

The Home/School Connection:

Collaborating to Promote Best Practice in World Language Education, PreK-8
Issue 4

What Are the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning?

To study another language and culture gives one the powerful key to successful communication: *knowing how, when, and why, to say what to whom...*The approach to second language instruction found in today's schools is designed to facilitate genuine interaction with others, whether they are on another continent, across town, or within the neighborhood.

— *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*

Dear Parents,

The national Kindergarten through twelfth grade *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*, developed through the collaborative effort of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and several language organizations, define content standards ("what students should know and be able to do") for world language programs, as measured at fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade points.

Let us examine the concept behind the national *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* in this issue of Home/School Connection:

Communication: Communicate in Languages Other than English

When asked what they remember from their language classes in school, many parents respond that the instruction consisted mainly of grammar drills such as learning conjugations and completing fill-in-the blank exercises, and that they

never learned to use the language in real life. Lacking the motivation to continue studying, they soon forgot what they learned.

In sharp contrast, the three Communication standards aim at achieving high performance abilities for all of our students via the use of meaningful and interactive exercises. If you visit a standards-based classroom, you may see students expressing their reactions and opinions to current issues in the world or in their community. Young children may be playing games or pretending to be a character in a story. Reading and writing proficiency is acquired through purposeful interaction with texts and with other people via the reading of authentic stories, sing-along activities, e-mail exchange, letters, journals, and many other formats depending on age and availability of resources.

The advent of the Internet and the improvements in technology have opened new opportunities for purposeful

learning, and children in an increasing number of schools have access to audio and video programming, chat rooms, pen pal groups, blogs, dictionaries, podcasts, and other resources in many languages. Our students can now literally embrace the entire world from their workstations at school!

Cultures: Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures

Cultures get “lost in translation.” The truth is that if you don’t speak the language, you are at the mercy of mediators, and even though you may have a good disposition to others, it is quite possible that your perception about a culture will be very much influenced by prevailing stereotypes.

Learning languages allows our children to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures. Students’ first-hand familiarity with cross-cultural “products,” “practices” and “perspectives,” as defined in the two Cultures standards, helps to dispel misunderstandings caused by ethnocentric points of view and facilitate the establishment of better lines of communication and collaboration among the diverse communities of our global society.

Connections: Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information

Standards-based world language classes utilize the language of study as a tool to access academic and non-academic information expressed in another

language. In this way, today’s language classroom is a space where new knowledge is introduced and where concepts acquired in other disciplines are reinforced and expanded through the use of the language of study. For example, students learning about French Impressionism in the arts class may also read texts about Impressionism in the French class.

Comparisons: Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

Students in language classes discover many things about the new language and culture, and by comparison, they also discover many things about their own language. Depending on age and level of instruction, they may be surprised to learn—for example—that all things in Spanish have gender, that books in Arabic begin in the last page and are read from right to left, and that expressions vary from culture to culture. This comparative process creates an elasticity of thought and openness to differences that are very valued in professional and social realms.

Communities: Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home and Around the World

The opportunity to participate, take advantage of, and integrate oneself in local and world communities is an enormous benefit of language learning. The two Community standards make these benefits immediate by supporting

curricula and methodology approaches that go beyond the classroom. This may include inviting guests to speak about their countries and cultures, creating language clubs for parents and children, offering local field trips and programs to study abroad, and many other opportunities.

Languages Covered

As of today, language specific standards based on the general standards have been written for Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), Classical Languages, French, German,

Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. You may read them all in the book *Standards for Foreign*

Language Learning in the 21st Century, available from ACTFL.

The Standards in US Schools Today

While even today schools in many states throughout the US delay offering world languages until middle school or high school, our hope is that the standards will facilitate the transition to longer sequences of high quality language instruction starting in kindergarten. Parents can help speed up this transition by sharing the information contained in this and other issues of *Home/School Connection* with school boards, administrators, and PTA groups in their community.

NNELL can assist teachers, parents and administrators with learning and advocacy efforts. Contact your State Representative today. We would love to hear from you!

This issue of Home/School Connection was written by Ana Lomba. It is full of tips and resources that can be found at www.nnell.org. Teachers may reproduce it and send it home in their students' backpacks. Send suggestions/comments to Tammy Dann, NNELL's Early Language Advocate: trdann@q.com