



(PAUL TOPPLE/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL/MCT)

# Elementary World Language Instruction

*Learning a second language at an early age has many benefits, research shows—yet only 25 percent of U.S. elementary schools have world language programs*

At Scenic Heights Elementary School in Minnetonka, Minn., students practice writing Chinese characters in their notebooks as their teacher writes these characters in broad strokes on an interactive whiteboard. Then, the teacher leads students in a song that is sung in Chinese.

The students are part of an optional Chinese language immersion program, in which most of their daily lessons are taught in this second language. Each of Minnetonka's six elementary schools offers an immersion program in either Chinese or Spanish, and the district's two middle schools allow students to continue their language instruction in grades 6-8.

A YouTube video shows Scenic Heights students quickly picking up the Chinese language.

"It just seems like the right time to do it," says parent Cathy Smith in the video. "They're young and they don't even know it's supposed to be hard—and their brains are ready to take a lot of things in."

Minnetonka's elementary schools are among the thousands of elementary schools nationwide that offer some type of world language instruction. But, despite a large body of research suggesting numerous benefits to having young students learn a second language, the percentage of elementary schools offering foreign language instruction actually declined during the 2000s, according to the Center for Applied Linguistics.

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About a quarter of the nation's elementary schools offered instruction in a world language during the 2008-09 school year, according to the center's most recent survey on the topic. That's down from about a third of elementary schools some 10 years earlier.

Although studies point to both cognitive benefits and academic gains from learning a second language early on,

"budgets often present a problem," said Martha G. Abbott, executive director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

And with heightened accountability on schools to ensure their students' success in reading and math, some elementary school leaders might view world language instruction as an unnecessary activity that takes away from instructional time in these high-stakes subjects.

While ACTFL has noticed a growing interest in foreign language instruction

among parents, and some elementary schools are implementing or expanding world language programs, "at the same time, we're seeing schools eliminating programs when their budgets get tough," Abbott said.

### Cutting programs a shortsighted approach

Advocates of learning a foreign language at a young age believe it's shortsighted for schools to cut these programs, because their benefits extend to all academic areas.

Research shows a young child's brain is more receptive to learning multiple languages. Young children can learn as many spoken languages as they can hear systematically—but if students wait until high school to start learning a second language, the task becomes much harder.

What's more, there is substantial evidence suggesting that early language learning improves a child's cognitive abilities—and it correlates with higher academic achievement on standardized tests (see sidebar). Learning a second language also helps students appreciate cultural diversity.

Dual-language programs, in which students are taught core academic content in two languages, are a fairly cost-effective way to have students learn a world language in elementary school, Abbott said—and states such as Utah and Delaware have made efforts to expand their dual-language programs.

In Minnetonka, the world language immersion program began in 2007 with kindergarten and first grade, and it now extends to middle school.

In grades K-2, all classroom instruction occurs in Chinese or Spanish, except for specials such as gym, art, and music. Beginning in third grade, students learn reading, writing, and English language arts through direct instruction in English, though they continue to learn other subjects in the second language. This continues until the sixth grade, when the students move to a model with an 87-minute block of

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## Studies show the value of learning a second language early on

Research shows that learning a second language at a young age has measurable cognitive benefits that correlate with higher achievement in other subjects as well. Here's a look at some of this research.

### There is evidence that early language learning improves cognitive abilities.

- Foster, K. M., & Reeves, C. K. (1989). "Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) improves cognitive skills." *FLES News*, 2(3), 4. This study looked at the relationship between elementary foreign language instruction and scores on tests designed to measure cognitive and metacognitive processes. The study included 67 sixth-grade students who were divided into four groups that differed by lengths of time in the foreign language program, including a control group who had no French instruction. The analysis found that students who had received foreign language instruction scored higher on tasks involving evaluation, which is the highest cognitive skill according to Bloom's taxonomy—and the students who had studied French the longest performed the best.

### Language learning correlates with higher academic achievement on standardized tests.

- Armstrong, P. W., & Rogers, J. D. (1997). "Basic skills revisited: The effects of foreign language instruction on reading, math, and language arts." *Learning Languages*, 2(3), 20-31. Third-grade students from were randomly assigned to receive 30-minute Spanish lessons three times a week for one semester. Students in the Spanish classes scored significantly higher than the group that did not receive Spanish instruction in math and language on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT); there was no significant difference in reading scores.
- Rafferty, E. A. (1986). *Second language study and basic skills in Louisiana*. U.S.; Louisiana, from ERIC database. A statewide study in Louisiana revealed that third, fourth, and fifth graders who participated in 30-minute elementary school foreign language programs in the public schools showed significantly higher scores on the 1985 Basic Skills Language Arts Test than did a similar group that did not study a foreign language. Further, by fifth grade, the math scores of language students were also higher than those of students not studying a foreign language. Both groups were matched for race, sex, and grade level, and the academic levels of students in both groups were estimated by their previous Basic Skills Test results and statistically equated.

