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FYC 13100

Professor Clauss

December 4, 2008

Foreign Language Program in Elementary School Beneficial to Students

As a bilingual graduate of Penn High School interested in studying foreign languages, I am presenting my ideas to the Penn Harris Madison school board to request that the school system begins teaching foreign languages to students in elementary school, rather than beginning in high school. The school board understands the importance of foreign languages in today's society but has not seriously considered initializing a foreign language program in the elementary schools. I would present this argument at one of the school board meetings and hopefully as a result of my presentation, the school board would start making changes in the school system that would allow students to start learning a foreign language early on in their educational careers.

Good Evening Dr. Thacker and School Board of Penn Harris Madison,

Last spring, I graduated from Penn High School and am currently a freshman at the University of Notre Dame. I am forever grateful for the wonderful education I received at Penn. Now that the Penn Harris Madison School Corporation has presented me with so many opportunities, I feel obligated to give back to the school system. For this reason, I am here to share with you an idea of how Penn Harris Madison can become an even greater learning community than it already is.

As you already know, the world we live in is becoming more and more global every day. As a result, effective communication between nations is a key factor to succeeding as a nation in this broadening global community. However, effective communication within the world can only be achieved if the members of our society become proficient in the languages of other countries. Allow me to share a lighthearted joke with you that is both amusing and relevant to the topic at hand: If someone that speaks two languages is called "bilingual" and someone that speaks three languages is "trilingual", what do you call someone that speaks only one language?

American. Certainly this is a stereotype that the American society should change, not only for the country's image, but also to open up more opportunities for Americans in the global community. The most effective approach to bring this change in our nation is by initializing more foreign language programs earlier on in the American education systems. By offering foreign language courses beginning in the elementary schools, Penn Harris Madison can greatly benefit all of the students by introducing them to other cultures, improving their cognitive abilities, and making them better prepared for the increasingly globalized community.

Teaching foreign languages to children enhances their awareness and acceptance of other cultures. Once children learn a foreign language, they show more interest in other cultures, making them "more open to diversity", research suggests (Walton). It is important for children in America to learn to accept other cultures because every day the United States is becoming more diverse, meaning that these children will without doubt need to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds than themselves. By teaching children a foreign language at an early age, they will be more likely to accept the differences between their culture and other cultures because the language will not seem as foreign and unapproachable to them. It will not be until all members of our society learn to accept and understand people of different cultural backgrounds that we will have a fully unified nation. Therefore, the initialization of foreign language programs in the elementary schools of Penn Harris Madison will encourage all the students to appreciate the diversity present in their own nation.

Many schools are reluctant to incorporate foreign language programs into their school systems because they do not want to reduce the study time of other subjects that seem more essential to the educational development of students (Abbott). However, researchers, including Abbott, the director of Education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign

Languages, agree that a major advantage to teaching foreign languages to children at an early age is that “it has been shown to enhance children’s cognitive development”. Consequently, children that study foreign languages increase their reasoning abilities and become better problem solvers. Although they may be spending less time studying other subjects, children that study foreign languages tend to outperform students that do not in all subjects, including math and science, because research shows that “learning languages helps increase listening ability, memory, creativity and critical thinking-all of which are thinking processes that increase learning in general”(Walker). Also, studies show that the SAT scores of students that have been studying a foreign language for several years tend to be higher than the scores of students that have not had as much experience with a foreign language (Walker). Therefore, by offering opportunities to learn a foreign language starting at the elementary school level, Penn Harris Madison can help its students become better thinkers, which will not only facilitate their learning processes, but will also help them achieve their highest potential as students and as members of the American society.

As a child of Mexican immigrants in the United States, I was fortunate to simultaneously learn English and Spanish with no effort. Being fluent in two languages has made life more interesting and has opened many education, traveling, and job opportunities for me. As a matter of fact, I wish I would have started learning French, my third language, as a young child rather than in high school. Research shows that “learning a foreign language [is] easier for children than it is for adults”, so if I would have learned the language at a young age, it would have made it easier for me to become an almost fluent French speaker (Walton). Now, even though I studied French for four years at Penn High School and spent an entire summer in France, through the Indiana University Honors Program in Foreign Languages, speaking absolutely no English, I

still speak the language with an American accent. “The advantage for younger learners”, according to Abbott, “is that they have the ability to mimic closely the native pronunciation and intonation of a new language.” So, if students begin learning a foreign language at a young age, for example in elementary school, they are more likely to acquire a near-native accent than a student who is just beginning to learn the language later in life, or in high school. By getting children started in elementary school, Penn Harris Madison will help make learning a foreign language easier for students.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important reasons for students to learn a foreign language early is that the society we live in is becoming more globalized. In order for the United States to maintain its position as one of the leading countries in the world, Americans must be able to communicate at an international level. According to Abbott, “knowing other languages and understanding other cultures is a 21st Century skill set for American students as they prepare to live and work in a global society.” For this reason, it is important to educate the youth of America in such a way that they will be able to carry out these international relationships. Foreign language experts suggest that “an uninterrupted sequence of foreign language study in grades K-12” is crucial “to gain the level of proficiency needed to communicate with people around the world in other languages” (Walker). Also, many experts agree that there is “an increased demand for people who can speak foreign languages at a sophisticated level” because employers in a wide range of career fields are in need of workers that are proficient in a second language (Walker). Therefore, anyone who gains enough experience in a foreign language will have many more career opportunities available to them than someone who has not acquired that level of expertise. Hence, it is important for Penn Harris Madison to begin teaching students a

foreign language in elementary school so that these children may grow up to be the great international communicators that our country needs.

In order to confront the stereotype that all Americans are monolingual, but more importantly, to help secure America's position as a world leader, Penn Harris Madison should initialize foreign language programs in all of the elementary schools. The students of Penn Harris Madison would greatly benefit from learning a foreign language at a young age in unlimited ways. By studying a foreign language in elementary school, these students would learn to more openly accept different cultures and would greatly increase their cognitive abilities. Also, by exposing these students to a foreign language at an early age, they would pick up the language faster than if they had started at a later age. By continuously teaching the students of Penn Harris Madison a foreign language for many years, these students would reach a level of proficiency that would make them suitable for many career positions. As a graduate of Penn High School, I know that Penn Harris Madison is a school corporation that does everything to meet all of the student's needs.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and I hope that you will begin taking steps towards making Penn Harris Madison a learning community that better prepares its students for the increasingly globalized world.

Works Cited

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