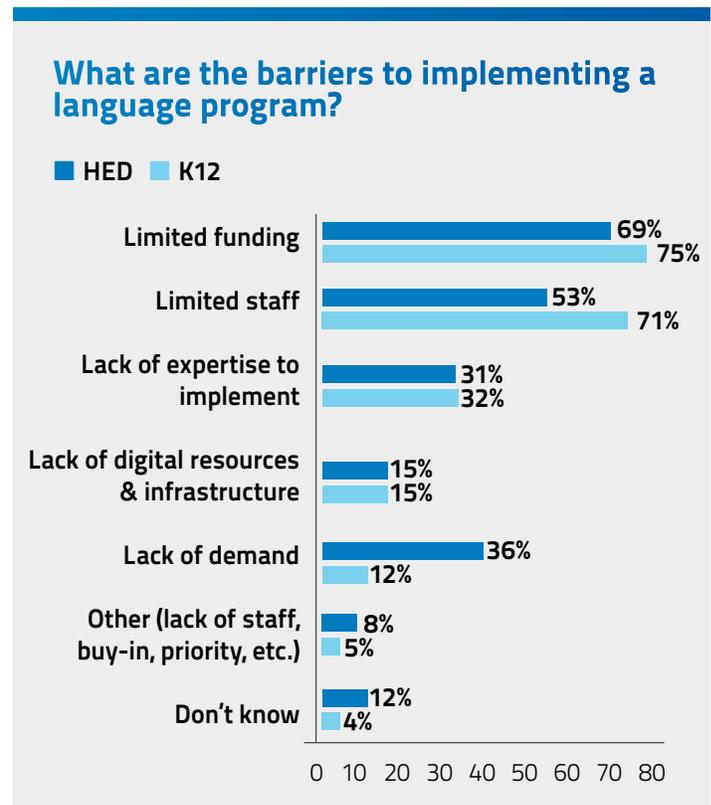
However, online immersive language learning programs are emerging that can help educators overcome these immediate hurdles. Considering that delivering a foreign language is already typically less expensive than other core courses (like a science class) and despite the initial investment of purchasing the software, an online immersive language learning program is a low-maintenance, cost-effective solution that lessens the burden on foreign language instructors. An effective online immersive learning program should have the following attributes.

#### Cutting-Edge Technology

Learning is dynamic, which means that the most effective language learning programs incorporate a blended visual (what you see) and aural (what you hear) experience.

#### Live Conversation

In learning a new language, formative assessment is critical to long-term progress. For this reason, top language learning programs provide for immediate and ongoing assessments of speech, helping students pronounce



Source: Center for Digital Education Research Survey, October 2012

syllables, words and sentences correctly. Some programs even include live conversational trainings with native-speaking language coaches. These trainings are tailored to each student’s individual level of progress.

#### Social Learning Activities

Learning a language should never be one-dimensional. With this in mind, a handful of top-tier language learning programs empower active learners to participate in online communities that could extend their immersion experience. These virtual meeting spaces enable students from all over the world to play games and/or engage in one-on-one practice sessions designed to perfect conversational capabilities.

## Anywhere Access

Because today's students are digital natives, they are not only constantly on the go, but expect online accessibility to learning resources. Therefore, the best language learning programs enable students to engage in learning from just about everywhere they might be. In particular, look for software suites that can turn a student's personal computer, tablet, smartphone or other Web-enabled device into a portal for on-the-go language learning.

Online immersive language learning programs are flexible and sustainable. In addition, they support learning in a variety of formats, and enable students to learn 24/7 from just about anywhere. Educational institutions across the nation are implementing immersive learning programs and realizing these benefits and many more.

## Online Immersive Language Learning in Action

In 2011, Guthrie Common School District (GCSD) in Guthrie, Texas, needed to find a solution that could offer students credits for either the two- or three-year language requirement without the district having to hire new teachers. The district also wanted to leverage technology to offer language courses through the Texas Virtual School Network to neighboring districts, and to provide additional instruction to students who wanted to accelerate learning.

