

Ensuring America's Place in the Global Economy by Building Language Capacity in the Schools

Testimony of Rita Oleksak, President
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia

January 25, 2007

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. ACTFL supports the premise you so eloquently state in your letter inviting us to testify: that the national security and economic vitality of the United States and the basic career security of many American citizens is now tied in large part to our foreign language capability. We believe this capability is in dire need of strengthening. Indeed, the United States suffers from a “language deficit” because our country has failed to make language learning an important part of every child’s education.

ACTFL and the language teaching profession support initial efforts by the government to address this language deficit through proposals by the Department of Defense following its 2004 National Language Conference, as well as their “Defense Language Transformation Roadmap.” We also support the President’s National Security Language Initiative, but the lack of authorizing legislation has resulted in an incomplete plan, duplication of effort, and an unequal emphasis on the importance of the initiative within the various agencies. While the Department of Education has re-directed some

of its existing resources, it too does not have the authorizing legislation it needs to implement all the education-based activities envisioned by NSLI. The initiatives and funding from the Departments of Defense and State are welcomed, but for the long term we do not believe that it makes sense for the National Security Agency and the Director of National Intelligence to run teacher training and summer youth programs.

Just as the military has its “Defense Language Transformation Roadmap,” we need a similar “roadmap” for a comprehensive and coordinated plan to expand and strengthen school-based foreign language education in the United States. The goals of achieving a language-trained military and language qualified personnel in embassies around the world will fail unless strong support is provided to our nation’s K-20 foreign language education infrastructure.

ACTFL offers the following recommendations to strengthen the foreign language capabilities of our nation:

1. Ensure that ALL languages are supported in our educational system, not just the languages that are deemed critical for today. Since research supports the notion that after learning a second language, the third and fourth languages come more easily, it is important to support any language that a school system considers important for its community and for which teachers are available.
2. Encourage and support the creation of articulated, continuous sequences of language courses beginning in the earliest grades and

continuing through college, with immersion and language study abroad as key components.

3. Include funding for the development of a consistent program of assessments starting in the earliest grades to measure student progress toward proficiency in foreign languages.
4. Since learning a foreign language increases performance in other core subject areas, make foreign languages **truly** a part of the core curriculum in every school.
5. Provide assistance to community colleges and universities offering specialized foreign language instruction focused on combining language instruction with other majors, and for special purposes, such as law enforcement, health care, and first responders.
6. Provide incentives to enhance teacher recruitment and retention, such as loan forgiveness, and ensure teacher quality through the teacher education and certification process.
7. Require intensive training for teachers recruited from abroad so they understand how to teach in American schools, and provide professional development for teachers currently in the classroom on how to incorporate standards-based teaching into their curriculum.

8. Develop the skills of our Heritage Language speakers by encouraging the continued learning of their native language as well as English.
9. Fund research into a wide range of areas, including enrollments, best practices, and longitudinal studies to examine the effects of language education on the cognitive development, as well as the academic and career success of students.
10. Provide funding for public education initiatives such as the *Discover Languages...Discover the World* campaign. Policy makers and business leaders need to support efforts to change public attitudes toward foreign language learning.

In summary, we need the coordinated plan and funding of federal legislation to strengthen foreign language education and enable us to provide the linguistic capabilities so desperately needed by government agencies and the workforce in general. ACTFL and the language profession stand ready to assist Congress in developing this plan in order to achieve a multilingual citizenry, thereby strengthening our national security and securing our leadership role in a global economy.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee.