

Richard Barnell, President
Vista School Board
Vista School District
Canby, OR

January 1, 2013

Dear Mr. Barnell,

I understand that you anticipate making critical decisions about the future of foreign language education in your school district. I am writing to insure that you are informed about the recent research regarding the benefits of early language learning.

Thanks to recent developments in neuroscience, scientists are discovering a multitude of benefits of being bilingual. Researchers Marder, Carew, and Van Essen (2008), writing in the *Society of Neuroscience*, found that being fluent in two languages, particularly from early childhood, enhances a person's ability to concentrate and builds brain power. They state: "This finding suggests that being bilingual from an early age significantly alters the brain's structure."

Ellen Bialystok, a researcher at York University, has studied effects of bilingualism for over two decades. She recently concluded that bilinguals have stronger executive control abilities throughout their lifespan and that the abilities develop earlier in children who are exposed to languages. Bialystok highlights that the studies she reviewed were focused on people who were fully bilingual and who used both languages regularly to a high level of proficiency.

The European Commission recently collected data from 30 country-specific experts in Europe across a wide range of European languages. Data were evaluated by an inter-disciplinary team of European experts who concluded: 1) multilinguals are open to a variety of perspectives and are able to think divergently and convergently; 2) multilinguals have enhanced problem-solving capabilities; 3) multilinguals have expanded metalinguistic awareness (ability to analyze how language is used and use languages to achieve goals); 4) multilinguals have stronger memory abilities that improves the learning process; 5) multilinguals possess robust interpersonal communication skills; and 6) multilingualism may slow the rate of decline of certain cognitive processes as a person ages.

A recent study at Cornell found that children who learn a second language early in life, strengthen their executive attention, or ability to attend to important input, dismiss unimportant input, and decide what actions to take as a result of the important input (Booker, 2011).

These are just a few reviews of emerging research that supports earlier research conducted in the 70s, 80s, and 90s that showed the myriad of benefits of early language learning related to academic success. In addition to research, recent discussions among policy makers, U.S. government agencies and business leaders recommend that knowledge of other languages and cultural competence are crucial for our country's future national and global security and competitiveness. For example, the Center for American Progress urges policymakers to increase the amount of public dual language immersion preschool programs to meet the needs of the increasing English learners in our nation and promote bilingualism. The report highlights the

lack of school readiness programs for Latino children and the research that shows that literacy in one's first language improves the learning of English. A recent study found that Latino students who maintained their native language and embraced their cultural heritage received higher grade point averages than those Latinos who only spoke English at home and in school. Since research also shows that Latino students have high dropout rates, the researcher recommends that schools welcome and support English learners' home culture and native language to promote their academic success. Finally, outcomes from the *Language and Culture Summit: A Strategic Imperative* sponsored by the Department of Defense endorse the enhancement of language and cultural capabilities within the US. Leaders from the Department of Defense, industry, and universities established initiatives that prioritize the learning of languages and cross-cultural competence by making them core competencies. The key conclusion from the summit stated that knowledge of other languages and cultural competence are crucial for the United States' future national and global security.

As the Pacific Northwest Representative for the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL), I would be happy to speak with you further about the benefits of learning other languages and have included my contact information below. Thank you for your careful consideration of this matter.

Sally Hood

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