

Foreign Language Instruction In The Region's Public Schools: Where Do We Stand?



FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE REGION'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS: WHERE DO WE STAND?

The benefits of knowing how to speak, read and write a second language are well known. Being able to communicate in more than one language provides empathy and insight into other cultures and is a key economic asset in a globalizing world. Public- and private-sector employers actively seek workers who are fluent in languages other than English; demand is particularly high right now for Mandarin Chinese, Spanish and Arabic. There is a growing need for bilingual workers in numerous sectors of the economy, across all levels of the skill spectrum¹ (see Table 1), and workers who are fluent in a second language will typically earn more money over the course of their lifetimes than their monolingual counterparts.²

The benefits of bilingualism are cognitive as well as social and economic. A growing body of research suggests that bilingual children are particularly agile learners, tending to outperform other children their age in a variety of cognitive tasks. The benefits of this mental flexibility extend into adulthood, and bilingual seniors have proven to be more resistant to the onset of dementia. (There are multiple sources for this finding, including an article in the Feb. 18, 2011, edition of *The Guardian*, "Being bilingual may delay Alzheimer's and boost brain power," <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/feb/18/bilingual-alzheimers-brain-power-multitasking>.)

It is also well known that the United States suffers from a "foreign language deficit." Just 25 percent of American adults can speak a language other than English, and of this small group, only 43 percent claim to speak the other language "very well."³ By contrast, 54 percent of all Europeans can hold a conversation in a language other than their native tongue, with 25 percent able to converse in at least two additional languages and 10 percent in at least three.⁴ Most schoolchildren in Europe and Asia begin to learn their first foreign language (usually English) in the primary grades. The U.S. has benefited from

the rise of English as a global *lingua franca*, but we have also fallen behind much of the rest of the world in learning languages other than our own.

According to a three-year study by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, just 18 percent of all K-12 public school students in the U.S. were enrolled in a foreign language course in the 2004-05 school year. This percentage increased to 19.7 percent in 2014-15.⁵ In most states, including Virginia, these figures ranged between 10 to 30 percent for the same school year.⁶ To graduate with an advanced diploma (required for admission to most four-year colleges and universities), Virginia high school students must take at least three years of one foreign language, or two years of two foreign languages. On the other hand, the requirements for a standard diploma include two years of foreign language, or two years of fine arts, or two years of career and technical education. Nearly 45 percent of Virginia's high school graduates may receive little or no foreign language instruction (see Tables 2 and 3).

Even students who attend a college or university are unlikely to deepen their foreign language skills beyond the basics they learned in high school. The Modern Language Association determined that just 8.1 percent of college students studied a foreign language in 2013, down from 8.7 percent four years earlier. Growing interest in the study of Korean, American Sign

¹ New American Economy, "Not Lost in Translation: The Growing Importance of Foreign Language Skills in the U.S. Job Market" (March 2017), at: http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NAE_Bilingual_V8.pdf.

² Johnson: "What is a Foreign Language Worth?", *The Economist* (March 11, 2014), at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2014/03/language-study>.

³ Pew Research Center, "Learning a foreign language a 'must' in Europe, not so in America" (July 13, 2015), at: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/13/learning-a-foreign-language-a-must-in-europe-not-so-in-america/>.

⁴ Eurobarometer 386, "Europeans and Their Languages" (June 2012), at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf.

⁵ "The National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report" (June 2017), at: <https://www.americancouncils.org/sites/default/files/FLE-report-June17.pdf>.

⁶ "Foreign Language Enrollments in K-12 Public Schools: Are Students Prepared for a Global Society?", Executive Summary, at: <https://www.ced.org/pdf/actfl-k12-foreign-language-for-global-society.pdf>.

Language, Portuguese and Chinese has been offset by larger declines in traditionally well-attended language courses like Spanish, French, German and Italian.⁷

There is, however, a growing consensus that the United States must reverse its longstanding indifference toward languages other than English if it hopes to meet the challenges of globalization and a multicultural society. Financial Times columnist Simon Kuper bluntly states that dependence on the English language has become a critical security weakness for the U.S. and the U.K.: “English-speaking countries are particularly easy to hack because their enemies understand what they are saying. Being an English-speaking society is like living in a glass house: it makes you transparent. Conversely, foreign countries are opaque to mostly monolingual Britons and Americans. Foreigners know us much better than we know them.”⁸

In 2014, four members of the U.S. Senate and four members of the U.S. House of Representatives (both Democrats and Republicans) requested that the American Academy of Arts and Sciences undertake a comprehensive study to examine the nation’s current capacity in languages. The academy released the study, “America’s Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century,” earlier this year.⁹ It offers five key recommendations for language education in the U.S.:

- 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.
- Supplement language instruction across the education system through public-private partnerships among schools, government, philanthropies, businesses and local community members.
- Support heritage languages already spoken in the United States, and help these languages persist from one generation to the next.

