



Monolingualism diminishes America's stature on the world

BY MARTHA G. ABBOTT, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 03/08/18 10:00 AM EST
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Most school districts across the United States tout 21st century skills along with developing students' global competence. Yet, in the majority of those efforts, administrators and policymakers fail to emphasize an increasingly important skill for all Americans: speaking more than one language.

At a time when there is an increasing demand among employers for multilingual skills and a [national report](#) commissioned by Congress, "America's Languages: Investing in Language Education in the 21st Century," calling for closing the language gap in this country, we find that only about one-fourth of elementary schools in the United States offer any kind of language instruction to students beyond English. So critical is the language gap in filling business, government and education positions, a national public awareness campaign, [Lead with Languages](#), has been launched by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

This campaign, designed to create a new generation of linguistically and culturally competent Americans, is raising public awareness about the critical role that multilingualism can play in career options. No longer are multilingual skills limited to certain sectors of the U.S. economy, but the [demand is evident](#) across career sectors and across government agencies. No matter what career interest students have, they will be better equipped to not just survive, but thrive, in our interconnected

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world if they develop language proficiency in more than one language.

The America's Languages report recommends five specific areas in which we need to take action in order to integrate valuing languages into the fabric of U.S. society:

1. Increase the number of language teachers at all levels of education so that every child in every state has the opportunity to learn a language in addition to English. With 43 states plus the District of Columbia citing shortages in the area of language teaching, the crisis is real. ACTFL has teamed up with [Educators Rising](#) to encourage middle and high school teachers to develop programs that will encourage young people to consider a career in language teaching.
2. Supplement language instruction across the education system through public-private partnerships among schools, government, philanthropies, businesses and local community members. The report encourages local communities to leverage their resources to expand access to language learning opportunities: "A number of public-private partnerships have already been established in communities around the nation. For example, the Chicago Public School system supports a flourishing Arabic language program, guided by the Center for Arabic Language and Culture, that draws on the local Arabic-speaking populations as well as support from local and international businesses and the Qatar Foundation International to supplement classroom learning."
3. Support heritage languages spoken in the United States, and help these languages persist from one generation to the next. Census data show that generally by the third generation, immigrant populations have almost entirely lost their ability to speak the native language. As we seek to build our nation's linguistic capacity, it is essential that heritage speakers be provided opportunities to continue to develop their native language while learning English. Programs in schools and communities can help raise awareness among heritage speakers of this important connection between becoming fully bilingual and biliterate and career and job opportunities that are rapidly expanding for bilinguals.
4. Provide targeted support and programming for Native American languages as defined in the [Native American Languages Act](#). The use of Native American languages in schools, whether as the language of instruction or in addition to an English-based curriculum, needs to be actively encouraged and supported so that these languages can not only survive, but continue to thrive.
5. Promote opportunities for students to learn languages in other countries by experiencing other cultures and immersing themselves in multilingual environments. Both at the high school and university levels, students need to be offered the opportunity to study abroad without facing hurdles in meeting graduation requirements or in fulfilling federal financial aid requisites.

In addition to acting on these recommendations, there are additional glimmers of hope that the United States is turning the tide toward multilingualism. Programs such as the [Seal of Biliteracy](#), now operational in 30 states and being considered in an additional 10, are challenging high school students to demonstrate language competence in two languages to receive a special seal on their high school diploma. This program also promotes our heritage and Native American language learners to continue developing their native language at the same time

they are becoming proficient in English.

In addition, states such as Utah and Delaware, along with urban areas such as New York and Los Angeles, have implemented dual language programs at the elementary level that offer students the opportunity to begin learning a second language at an early age allowing students to participate in a long sequence and develop higher levels of language proficiency. Parent groups have effectively mobilized to lobby local school districts to implement language programs.

The timing could not be more critical for the United States to embrace linguistic and cultural development for all its citizens. We face a challenging future in navigating worldwide economic and security issues where our current monolingualism will definitely work against us. Creating a "new normal" of multiliteracy and multiculturalism is key to the future of our country as a leader on the world stage.

Martha G. Abbott is executive director of the [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages \(ACTFL\)](#).

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