

Putting the World into Our Classrooms

A New Vision for 21st Century Education

By Michael H. Levine

With some notable exceptions, our public schools are doing a woeful job of teaching students about the world outside America's borders. For example, surveys conducted by the Asia Society and the National Geographic Society show a huge gap in most students' knowledge about the growing importance of Asia and other world regions to our nation's economic prosperity and national security.¹ The surveys find that 25 percent of our college-bound high school students cannot name the ocean between California and Asia. Eighty percent do not know that India is the world's largest democracy. Young Americans are next to last in their knowledge of geography and current affairs compared with young adults in eight other industrial countries. The overwhelming majority cannot find Afghanistan or Israel on a world map, but know that a recent "Survivor" show was shot in the South Pacific.

Meanwhile, K-12 language instruction does not reflect today's realities: Only about one-half of today's high school students study a foreign language, with the vast majority at the introductory level. Moreover, 1 million U.S. students study French, a language spoken by 80 million people worldwide, while fewer than 40,000 study Chinese, a language spoken by 1.3 billion people. None of this should come as a surprise, since our teachers are not prepared to teach about the world. Most prospective teachers do not take any international courses and have low participation rates in study-abroad programs.

These trends have serious consequences. In the 21st century, young people who understand the dynamics of global economic and intercultural relations will have a distinct advantage in securing good jobs. Those with knowledge of world history, languages, global health, and international affairs will be able to make informed decisions as voters about domestic issues influenced by global circumstances. By the same token, with an entire generation lacking in that knowledge, the United States is in danger of putting itself at a competitive disadvantage.

Globalization is causing policy and business leaders to call for new competencies to advance

***“One person with a belief is a social power equal to
ninety-nine who have only interests.”***

—John Stuart Mill

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U.S. competitiveness, leadership in global markets, scientific innovation, security, and proactively improve international relations. These emerging realities of the globally interconnected world have been documented in both national and state-specific reports.² Already, one in six American jobs is tied to international trade.³ Our trade with Asia now equals more than \$800 billion per year, a figure that has surpassed our trade with Europe since 1979.⁴ The majority of future growth for industries of all sizes will be in overseas markets.⁵ Meanwhile, in addition to economic considerations, solving new national security and humanitarian challenges, such as terrorism, AIDS, environmental degradation, and poverty, will also require increased knowledge of other world regions, cultures, and languages. Increased

diversity in our nation’s classrooms, workplaces, and communities, including new immigrants from many different parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, requires greater understanding of the myriad cultures and histories students bring to school. These new realities demonstrate that future workers seeking careers in business, government, health care, law enforcement, and a wide variety of other jobs will all require global knowledge and skills.

Unfortunately, our K-12 schools do not have the capacity to respond to those demands. Recent reports from the Southern Growth Policies Board, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and Harvard’s curriculum review committee confirm that most U.S. students lack sufficient knowledge about other world regions, languages, and cultures, and will not be able, if

current educational practices continue, to be effective employees of globally-oriented organizations.⁶ Members of minority groups are especially underrepresented in international courses and careers. In today's world, the status quo is tantamount to a kind of educational isolationism. That is unacceptable. To meet future workforce needs and provide equal opportunities for disadvantaged and minority students, our schools need to expose all students—not just those from affluent families—to international content earlier in their education.

International issues are too often crowded out of local and state reform discussions by the primacy accorded to reading, math, and science proficiency. This is unfortunate considering international knowledge, skills, and awareness can be taught the old-fashioned way—as an important part of the basic disciplines covered everyday in school.

As children learn to read, write, and compute, or are introduced to the foundations of scientific inquiry, there is no compelling reason why the international dimensions of these subjects cannot be included. In fact, adding international content is an exciting new way to advance the rigor, breadth, relevance, and intellectual ambition of classroom instruction. Recent reports from the Council on Basic Education and the National Association for State Boards of Education have justifiably complained that many schools are responding to accountability pressures by reducing their arts, humanities, and language programs.⁷ Global citizenship and international skills have substantial potential as a fresh, compelling theme for policymakers to appeal to parents who are increasingly concerned about their children's future as economic competitors and engaged, constructive citizens.