⁷ “Enrollments in Languages Other than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2013,” at: https://www.mla.org/content/download/31180/1452509/EMB_enrllmnts_nonEngl_2013.pdf.

⁸ Simon Kuper, “The problem with English,” *Financial Times* (Jan. 12, 2017), at: <https://www.ft.com/content/223af71a-d853-11e6-944b-e7eb37a6aa8e>.

⁹ America’s Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century (2017), at: http://www.amacad.org/multimedia/pdfs/publications/researchpapersmonographs/language/Commission-on-Language-Learning_Americas-Languages.pdf.

- Provide targeted support and programming for Native American languages as defined in the Native American Languages Act.
- Promote opportunities for students to learn languages in other countries by experiencing other cultures and immersing themselves in multilingual environments.

With these recommendations in mind, this chapter reviews the state of foreign language instruction in the public school divisions of Hampton Roads’ seven cities. The chapter draws upon our conversations with school administrators in Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk and Virginia Beach, and the information about their language programming that they generously provided. Although we are not in the position to evaluate some of the essential elements of a successful language program – including the quality and effectiveness of instruction, as well as student outcomes and enthusiasm – we can provide an overview of current offerings in our region’s school divisions and identify relevant trends. We conclude with some observations about the strengths of our divisions’ foreign language programming, as well as opportunities for growth.

TABLE 1

TOP 15 OCCUPATIONS ADVERTISED ONLINE FOR BILINGUAL WORKERS (2015)

Occupation	Number of Total Bilingual Job Listings	Share of Total Bilingual Job Listings	Skill Level
Customer Service Representatives	46,948	7.80%	Less
Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing, Except Technical and Scientific Products	38,164	6.30%	Less
Retail Salespersons	37,115	6.10%	Less
Registered Nurses	19,211	3.20%	High
Sales Agents, Financial Services	19,012	3.20%	High
Tellers	16,346	2.70%	Less
First-Line Supervisors of Retail Sales Workers	15,058	2.50%	Less
Managers, All Other	13,992	2.30%	High
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, Except Legal, Medical and Executive	13,009	2.20%	Less
Human Resources Specialists	11,966	2.00%	High
Medical Assistants	9,351	1.60%	Middle
Receptionists and Information Clerks	8,735	1.50%	Less
Financial Managers, Branch or Department	8,009	1.30%	High
Medical and Health Services Managers	7,498	1.20%	High
Loan Officers	6,763	1.10%	High

Source: New American Economy, "Not Lost in Translation," at: http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NAE_Bilingual_V8.pdf

TABLE 2

VIRGINIA GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

Advanced Studies Diploma Course Requirements		Standard Diploma Course Requirements		Modified Standard Diploma Course Requirements**	
Discipline Area	Standard Credits	Discipline Area	Standard Credits	Discipline Area	Standard Credits
English	4	English	4	English	4
Mathematics	4	Mathematics	3	Mathematics	3
Laboratory Science	4	Laboratory Science	3	Laboratory Science	2
History & Social Sciences	4	History & Social Sciences	3	History & Social Sciences	2
Health & Physical Education	2	Health & Physical Education	2	Health & Physical Education	2
Foreign Languages*	3	Foreign Language, Fine Arts, or Career & Technical Education	2	Fine Arts or Career & Technical Education	1
Fine Arts or Career & Technical Education	1				
Economics & Personal Finance	1	Economics & Personal Finance	1	Electives	6
Electives	3	Electives	4		
Total	26	Total	22	Total	20

* Courses to fulfill this requirement may include three years of one language, or two years of two languages.
** Modified Standard Diploma: For certain students with disabilities who entered the ninth grade before 2013-2014. Credit accommodations now allow these students to earn a Standard Diploma.

