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ATTAINING HIGH LEVELS OF PROFICIENCY: CHALLENGES FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent events have highlighted America's security, military, diplomatic, and business needs for individuals who can speak and understand languages other than English with high levels of proficiency. In order to achieve these language proficiency goals, significantly greater resources are required, particularly in the higher education community. This paper investigates the adequacy and availability of pedagogical methods and tools, information technologies, and testing procedures for language training for achieving high levels of proficiency, specifically in the less commonly taught languages (LCTLs).

The results of research and experience suggest that developing high levels of proficiency for professional purposes in LCTLs requires a great deal of time in formal language instruction, as well as in immersion and study abroad experiences. Although LCTLs often require more time for native speakers of English to learn than the commonly taught languages, few are offered in grades K-12, thus limiting the time available to learners to develop high levels of proficiency before and during the university experience. Heritage language speakers have a headstart, and building on their existing skills is an effective way to move more individuals toward high-level proficiency. Professional development for teachers and faculty is also key.

There is great promise in recent developments for many languages, but the challenge is great, given the number of languages and the investment needed to attain high levels of proficiency. To address these challenges, we need to: clarify and disseminate definitions of high levels of proficiency; support the development and use of more tests that measure high levels of language proficiency; provide incentives to K-12 school districts to develop well-articulated, sustained learning sequences in languages beginning at the lower grades; support heritage language learning; provide incentives for students to attain high levels of proficiency; provide support for institutions that offer LCTLs; support high quality in language teaching (K-12 and university faculty) across all languages; support effective and essential approaches to developing high levels of language proficiency; and conduct research on the teaching and learning of languages.

Ongoing federal support for research, programs, and resources has helped a number of programs offer students an opportunity to reach high levels of proficiency in diverse languages. Continued well-planned and sustained support will increase the number of such programs. The need for proficient foreign language speakers is clear in the context of national interests and security. The cost of ignoring this area has already been felt, and the situation will become even more urgent if sufficient planning and funds are not allocated to develop a language-proficient society that includes individuals with high levels of proficiency in particular languages.