While most schools are behind the curve on their international content, some pioneering work is already underway. For example, the Asia Society and the Goldman Sachs Foundation

introduced the nation's first prizes for excellence in international education in Fall 2003. Over 400 public, private, and public charter schools and organizations in rural, suburban, and urban locales in almost every state have applied. An emerging knowledge base of "best practices" is documented in *Schools for The Global Age*, a recent report written by award-winning journalist Emily Sachar.⁸ States are also beginning to take the issue seriously. With support from the Ford Foundation, Starr Foundation, Longview Foundation, and Asia Society, 15 states are studying their economic connections to other countries; assessing and strengthening their curriculum standards; enhancing opportunities for teachers; creating linkages with schools in other countries; and strengthening world language programs.

Yet, this is only a small start. State action is essential to take international education to scale, but the speed of change in the world requires an immediate national leadership role. There are at least four steps policymakers can take to ensure that our high school graduates will have the international knowledge and skills they will need in the 21st century:

1. Teach critical foreign languages to 100,000 Americans

Our military and intelligence agencies are woefully in need of more linguists and cultural experts, particularly those specializing in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The U.S. Departments of Defense and State, along with private-sector and university-based intensive language classes, are expanding to meet Americans' needs for learning non-European languages, however not nearly fast enough. This unsystematized patchwork of language instruction does not build consistent, usable language skills between levels of schooling, is not yet adequately focused on rigorous and realistic outcomes, and is still teaching primarily Spanish and French.

We must create an effective elementary-through-college pipeline in major world languages that draws on recent research findings to ensure effective instruction. Studies have found that language instruction should start in the elementary years; include immersion experiences; be reinforced during summer breaks; draw from the untapped expertise of native speakers in many communities; be delivered by qualified teachers; be reinforced by cultural experiences such as travel abroad; and be supported by new technology.⁹

Generating 100,000 new foreign language speakers by 2010 in critical languages, such as Chinese, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Farsi, Hindi, and Russian, is entirely possible, but will require bold, decisive policy action. As a starting point, the College Board's ambitious initiative to introduce the first world language and culture Advanced Placement examinations in Chinese, Japanese, and Russian will commence in 2006, for the first time in more than 40 years. Congress should provide support to enable students to take advantage of these and other opportunities to develop language and cultural skills, and the knowledge essential for success in the global economy.

2. Train 25,000 teachers in international subjects

Teachers cannot teach what they do not know. During the Cold War era, our nation made an admirable and important commitment to science and math education by creating the National Science Foundation. A similar national commitment is needed now to prepare teachers to promote international knowledge and skills.

The Higher Education Act (HEA), due to be reauthorized by Congress this year, provides an important vehicle for modernizing teacher preparation and building teachers' international knowledge and skills. Building on 50 years of federal support to promote international expertise at the postsecondary level, Congress

and the president could direct funds from Title II and Title VI of the HEA to create partnerships between public schools and colleges or universities that would foster teaching excellence in international education, and create a new cadre of highly qualified teachers who understand the international dimensions of their subjects. The program could draw from successful models created by the Peace Corps and Teach for America, both of which have prepared thousands of intellectually curious teachers committed to social change.

The goal would be to support world-class professional development opportunities, including study-abroad and online courses, for 25,000 new and experienced teachers. Reaching this goal would require about \$50 million in new professional development spending from states and the federal government over five years.

3. Create internationally themed high schools

Many young people leave high school lacking either the academic preparation necessary for postsecondary education, or the broad habits of mind and skills necessary for success in the workplace and a diverse society. Current high school reform discussions focus wisely on the need to reduce dropout rates, and increasing achievement in basic subjects like reading and math. However, the content of the overall high school curriculum needs to be seriously upgraded and modernized.