Source: Virginia Department of Education, at: <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/graduation/index.shtml>

TABLE 3

DIPLOMAS EARNED ANNUALLY BY DIVISION, 2015-2016

Division	Advanced	Standard	Modified	Special	Total Diploma Graduates	Advanced Diplomas as % of Total Graduates
Chesapeake	1,795	1,043	72	108	3,018	59.48%
Hampton	579	767	13	54	1,413	40.98%
Newport News	698	936		53	1,695	41.18%
Norfolk	626	971	16	65	1,678	37.31%
Portsmouth	333	533		60	929	35.84%
Suffolk	403	495	12	30	940	42.87%
Virginia Beach	2,857	1,831	13	173	4,874	58.62%
Virginia	49,324	35,783	1,339	2,402	88,848	55.52%

Source: http://bi.vita.virginia.gov/doe_bi/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=Main&subRptName=Graduation

Foreign Language Instruction In Hampton Roads

The Hampton Roads Economic Development Alliance touts our region as “engineered for the future of global business,” pointing to technical innovation, a friendly business climate and a skilled workforce as important regional assets.¹⁰ But how many Hampton Roads workers can claim proficiency in a language other than English as one of their essential skills?

Our region’s military presence suggests that many families have gained valuable experience living and working abroad, yet only 9 percent of the regional population 5 years and older speaks a language other than (or in addition to) English at home.¹¹ The highest proportion of foreign language

speakers (nearly 12 percent of the population 5 and older) can be found in Virginia Beach, most likely because of its substantial Filipino-American community, whose members may speak Tagalog or another Philippine language.¹² Hampton Roads’ proportion of foreign language speakers is lower than in the Commonwealth of Virginia as a whole (15.4 percent), as well as in nearby metropolitan areas like Charlotte (13.1 percent) and Raleigh-Durham (15.4 percent), most likely because our immigrant, or “foreign-born,” population is comparatively low as well¹³ (see Table 4). The U.S. Census question about languages spoken at home tends to reflect “heritage speakers,” rather than those who have learned a second language at school. However, a comparatively low proportion of heritage speakers means that Hampton Roads is particularly dependent on its schools to promote competence in languages other than English.

¹⁰ Hampton Roads Economic Development Alliance, “Navigate the Region,” at: <http://www.hreda.com/navigate-the-region/>.

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 98. Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over for Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC: 2009-2013 (October 2015), at: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>.

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 149. Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over for Virginia Beach City, VA: 2009-2013” (October 2015), at: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 47. Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over for Virginia: 2009-2013” (October 2015), at: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>.

TABLE 4

LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME (POPULATION 5 YEARS AND OLDER, 2015)

	Hampton Roads (7 cities)		Chesapeake		Hampton		Newport News		Norfolk		Portsmouth		Suffolk		Virginia Beach	
Population 5 years and older	1,329,116		216,096		128,378		168,083		228,614		88,879		80,549		418,517	
English only	1,204,450	90.6%	200,400	92.7%	119,075	92.8%	149,765	89.1%	205,006	89.7%	84,615	95.2%	76,943	95.5%	368,646	88.1%
Language other than English	124,666	9.4%	15,696	7.3%	9,303	7.2%	18,318	10.9%	23,608	10.3%	4,264	4.8%	3,606	4.5%	49,871	11.9%
Spanish	55,184		7,160		4,642		9,680		11,524		2,201		1,723		18,254	
Other Indo-European languages	26,058		3,486		1,445		4,014		4,560		1,155		958		10,440	
Asian and Pacific Islander languages	36,614		4,197		2,044		3,766		5,827		817		661		19,302	
Other languages	6,810		853		1,172		858		1,697		91		264		1,875	
	Hampton Roads (MSA)		Richmond (MSA)		Raleigh, NC (MSA)		Charlotte, NC (MSA)		Charleston, SC (MSA)		Virginia		United States			
Population 5 years and older	1,597,129		1,171,968		1,135,941		2,186,103		666,057		7,744,352		296,603,003			
English only	1,454,690	91.1%	1,056,241	90.1%	960,817	84.6%	1,899,010	86.9%	619,000	92.9%	6,551,019	84.6%	234,171,556	79.0%		
Language other than English	142,439	8.9%	115,727	9.9%	175,124	15.4%	287,093	13.1%	47,057	7.1%	1,193,333	15.4%	62,431,447	21.0%		
Spanish	62,065	3.9%	52,138		98,359		181,588		27,805		526,043	6.8%	38,694,150	13.0%		
Other Indo-European languages	31,760		28,980		33,147		53,022		9,465		274,379		10,884,070			
Asian and Pacific Islander languages	40,914		24,941		30,603		39,798		8,233		281,914		10,027,065			
Other languages	7,700		9,668		13,015		12,685		1,554		110,997		2,826,162			
	142,439		115,727		175,124		287,093		47,057							

Source: 2011-2015 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates (Selected Social Characteristics in the United States), at: <http://factfinder.census.gov>

WHICH LANGUAGES?

