

# The Necessity for a Global Education Curriculum

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## I. Introduction

In today's increasingly interconnected world, it is imperative that public schools in the United States incorporate global and international studies into curriculum instruction. The challenges that we face in the world today ranging from global poverty and climate change to financial systems and conflict resolution-require globally minded solutions.<sup>1</sup> The need to provide American students with the knowledge and skills to effectively function in a global and complex world has never been more apparent, yet support for developing and integrating a curriculum with a global dimension has lagged dangerously behind initiatives in Europe, Australia and Canada.<sup>2</sup> The traditional core curriculum in U.S. K-12 education has primarily consisted of mathematics, literature, English, social sciences, and physical and biological sciences. Schools in the U.S. have been slow to integrate international perspectives into these areas of study. Instead schools have presented these subjects in a U.S.-centric approach, ignoring the contributions and cultures of other nations. Curriculums in the U.S. have failed to show how the world is interconnected and how what happens in one country affects another.

There must be a shift in the education curriculum to integrate international perspectives into the classroom. The goal of the education system in the U.S. should be to prepare students to

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Van-Fleet & Rebecca Winthrop, *To be Globally Competitive, We Must be Globally Competent*, BROOKINGS UP FRONT BLOG (Sep. 29, 2010), [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0929\\_education\\_winthrop.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0929_education_winthrop.aspx) [hereinafter *To be Globally Competitive*].

<sup>2</sup> Justin W. Van-Fleet & Abigail Falik, *Beating Tight Education Standards with Alternative Models: A Model for Peer-to-Peer Development Education*, 2 POL'Y AND PRACTICE: A DEV. EDUC. REV., 57, 57 (Spring 2006) [hereinafter *Beating Tight Education Standards with Alternative Models*].

function in a global world by making sure they are globally literate. In addition to making sure our students are competitive for employment opportunities in the international market place, a global education curriculum will also help create a more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. American students must be knowledgeable not only in their own country and culture but also the nations and cultures of the rest of the world. Methods for achieving these goals and identifying subject matters in international and global studies to be incorporated into the education curriculum, has generated much debate among education policy scholars. For the purpose of this paper, I recommend that American K-12 students study the following subject areas or themes in the international dimension of their education: (1) foreign language study, (2) cross-cultural studies, and (3) global connections.

## **II. Foreign Language Study**

One of the pathways to achieving global literacy is through studying foreign languages. The ability to communicate in another languages is a necessary skill for achieving global literacy. The study of world languages promotes global understanding and increases U.S. competitiveness for employment opportunities in a global economy. An increasingly global economy calls for the workforce to be not only understanding of international cultures, but also ability to close the communication gap by speaking a second language.<sup>3</sup> The ability to speak a second language also shows respect for another culture and identity. For example, as Nelson Mandela observed, “if you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”<sup>4</sup> Although the advantages of speaking

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<sup>3</sup> EDUC. COMMISSION OF THE STATES, *State Policies Encouraging/Requiring Foreign-Language Instruction Apart from High School Graduation Requirements*, 1 (2002), <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/39/83/3983.pdf> [hereinafter *State Policies*].

<sup>4</sup> CNN, *Mandela in His Own Words*, CNN.com, June 26, 2008, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/africa/06/24/mandela.quotes/index.html>.

two languages or more are well documented, the percentage of students in the U.S. that speak a second language is significantly less than students in other countries.<sup>5</sup>

One reason that American students lag behind other nations in their ability to speak second languages, is due to the lack of importance that curriculums in the U.S. place on studying world languages. In contrast to the U.S., almost all developed educational systems in the rest of the world require that students study a language other than the official language of the country.<sup>6</sup> In a study released by the Center for Applied Linguistics, which compared the United States with twenty-two other nations, seven countries – Australia, Austria, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Spain and Thailand had compulsory education in foreign languages by age eight.<sup>7</sup> The study also revealed that another eight countries – Canada, the Czech Republic, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Israel, Kazakstan, Morocco, and the Netherlands-introduced a foreign language in the upper elementary grade levels.<sup>8</sup> The study further explained that in almost all cases, a second foreign language was offered or required in the elementary grades.<sup>9</sup> Currently, in every European Country with the exception of Ireland, foreign language classes are required at the primary grade level.<sup>10</sup>

While these studies and facts reveal that a foreign language is required or at least offered in the elementary grades, U.S. students who study a foreign language often do not start before

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<sup>5</sup> Ingrid Pufahl et al., *Foreign Language Teaching in 19 Countries- Lessons to Learn*, 2001 Nov. / Dec. INT’L J. OF TECH. FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING 39, 41.

<sup>6</sup> See LENE MEJER ET AL., *More Students Study Foreign Languages in Europe but Perceptions of Skill Levels Differ Significantly* (EUROSTAT 2010)

[http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-SF-10-049/EN/KS-SF-10-049-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-10-049/EN/KS-SF-10-049-EN.PDF) [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-SF-10-049/EN/KS-SF-10-049-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-10-049/EN/KS-SF-10-049-EN.PDF).