High school reform initiatives introduced by the Bush administration, championed by reform-oriented governors like Virginia's Mark Warner, and supported by pioneering foundations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation offer an opportunity to include international knowledge and skills in high school re-design efforts. Priorities should include: innovation grants to states and districts that integrate international content into high school graduation requirements; development of assessments of

international knowledge and skills that compel teachers of all the major subjects to introduce more academic content about the world; incentives for small, more personalized schools of academic rigor; and the adaptation of existing technology initiatives, such as “virtual high schools,” to bring international knowledge and language skills to rural and under-resourced schools.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many states established special magnet or governors’ schools in math, science, and technology, or the arts. An attainable goal in the next five years is to ensure that every state—and every large urban district—has several internationally themed schools open to all students.

4. Modernize public media and technology funding to promote distance learning

Tens of billions of public and private dollars have been invested in the last decade to wire schools to the Internet, build educational Web resources, open the broadcast spectrum to new television channels, and provide quality media resources to families, schools, and communities. But the impact on children’s and teacher’s knowledge of other regions, languages, and cultures has been negligible. Existing federal education and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) funding in these areas is missing the mark and must be seriously overhauled. We should create a Global Learning Media/Technology Fund, with the following three purposes.

- ❑ First, this Global Learning Media/Technology Fund would create and expand online and distance learning programs to deliver international content and language courses on a much wider scale. This initiative could draw on existing distance learning resources. One approach is to link more students into a growing network of high-quality virtual high schools already established by public

education systems in several states. For example, the Florida and Kentucky Virtual High Schools have created online communities that expand access to Advanced Placement courses for students in schools that would otherwise be unable to offer these opportunities, with promising results. The Asia Society is working with state leaders in Kentucky to build a virtual international studies school that would deliver high-quality instruction in world languages, advanced placement courses, and other internationally themed content to schools in the state and other rural schools in the region. Another approach is to create more successful school-to-school linkage projects, such as the GLOBE science program and International Education and Resource Network (iEARN), both recent recipients of the Goldman Sachs Foundation Prize for Excellence in International Education. GLOBE is a hands-on primary and secondary Earth science education program that brings together students, teachers, and scientists from around the world to study and share data about the dynamics of the Earth’s environment. The iEARN project engages more than 15,000 schools in 100 countries in teacher-designed collaborative learning projects designed to meet high-priority curriculum needs. Together, these two programs connect more than 1 million students and teachers around the world, and offer instructive ways of expanding collaborative international education to serve more U.S. students while also helping meet state curriculum standards.

- ❑ Second, the fund would encourage joint projects by child development specialists, international experts, and communications companies, such as those created by Sesame Workshop. Their recent introduction of a new “Global Grover” character in the United States, who introduces world

languages, dances, and cultural events to the nation's preschool set everyday, is a great example of what public television can do to enlighten the next generation of global citizens. And its affiliation with trailblazing children's productions in more than 30 nations, including China, Egypt, and Bangladesh, are building vital bridges with children who may not otherwise be exposed to, or understand, democratic values. These projects are a key part of the next wave of public diplomacy necessary to build commitment to freedom of expression and access to education.

- ❑ Finally, the Fund would establish new programs dedicated to educating young Americans about the world as a priority in all Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS funding decisions.

Conclusion

To accelerate academic progress in the next decade, we must spur a sea change in our education system—with improvements such as quality preschools, real parent choices, and a serious emphasis on the quality of teaching. But these educational reforms will fall short unless the content of learning is also modernized to reflect the age in which we live. We must dramatically improve foreign language instruction in the United States; students must have greater access to internationally themed educational opportunities; and teachers must be qualified to prepare young people for the opportunities and challenges of globalization.

The stakes for our kids and our nation could not be higher. In the 21st century, like it or not, knowledge of the world is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity.

Endnotes

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