¿Hablas español? “Sí” is the response that you’ll hear from a majority of the students who are learning a language in one of our region’s public schools. The data that some local school divisions shared with us indicate that around 6 to 7 of every 10 students enrolled in a world language course are currently learning Spanish. The strong interest in Spanish undoubtedly reflects its prominence in our country today; more than 38 million U.S. residents (13 percent of the population 5 years and older) speak Spanish at home, and there are abundant opportunities for U.S. workers with Spanish language skills.¹⁴ Other factors likely contribute to the prevalence of Spanish in Hampton Roads classrooms – including the availability of qualified teachers, the longstanding status of Spanish (next to French, and to a lesser degree, German and Latin) as a fixture of high school curricula, as well as a perception that Spanish may be easier to learn than other languages.

Students at every public high school in Hampton Roads have the opportunity to take at least four years of Spanish (and with very few exceptions, French). German and Latin are offered in many, but not all, of our region’s high schools. Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Russian and American Sign Language are taught in a much smaller group of schools (see Table 5).

The Virginia Department of Education formulates the Standards of Learning (SOL) to provide clear guidelines for first-, second-, third- and fourth-year language instruction, although SOL exams (a requirement for other disciplines) are not given in foreign language.¹⁵ Virginia’s foreign language standards are informed by these broad goals:

- Effective communication
- Enhanced cultural understanding
- Expanded access to information
- Increased global perspective.

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 1. Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over for United States: 2009-2013” (October 2015), at: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>.

¹⁵ Foreign Language Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools (May 2014), at: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/testing/sol/standards_docs/foreign_language/2014/stds_foreignlanguage.pdf.

In nearly all Hampton Roads divisions, students may enroll in first- and second-year language study while still in middle school. Some Virginia Beach middle schools offer three full years of language study. Hampton Roads students who continue with the same language into high school can typically graduate with five or six years of language study, including AP coursework that is geared toward earning early college credit. In practice, however, there seems to be a significant decline in course enrollments after the third year of language study (not coincidentally, three years of language study is the minimum requirement for the advanced studies diploma). The Newport News schools shared with us, for example, that the continuation rate after the first and second years of language study ranged between 81 to 85 percent in the 2016-17 school year. These percentages dropped to between 31 to 33 percent after the third and fourth years of language study.

Virginia Beach schools stand out for their particularly diverse language offerings – including Japanese, Russian, Chinese and Arabic, as well as American Sign Language. The breadth of language courses can be attributed in part to the division’s large size, but also to innovative programming. Although every high school does not employ teachers in all these different languages, students in the division may nevertheless enroll in less frequently offered courses through a distance learning option. All distance learning courses are taught in real time by a Virginia Beach teacher, and a teaching assistant is always present on-site to supervise students who are learning remotely. Although distance learning may not be the best fit for all students, Jennifer Carson, world languages coordinator for Virginia Beach City Public Schools, tells us that those who choose this option tend to be motivated and independent learners, with a specific interest in a given language.

TABLE 5

LANGUAGE COURSES OFFERED AND SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP (2016-2017)

	Fall Membership (2016-2017)	Limited English Proficient (2016-2017)		Elementary School*	Middle School*	High School*	Special Programs
Chesapeake	40,192	1,329	3.3%		Spanish I ; French I; German I; Latin I	Spanish I-V, AP; French I-V, AP; German I-V, AP; Latin I-V, AP	Summer language program for elementary students
Hampton	20,286	448	2.2%		Spanish I-II ; French I-II	Spanish I-V; French I-V; German I-IV; Latin I-IV	IB program
Newport News	28,843	1,652	5.7%	Spanish, French, German, Latin, Spanish immersion	Spanish I ; French I; German I	Spanish I-IV, AP; French I-IV, AP; German I-IV, AP; Latin I-III, AP	IB program; dual language (Spanish + English) immersion program at 2 elementary schools; Global Studies elementary school; Communication Arts elementary school
Norfolk	31,425	1,226	3.9%	Chinese	Spanish I-II; French I-II ; Latin I-II; Chinese I-II; Japanese I-II	Spanish I-IV, AP; French I-IV, AP; Latin I-IV, AP; German I-II; Chinese I-II; Japanese I-IV	IB program; international studies middle school; French American School
Portsmouth	14,611	100	0.7%		Spanish I	Spanish I-V, French I-V, Latin I-V	Summer language camp for gifted elementary students
Suffolk	14,284	67	0.5%		Spanish, French	Spanish, French, Latin, American Sign Language	
Virginia Beach	69,085	1,544	2.2%	Spanish immersion	Spanish I-II, III; French I-II, III; German I-II; Latin I-II, III; Japanese I-II, III; Spanish immersion	Spanish I-V, AP, AP literature; French I-V, AP; German I-V, AP; Latin I-V, AP; Japanese I-IV, AP; Russian I-IV; Chinese I-IV; Arabic I-IV; American Sign Language I-III	IB program; Spanish partial immersion program at 3 elementary schools and 1 middle school; Global Studies and World Languages high school; STARTALK summer academy for elementary students in Chinese and Russian

* Entries in boldface are available to students at all schools in the division; entries in non-boldface are available to students at one or more (but not all) sites.

