

From staff reports

Learning a language online

Web-based programs help fill gaps in foreign language instruction

In tiny Weybridge, Vermont (population 833), the most common industry is farming. Yet the fifty or so students in the town's K-6 elementary school are preparing for a much larger world of opportunities by learning a second language.

With just four full-time teachers at Weybridge Elementary, that poses a challenge. The school does have a part-time Spanish teacher who comes in three days a week, says Principal Christina Johnston—but it's an online curriculum developed by Middlebury Interactive Languages, in collaboration with faculty from nearby Middlebury College, that is helping to fill the gap.

"Students can access the curriculum at home, which is a huge advantage in a monolingual culture," Johnston said, noting that Weybridge has an overwhelmingly English speaking population. "The online program helps bring Spanish into students' homes, which shifts everyone's expectations about the importance of language learning."

Nationwide, support for foreign language instruction is dwindling amid tight budgets and a laser-like focus on the high-stakes subjects of English and math. That has some experts alarmed at the ability of U.S. students to compete in a global economy (see sidebar).

Yet Weybridge Elementary is one of several schools that are bucking this trend by turning to online curricula, allowing students to work independently and learn foreign language skills when a teacher isn't available.

Foreign Language,
page 34



Foreign Language...

continued from page 33

While Weybridge is able to provide a part-time Spanish teacher, other schools are using online curricula to teach languages for which they can't find—or afford—a teacher at all.

Colvin Run Elementary School in northern Virginia wanted a language-learning solution that could support and expand its existing Spanish curriculum, while also serving as the foundation for an independent study program in languages for which no teacher was available, such as Chinese.

Colvin Run is using Rosetta Stone's online lessons to supplement its Spanish language program, and the K-6 school is using the company's TOTALE PRO system to teach students Chinese. TOTALE PRO combines online lessons with web-based practice sessions conducted with live native speakers, through a platform called Rosetta Studio.

Funding from the school's PTO supplied netbooks for students to use in a world languages lab, and the system has given Colvin Run "the ability to meet the individual needs of each learner," said Principal Stephen Hockett.

Authentic interactions are key

At Weybridge Elementary, students use the Middlebury Interactive Languages program in the library on laptops that are part of two mobile laptop labs that travel to the classrooms throughout the day.

"For the language program, we set the laptops up in the library, so students are the ones traveling rather than the laptops," Johnston said. "This saves us on setup. Students can also access the program at home and in the classroom."

The Middlebury Interactive Languages (MIL) curriculum was developed by academics at Middlebury College's renowned Language Schools. The college has offered summer language immersion programs for nearly a century, including a program for students ages 12 to 17 that began five years ago.

Students who participated in this



Nationwide, support for foreign language instruction is dwindling amid tight budgets and a laser-like focus on the high-stakes subjects of English and math. That has some experts alarmed at the ability of U.S. students to compete in a global economy.

summer immersion program found it quite valuable, said Aline Germain-Rutherford, chief learning officer for MIL and director of the French School at Middlebury College. But many students noted that, when they returned to school in the fall, they didn't have the opportunity to practice their newly acquired language skills.

"So, about four years ago, we decided that creating online courses with the same immersive approach could help bridge this gap," she said.

Middlebury College partnered with eLearning provider K12 Inc. to develop its online language curriculum, which covers five languages—Spanish, French, German, Chinese, Latin—for grades three to 12. K12 provided its expertise in online learning, and Middlebury faculty—including Germain-Rutherford—provided expertise in language acquisition.

The MIL curriculum is based on principles that research shows to be effective in language instruction, such as the use of authentic materials and experiences. For instance, Middlebury faculty have recorded real interactions between native speakers in different countries.

"We've built language learning activities using these videos, as well as authentic written resources such as newspapers," Germain-Rutherford said.

The use of authentic materials helps students learn not just the language, but also the culture. When watching videos of people greeting each other in Spain, compared to Argentina, "students can see the cultural differences between the two," she explained. "It's not just about the words and the structures."

That cultural understanding is as important as learning the language,

Foreign Language , page 35

Foreign Language...

continued from page 34

Johnston said. She noted that it helps meet curriculum goals in social studies, as well as fulfilling a key objective of Weybridge's Spanish language program: to develop "cross-cultural awareness ... , preparing children to participate effectively in the world."

