

State vs. Federal Responsibility: Evaluating California's Minimal Foreign Language Requirement

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Abstract

The longstanding debate over foreign language (FL) education in the United States reflects a deeper structural tension between state autonomy and federal responsibility. Despite more than a century of national calls to strengthen multilingual education, from the 1898 American Association of Colleges and Universities initiative to modern global competency campaigns, FL policy remains largely decentralized, producing uneven access and inadequate instructional standards. California, often viewed as a national bellwether, mandates only two years of FL education for high school graduation, a requirement far below the four years widely recognized as necessary for functional proficiency. This study evaluates how such minimal state requirements, coupled with declining teacher pipelines, outdated pedagogical models, and volatile federal political pressures, have contributed to a nationwide contraction of FL instruction. Drawing on scholarly research in applied linguistics, education policy, and political science, this paper analyzes how conservative ideological shifts, particularly skepticism toward DEI, federal oversight, and public-school funding, have deprioritized FL education. With case studies, policy analysis and a review of multilingualism research, this paper demonstrates that insufficient FL education weakens cultural competence, exacerbates socioeconomic inequities, and threatens national security by limiting the nation's diplomatic and intelligence capacity.

California serves as a microcosm for these tensions: its limited FL mandate reveals both the constraints of state-based policy making and the vulnerabilities created by fluctuating federal priorities, including proposals to dismantle or diminish the Department of Education. Strengthening FL requirements is not just an academic enhancement, it is a national imperative for economic competitiveness, global cooperation, and equitable opportunity.

Introduction

The debate over foreign language (FL) education in the United States underscores a century-long struggle between state autonomy and federal oversight. Since the 19th century, initiatives like the 1898 effort by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to lift “America’s Language Curtain” aimed to expand FL curricula. However, FL education remains primarily under state control, resulting in a fragmented educational system (Kirst). While California mandates two years of FL education for high school graduation, most states require one year to none at all (California Department of Education): all of these mandates are insufficient for achieving the 4 year proficiency requirement (Hartmaier). By 2008, FL instruction in public K-12 schools had declined from 31% to 25%, compared to 50% in private schools, driven by limiting funding, inadequate teacher pipelines, and inconsistent district-level decision-making (Pufahl and Rhodes). Despite the known benefits of multilingualism, including economic competitiveness and cultural sensitivity (Dewaele et al.), FL education remains deprioritized, leading to a predominantly monolingual population. The major contributing factors to the decline of FL curricula include the following: (1) the minimal two-year requirement (California Department of Education), (2) low enrollment keeping classes at beginner level (Sung et al.), (3) exclusion from core curricula (Kubota), (4) frequent political shifts that undermine federal support (Schoettler). As the national constituency of FL teachers and advocates declines, shifting political priorities widen education disparities, leaving students unprepared for a globalized world. The critical question remains: What does California's minimal two-year foreign language requirement in public California high schools reveal about

state-federal tensions and the need for increased national standards and government resources.

The Insufficiency of Current Foreign Language Requirements

California's minimal FL requirement reflects broader state-federal tensions, illustrating how states have prioritized local autonomy over national standards. This situation is compounded by conservative skepticism toward the influence of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), often perceived as distractions from core educational goals, thereby deprioritizing subjects like FL (Hankinson). Sarita G. Schotta, director of the Education Services Division at Brown University, reports that the Dean of the University of California, Davis, dismissed poor FL outcomes, claiming that "having a forty percent dropout rate doesn't mean anything [...] it's hard to find out why students drop courses [...] the department has excellent teaching" (Schotta). Such attitudes reflect a broader trend where state education executives prioritize subjects deemed more beneficial to economic competitiveness and local community needs, a philosophy that aligns with those of conservative education advocates. According to Lindsey Burke, a consultant with the Heritage Foundation, a prominent conservative think tank, "states and local school districts are better positioned than federal policy makers to understand and meet the needs of students in their communities" (Burke). The political tension is exacerbated by the Republican preference for STEM curriculum over the humanities, a position conservatives support by citing STEM's direct applicability to the demands of the economy (Goldstein).

This shift has led to a shortage of qualified FL teachers, with positions renewing without proper oversight (Kramsch). High turnover rates hinder students' ability to form meaningful

relationships or achieve FL progress, resulting in disengagement and high dropout rates that educators overlook. These administration issues are fueled by reliance on outdated FL curricula, such as the Grammar-Translation method, leading to student dissatisfaction (Schotta). Student testimonies note that “as soon as you get used to your language classes, you are practically through the quarter... or the instructors didn’t really care about the course” (Schotta). The absence of federal guidance combined with inconsistent state mandates further ineffective FL classes, despite demands for multiculturalism in a globalized workforce.

Federal ideological politics are taking precedence over states’ financial and educational needs, further limiting the quality and accessibility of FL learning. Linda McMahon, Trump’s Secretary of Education, has a history of supporting initiatives that divert resources from public schools. Eric Jotkoff, a communication strategist at the National Education Association (NEA), states that McMahon’s apparent goal is to dismantle the Department of Education, redirecting the taxpayer funds supporting public schools, which serve 90% of American students, to private institutions. This ideological shift is compounded with her ambiguous stance on FL education (Jotkoff). Initiatives like Project 2025, which aims to streamline education resources in California (Walker), threaten to reduce resources for marginalized communities, particularly in California, while increasing class sizes and limiting access to quality FL education for middle class families. This skepticism towards public institutions is bolstered by a conservative narrative labeling them as ineffective, while portraying private schools as more responsive to parental demands and results-oriented. Brooke Schultz, an Education Week reporter, indicates that Trump’s executive aim is to strip federal funds from schools he labels “discriminatory” and “radically indoctrinating

students” (Schultz). Although Congress asserts states’ control over curricula, the Trump administration’s current pedagogical priorities hinder FL education advancement. States like California struggle with low FL standards, while relying on property tax revenue which exacerbates inequalities (Baker). These minimal FL requirements reflect a change where national security concerns overshadow local policy changes.

The Broader Benefits of Foreign Language Education

FL education is crucial for enhancing cultural competence, national security, and global economic competitiveness. Public FL instruction fosters cultural sensitivity, enhancing national security. Dewaele et al., scholars in applied linguistics and communication, studied 2200 multilingual and monolingual studies, showing a strong correlation between multilingualism and cognitive empathy, which aids understanding and reduces cultural stereotypes (Dewaele et al.). FL fosters acceptance and reduces racist stereotypes, contributing to public safety and thus, national security through peaceful diplomacy. La Corte et al., directors of immigration policy, argue that insufficient FL proficiency creates “backlogs in intelligence translations, hindered US military ... and diplomatic efforts” (La Corte et al.). A national curriculum could better address FL skills demand in business and government, increasing national security and improving relations with nations in conflict.

FL education strengthens international diplomacy by supporting immigrant communities and intercultural relations. A study by Collier et al. highlights the challenges FL learners face

when connecting with native speakers (NS). One student reflected, “it was extremely difficult to understand how to address a particular group... [but] interacting with our own age group of NS was enjoyable because we are using language to communicate with Japanese people” (Collier et al.). With FL learners having limited contact with native communities to form well-founded attitudes (Chen et al.), FL exposure can reshape student attitudes and reduce political tension. Terry Osborn, an expert in contemporary FL curricula, states that language education supports cultural acquisition, allowing immigrant groups to seek validation through FL connections (Osborn). FL instruction mitigates ethnocentrism and fosters equitable political policies supporting marginalized communities, fueling social cohesion through cross-cultural understanding.

Conclusion

Given the fragmented nature of FL education and potential setbacks from efforts to dismantle the Department of Education, California’s FL curriculum should mandate at least three years of FL instruction and increase state funding for teacher training while offering scholarships to attract qualified FL educators to underserved areas. Scholars such as Schoettler and Dewaele et al. argue that the existing FL system fails to adapt to global engagement demands, widening resource gaps (US Department of Education). However, California’s reliance on federal funding makes it vulnerable to political shifts, limiting its capacity to sustain FL programs, especially in economically challenged districts. Given the volatility of federal funding, establishing a model to sustain FL education in marginalized communities is crucial, engaging with federal

policymakers, maintaining public-private partnerships and nonprofit support, and even engaging with adaptive learning like EdTech solutions (Andriivna et al.). Additionally, conversations about weighted funding models that allocate money based on priority, could help close socioeconomic disparities (Obadan). Without decisive action, these political gaps could persist, weakening students' linguistic competencies and limiting their opportunities in an interconnected world.

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