Source for language courses: Hampton Roads school divisions

Source for fall membership figures: Virginia Department of Education, at: http://bi.vita.virginia.gov/doe_bi/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=Main&subRptName=Fallmembership

HOW EARLY?

The authors of the “America’s Languages” report note that because young children are especially receptive to language acquisition, “it is critical that language education begin at the earliest possible moment in the educational continuum.”¹⁶ The authors also acknowledge that significant barriers stand in the way of realizing this vision. Elementary school curricula are already full, with tightly scheduled days for even the youngest children. Virginia public schools must ensure that their students meet strictly prescribed Standards of Learning in multiple disciplines, leaving little time for additional learning activities that are deemed “nonessential.” Full-time language teaching positions in the early grades are few and far between. With the notable exception of language immersion programs (discussed in the next section), few school systems have been able to incorporate foreign language instruction in the early grades in a consistent and meaningful way.

Hampton Roads is no exception, although several divisions have introduced elementary and middle school language programs that we would like to recognize here. Most of these programs follow the “exploratory” language model, which means that they introduce basic communication skills, as well as learning in a more general way about other countries and cultures. (“Exploratory” or “introductory” language is likewise a standard middle school elective in our region’s school divisions, often intended for the sixth-grade year. Exploratory courses may focus on one language, or they may provide a broad introduction to several different languages. Intended to spark interest in further language study, they are not a prerequisite for high school-level coursework.)

Newport News stands out for its commitment to foreign language education in the early grades. Sixteen of its elementary schools offer introductory world language instruction as part of their programming for gifted students in grades 3–5. Classes meet for 50 minutes once a week, allowing students to learn basic communication skills in French, German, Latin and Spanish, as well as about countries where these languages are spoken. In addition, two Newport News magnet schools have incorporated foreign language instruction into their programming for all students. Introductory French and Spanish are taught through the Global Studies magnet program at Dutrow Elementary, and all

¹⁶ *America’s Languages*, p. 8.

students in grades 1–5 meet once a week for exploratory Spanish through the Communication Arts magnet program at Hilton Elementary.

Through a partnership with Old Dominion University’s Confucius Institute, students at one Norfolk elementary school (Larchmont Elementary) and two middle schools (Academy for Discovery at Lakewood and the Academy of International Studies at Rosemont) participate in classes in Chinese language and culture, taught by native Chinese speakers. (A Confucius Institute instructor also teaches at Granby High School.) One of 100 such institutions across the country, the Confucius Institute at ODU “promotes understanding between the citizens of the United States and the people of China” and maintains a relationship with a Chinese sister institution, Minzu University in Beijing. The institute’s cooperation with Norfolk’s schools – unique among our region’s public school divisions – is one of many cultural outreach and scholarly initiatives that it supports in Hampton Roads.

Both Chesapeake and Portsmouth offer summer language programs for elementary school students. In a two-week summer program in Chesapeake, students explore French, German, Latin and Spanish from a thematic and cultural perspective. In Portsmouth, students who have been identified as gifted may participate in a multiweek camp that introduces several different languages and cultures. Participants work toward creating an original project that brings together language skills with other areas of academic interest. Beverly Jackson, Portsmouth Public Schools’ program supervisor for foreign languages, tells us that the division is currently exploring new options to introduce elementary-level language instruction during the main school year.

Finally, Virginia Beach City Public Schools offers its own summer learning opportunity for elementary school students through STARTALK, a National Security Agency-sponsored program that seeks to increase the numbers of young people learning “critical need foreign languages” such as Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Korean and Hindi. In Virginia Beach and numerous other sites across the country, STARTALK offers “creative and engaging summer experiences” that promote language study. In 2017, the Virginia Beach STARTALK academies gave 45 rising fifth-graders the opportunity to learn about Chinese language and culture in an intensive four-week session, while

30 rising fifth-graders participated in a Russian academy. Students are selected by lottery, and participation is free of charge.

Each of these programs enhances students' global awareness, providing them with valuable exposure to other languages and cultures. However, the programs' success in promoting second-language proficiency is somewhat less clear. Once-weekly meetings or a single summer camp are hardly enough to reinforce the learning of a second language, particularly when the experience may encompass multiple world languages. Another issue is that these language programs are largely self-contained; when students change schools, or move on to the next level of their education, they may not have another opportunity to build upon what they have learned, beyond enrolling in the traditional high school-level courses that are offered to all.

