



Executive Summary

Mission Statement:

ACTION (Active Cross-Cultural Training In Our Neighborhoods) is a program designed to promote and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity by mobilizing volunteers to work towards making foreign language and culture education pervasively accessible within their communities. ACTION aims to empower at-risk students who lack access to foreign language and culture education to *live* globally.

Social Problem:

The Foreign Language Education Deficiency in the United States

The United States suffers from a severe language education deficiency. Only 85% of America's elementary students, 42% of its middle school students, and nearly all students at socioeconomically disadvantaged schools, lack access to a foreign language education, which has become a necessity in today's global world.

Social Innovation:

ACTION combats the foreign language education deficiency that widens the socioeconomic achievement gap and impedes US students from competing at the global level by increasing access to multicultural education through an innovative approach:

- Implementing a curriculum that integrates cultural and linguistic themes
- Mobilizing volunteers in schools within their communities so that they can meet specific community needs
- Employing a financial model that ensures accessibility, simplicity, sustainability, and fairness.
- Teaching language and culture not just to facilitate academic learning but to inspire students to live more *global lives*.

Current status of ACTION

Currently, ACTION reaches hundreds of students in two socioeconomically disadvantaged schools in West Philadelphia (Lea Elementary and Jackson Elementary) and a school for students with learning disabilities in Jacksonville, Florida (The Noble School). The program has two branches: a team of ten volunteer teachers and lesson planners based in Jacksonville, Florida and a twelve-person board that governs over a

group of approximately 60 volunteers at the University of Pennsylvania. The program has brought weekly hour-long Spanish classes to students with learning disabilities to The Noble School since September 2010; daily hour-long Spanish classes to Lea Elementary since September 2012, and hour-long after school Spanish classes three days a week to Jackson Elementary since September 2013.

In addition to its partnerships with the aforementioned schools, ACTION has partnered with Allen D. Nease High School in Jacksonville, Florida (Nease students are ACTION volunteers), the University of Pennsylvania's Latino Coalition, Whiz Kid afterschool program, and Impact Magazine.

The Importance of Learning a Foreign Language

The importance of a language competent United States is more extreme now than ever before. As the global economy continues to shift toward East and South Asia and Latin America—with the Chinese economy predicted to be the world's strongest as soon as 2030— and away from the English-speaking world, foreign language proficiency becomes an inarguably indispensable component to economic success and national security. United States educational policy fails to reflect this need. The US has never had a centralized national foreign language education policy, and unlike almost every other academic subject, there exist no national standardized achievement tests to measure student achievement in foreign languages. Only one out of every five American public school students is enrolled in a foreign language class—a number that has *decreased* over the last ten years, in spite of the steady and rapid globalization of the economy that has occurred during this time period.

The foreign language education deficiency of the United States contrasts starkly

against the policies of its foreign economic competitors. Indeed, nearly all other developed countries have mandated the accessibility of foreign language education for all students, beginning as early as age five and no later than age ten; these countries, also unlike the US, have instituted national standardized testing to measure achievement in language acquisition.

The US lags severely behind its competitors, in that foreign language class is, in most cases, not a compulsory component of the academic curriculum until the high school level, despite a vast body of research that supports that the “critical period” for learning expires earlier than puberty and that acquisition of native like proficiency of a foreign language becomes nearly impossible after the critical language period ends. While 90 percent of America’s high school students have access to foreign language education, only 58 percent of America’s middle school students and 15 percent of elementary school students do. Nearly all of the country’s most socioeconomically disadvantaged elementary and middle schools lack foreign language programming, further disadvantaging at-risk children and ultimately widening the academic and professional achievement gap. The failure of educational policymakers to address the importance of mandating language-learning programs in primary schools means that thousands of American students outgrow the critical language period without ever having been exposed to a second language. They instead enroll in their first required foreign language class in high school, struggle to learn their target language as a result of cerebral lateralization and decreased language acquisition facility, and thereby become frustrated, disengaged and disinclined to strive for multilingual fluency –driven instead only to fulfill their academic language requirement through a minimal effort. For at-risk students,

struggling in a foreign language class causes a diminished sense of self-worth, hindering the progression of a student's social, academic, and extracurricular trajectory.

Amongst a plethora of competing priorities and a paucity of resources, policymakers rarely opt to mandate foreign language programming in elementary schools and thereby fail to account for the many benefits inherent in early childhood language learning. Education research supports that elementary students who study a foreign language in school outperform their peers on standardized tests, have a greater ability to “shift easily between symbol systems”, a larger capacity for creative thinking, more metalinguistic cognizance, and stronger communication skills.

The benefits of multilingual competence are indisputable, and that younger children are more able to acquire a foreign language is clear. It is thus the **ACTION mission** *to make foreign language and culture education accessible to every student at a young age –irrespective of his or her background.* Childhood exposure is the most secure way to ensure that students acquire true foreign language proficiency during their lifetime. *And foreign language and culture proficiency is imperative for Americans who wish to compete in this modern global world.*

Overview of ACTION

ACTION responds to the ubiquitous lack of access to foreign language and culture education by mobilizing volunteers to facilitate cross-cultural training within their communities. ACTION is an educational organization whose impact extends beyond the classroom by empowering students to make internationalism a *lifestyle*. It does so through its implementation of an innovative curriculum; engaging and accessible

extracurricular and academic programming; and its fair, sustainable, and simple financial model.

A Look at the ACTION Curriculum

The ACTION Curriculum is unique in that it seeks not only to improve the academic experience of the students it reaches, but also to create a new lifestyle for them; to empower students to *live globally*.

The curriculum:

- Is based on the synthesis of extensive foreign language acquisition research*
- Responds to designated desired student outcomes*
- Makes for an authentic cultural experience by emphasizing pragmatics, not accuracy*
- Integrates linguistic themes with authentic cultural lessons*

The following are the desired student outcomes for the ACTION curriculum:

1. Students will learn and retain new, key words during each class.
2. Students will be able to communicate using the words they learn.
3. Students will learn about and experience a new culture, and be able to articulate what they have learned while drawing parallels and finding differences between this new culture and their own.
4. Students will become lifelong language learners and speakers, progressing and building on their knowledge of a new language and culture over many years.

The key to achieving the aforementioned goals lies in research on recommended methods for successful curriculum design. Elements considered are the amount of *time* students are exposed to the language, the *intensity* of their classes, the nature of their *interactions* and assigned *tasks*, and *continuity* and consistency of their learning.

Integrating Language with Culture

How does the ACTION curriculum ensure an authentic cultural experience? It does so by emphasizing pragmatics –instead of accuracy –so that students are empowered to use their language skills in a natural, authentic way. In lieu of such grammar and rote vocabulary retention drills as those commonly used in traditional foreign language classes, ACTION students learn new vocabulary while practicing bargaining in Spanish during a Latin American open air market simulation, or while singing *Happy Birthday* in Spanish at a traditional Latin American *Quinceanera*, or while using Spanish to place an order at a Guatemalan restaurant. Every single class is culturally relevant and practical; students learn a new language *without feeling like they are studying* and concomitantly expand their knowledge about a different way of life.