

Foreign Language Discussion

Inter-Lakes School District
Wednesday, November 15, 2007
Meredith Community Center
7:00 p.m.

Meeting called to order at 7:00 p.m. by School Board member Dan Cunningham. (The following notes do not make use of quotation marks, but try to reflect as accurately as possible the comments made during the meeting.

Dan Cunningham opened the meeting. He explained that the purpose of the committee was to investigate the expansion of foreign language in the District.

Mr. Cunningham then explained what the constituency of the committee would be. It would include:

- Board member (Mr. Cunningham),
- Administrator (Mr. Hansen),
- High school foreign language teacher
- Elementary classroom teacher
- High school student
- Parent from Sandwich Central School
- Parent from Inter-Lakes Elementary or Middle Tier
- Someone involved in local business

He then spoke of four questions that would be addressed:

1. Should we teach a foreign language?
2. If yes, when should we teach it (what grade/age)
3. What language?
4. How often should instruction be delivered?

An open discussion ensued. It was noted that the focus of the committee would most likely be on elementary and middle tier foreign language opportunities.

Someone noted that barriers to elementary language instruction include state standards for core subjects and the time it would take to implement foreign language.

It was asked what is the policy for language in the District now? It was explained that there is a Spanish class offered currently in 8th grade that counts as ½ of a high school course.

Someone suggested that the questions that the committee should address are:

- What languages to students need?
- What level of proficiency do they need?
- What do they need by the time they graduate?

One participant noted that the younger a student is when introduced to a language, the more proficient a student becomes in that and other languages. This participant commented that her son, with only 10-15 minutes of instruction per day at the kindergarten level, by the end of the year, he knew a fair amount of basic vocabulary (colors, numbers, etc.). This occurred in another district out-of-state.

This parent went on to say, What language? --- we need to look to the future to choose. But at the high school level, I see a big gap by not offering Latin.

Another member of the audience said that she would like to see something start in kindergarten and build from there.

I agree with a lot of what she says. When you start a foreign language in 8th grade, there are already so many other distractions. They aren't interested in it. At a younger age, they are more receptive to it. They don't need a (full length) class, but short doses.

Two members of the audience spoke about work many years ago to expand foreign language in the District. A group back then did the research, met many times but nothing came of it. One stumbling block was finding staffing (certified) and finding a replicable model. They said that they were told that this current (2007) committee represents the third time the District has investigated this issue. They also noted that kids at the high school are pursuing foreign language study beyond high school.

Patti Kennelly suggested that we consider joining forces with other districts in order to have more offerings. In the past, we did offer Latin at the high school, but didn't have enough interest to sustain more than a part time person. It was then difficult to retain a part time person who was qualified. It would be difficult to offer classes with enough students, but there are other opportunities for language instruction through technology.

Language study is not required for high school graduation, but most colleges require through the third level of study.

An audience member wondered if ILSD could require foreign language study by all students.

Why do we offer foreign languages in the District? Right now, the district offers foreign language so that students can get into college.

But students stand to make more money if they know another language. They will need it (foreign language experience) later in life to be successful.

A parent noted that there is interest in foreign language study, including Latin. Last year a Latin Club was offered after school and about twenty-five students participated.

What is the most effective instructional delivery for foreign language – some research indicates one time a week isn't enough.

If your goal is to expose kids a language and another culture, then a once a week special is fine. But if your goal is make them speakers of another language, then you need a different model.

An audience member noted that younger, kindergarteners', neuron-transmitters are much more open/receptive to foreign language. I think language and culture would be great – we live in really white place. It wouldn't be bad one day a week, but I'd rather see it three days a week.

Perhaps there could be two tracks – one for those who either need the foreign language in order to attend college or because they want to be able to do in depth study of the literature and one for those who don't need a language, but should be exposed to another culture.

The way you get a sense of a culture is by trying it on. One day a week probably isn't enough, but learning the language, working more often during the week, you do get to try it on. What's a different language/culture like?

WHAT LANGUAGE:

We already have French and Spanish – why not add something else like Chinese and Latin.

Why not offer French and Spanish in the elementary grades so that they can feed into the high school, and perhaps we can offer AP classes.

Part of the value of studying a foreign language is that it is foreign – it is different. It requires a different way of thinking. The study of foreign of language is a way of thinking linguistically, much like the study of Algebra is a way of thinking logically. Check with PSU about what they are looking for in a student – a particular language or a world view?

My daughter took Spanish in high school, but ditched it when she got to college and took Arabic.

In an article written in 2006, more than 1.6 billion people speak Chinese. It's bound to affect the kids when they get out. Only 24,000 students in the US are currently studying Chinese. You need to start them at the kindergarten level.

I think we should keep Spanish and French but add additional languages.

I think we need to be careful that we're going to give kids 12 years of a language. We need to open to more than 12 years of one language. The real beauty of learning a language at a young age is brain plasticity – learn one language at a young age makes it easier to learn another language later in life.

Continuity of a language is important. I would hate to see Chinese (for instance) offered until third grade and then discontinued due to a lack of resources including qualified teachers.

Utility – we can't do all things for all languages as it isn't practical. So what do want? English is a given. There are billions of people speaking Chinese. If you put that on a resume, you will get a job. Why are we doing it and how useful will it be beyond high school? Arabic is another language that is from a culture that is remerging as a global player. The committee's charge should be to look further on down the road beyond high school to see how valid and important their training would be.

Cost is the elephant in the room. It was suggested that implementing a comprehensive foreign language program from K-12 in one language could cost a quarter of a million dollars.

Chinese government is offering free teachers – but District's must pay room and health insurance for two years, then pick up full cost.

Sustainability is an issue also -- if we start something but then can't finish it due to part time people constantly leaving.

Is it possible on a trial basis to do little introductions at an elementary level of the languages we already offer?

Department of Defense provides grants for some language study in languages considered critical to the future defense needs of the country.

With all these head honchos here, what are the chances that we could stick this in the current school day? I'm just wondering what my teachers will say when I say a foreign language is coming in three days a week for 15 minutes. What will they not get to?

Couldn't you do it during snack?

Could it be a pilot program?

Could we survey the kids and parents as to what language they would like to study?

To elaborate on survey idea, we could put in school newsletters that there will be a survey coming up of the students. Prepare the parents to talk to their children about it before.

I don't think you can ask a five or seven year old what language they want. We did a survey at Sandwich – sent out 60 and got 40 back. All but one wanted Spanish.

Mr. Cunningham thanked people for their input and asked that people interested in joining the committee sign up. The following people indicated interest in participating on the Foreign Language Committee:

- Lobin Frizzell, Sandwich resident and parent
- Nancy Stetson, ILHS Foreign Language Teacher
- Corey Henderson, ILHS Foreign Language Teacher
- Meg Bedford, ILHS Foreign Language Teacher
- Lisa Doscher, ILSD ESOL Teacher
- Wendy Chappuis, ILSD Speech/Language Assistant, Sandwich resident and parent

Note taker:
John Hansen