<sup>7</sup> Sandy Cutshall, *Why We Need the Year of Languages*, 62 EDUC. LEADERSHIP J. OF THE DEP’T. OF SUPERVISION AND CURRICULUM DEV., 20, 22 (Dec. 2004/Jan. 2005)

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> MEJER *supra* note 6.

age fourteen.<sup>11</sup> Most foreign language study in the U.S. takes place in grades nine through eleven, during which time only about one-third of students study a foreign language.<sup>12</sup> Only six percent of U.S. students study a foreign language during grades one through six.<sup>13</sup> Learning a foreign language takes time and dedication.<sup>14</sup> U.S. schools compound the difficulty of learning a new language by waiting too long to start instruction.<sup>15</sup> This is problematic because numerous studies reveal that beginning foreign language instruction early promotes achievement of higher levels of language proficiency.<sup>16</sup> Elvira Swender, the Director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), notes that by U.S. students beginning foreign language study at puberty, their brains are least receptive to language learning at these ages.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, some of the language that are most crucial for U.S. students to learn are the most challenging for English speakers, requiring the greatest commitment of time and effort.<sup>18</sup> For example, research estimates that it takes between 2,400 and 2,760 hours of instruction for someone with a superior aptitude for languages to attain the highest level of achievement in Arabic.<sup>19</sup> The ACTFL recommends that elementary school language programs include classes three to five days per week for thirty to forty minutes.<sup>20</sup> It is also recommended that middle schools should hold classes daily for forty to fifty minutes.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pufahl, *supra* note 5, at 39.

<sup>12</sup> Cutshall, *supra* note 1, at 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 23.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

At the federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act brings attention to the importance of foreign-language instruction through the inclusion of the Foreign Language Assistance Act of 2001.<sup>22</sup> The Foreign Language Assistance Act incentivizes schools to provide foreign-language instruction by providing grants to elementary schools that offer foreign-language programs.<sup>23</sup> In order to qualify for the grant, the school must offer at least forty-five minutes of daily foreign-language instruction for at least four days a week throughout the school year.<sup>24</sup> The federal government can only encourage schools to offer foreign-language instruction by providing incentives; ultimately the decision to offer foreign-language instruction or implementing mandatory foreign language classes are up to the states. However, many states have adopted policies encouraging or mandating foreign-language instruction.

California Education Code § 51212 and § 51220, encourages schools to provide foreign-language programs in grades one through six, with instruction beginning as early as feasible for each school district.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, in grades seven through twelve, schools must offer courses in foreign languages beginning no later than grade seven.<sup>26</sup> Florida requires that every school district plan adopt a plan for a K-12 foreign-language curriculum.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Florida State Board of Education has adopted the Sunshine State Standards, which holds schools accountable for meeting standards in various subjects, including foreign languages.<sup>28</sup> The Illinois General Assembly recognizes that urban schools should foster improvement and student growth in a number of areas, including assuring that students are better prepared to compete in

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<sup>22</sup> *State Policies, supra* note 3, at 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

the international market by having foreign-language proficiency and stronger international studies.<sup>29</sup> Illinois Administration Code Title 23, § 1.440, requires that high schools offer foreign language, with allotted time to be determined by the local school district.<sup>30</sup>

The bulk of recent international education initiatives backed by the US State Department and Department of Defense, aims at promoting foreign language, mathematics and science instruction as a means of preparing students for competition in the international market place.<sup>31</sup> These proposals have gained some traction at state and local levels and have led to implementation in some school districts as demonstrated above.<sup>32</sup> However, incorporating global citizenship and development education, which aims to help students learn about the interdependence of the world's system and addressing global challenges, remains an uphill battle.<sup>33</sup> The next sections in this paper addresses methods for incorporating global citizenship and cultural understanding in U.S. curriculums.

## **II. Cross-cultural awareness**

The study of foreign languages progresses the goal of achieving global literacy but understanding other nations and cultures requires more than just studying a foreign language. Most curriculums in the U.S. stress American civic values, particularly democratic values.<sup>34</sup> The U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence are studied in

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<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> *Beating Tight Education Standards with Alternative Models*, *supra* note 2, at 57.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> H. Thomas C Collins ET AL., *Guidelines for Global and International Studies Education: Challenges, Culture, Connections* 5 THE AMERICAN FORUM FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION (1995) [hereinafter *Guidelines for Global and international Studies*].

practically every American school.<sup>35</sup> Although the U.S. is a diverse nation and every American has roots in one or more cultures, most students' knowledge of other cultures is limited.<sup>36</sup> Cross-cultural learning is essential for understanding both our own culture and that of others.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the study of culture allows students to understand how other people may view things in ways that are different from the ways we view them.<sup>38</sup> Through cross-cultural learning students will gain an appreciation of other cultures and learn to tolerate cultural diversity.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, by studying the commonalities and differences in other cultures, it will prepare students with the skills, knowledge, and perceptions they need to live in a multicultural society and world.<sup>40</sup>

One of the ways to integrate cross-cultural awareness into the education curriculum is by creating global networks.<sup>41</sup> Transnational communication between students in different parts of the world fosters cross-cultural learning. Link programs or sister-school projects, allow students to learn about other cultures through active dialogue, which provides a more exciting and effective alternative learning tool than traditional textbook methods. Traditionally, in many link programs students exchanged letters between one another, which traveled through standard mail. The communication channels limited the effectiveness of these programs because it reduced communication to written material. Additionally, the delay in time it took for students to receive correspondence from one another presented a barrier in developing meaningful relationships.

