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The World Language Challenge

Wisconsin districts are working hard to provide students with a global perspective and international opportunities

Shelby Anderson

When it comes to teaching world languages, schools in the United States have lagged behind other countries. Much of Europe and Asia require that students take a second language early in grade school. In China, a national law requires grade-school students to begin learning English by third grade.

However, in the United States, world language courses can be limited and are not always required. In response, many school districts across the state are expanding the number of world language classes in their schools and adding or building upon other global education opportunities. In addition, this school year, the Department of Public Instruction has launched the Wisconsin Global Education Achievement Certificate, which helps school districts evaluate the entire school curriculum through the lens of global knowledge.

This article features districts that are going above and beyond by offering expanded world language classes and programs.

MENASHA Joint School District

Last school year, school leaders in the Menasha Joint School District were faced with some difficult budget decisions. One option was to reduce the district's world language program. In response, community members quickly spoke out in support of the district's program.

"They came out and said this is something we're proud of," said teacher Lynn Neitzel. "No other district in the Fox Valley area offers the kind of language program that we do."

In the Menasha Joint School District, each of the elementary schools teaches German, Spanish, or Japanese. Neitzel says teaching a new language to students when they are young and just beginning school is the perfect time for them to learn.

"When you learn something when you're young, your brain is still very flexible and you can pick up something like a new language relatively easily," she said.

Students are required to take one of the languages through kindergarten to sixth grade. Students then have the option to take a break from their language, try a different one, or continue. Neitzel says more than 50

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percent of students continue studying a language. Additionally, the high school offers two college-level language classes.

“We want our students to be exposed to different cultures and languages, and to learn that they are not weird, just different,” said teacher Sarah Welke. “They can be engaging and you can learn so much from someone who has a different perspective than you.”

A recent survey of Menasha graduates collected many positive responses about the district’s language program.



“They wrote back to us and said how much the language program changed their lives,” Neitzel said. “They said that they were much more open to meeting new people from different cultures.”

Neitzel said learning a new language opens students’ minds as well — allowing them to think more critically and giving them the ability to put themselves in other’s shoes — skills that are crucial to student success.

“We can’t survive as a nation if we do not have students who can talk to our global neighbors in their language,” she said. “You can’t separate culture and language.”

MIDDLETON-CROSS PLAINS Area School District

In today’s school funding climate, when a district adds a language, it usually has to drop another. However, that was not the case

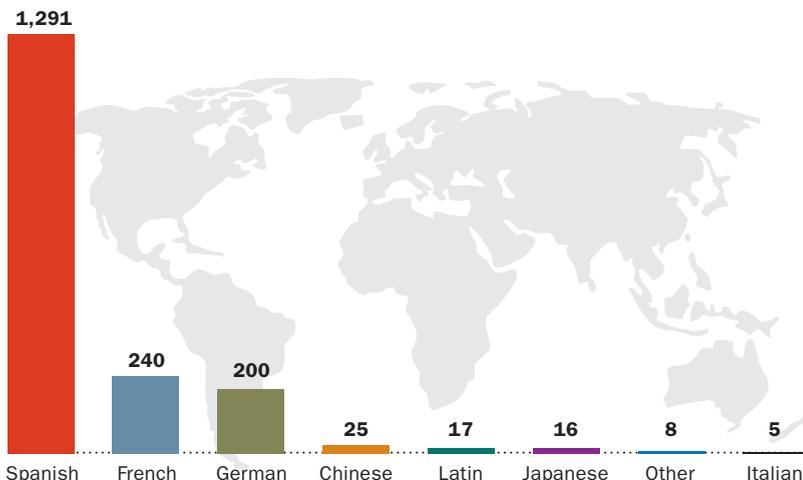
Set for Success

Lynn Nietzel, a teacher at Menasha Joint School District, helped the district establish its K-12 world languages program. She shares some advice about establishing a successful program:

“Start with an overall vision and goal that will bring your ideas to fruition. We had a vision for what our K-12 World Languages program would be from day one, before we started teaching our first kindergartners. Put together a working group to study and continuously move the program through all of the stages — have a plan and timeline in place. Be sure to consider the needs/wants of your community and don’t just follow popular trends. You’ll need staff with both the proper credentials and personality to make the most of your program. And finally, ensure professional development time for all staff, not just your world language teachers, so that everyone can be part of your success.” □

Language Teachers by the Numbers

2012 totals for Wisconsin World Language Teachers in a Classroom





For a district to maintain a world language program that offers four languages, the district needs support from the teachers, administration, students and community.

when two years ago the Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District began offering classes in Mandarin Chinese.

Middleton-Cross Plains is one of the rare districts in the state to have German, Spanish, French, and, now, Mandarin. The first year the district offered Mandarin classes, it shared a teacher with the Waunakee Community School District. This year, the district has it first, full-time Mandarin teacher.

Laura Love, director of teaching and learning at the secondary level, said for a district to maintain a world language program that offers four languages, the district needs support from the teachers, administration, students and community.

“The Middleton-Cross Plains community sees globalization as a crucial topic for our students,” Love said.

Through a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, the district also offers college-level courses in German, Spanish and French. High school teachers are certified through the university and teach a college-level course in their high school classrooms.