Ultimately, the district turned to an online immersive language learning program. With this technology, not only were students able to pass the language requirements for the state of Texas, but they also achieved a 96.4 percent course pass rate, and a 295 percent increase in active learners overall. Most impressively, District Superintendent Dr. Nelson Coulter says the technology enabled GCSD to offer foreign language instruction for academic credit to schools lacking instructional resources.

Still, for Spanish Instructor Summer Real, the biggest benefits came in the day-to-day application of the knowledge that the program facilitated. "I think the program may provide more opportunities for students to practice speaking the language



**Guthrie Common School District's online immersive language learning program enabled students to pass the language requirements for the state of Texas, and also achieve a 96.4 percent course pass rate and 295 percent increase in active learners overall.**

than they might have had in a traditional setting," she says. She adds that she was "impressed" by students' pronunciation capabilities, and marveled at how quickly students built the confidence to communicate and collaborate in the classroom.<sup>10</sup>

Administrators at a leading medical school in Pennsylvania have used a similar solution to achieve impressive results. There, officials wanted a language learning solution to build critical communications skills for medical students enrolled in the M.D. degree program, to help them improve their interactions with Spanish-speaking patients and to prepare them for study abroad opportunities.

The online immersive language learning solution the university adopted accommodated the scheduling demands of students since it could be accessed 24/7. The students were able to build the critical communication skills needed to consult with patients in the field and the university was able to realize a return on investment of over 160 percent by having the flexibility of re-assigning licenses throughout the year.

The associate dean for medical education at the university stated that the online immersive language learning program “provided on-demand language study without the administrative burdens associated with arranging for an instructor or scheduling a course. It removed the barriers to providing medical students with language instruction.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Additional Strategies for Change**

To increase language learning in the U.S. school system, a concerted effort needs to take place involving government, education and the private sector. To start, language learning needs to be funded like any other core curriculum class. Budget cuts have significantly hindered language learning progress and the only Department of Education program devoted to primary and secondary foreign language education, the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), was terminated in 2011.<sup>12</sup>

Common accountability measures should be developed that allow educators to measure results across language learning programs. Additionally, a broader approach to instruction should be taken that includes adding languages that will increase economic competitiveness, including Mandarin, Arabic, Chinese, German and Hindi.

At the K-12 level, language learning needs to be worked into the curriculum in lower grade levels so students can start the process early on. Over the last 40 years, a number of different research efforts have indicated significant benefits to starting language learning in lower grade levels.<sup>13</sup> (Only 43 percent of respondents to the Center for Digital Education survey said language learning is taught in grades one through six.) Additionally, by providing students with basic reading, listening, comprehension and writing skills in both English and another language, schools and districts are working to prepare them for the rigors of the language and literacy requirements established by the Common Core State Standards.

In higher education, language learning should be added as a core part of the standard liberal arts curriculum

— reversing a trend that has seen the percentage of institutions with an undergraduate foreign language requirement for graduation decline steadily over time across all sectors, from 53 percent in 2001 to only 37 percent in 2011.<sup>14</sup> Language learning should also be incorporated as part of university professional school programs such as for business, medical and law.

Finally, in order to achieve a legitimate competitive edge in the global marketplace, educators and employers need to work together to transform students into globally competitive workers. Hiring organizations must establish open lines of communication with K-12 and higher education institutions to make clear what skills they expect students to possess when they are ready to enter the workforce. In addition, businesses and educational institutions should partner to provide internship/placement opportunities for students, and to assess the career-readiness of students throughout the educational system.

### **Conclusion: A Competitive Edge for Students**

At a time when students are graduating into not only a competitive U.S. workforce, but a competitive global workforce, investment in language learning throughout the K-20 educational system is needed more than ever. Fortunately, online immersive language learning programs are emerging that can allow schools to overcome immediate funding and staffing barriers and provide language learning to students. However, a concerted effort by government, education and the private sector to reform language learning strategies is also needed. The goal of this white paper was to call attention to our nation’s foreign language learning deficit and introduce practical strategies to help tackle it. Because providing language learning to our students not only enhances their learning overall by improving collaboration, communication, problem solving and critical thinking skills, it gives them an advantage in their future careers. It also helps ensure the U.S. will remain competitive in an increasingly global economy.



## Endnotes

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