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<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>41</sup> Amy Roberts, *Global Dimensions of Schooling: Implications for Internationalizing Teacher Education*, TEACHING EDUC. Q., 9, 16 (Winter 2007).

Today, linking U.S. classrooms to classrooms abroad is easier and more effective than ever because of the rise of Internet access in U.S. schools and schools around the world. The Internet removes many of the geographic barriers to communication by allowing students to send messages to one another instantly and at a much lower cost than standard mail. Additionally, depending on time zone, students have the ability to communicate with one another in real time and see each other through the use of web cameras. Numerous computer network resources are available to support global projects. For example, the Institute for Global Communications provides computer-networking tools for international communications and information exchange.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the International Education and Resource Network, a non-profit international telecommunications network in twenty-one countries, enables participants to collaborate efforts on projects that make meaningful differences in the world.<sup>43</sup> Many studies have documented the effectiveness of using these tools for teaching intercultural learning and global competency.<sup>44</sup> Schools in U.S. can also integrate global culture awareness programs by looking no further than their own communities. Cultural, ethnic, racial, language, and religious diversity can be found within reach of every school district in the U.S. Schools can give their students opportunity to “travel without a passport” through sponsored visits to nearby ethnic neighborhoods and international events such as Chinese-American New Years, and the Mexican-American Dia de los Muertos commemorations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 16-17.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 16.

<sup>45</sup> INT’L EDUC. COUNCIL, GLOBAL LITERACY FOR WISCONSIN 13 (2005) *available at* <http://dpi.wi.gov/cal/pdf/ie-recom.pdf>.

### III. Global Connections

In order to prepare students to live in a global world, they must have a broad base of knowledge about other nations and cultures, but they also need to understand their own connections to the nations and cultures of the world.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps one of the most important components in international and global studies education is the ability for students to understand how they are connected to the rest of the world.<sup>47</sup> Americans are tied to global issues and cultures in several ways, and students must understand the United States' contemporary and historical connections with global issues and regions.<sup>48</sup> Numerous studies illustrate the current global linkages of cities, regions, and states. The aim of teaching students to recognize the interdependence of nations and commonality to global issues, lays the groundwork for developing attitudes of solidarity and fostering a sense of responsibility for global problems and issues.<sup>49</sup>

In order to help students understand how the U.S. is connected to the rest of the world, educational curriculums must examine the role and actions taken by the U.S. in the past with respect to foreign policy international relations. Understanding the history of the United States' connections and interactions with the world, is essential for student understanding of contemporary history because our actions today are shaped by our actions in the past. Traditionally, U.S. and world history are taught as separate courses, but curriculums should teach U.S. history in a global perspective and world history should include connections with the U.S.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Guidelines for Global and international Studies*, *supra* note 34, at 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> Roberts, *supra* note 41, at 17.

<sup>50</sup> *Guidelines for Global and international Studies*, *supra* note 34, at 10.

Students should study topics such as U.S. foreign policy, U.S. participation in international organizations, as well as understanding long-term U.S. political and strategic interests.<sup>51</sup>

As students begin to recognize, analyze, and understand the interdependence of the world's systems, they will see how global challenges and issues affect all of us. It is the hope that this will inspire students to be morally compelled to confront global injustices and take responsible action to promote a just, peaceful and sustainable world.<sup>52</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Despite the recognition that we live in a globalized world, U.S. K-12 curriculums have failed to sufficiently cover issues relating to global and international studies. Many schools in the U.S. have not provided students with the knowledge and skills to effectively function in a global world. There is no clear consensus of how to reform the standard curriculum to address these needs. In this paper, I have suggested some of the skills that students need to effectively function and succeed in global world. The ability to speak more than one language is crucial in the global marketplace and U.S. schools should make foreign language study a priority. Additionally, it is critical that schools foster student understanding of cultures and perspectives of other nations. This provides the basis for student understanding of how they are connected to the rest of the world. Furthermore, it will provide them with the knowledge to effectively respond to global issues, problems, and challenges. If the U.S. schools do not incorporate global and international studies into curriculum instruction, our students will be inadequately prepared to function in an increasingly interdependent and conflict-prone world. Such failure to take action would seriously handicap our future generations in competing in a global economy.

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<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>52</sup> *Beating Tight Education Standards with Alternative Models, supra note 2, at 57.*