LANGUAGE IMMERSION

Meredith Hobson, Norfolk Public Schools' senior coordinator for foreign language and ESL, told us about an out-of-the-box proposal that she discussed with Jean-François Genay, general delegate of the Mission Laïque Française in North America. If U.S. elementary schools really want to encourage their students to speak a second language, Genay suggested, perhaps they needn't worry about bringing in additional specialists and carving out time each week for language instruction. Instead, why not just hire P.E. teachers who agree to speak a second language only with their students?

We understand why Genay's modest proposal is unlikely to be a realistic solution for Hampton Roads schools. Nevertheless, his suggestion does address many of the key factors that facilitate language learning. Children learn languages best not by participating in vocabulary drills or memorizing grammar rules, but rather through play, and through immersion in a setting where the second language is used in a natural, conversational way. Physical cues and facial gestures can clarify the meaning of initially unfamiliar words or phrases, while reverting to the first language should be avoided wherever possible. Consistently integrating a second language within the course of a typical school day encourages greater fluency than when a second language is taught as a separate subject.

This is, of course, the educational philosophy behind language immersion programs, which have attracted ever-greater interest throughout the U.S. As of the 2012-13 school year, public school language immersion programs had been established in 39 states plus the District of Columbia. Spanish, followed by Chinese, was the most commonly reported partner language. Immersion (or "dual language education") programs take many forms, but their unifying feature is that "a minimum 50 percent of instruction takes place in the partner language through the elementary school grades."¹⁷ Hampton Roads is home to two public school language immersion programs, in Virginia Beach and Newport News.

Virginia Beach's World Language Immersion Program has been in place at Christopher Farms Elementary School since 2002. Two additional elementary schools, Alanton and Trantwood, joined the program more recently. At each site, approximately 50 students in each grade receive half of their daily instruction (math and science) in Spanish, and the other half (language arts, social studies and electives) in English – thus the program's identification as "partial immersion." Participants are chosen by lottery and must live within the schools' attendance zones. After fifth grade, students in the program may elect to continue their immersion experience at Landstown Middle School, with Spanish-language instruction shifting to social studies and civics. Students who successfully complete the middle school program are guaranteed admission to the Global Studies and World Language Academy at Tallwood High School. This academy, which is attended by around 360 students from throughout the division, prepares students "to contribute to the world community through multicultural and international perspectives in languages, geography, history, politics and economics." Among other requirements, students at the academy must study two different languages and complete a long-term project on a global culture and a global issue of concern.

Three years ago, Newport News began its own dual language immersion program at Palmer and Saunders elementary schools, as well as the Watkins Early Childhood Center. These sites were chosen because of their growing population of native Spanish speakers. The two classes in each school that participate in the immersion program are made up of half native English

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Education, *Dual Language Education Programs: Current State Policies and Practices* (December 2015), x, at: https://ncela.ed.gov/files/rcd/TO20_DualLanguageRpt_508.pdf.

speakers and half native Spanish speakers – hence the “dual language” label. As in the Virginia Beach program, students receive half of their instruction in Spanish and half in English, switching between teachers at the midpoint of the day. The program began with kindergarten only in the 2014-15 school year and has added a new cohort of kindergarteners each successive year. Helen Small, instructional supervisor for world languages at Newport News Public Schools, tells us that the goal is to continue to grow the program each year, so that participants will eventually be able to continue their dual language education into middle and high school.

Immersion programs are a highly effective means of teaching a second language. Moreover, dual language education appears to enhance student achievement in a variety of other ways. One recent study has shown that “by the time dual language immersion students reached the fifth grade, they were an average of seven months ahead in English reading skills compared with their peers in nonimmersion classrooms. By the eighth grade, students were a full academic year ahead, whether their first language was English or another world language.”¹⁸ Such findings remain consistent even when controlling for socioeconomic disparity. As Virginia Beach’s world languages coordinator, Jennifer Carson, noted in an interview with WHRV earlier this year, “The brain changes when students acquire a second, or even a third, language, and this magnifies cognitive benefits, not just linguistic benefits” – including improved spatial relations, higher-order thinking and standardized test scores.¹⁹

The Standards of Learning exam pass rate data that Carson shared with us appear to support these assertions. By this measure, students in the Virginia Beach immersion program have generally been as successful, or more successful, than their peers, with the expected variations from grade to grade and year to year. The 2017 math and reading scores of the third- and fourth-grade immersion students at Christopher Farms Elementary were about the same as, or slightly higher than, their nonimmersion counterparts. However, the fifth-grade immersion students outperformed the nonimmersion students by nearly 20 percentage points, in math as well as reading (see Table 6). The Newport News immersion program is still too young to have collected this kind of data; its first cohort of third-graders will take the SOL exams this spring.