Another principle of the MIL curriculum is that, to learn a new language, "students must interact and negotiate in a meaningful way," Germain-Rutherford said. Toward that end, the curriculum includes task-based activities rooted in a real-life purpose, such as

ordering in a restaurant.

To recreate this kind of interaction online, the curriculum embeds audio inputs within the dialog, and there are also opportunities for students to interact asynchronously or in real time with a certified online instructor.

For Weybridge, giving students access to an online instructor helps fill the gaps when the school's part-time Spanish teacher isn't there. This personalized instruction also helps students develop confidence in their speaking skills, Johnston said.

Students can practice their pronunciation privately online, she explained, which helps those "who might be hesi-

tant to speak in front of the class. They can bring that confidence to class after using the online curriculum."

With help from this online program, students not only are learning a skill that can prepare them for life and work in a global society, Johnston said; they're also enhancing their English competency.

Weybridge's Spanish language program "meets so-called 21st century skills," she said, "but it also increases students' metacognition of the English language. They can see that word order makes a difference. They realize: It makes a difference in Spanish—and, oh yeah, it makes a difference in English, too." **eSN**

Foreign language instruction meets a critical need

Across the United States, foreign language programs are shrinking or disappearing altogether as school leaders face budget concerns and competing priorities.

According to an article in *Forbes* magazine, for instance, the percentage of public and private elementary schools offering foreign language programs declined from 31 percent in 1997 to 25 percent in 2008.

Advocates of foreign language instruction say online programs can help offset this decline. That's important, they say, because learning a foreign language is an important skill as our society and our workforce become increasingly global.

According to a study conducted this year by International Data Corp. and commissioned by Microsoft, "bilingual/multilingual" ranked No. 8 on the list of skills most desired by U.S. employers.

That's a reflection of the fact that most businesses today have employees and/or customers around the globe—as well as the critical importance of communications skills to employers. (In fact, "oral and written communications skills" ranked No. 1 on IDC's list.)

But foreign language skills aren't just important for employability; they're also critical to U.S. security interests.

Last year, the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations issued a report, titled "U.S. Education Reform and National Security," that called the decline in foreign language instruction "a national security issue."

"The lack of language skills and civic and global awareness among American citizens increasingly jeopardizes their ability to interact with local and global peers or participate meaningfully in business, diplomatic, and military situations," the report said.

The U.S. isn't producing enough foreign-language



speakers to staff important posts in the Foreign Service, the intelligence community, or American companies, the report noted. It cited a separate report from the Government Accountability Office that found the State Department faces "foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest," leaving the U.S. "crippled in its ability to communicate effectively with others in diplomatic, military, intelligence, and business contexts."

What's more, the report said, students' failure to learn about global cultures also has serious consequences. A recent report by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences noted that "cultural learning" and "cultural agility" are critical skills in the military.

These skills allow soldiers to "correctly read and assess situations they encounter," the council's report said. They also give soldiers "the tools they need to respond effectively and in line with the norms of the local culture" and help them "anticipate and respond to resistances or challenges that arise." **eSN**

Digital World Language Courses for K-12

	Grades K-2 Elementary	Grades 3-5 Elementary	Grades 6-8 Middle School	Grades 9-12 High School	Grades 9-12 Fluency	Grades 11-12 AP* Advanced Placement*
Spanish	1	1 & 2	1 & 2	I & II	I, II & III	AP*
French		1 & 2	1 & 2	I & II	I, II & III	AP*
Chinese		1	1 & 2	I & II	I & II	
German		1 & 2	1 & 2	I & II		
Latin		1	1 & 2	I & II		

Make the academic excellence of Middlebury College available to your students.

Middlebury Interactive, the recognized leader in digital world language education, provides access to superior online programs that prepare students with the language skills and cultural understanding to compete in the 21st Century global marketplace.

Interactive courses:

- Integrate communication, culture, connections, comparisons and communities at varying levels of immersion.
- Offer customized programs and courses that are specifically designed at grade level—whether used fully online, in a blended model or as supplemental material.
- Engage students in a variety of activities, practices, tasks and assessments.
- Align with the National Standards developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).



*Advanced Placement and AP are registered trademarks of the College Board, which was not involved in the production of, and does not endorse, this product.