

COMPETENCY-BASED CREDIT FOR WORLD LANGUAGES IN DC: A POLICY INITIATIVE TO EXPAND ACCESS AND EQUITY FOR DC PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS

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January 2025 - The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) is currently engaged in a multi-year Reimagining High School Graduation Requirements Initiative that will likely lead to significant changes in how DC public high schools operate and how they are experienced by students. Among the policy reforms currently under consideration is Competency-Based Credit For World Languages, a policy we have been seeking for a decade, and which we believe will bring enormous benefits to our students.

Globalize DC has been the primary advocate pushing for competency-based credit for world language learning in DC. We believe a well-crafted and well-implemented policy can significantly increase access for DC students to language learning outside their schools, especially beneficial to students in schools and communities with less-than-robust language offerings. Read on for a more in-depth understanding of the issue and the benefits competency-based world language credit could offer the children of the District of Columbia.

History

In December 2015 the DC State Board of Education (SBOE) approved a resolution listing recommendations which grew out of its High School Credit Flexibility Task Force. This resolution included a recommendation to “allow students to receive credit for demonstrated knowledge in world languages and mathematics.” These were forwarded to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to initiate rulemaking to implement these endorsed recommendations. In OSSE’s follow-up communication, the State Superintendent indicated that, given the range of comments on the subject, “further discussion [of credit by exam for world languages] would be beneficial,” and the recommendation was stricken. In May 2018, the State Board of Education approved a resolution to adopt the recommendations of another task force -- its High School Graduation Requirements Task Force, including renewed support for competency-based credit for world languages - “provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate they have mastered course content for world language and mathematics.” Since that time, OSSE has taken no action on this policy recommendation.

Stymied at OSSE, Globalize DC reached out to the Deputy Mayor for Education who expressed interest in the concept and encouraged us to work directly with DC Public Schools. We did so. We sensed genuine interest in this issue on the part of DCPS, and after some initial meetings felt optimistic that we were making progress and had found a partner willing to explore the feasibility of this policy as a strategy to expand access and equity for DCPS students. In the end, the pandemic put an end to these discussions.

Goal

The DC State Board of Education’s stated goal is to ensure that every student is prepared for college and/or career success, and to “become informed, competent, and contributing global citizens.” World language education plays an important role in that preparation. In our globalized, linguistically and culturally diverse society, cultural competencies and proficiency in a two or more world languages provide significant advantages, particularly in our local DC economy.

The Problem

In regard to current world language education, we are trying to meet 21st century goals working within an outmoded 20th century framework. The required two credits of world language, offered in a DC public school classroom, even in the same language, will generally yield only novice proficiency, allowing the student only very limited ability to use the language in real life situations. Today, in our more mobile, technologically and globally interconnected society, students are currently learning languages outside the classroom in many ways, with real potential to move towards bilingualism. Yet there is no established mechanism for recognizing, encouraging, or allowing students to build on these other modes of language acquisition. In addition, languages offered within schools are very limited – in most cases to Spanish and French – and access to in-demand “critical languages,” as well as higher level language instruction (AP), is rare and inequitably available. As long as students’ language learning is confined to the four walls of their own school, DC world language education will be limited and inequitable. We want to build the capacity of our local schools to offer great language programs, but we should also recognize that authentic and high quality language learning is taking place outside the schoolhouse doors. A competency-based approach to language credit will allow us to reduce the artificial barriers that exist between officially recognized language learning and unrecognized language learning and create a more seamless approach that builds on the multiple ways that students actually acquire languages. It will also allow us to create more viable pathways towards proficiency, bilingualism, and biliteracy for DC students.

Well Regarded Assessments

Opening up options for DC students to earn proficiency-based credit is particularly appropriate for world languages, where established tools for measuring proficiency exist. We know that there are widely accepted, research-based exams for language proficiency used in government, business, academia, and promoted and/or administered by established world language professional associations. These exams measure all four communicative modalities - reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These assessments are already being used in DCPS, and in other states to measure student learning.

Who Would Benefit?

We see proficiency-based credit as a means of increasing (not diminishing) the quality of language instruction, expanding access and choice, helping address challenges created by the highly mobile student population in DC (especially between schools), and better equipping and positioning DC students to compete for good jobs in our 21st century globalized economy.

- **Heritage speakers** could earn credit for language proficiency in their home language. This could potentially allow them to fulfill their world language requirement, so they could focus on other subjects. Or students could choose to take higher level school-based world language courses, such as AP, literature, or other advanced courses designed to improve and maintain their home language, and equip them for careers requiring advanced language skills. Many heritage speakers are not proficient in all four modalities (ie, they may speak and understand the language, but may lack reading and writing skills). Coursework designed to address these specific deficits in order to prepare them for an exam could put these students on a pathway to professional level proficiency in their home language.
- Similarly, students who have acquired some level of proficiency in a second language outside the school setting (through **study abroad, outside courses, living abroad**) can earn credit – either to fulfill their language requirement or to pave the way for them to continue their language learning (in or outside of school) at more advanced levels.

- Allowing for proficiency-based credit could open the door for **credible outside service providers (universities, nonprofit organizations, study abroad organizations)** to create or adapt high quality language programs for DC students, particularly in “critical” and less commonly taught languages. At present, requirements for traditionally credentialed teachers create enormous barriers to access for our students to learn the most in-demand languages (Arabic, Chinese, Russian, etc.).
- Creating new opportunities for alternative means of learning languages can also help reduce the **current inequities in access** to world languages for DC students with much fewer language options available in east-of-the-river schools, whether DCPS or charter.
- A proficiency-based approach to high school world language requirements would be a good complement to increasing interest in elementary **language immersion programs**. The articulation between elementary immersion programs and high school graduation requirements can be challenging, and establishing a consistent proficiency-based option for placement and granting credit could be helpful.

None of these examples address the situation of a high school student who wants to take an exam instead of their school world language class – either because they’re struggling, they need to repeat, or they want to satisfy their requirement through self-study to free up time for other classes or pursuits. Every situation above is meant to expand language opportunity, to acknowledge and embrace outside learning, and to facilitate more effective pathways to gaining proficiency in a second or third language.

Look at Washington State

I recommend that you take a look at what the State of Washington is doing around World Languages and credit flexibility at <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/resources-subject-area/world-languages/world-language-competency-based-credits>. For what a district or LEA policy looks like in Washington, refer to the Seattle Public Schools experience at <https://www.seattleschools.org/departments/international-education/world-language-credit-testing/>.

You will find a fantastic video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgCMhiM1N-o&t=331sm>, which focuses on the value of competency-based credit for heritage speakers, but the policy in Seattle is also available to other kinds of language learners.

Moving Forward

A number of questions have been raised regarding details of how this policy would be implemented. The city has the nation’s leading experts in language learning and assessment, and we believe our public education institutions should tap into that expertise as a new policy is crafted. Globalize DC looks forward to working with DC Public Schools, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, the State Board of Education, and the Deputy Mayor for Education to convene these experts to think more closely about what a new proficiency-based policy for world languages should look like in DC, and how such a policy could open up new language learning and career opportunities for DC students. Globalize DC is now inviting experts in the field and interested community members to join us in advocating for DC to adopt a new competency-based credit policy for world languages.