Foreign Language Requirements in High School:

Solution and Advantages

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Learning a foreign language is a requirement in most other countries where English is not the primary language. However, learning a foreign language is not a requirement in America despite the number of benefits it holds not only academically, but socially and mentally as well. The obvious benefit starts with the completive nature of the job market. Knowing another language can also make students more cognitively functional, which means an increase in memory and the staying power of knowledge. Around the world, schools are teaching their students second and third languages to advance them in the world. Being one of the few countries who do not, America is falling behind by not having this requirement. Socially, the benefits of learning another language comes from the ability to have a conversation with your peers who, in this day and age, may not know English as their primary language. By requiring a foreign language in high school, a student has the opportunity to increase their overall knowledge base, gain an advantage over their later employment competition, and make communication easier over all.

**History and Overview:**

Schools across the United States are torn over the amount of foreign language that their students should be learning. Some schools are dropping foreign language altogether due to budget cuts and lack of reliable teachers for the subject. There are many studies for the teaching of foreign language in grade schools, however a growing number of students either do not have access or opt out of learning it and instead choose other subjects. Requiring a foreign language is not a nation-wide norm yet, and different states have different policies. California, for example, requires one class in either art or foreign language (Devlin, 2015). Other countries have students starting to learn a second language as early as first grade in some places. Even though English is still one of the most used languages in the world, other languages such as Spanish and French are close seconds and deserve similar attention as global awareness becomes more prevalent.

**Academic Success:**

Studies have shown that learning a foreign language promotes cognitive functions, which encourages academic achievement. Cognitive functions are memory, reasoning, and attention. Many studies have been done on the effect foreign language has on the mind. Results from studies done in the 1980s show that student with more time learning foreign language tested better on tasks involving evaluation (What the Research Shows, n.d.). Due to the way the brain processes languages, when words are spoken the brain hears part of the words and can make guesses as to what the word may be before it is finished (Marian, 2012). This goes double for those who can understand more than one spoken language. Because of this, the brain develops memory and knowledge recognition much better than someone who has not learned a second language.

This extra boost in cognitive function can help later on when age starts to take away a person’s memory, or the ability to retain information. Studies have shown that those who are bilingual are less likely to experience cognitive regeneration as they age than someone who does not know a second language (What the Research Shows., n.d).

**World Wide Inequity:**

In a study done by the U.S. Department of Education, only 18% of American can speak a language other than English (Altschuler, 2013). This is far behind the 53% of Europeans. With global implications being ever more present, the need to understand a foreign language grows, and the United States is not prepared. Budget restrictions have meant the end for many foreign language programs in K-12 schools in place of other programs, and the result is the unequal balance between the U.S. and the rest of the world. The study of foreign language starts as early as the first grade in other countries (Devlin, 2015), while here in America we do not deem it important enough to require or to even fund regularly.

The inequity is not just about global numbers either. Diplomats, interrupters, policy experts, and other industry leaders benefit from knowing a foreign language as part of their job description. While other countries recognize the importance of learning a language other than your primary, and it is not always English. English is the required second language in some countries, for obvious reasons such as travel, career choices, and over all usability. However, French and German are other popular choices by other countries as a foreign language choice. Learning to speak and understand another language also helps the person learn about the culture related to the other language. So, with other parts of the world learning other languages at such a higher rate than the U.S., why are we not requiring the same? It puts Americans at a disadvantage in more ways than just in the job market.

**Social Communication:**

With almost half of the U.S. population immigrants, or having the ability to speak a language other than English, the ability to communicate with ones’ peers will become even more important once they leave high school. Once high school students graduate and starting applying for colleges and jobs, they’ll begin to realize that not everyone speaks English. With this realization comes the problem of trying to communicate even the most basic thought to someone who may not understand your language. While other countries are starting to require their students to learn English to cope, it should be time for the students of the US to start doing the same in order to do their part to bridge the language barrier. Communication is key to so much more than just job success. Tourist jokes in other countries are at an all-time high, because many visitors to their country cannot speak the language for even the most basic need. The need to communicate is ever present in our day to day lives.

The language shortfall of the United States is such an easy solution. By not having a universal nation-wide requirement for a foreign language in high school the U.S. falls behind almost every other major country when it comes to language competency. Learning a second language has far more benefits then just being able to communicate. It is proven to increase brain function and help with memory and information retention rates not only when the student is young but long term as well. The students who study foreign language are more likely to remember facts they study which makes getting through college and getting a job easier. And once they start applying for jobs, being bilingual is an asset that sets the students out above those who do not, especially in current job markets where more and more people speak a language other than English. By starting students off early in a foreign language, schools have the opportunity to set their students up for a lifetime of success in more than just academics. These opportunities shouldn’t be passed up because of budget cuts.