Due to budget restraints, the district doesn’t have any formal language classes or activities at the elementary school level. In Middleton, students are introduced to world languages in sixth grade by taking a short exploratory class that exposes them to the four languages the district offers. Then, students are required to take at least one year of a world language in seventh or eighth grade. Considering the large numbers of students taking a language at the

Wisconsin Global Education Achievement Certificate

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has announced the launch of a unique initiative aimed at recognizing and helping students pursue a global education curriculum.

The initiative, the Wisconsin Global Education Achievement Certificate, allows districts to use their existing curriculum to develop criteria to fit the model laid out by the DPI, which includes foreign language education and community service tied to a global issue.

The Wisconsin Global Education Achievement Certificate does not require additional resources in local school districts, as all necessary courses are already part of the curriculum. The certificate, however, gives school districts an opportunity to evaluate the entire school curriculum through the lens of global knowledge. Teachers will be encouraged to include a global dimension whenever possible and warranted.

Each Wisconsin school district develops its own specific Global Scholars policy using guidelines from the DPI and submits its policy to the State Superintendent. This policy should specify the criteria for students to attain the designation, including a listing of specific classes that would fulfill the requirements. This is the first school year the program is available. □

For more information, contact Gerhard Fischer, DPI world language and international education consultant, at 608-257-9265 or Gerhard.fischer@dpi.wi.gov. Or visit, http://cal.dpi.wi.gov/cal_internatled.

high school, most students opt to continue with a language. For example, Sherri Cyra, director of teaching and learning at the elementary level, says that the high school needed six classes of 30 students to meet demand for Spanish 3 this year.

So far, Mandarin hasn’t been as popular but, in addition to being a new language for the district, Cyra said Mandarin can be a little intimidating since it is based off of an entirely different alphabet. Still, the district expects enrollment numbers to increase for Mandarin classes.

PLYMOUTH School District

The Plymouth School District is challenging its students to take a larger approach to global education. In addition to offering world language classes and travel abroad opportunities to students, the district has developed a Global Studies Certificate.

To earn the certificate, a Plymouth High School student has to complete four consecutive years of a world language and take a class in economics, world affairs, and global marketplace. In addition, students are required to read eight books from the district’s world literature list, attend numerous cultural activities each year, and complete 20 hours of related community service.

“The world is becoming increasingly interconnected,” says Laura Koebel, a Spanish teacher at Plymouth High School. “We really need our students to have a cultural awareness and acceptance.”

Koebel established the Global Studies Certificate after participating in a similar program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and attending a world language conference. Only a handful of students have completed the rigorous certificate, but each school year, more students begin to work their ways towards completion.

Plymouth also offers a facilitated

Arabic class to high school students. Two years ago, the district received a grant to hire an Arabic teacher. About 40 students took the class. Today, Koebel continues a version of the class, arranging for students to speak online to an instructor in Egypt about once a week. Koebel also works with the University of Wisconsin-Madison to arrange for other Arabic learning opportunities

for the students.

Throughout all of the district's efforts, Koebel says the administration, the school board and even the larger community has been supportive of the district's global education work.

"Our school has worked really hard to bring the world to our students," Koebel said. ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

A Call to Action

Are world language programs in Wisconsin headed in the right direction?

Mark Lichte

Students who graduate from Wisconsin schools in the year 2025 will enter a world much different than our parents and their grandparents. Our role as educators is to prepare our youngsters for a positive reaction to a changing society.

Oftentimes, our American view is that English will be the dominant language throughout the world. This may be true; however, we have a changing population. This change will provide us with many positive economic, cultural, and educational opportunities. This change could also cause the United States to take on a very isolated view of the world if we do not expand our understanding of languages and cultures. In particular, adults without a relevant world language base may have difficulties in a global economy and could find themselves culturally ignorant.

Administrators and school boards must understand the differences in cultures and languages that will dominate our world in the not too distant future.

What languages should be offered? Based on the demographics of the most populated countries, I would contend that our schools are doing a wonderful job of incorporating the Latino language and culture. In fact, Wisconsin has 200 more certified Spanish teachers than we did 10 years ago.

However, I would contend that we lag far behind in offering languages like Chinese and Arabic. Not offering these languages will negatively influence our economic and global standing in future years. Our world's population projections reflect a serious need to begin thinking about changing our focus in world language programs. For instance, as of this year, Wisconsin has certified only 43 Chinese-language teachers. Children graduating from our current world language programs will not have an advantage over children from other countries, unless we make a change.

Over the last 10 years, we have made slight changes, but not enough, I believe, to say that world languages are



heading in the right direction. The state of Wisconsin has not assisted in this endeavor at this point, especially given the large decrease in funding as well as the promotion of additional academic testing. I am typically an optimist, but peripheral programming in world languages is clearly not a current focus by our state and federal officials.

■ What Can We Do?

I would once again implore our leaders to review the facts on the population of our largest and most powerful countries.

I would also challenge the DPI to allow alternative routes to certification to find future educators in the yet untapped, but increasing Chinese and Arabic populations.

Lake Country School District continues to support students taking French as a world language. However, we do not offer this program as a selection for students. We continue to host students from Toulouse France each year and send students to France each summer.

On the local level, schools might consider the implementation of cultural projects or programs such as Lake Country's "World Explorers" program. Beginning in kindergarten, students grow accustomed to the culture, language and traditions of countries around the world. Additionally, formal or informal exchange programs could be implemented to enhance cultural understanding. Even short-term exchanges can assist in the development of a global perspective. □

Lichte is superintendent of the Lake Country School District.