(Source: [www.actfl.org](http://www.actfl.org))

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instruction in their second language.

Many students in language immersion programs see their ELA test scores dip slightly from grades 2-4, then rebound by fifth grade to meet or exceed the scores of their peers. However, in Minnetonka schools, this has not occurred.

“Our immersion students perform on par with their English program peers at all grade levels,” the district reports on its website, citing a strong commitment by parents to read with children in English at home every night. “By the end of fifth grade, most Minnetonka students are reading in English at the 11th grade level.”

As reflected in Minnetonka, Chinese and Spanish tend to be the most popular world languages taught in dual-language programs, Abbott said—and ACTFL has seen a growing interest in Chinese instruction at the elementary level in recent years.

## Baltimore County pilots innovative blended model

Maryland’s Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) is bucking the trend of declining world language instruction at the elementary level with an innovative pilot program beginning this fall.

The BCPS pilot is not an immersion program, but a cost-effective blended learning program in which fourth-grade students at 10 pilot schools will learn Spanish for one period every day.

“Proficiency in a second language is an important part of any 21st-century skills toolkit, one that every student will need to be successful,” said BCPS Superintendent S. Dallas Dance, a 2014 Tech-Savvy Superintendent Award winner from eSchool News, in a statement.

“As our world becomes smaller and more interconnected thanks to technology, we know these skills will become increasingly valuable to our graduates in commerce, communications, and lifelong learning,” Dance said.

review process, a committee of teachers, administrators, and language specialists chose the curriculum from Middlebury Interactive Languages (MIL), which grew out of Middlebury College’s famed Language Schools, for this online instruction.

“Far and away, Middlebury was the vendor whose content they responded to the best,” Schiffer said of the committee.

The MIL curriculum is based on principles that have proven to be effective in language instruction, such as the use of authentic materials and experiences. For instance, the curriculum includes video clips showing real interactions between native speakers in different countries.

The 10 Baltimore County pilot schools were chosen from among 31 elementary schools that expressed interest in having a world language program, and they had to demonstrate support from the community. The responses from these schools were overwhelming, Schiffer said—and they showed

*After a lengthy review process, a committee of teachers, administrators, and language specialists chose the curriculum from Middlebury Interactive Languages (MIL), which grew out of Middlebury College’s famed Language Schools, for this online instruction.*

“Historically, we’ve shown interest in the languages of countries we see as competing with us economically,” she explained. “As parents are thinking of the future of their children and what languages will be important for their economic competitiveness, Chinese stands out.”

Responding to this trend, many companies now offer Chinese as part of their elementary-level world language curriculum.

For instance, Mandarin Chinese is included in the Rosetta Stone Foundations program for grades K-12. Middlebury Interactive Languages has been supplying Chinese instruction for grades 3-5, and a new offering from the company will extend Chinese to grades K-2 this year as well.

In planning the program, BCPS officials were looking for a model they could sustain and replicate throughout their 108 elementary schools, said Brian Schiffer, director of social sciences, fine arts, and world languages for the district. They chose Spanish because Spanish is taught in all of the district’s high schools.

BCPS has hired two elementary Spanish teachers, and each one is responsible for five schools. The teachers will visit a different school every day of the week and work with each fourth grade class on conversational Spanish, using a curriculum the district developed.

For the other four days, the students will learn Spanish via computer, working at their own pace. After a lengthy

how strongly parents and students valued foreign language instruction at the elementary level.

“Speaking and understanding the Spanish language is becoming more and more important in today’s changing world,” wrote one parent, who referenced the growing population of Spanish-speaking families at her children’s school. “Having a Spanish class ... will enhance student relationships and enrich everyone’s educational experience.”

“I want to be able to talk to my friends that are Spanish,” wrote a student from Padonia International Elementary School. Another noted: “If students here learn a second language now, they will get a head start for the future.”







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- Utilizes immersion learning principles to help students gain a strong base of comprehension and accelerate language acquisition.
- Aligns with the National Standards developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.



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