**Part 2: Solution to Problem and Advantages**

The solution to the United States’ foreign language problem would be to create a nationwide foreign language policy. This policy would help equalize the balance between the U.S. and the rest of the world who have required a foreign language for years. A minimum requirement of at least two years of consecutive foreign language study starting in middle school, and another two years of consecutive study in high school should be implemented. Even though other countries start their foreign language program at a younger age, this will still give American students a chance to learn at a time when memory and cognitive functions need the most help. The policy should give the students a chance to choose what languages they wish to study and fund them properly. It is also advisable to add more options than French and Spanish. While these two are the most popular by far, China and Germany are also large countries in which the U.S does business with and the U.S. could use more people who understand their languages. The advantages of this policy would not only be to equalize the balance between the U.S. and the rest of the world, it also gives students a boast in their cognitive functions at a time when memory is most critical. A required foreign language will offer students better reasoning and social skills, as studies have shown a connection between foreign language and cognitive and social functions

**Worldwide inequality:**

As stated before, other countries require their students to start studying a language other than their primary language in early grade school around first or second grade. The U.S doesn’t even have a nationwide policy in place, which places us far behind other countries when it comes to providing interrupters, diplomats and other industry leaders where foreign language is a vigorous part of day-to-day use. Budget restrictions have cut foreign language programs in the U.S. significantly, but in order for us to become a great nation again we need to focus on the education of our children and that includes the introduction of languages other than English.

The global economy is shifting way from America and closer to the non-English speaking countries (Wiley, Moore, & Fee, n.d.). Economies like China, Latin American, and South Asia are growing rapidly and in order for the U.S. to keep up we must be able to produce leader who can function in these countries. To do that, the U.S. needs to fund the learning of these language as well as others. Learning these languages will make it easier for U.S. national to work in other areas of the world when it comes to making important business connections and transactions with countries around the world. Being bilingual is highly searched for in the job market, home and abroad and could lead to new opportunities for American students.

**Cognitive Functions:**

Learning a language is shown to help increase cognitive functions which can help students memory and increase brain function. By requiring a foreign language in middle school, earlier than most states in the U.S., the policy can start to help students increase their memory for future study. Other countries start out as early as Elementary school. By not requiring foreign language until middle school, it gives the students time to understand English as their first language before adding in the extra confusion of a second or third language. (Friedman, 2015).

Studies have shown that children who are bilingual can switch from one task to another easier than students who are not (Beth, 2016). Being able to think in multiple different ways means that school work could become easier for students. Cognitive skills are shown to be an important part of learning, and foreign language skills help students achieve these skills that can later be used for other subjects, such as math and science. With test scores being a main focus in most American schools, an increased in cognitive functions could also mean an increase in test scores. Logically, any parent would want their child to do better in school; why not give them every opportunity?

**Communication and Culture:**

There is a large population of the U.S. that has the ability to speak and understand a language other than English. Imagine having a friend that you couldn’t communicate with? A professor? Once students go off to college, home or abroad, they will encounter other students and facility who they may wish to communication with and doing do in a language other than English may make it easier to do so. The process to bridge the language barrier does not have to come from the other countries. They are already teaching their students English. Now is the time for us to show our students that the U.S. is not the only great nation in the world, by teaching them the language and therefore the culture of other countries. Learning the culture and the language of another country could encourage students to travel and experience other lives outside their home country. Even in our own country, more and more immigrants are seeking citizenship here and even though they are citizens they still may prefer their native language over English. This is not a bad thing. Being able to communicate is not only good academically and professionally. The need to communicate is ever present in our day to day lives. Communicationbrings people together in a time when they are otherwise tearing each other apart.

Requiring a foreign language in the U.S. is a daunting idea for the government who already has so much on their budget to handle. However, the benefits that come from our students learning a second language are more than anyone can put a price tag on. Communication is key to so much more than just job success. While those are important, it is also important to remember that we are a world living together and in order to live together we need to be able to communicate. In order to communicate, we need people to become translators, diplomats, and industry leaders. By teaching American children a foreign language the U.S. will no longer depend on other countries for translators. In a world that is already globally diversity, the American child need to be able to hold their own and are currently falling behind due to lack of legislation on foreign language requirements in the U.S. A policy requiring students to learn a foreign language will benefit them long after grade school ends, and will help them prepare for a future with a shifting global recognition.

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