

National Foreign Language Coordination Act

The National Foreign Language Coordination Act would create the position of a National Language Director and a National Foreign Language Coordination Council to develop and oversee the implementation of a foreign language strategy. The proposed Council, chaired by the National Language Director, would identify crucial priorities, increase public awareness of the need for foreign language skills, advocate maximum use of resources, coordinate cross-sector efforts, and monitor the foreign language activities of the federal government.

The genesis of this legislation is a report entitled, “A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities,” issued by the National Language Conference held in June 2004 under the auspices of the Department of Defense, and attended by government, industry, academia, education, and language association representatives.

The establishment of a National Language Director and the creation of a National Foreign Language Coordination Council will ensure that the key recommendations of the conference will be implemented, which include:

- developing policies and programs that build the nation’s language and cultural understanding capability in the public and private sectors;
- engaging federal, state, and local agencies and the private sector in solutions;
- identifying and increasing education of languages and cultures;
- strengthening educational programs and tools in foreign languages and cultures, and
- integrating language training into career fields and increasing the number of language professionals.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, showed how much more was needed to improve education in these critical areas. America needs people who understand foreign cultures and who are fluent in locally-spoken languages. The stability and economic vitality of the United States and our national security depend on American citizens who are knowledgeable about the world. We need civil servants, including law enforcement officers, teachers, area experts, diplomats, and business people with the ability to communicate at an advanced level in the languages and understand the cultures of the people with whom they interact.

In 2005 and 2006, the Senate added the modified bill to the Defense Authorization Act by unanimous consent, but it was removed from the conference report out of concerns it would duplicate the Administration proposal, the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI). However, it has become clear that we need a national strategy to address our foreign language shortfalls in all languages, not just those deemed critical today, in a comprehensive manner that includes input from state and local governments, industry, academia, and other stakeholders.

Sections a-d. Establishment of the National Foreign Language Coordination Council.

Establishes a National Foreign Language Coordination Council in the executive office of the President which is composed of the National Language Director (chair), the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Attorney General, the Director of National Intelligence, the Secretary of Labor, the Director of the Office of Personnel Management, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Chairman and President of the Export-Import Bank, and other such federal agencies as determined by the Council.

The Council will be charged with developing and overseeing the implementation of a national foreign language strategy (built upon the efforts of NSLI), which shall identify crucial priorities, improve public awareness of the need for language skills, develop incentives for teacher training, coordinate cross-sector efforts, and identify best practices, among other activities. The strategy is required to be completed within 18 months after enactment of this Act. The Council is to consult with State and local government agencies, academic sector institutions, foreign language related interest groups, business associations, industry, and heritage associations, and other relevant stakeholders in developing this strategy.

The Council is also required to conduct a survey of federal agency needs for foreign language area expertise.

Sections e-i. Meetings, Staff, Powers, Reports, and Outreach.

The Council is required to meet at least twice a year in formal session and meet with stakeholders at least once a year. The Council is also encouraged to hold conferences and send out a newsletter on its activities. It is required to create and maintain a website with information on its activities. The Council shall report to Congress within 90 days of enactment of this Act on its activities and annually thereafter.

Consistent with other federal councils established by law, the Council shall have such staff as needed; accept the services of details, experts, and consultants; and receive information from other federal agencies as necessary to carry out its functions. The sharing of information from other agencies must be consistent with federal privacy laws.

Section j. Establishment of the National Language Director

The National Language Director shall be appointed by the President and be a recognized individual with credentials and abilities across all sectors to be involved in the creation and implementation of long-term solutions toward achieving language competency. The Director shall oversee the implementation of the national language strategy; establish formal relationships with major stakeholders; and coordinate and lead a public awareness campaign to increase the interest in foreign language education.

Section k. Encouragement of State Involvement

The Council shall consult with each State to provide a point of contact for sharing and disseminating information from the Council. Each State is encouraged to establish a State interagency council on foreign language coordination or designate a lead agency to have responsibility for coordinating and interacting with the Council and State and local government agencies.

Section m. Authorization of Appropriations. Authorizes such sums as necessary to carry out the Act.