



LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs

Portland Public Schools
150 Ocean Ave., Portland, Maine 04103

Donald L. Bouchard

Tel.(207) 874-8135

Fax (207) 756-8421 Vol. 9, Fall 2005

2005 - The Year of Languages

2005 has been proclaimed The Year of Languages in the United States. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and other affiliated organizations are drawing attention to the academic, social, and economic benefits of studying another language. The goal of the campaign is to advance the idea that everyone should develop proficiency, not only in English, but also in another language. Portland Public Schools are well positioned to acknowledge the Year of Languages because over 50 languages are represented by almost 25% of learners attending its public schools.

WHY STUDY ANOTHER LANGUAGE?

There are many important reasons for studying another language:

1. *Students who have concentrated on foreign language studies are generally among the highest performers in other subject areas.* Standardized tests have shown that such students consistently score higher across content areas than students who have not concentrated on a foreign language.
2. *Studying language exposes us to more than the language; it exposes us to the cultures of its native speakers, as well as its literature.* Gaining proficiency is a

stimulating mental discipline leading to life-enhancing experiences. Proficiency leads to interpersonal interactions with native speakers of the language, to exposure of literature, or to unique travel experiences.

3. *In the technologically fast-paced, post-9/11 era, it is vitally important for us to increase our communicative competence in order to understand the subtleties of cultures, customs, and language.* This enables us to better comprehend differences between what people say and what they mean.

PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS' MULTILINGUAL CHARACTER

In the past 3 decades, the Portland community has embraced increasing numbers of refugee, migrant, and immigrant populations from all over the world. The diversity can be seen and felt in many vibrant ways all over the city. Neighborhoods and businesses reflect the many cultures and languages represented in the community. The variety of musical and artistic opportunities are a further reflection of this diversity.

Portland Public Schools mirrors the community's multilingual character. There are currently over 50 languages other than

English represented in Portland Public Schools in descending order: Somali, Khmer, Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, Acholi, Serbo-Croatian, Farsi, French, Cantonese Chinese, Nuer, Russian, Pashtu, Swahili, Thai, Amharic, Polish, Tigrinian, Tagalog, Albanian, Mandarin Chinese, Bulgarian, Romanian, Creole, Hindi, Lingala, Tshiluba, Dinka, Kurdish, Kinyarwanda, Laotian, Luo Ugandan, Azande, Dari, Nuer-Arabic, Portuguese, American Sign, German, Greek, Hebrew, Punjabi Korean, Afghani-Persian, Italian, Japanese, Kusaal, Nyanja, Bangle, Champa, Icelandic, Mina, and Swedish. The languages listed above are spoken in the homes in Portland.

WHY IS THERE A FOCUS ON LANGUAGES?

Here are some interesting facts:

- spoken language is a natural phenomenon which makes us uniquely human and is our common universal birthright before we reach the age of 10;

- languages evolved over 50,000 years ago from possibly a common, yet presently unknown ancestry;

- there are approximately 7,000 languages spoken or signed in the world, with well over 2200 represented each in Asia and Africa and 230 in Europe;

- every language presents a unique and separate window on how we view reality;

- no one language is inherently more difficult to learn than another as a second language. The difficulty is relative to the home language of the individual learning the particular second language;

- the United States is the *only* major country in the world that graduates students with only one language (English);

- spoken fluency in another language does *not* depend on IQ, nor is it limited to children as a population of learners;

- success in another language is predicated on two conditions: prolonged exposure, and someone to help make sense

of the system and the cultural aspects of the language.

THE CURRENT STATUS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING ACROSS THE U.S.

Language learning is currently in a state of *crisis*. There is a demand for job skills utilizing over 200 languages, especially for semitic languages such as Arabic. However, there is little emphasis in schools regarding foreign language instruction, despite the fact that 96%(!) of U.S. Americans believe foreign languages should be taught in schools. According to the 2000 U.S. census, 47 million people speak another language at home: there are two million Chinese speakers, 600,000 each of Arabic and Korean speakers, and 300,000 Hindi speakers in the United States! In part, because of the need for many of these speakers to learn English, little esteem is granted to the natural language skills of this population. There is a need to provide a wider and deeper education in languages and language learning.

Knowledge of another language enriches individuals in countless bountiful ways, not the least of which is creating cross-cultural understanding. In this age of instantaneous global communication, we should do no less than to help promote languages across the curriculum. This is why 2005 has been proclaimed the Year of Languages.

There is a joke well known around the world, and it goes like this: a speaker of many languages is known as a polylingual; a speaker of two languages is known as a bilingual; and a speaker of one language is known as a U.S. American. We need to render the impact of this joke meaningless with a focus on language and language learning in our schools.

Stay tuned for Year of Languages activities during this academic year.

Sources:

Language Magazine, January - June 2005. CA: Los Angeles.

Talkin' About Talk Radio Program. ACTFL.org.