



Establishing an Understanding of World Language Teaching Trends

The Issue

With one in three Washington state jobs affected by international trade, our state's future rests on how effectively its citizens and businesses can operate in a global economy. Yet Washington state and the U.S. lag behind countries with which they compete economically when it comes to the teaching of world languages. The new National Security Language Initiative addresses the seriousness of this problem, but in Washington state we still lack basic data regarding the world languages offered in our schools. This means that state officials and education policymakers are "flying blind" in making policy regarding the teaching of world languages in Washington state.

Before 2004, no comprehensive information was available regarding the scope and range of language offerings, or even the percentage of all schools statewide and by district teaching world languages. In the spring of 2004, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), the Washington Association for Language Teaching (WAFLT), and the Washington State Coalition for International Education conducted the first World Languages & Technology Survey to find out which languages were being taught in Washington. However, the absence of longitudinal data or even benchmark years means that there was no way of measuring the impact of any change in policy, or the degree to which schools collectively were responding to the state's economic needs or reflecting national/global trends.

"Of the high schools in our 2007 survey, 19% reported offering no world languages at all."

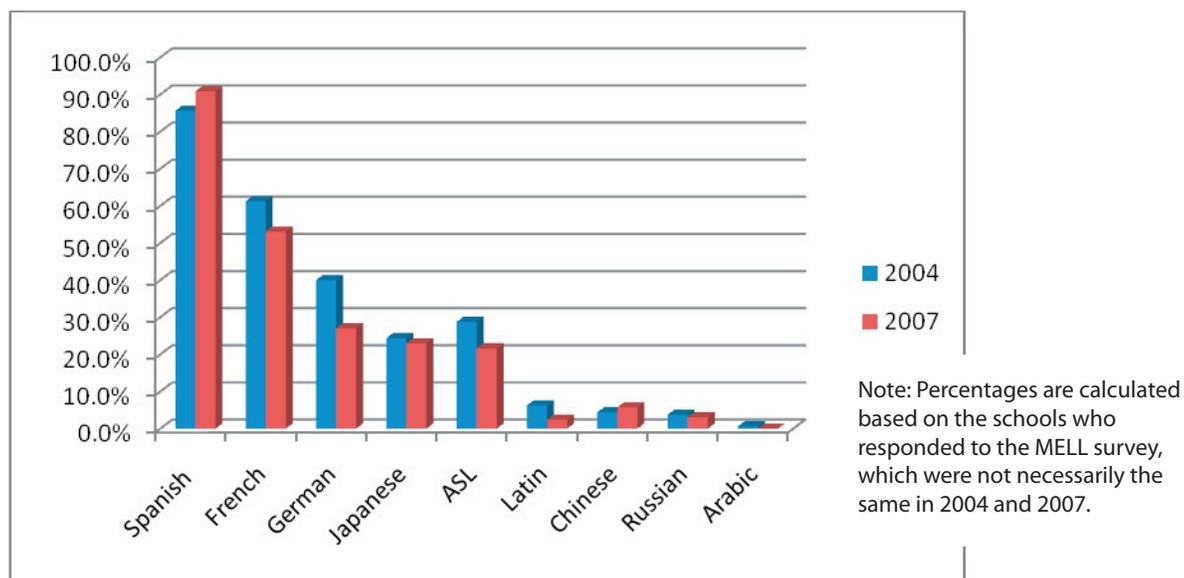
"There is a fallacy in this country that we don't have to learn other languages because everyone else is learning English, and that view profoundly misunderstands the value of foreign language learning. The fact that you can find a McDonald's anywhere in the world and order a burger in English is beside the point. In today's world we must be able to understand other people, their countries, their cultures, and their aspirations. And we do that through language. If we cannot communicate with people in their own language, our understanding of them will always be limited. We are, in many ways, blind to what is really going on in countries where we cannot communicate in their own language."

Richard W. Riley, former U.S. Secretary of Education, in a speech at NAFSA: National Association of International Educators, November 18, 2003

Getting Started 2006-2007

A project was initiated in 2006 to expand on the original 2004 report to create both a snapshot and trend reports over time. Four National Resource Centers at the University of Washington's Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies received funding in 2006 through the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI program to launch a four-year project entitled "Mapping and Enhancing Language Learning" (MELL) in Washington state. The Center for Global Studies, Center for West European Studies (CWES), East Asia Center (EAC) and the Ellison Center for Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies (REECAS) are working with the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Washington State Coalition for International Education, Washington Association for Language Teaching (WAFLT) and the UW Language Learning Center to collect data on what languages are taught where in our state.

Percentage of Languages Offered at Schools Surveyed Through MELL in 2007 vs. 2004



Our initial focus was on gathering data about Washington high schools. During 2006-7, MELL launched a website and collected data from 367 (79%) of the 463 Washington public high schools (compared to the 160 reached in 2004). We now have the prospect of producing the sort of longitudinal mapping originally envisioned, since MELL will continue for at least the next three years with Title VI funding.

What have we learned? Of the high schools in our survey, 19% reported offering no world languages at all. Of the 81% that did, 90.9% offered Spanish, with French a distant second at 53.0%, German third at 27.0%, Japanese fourth at 23.0% and ASL fifth at 21.6%. Some possible trends are visible in the data if one compares the new findings with the (lower yield) 2004 survey. The number of schools offering Chinese was still small, but this vital language was now taught at 6.5% of state high schools, up from 4.4% three years earlier. Despite the importance of the Middle East in global politics and economics, not one public high school in Washington reported offering Arabic during the school day. The sharp decline noted in several languages may

in part result from the difference in the schools sampled in the 2004 and 2007 surveys. Future MELL surveys will be able to confirm the exact scale of these shifts in Washington language teaching.

Looking Ahead: 2008-2009

In 2008-2009, MELL intends to update its 2007 high school survey while also compiling data on elementary and middle schools. MELL will also “map”—quite literally—the teaching of world languages by county and districts and diagram them geographically for the whole state. MELL will also attempt to find whatever data exist on foreign language survey projects in other states. The project will be judged as successful to the extent it can be said that Washingtonians are no longer “flying blind” on world languages, are inspired by the data to promote greater world language learning, and are debating whether or not our teaching priorities in this field are appropriate.

“Those who know nothing of foreign languages, know nothing of their own.”

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The Mapping and Enhancing Language Learning (MELL) project was initiated in 2006 by four National Resource Centers at the University of Washington’s Jackson School of International Studies, which received funding through the U.S. Department of Education’s Title VI program to launch a four-year project to collect data on world language learning and teaching in Washington K-12 schools. The Center for Global Studies, Center for West European Studies (CWES), East Asia Center (EAC), and the Ellison Center for Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies (REECAS) are working with the UW Language Learning Center, Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Washington State Coalition for International Education, and Washington Association for Language Teaching (WAFLT) to establish an understanding of world language teaching trends in Washington state. With funding from the Title VI program grants and a State Innovations grant from Longview Foundation, the MELL project is creating a series of policy briefs based on the data collected through the MELL surveys of schools. **For further information, call the Language Learning Center at 206.543.0563 or email mellwa@u.washington.edu. Web: depts.washington.edu/mellwa**