¹⁸ *America’s Languages*, p. 15.

¹⁹ “Educationally Speaking: The Science of Smart,” Segment 1, at: <http://whro.org/radio/45744-educationally-speaking-the-science-of-smart>.

Although only Virginia Beach and Newport News have established immersion programs, high-achieving high school sophomores and juniors in all our region’s school divisions can participate in a three-week summer immersion experience at one of five Governor’s Foreign Language Academies. In 2017, French, German and Spanish full-immersion academies were held at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, and Japanese and Latin partial-immersion academies took place at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland. Each public high school in Virginia may nominate a limited number of applicants each year. Admissions are extremely competitive, but nearly all the school divisions we spoke with have recently had students accepted into the academies.

TABLE 6

STANDARDS OF LEARNING PASS RATE DATA AT CHRISTOPHER FARMS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (SPRING 2017)

Spring 2017 SOL Data	Nonimmersion Students	Immersion Students
3rd Grade Reading	79%	90%
3rd Grade Math	88%	88%
4th Grade Reading	80%	83%
4th Grade Math	81%	77%
5th Grade Reading	79%	97%
5th Grade Math	75%	94%

Source: Virginia Beach City Public Schools

PROMOTING BILITERACY

A newer statewide initiative that reinforces the importance of second-language learning is the Seal of Biliteracy, a distinction that all Virginia public high school graduates can receive on their diplomas to indicate that they

- have passed all required End-of-Course Assessments in English reading and writing at the proficient or higher level; and

- are proficient at the intermediate-mid level or higher in one or more languages other than English.²⁰

Virginia is one of 23 states (plus the District of Columbia) that have adopted the seal, which was first introduced in California in 2008. Each school division is responsible for assessing its students' language proficiency, which is typically determined in the non-English language through an extra written exam. Hampton's curriculum leader for foreign language, Deborah Sommer, notes that the seal is a useful credential that can enhance high school graduates' career prospects.

The Seal of Biliteracy initiative is part of a broader educational movement that emphasizes the importance for all U.S. students to master more than one language, regardless of whether they are native or non-native English speakers. In 2016, California residents voted "yes" to a California ballot initiative (Proposition 58) to overturn a longstanding state policy that students who are learning English as a second language should receive instruction only in English, an outcome that will certainly encourage both dual-language immersion programs (as recently established in Newport News), and advanced Spanish language courses designed for heritage speakers.²¹

Hampton Roads' Spanish-speaking community (almost 4 percent of the population 5 years and older) is smaller than elsewhere in the U.S. and Virginia, but it has grown substantially in recent decades. The student population identified by the Virginia Department of Education as "limited English proficient" has likewise increased, creating new challenges for our region's public schools. The data for the Portsmouth and Suffolk school divisions that can be found on the DOE website appear to be incomplete, but other divisions in our region report a proportion of students who are learning English as a second language that ranges between 2.2 percent (Hampton and Virginia Beach) and 5.7 percent (Newport News). The majority of these students are native Spanish speakers, although numerous other world languages are represented as well.

The complete spectrum of services that our schools provide to English language learners is beyond the scope of this report – but in this context, it is worth noting that some divisions in Hampton Roads have begun to develop Spanish courses for native speakers. The goal of such courses is to enhance native Spanish speakers' reading and writing skills (similar to the function of traditional English courses for the broader student population), as a supplement to these students' ongoing acquisition of English as a second language. There are challenges to this approach, beginning with the scheduling difficulties that inevitably arise when one more item is added to an already full school day. Moreover, the reading and writing capabilities of heritage Spanish speakers vary widely, depending on the level of Spanish language schooling (if any) the students have already completed, making it difficult to design a single program of study. In the 2017-18 school year, Newport News will offer Spanish for Native Speakers I as a pilot program at Denbigh High School, the beginning of a two- to three-year sequence that will lead to an opportunity for native speakers to enroll in AP Spanish with other advanced language learners. In Norfolk, plans are underway to introduce Spanish for native speakers in the 2018-19 school year.

