



# CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT AND STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

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## LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN GEORGIA – A POSITION PAPER

The State of Georgia has consistently lagged behind most states in virtually all measures of school performance, despite many initiatives to improve standards. There have been many studies that indicate that students who have actively studied a world language significantly out-perform their non-language studying peers. There have also been many calls from government and other agencies for increased numbers of young Americans to take up language study. Indeed, in its 2006 publication Education for Global Leadership, the Committee for Economic Development, a Washington-based think tank, made it quite clear that, for economic and security reasons, “*an educated American in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be proficient in at least one foreign language.*”

Yet, in Georgia, we have not made serious progress in the development of a state-wide policy on world language programs in elementary and secondary public schools.

Recently the Georgia Department of Education endorsed a single set of criteria for graduation from high school, combining the two previous sets. Previous the college-preparatory diploma requirements had included two years of a world language, while the vocational diploma had no such requirement. The new single set of criteria has omitted the requirement for two years of language study.

Prior to this decision there was a great deal of lobbying from language proponents trying to ensure the maintenance of the two-year language requirement for graduation. These efforts were not successful, but did result in the establishment of a Task Force on Modern and Classical Languages charged with recommending future strategies for all secondary schools in Georgia. CASIE Executive Director Alex Horsley serves on that task force. This is a positive step in the right direction and CASIE will continue to work with others to ensure that the outcomes of this task force are meaningful and will be implemented across the State.

In developing this Position Paper, The Center for the Advancement and Study of International Education begins with its mission to promote international and language education in public and independent schools. We believe strongly that study of a world language should be an integral part of the core curriculum in all educational programs. We will address organizational issues as well as some more theoretical questions related to language learning.

First of all, however, we must recognize some issues relating specifically to Georgia, including the question of whether to require a two-year world language program for graduation from high school.

However important these may seem to be, we prefer to start with the philosophical notion that development of language proficiency is crucial to preparing students for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The current state of language offerings in Georgia falls far short of the ideal of including language study as part of the core curriculum for all students. Furthermore, it is dubious that an immediate insistence on two years of language study at the high school level would solve this problem. In itself, such a requirement will certainly not create a critical mass of students who develop a high degree of proficiency in a language other than English. We would much rather seek to develop an approach throughout Georgia whereby students can be involved in language study from an earlier age.

We propose some immediate ways to accomplish this without causing an undue burden on the resources of Georgia's public schools:

1. In all high schools there should be access to world language courses for all students at all levels, and that where students embark on such courses they should be required to take a minimum of two years study to gain credit. Students should also have access to Levels III, IV and beyond (International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement) in at least one language. This may require some cross-enrollment between schools, but should be feasible throughout the State.
2. In middle schools all students should have access to world language classes, and, as soon as practicable, this should become a requirement for all students in Grades 6 through 8. There may be a few specific exceptions to this requirement, but for the vast majority of Middle School students a second language should become part of the core curriculum.
3. World language study in elementary schools should be encouraged, with at least one school in each district having language programs from the very beginning (Kindergarten). In larger districts the goal should be to have a variety of language offerings spread throughout the district to allow some parental choice in the language to be studied.
4. World language study should be seen as a developmental continuum, requiring close cooperation between elementary, middle and high schools to ensure sequential and meaningful language study at all levels. This would allow those who pursue language education at the high school level to achieve good levels of proficiency.

Working toward an absolute requirement for language study in the middle years, coupled with development of strong foundation programs in the elementary schools will pave the way for students to acquire high degrees of proficiency as they go through their high school years. This will require commitment of educational leaders, training a body of new language teachers and re-training of many existing language teachers.

Too many educational planners and curriculum designers feel that time constraints restrict adding languages to the core curriculum, especially when there is so much pressure on schools to improve math and science levels. However, there is no basis for such a view. After all, language study is a part of the core curriculum at some stage in virtually every country with which the US competes economically (notably the countries of the EU, China and India). Most of these countries also have

significantly higher levels of achievement in math and science than the US. Specifically in the United States the significant growth and success of International Baccalaureate studies at all levels (Primary Years, Middle Years and Diploma), where study of a world language is an absolute requirement, demonstrate the practicability of including world languages as part of the core curriculum. The fact that the overwhelming majority of the 819 IB programs in the US are to be found in public schools serves as further evidence that this can be done.

One of the major problems is that educational policy makers continue to regard language development as simply another subject to be added to the curriculum. We prefer to see language development as a communication skill required for success throughout life. Language educators themselves bear some of the blame, because too many of them feel that they are training students for ongoing success in literary or other academic fields. The simple fact of the matter is that relatively few of those who develop high levels of proficiency in a world language during their K-12 years go on to major in languages at the university level. They regard their language proficiency as an added asset in whatever becomes their chosen field.

There are ways to address this issue:

1. We support the recent trend towards “content-based” language education, whereby students study other subjects through the medium of their second language. This encourages language teachers to go far beyond their current brief of instructing students purely in basic grammar and vocabulary and immediately demonstrates to students that language is a means of communication with relevance in all subject areas.
2. We urge the development of immersion programs in Georgia elementary schools. Such programs are now well established in virtually every other state, with consistently high overall performance results for those students participating. Certainly every school district of a reasonable size should consider adding at least one immersion program in its elementary schools, either as a magnet school or a charter school.

By adopting some or all of these ideas, we feel that the State of Georgia can make real progress in meeting two clear goals. The first is ensuring that as many students as possible meet the criterion of the Committee on Economic development cited at the onset of this paper that “*an educated American in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be proficient in at least one foreign language...*” The second goal was clearly stated by State Superintendent of Schools, Kathy Cox, when she said that her main priority is “*to prepare Georgia to lead the nation in improving student achievement.*”

Alex Horsley  
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