An additional program that promotes biliteracy is the French American School of Norfolk (FASN), established in 2011 through an initiative of the French Joint Staff and the Mission Laïque Française, to serve the needs of military families stationed at NATO's Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk. French students who participate in FASN enroll in either Crossroads School (elementary through eighth grades) or Granby High School, where they attend regular public school classes for most of the day. After school, they receive additional instruction in French, taught by FASN instructors. FASN classes are intended not only to reinforce French language skills, but also to help students meet the academic requirements of elementary and secondary schools in France. The French Ministry of Defense funds FASN, and Norfolk Public Schools provides the use of its facilities at no cost.

²⁰ http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/graduation/diploma_seals/seal_of_biliteracy/index.shtml.

²¹ Ashley Hopkinson, "A new era for bilingual education: explaining California's Proposition 58" (January 2017), at: <https://edsources.org/2017/a-new-era-for-bilingual-education-explaining-californias-proposition-58/574852>.

Conclusion

Hampton Roads' public schools – like those elsewhere around the country – do not require all their students to learn a language other than English. Foreign language is an elective, rather than a core component, of the school curriculum. However, for those students who choose (or are encouraged by parents or counselors) to learn a foreign language, our region's schools offer many outstanding opportunities – including International Baccalaureate, immersion and other specialty programs, as well as courses in less commonly offered but high-demand languages such as Chinese and Arabic. These learning opportunities are not distributed equally. Smaller school divisions, and divisions with a minority of students earning advanced studies diplomas, are less likely to support language programs that go “above and beyond” traditional offerings. However, even divisions that fit this profile can still prioritize language learning through innovative programming; in our region, Newport News stands out as a positive example.

The Commonwealth of Virginia offers an encouraging environment for foreign language instruction. The Governor's Foreign Language Academies and the Seal of Biliteracy program are prominent initiatives supported by the Virginia Department of Education. In addition, the Foreign Language Association of Virginia and the Virginia Foreign Language Supervisors Association provide a helpful resource for language teachers and administrators throughout the Commonwealth. Representatives of Hampton Roads schools participate and serve in leadership roles in all these initiatives.

The administrators we spoke with emphasized how much language instruction has changed in the past generation. The repetition drills and language labs that shaped many baby boomers' and Generation Xers' language-learning experiences are hardly present in today's classrooms. Beginning language classes now tend to emphasize effective oral communication over technical mastery; “teaching to proficiency” is a commonly stated goal. The Virginia Standards of Learning adhere to this approach, recommending that the target language be used within the classroom as exclusively as possible. Moreover, students are increasingly encouraged to draw interdisciplinary connections beyond their language classroom. Finally, the internet has opened a new world

of language resources for students and teachers alike; there are more readily available ways to engage creatively with other languages and cultures than ever before.

Nevertheless, we heard that it can be difficult to maintain enrollments in upper-level language classes, due in part to perceptions (held by students and their advisers alike) that languages are hard to learn, or relevant only for honors students. Smaller divisions sometimes struggle to maintain robust programs in languages other than Spanish and French; we heard from several divisions that had recently discontinued a language program in some or all of their schools. Because there is typically just one teacher per school who is responsible for teaching all levels of a less commonly offered language, like German or Japanese, these programs can suffer if a strong teacher leaves or retires. Attracting and retaining qualified teachers in all world languages is a broader challenge, particularly since the demand for bilingual workers in other, more highly compensated, fields is so strong.

Distance learning (a focus of the 2013 State of the Region report) is a promising option for schools that might not otherwise be able to offer instruction in certain languages. Virginia Beach currently operates its own “in-house” distance learning program that allows classes at one school to be broadcast to other schools in the division; students and teachers interact with one another in real time through two-way videoconferencing. Although this solution might not be feasible for all divisions, all Hampton Roads schools may enroll their students in online courses through the Virginia Department of Education's distance learning initiative, Virtual Virginia. Students in Chesapeake, Hampton, Portsmouth and Suffolk have recently taken languages such as Chinese and Arabic, as well as Advanced Placement courses, through Virtual Virginia. Although there may be some drawbacks to learning a language online, the option is a good one for motivated students who might not otherwise have access to such courses.

Finally, we would like to underscore the observation of the authors of the “America's Languages” report that “urban schools in particular are surrounded by valuable, untapped resources to enhance language and cultural education for all students.”²² In Hampton Roads, these resources include

²² *America's Languages*, p. 20.

ethnic and immigrant communities (particularly from the Philippines and Latin America), several institutions of higher education, NATO's Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, and more than 150 international companies from 26 different countries. There are rich possibilities for student internships, summer exchange programs, dual-language immersion programs, and other kinds of cooperation with international partners that have not yet been explored. Our school divisions should continue to build relationships within the broader Hampton Roads community as a means of supplementing or enhancing current language programming.



