

# Changing Perspectives in Foreign Language Education: Where Do We Come from? Where Are We Going?

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**Abstract:** *New beginnings, such as the start of a new century — not to mention a new millennium — lead to reflection on our professional past and possible future. This article reminisces about the “good old days” in foreign language education and assesses changes that have taken place in language teaching since the 1960s. Using questions posed originally by Brecht (2001) regarding the future of foreign language education in the United States, the author offers her own perspectives and adds additional questions and issues the profession will have to deal with successfully to guarantee a valued place for foreign languages in our schools and postsecondary institutions.*

## The Good Old Days, Briefly Revisited

As a *femme d'un certain âge*, I should have some credibility in recounting how life as a foreign language teacher was different in the good old days.<sup>1</sup> In those good old days — which ended sometime around 1970 — we had content-based instruction in the best sense of the word, the content being the language as such, that is, the phonetic and grammatical structures of the language we were teaching and how those compared with the sounds and patterns of English. We also touched on cultural patterns, particularly as they were reflected in the accepted literary canon of the time. We conjugated and declined; we transformed singular forms to plurals and present tenses to the past. We greatly preferred our students to be among those with high academic aptitude rather than the academically and motivationally challenged riff raff that would rather enroll in fly and bait casting than German.

Multiple intelligences, learning styles, and learning strategies were not yet topics under consideration. Diversity was considered an obstacle rather than an opportunity. Heritage learners were not an issue. The few who would land in our courses 30 or 40 years ago were seen as a nuisance or — for teachers with limited language proficiency — as a possible threat. Students with a home language other than English either had to adjust to audiolingual elementary language instruction or like my daughter — a heritage speaker of German — they were soon enough motivated to depart for other subjects rather than try to maintain or improve their mother tongue competence in the foreign language classroom.

Back in the good old days, we did not need to deal with “Standards” and we were not bothered by performance assessments. Portfolios were for investors or artists. A good old dictation or transformation exercise did just fine as an indicator of what our students had learned! In the 1970s, teachers had to develop reams of performance objectives which, however, ended up in

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some administrator's file cabinet, and this effort at goal setting, articulation, accountability, and assessment soon passed.

We also were technologically sophisticated for the times and tormented students with never-ending oral drills in the language laboratory or, if less technologically well endowed, at least in front of a tape recorder. The very adventurous of us even occasionally used 8mm film. Way back then, we did not have access to the menu of the Hofbräuhaus on the internet.

In the early and mid-1960s, we did not even have to worry about enrollments. French had the highest enrollments nationwide, followed by German. Spanish clearly was of lower prestige and had lower enrollments. In 1962, when I graduated with a B.S. in German and French, Minneapolis suburban schools practically fought over me, trying to recruit me for their schools. I did not have to take some newfangled test to obtain my teaching credentials. The State of Minnesota, and later Kentucky and Ohio accepted my seat time in various courses as evidence that I was competent in my field and competent as a teacher.

However, I disappointed all contenders for my teaching services and took advantage of a lucrative (by my financial expectations of the time), year-long NDEA fellowship. Foreign languages (together with mathematics and the natural sciences) had become critical to national defense after the now-defunct Soviet Union beat the United States in sending a satellite into outer space. FLES (Foreign Language in the Elementary School) programs were funded left and right to begin early language instruction that would, it was believed, ensure eventual masses of fluent users of the languages taught. Only few postsecondary institutions, however, trained FLES teachers, and the FLES movement soon died, partly because of a lack of teachers, problems with articulation, and inability to deliver on its promises.

The Bilingual Education Act was passed in 1968. Bilingual education was conceived as a fast and efficient route to competence in English for those with a different mother tongue. As to the fate of bilingual education, we are all aware that its effectiveness for its original purpose is being questioned nationwide.

Ah, the good old days! Or were they? Things have changed. Or have they? Anyway, at least some things appear to be in the process of changing.

### Where Are We Now?

Our classrooms look different now than they did 30 or 40 years ago. I don't mean so much different in physical appearance, but rather in the students who populate them. We no longer have the luxury to teach only the crème de la crème among the students. Some of us — if we teach a language other than Spanish — have to grapple for every Tom,

Dick, and Mary we can recruit to make minimum enrollments, particularly in courses after the first year. Mainstreaming has clearly made the teacher's job more challenging! We have little data on how it has affected teacher attrition or student achievement.

The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (National Standards, 1999) are a mixed blessing. They serve a positive role in that they have reinvigorated many teachers and challenged school systems to take a critical look at their curriculums. The *Standards* have been criticized, however, because many teachers perceive them as unrealistic, since they are based on the assumption of a K to 12 articulated foreign language curriculum that does not exist in the vast majority of American schools. I view the *Standards*, as they are currently formulated, as potentially dangerous, since they define foreign language learning predominantly in terms of basic communication skills, ignoring — or at least undervaluing — the benefits of foreign language study for general education.

I suspect that few of us would disagree with Met (2001), when she states that “useable language proficiency cannot be attained in only two years of ... language instruction” (p. 22) or that you would disagree with Kuhn-Osius (2001), who states that “practically no student who fulfills a language requirement of two, three, or four semesters will have acquired professionally relevant language proficiency” (p. 155). Yet in our curricular promises, we often ignore the time it takes to gain some lasting competence in a foreign language when instruction is limited to the classroom.

Moreover, I am disappointed that the *Standards* are framed as optional “content” standards, rather than performance standards that tell teachers, students, administrators, and the public at large what a student should realistically know and be able to do after a specific instructional sequence. Despite the *Standards*, we still have no consensus on what knowledge or abilities define an elementary or intermediate-level course. Some of the standards may be especially difficult to translate into performance standards, because they focus more on pedagogical processes than outcomes. For example, “Connections” and “Communities,” although fitting nicely the alliterative pattern of the “5 Cs” (i.e., Communication, Culture, Comparisons, Connections, and Communities), do not readily translate into actual performance assessment in the American context.

FLES still suffers from the same ailments it had during the 1960s. It is gratifying that according to a survey by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999), there has been an increase in foreign language instruction in the elementary schools. However, according to Met (2001), still only about one third of U.S. elementary school children have some exposure to foreign languages in school. And those who do are usually exposed to languages

other than English (LOTEs) in some sort of exploratory or enrichment program only, rather than in sequential, articulated FLES instruction. We still tout early language instruction as the magic potion that guarantees eventual competence, ignoring that it is not so much the age at which a learner begins learning a foreign language that leads to competence, but rather a lengthy, articulated sequence of high-quality instruction with a competent teacher who provides large amounts of appropriate language input and many opportunities to interact with competent speakers of the target language.

We also have not learned from the past that before we can mandate early language instruction (as some states have done), we need a sufficient number of well-trained teachers and well-developed curricula for that level. While I do not deny the general value of language awareness or exploratory language courses, they alone are unlikely to build a foundation for developing language competence.

### Some Important Questions

In the 2001 *Northeast Conference Report*, Richard Brecht of the National Foreign Language Center posed five “easy” questions that frame the major issues currently facing American foreign language education:

1. Will residents of this country need Languages Other Than English (LOTEs) to lead productive and rewarding lives?
2. Will our schools and universities continue to serve as the primary providers of language instruction, or will continuing education and the private and government sectors become the environments of choice for language learners?
3. Will the number of LOTEs taught in schools decline dramatically as the popularity of Spanish as our nation’s second language continues to grow?
4. Will technology change our educational structures, that is, will technology replace the teacher and the WorldWide Web supplant the classroom?
5. Will the demands of new learners, together with new technology and new scientific knowledge, radically change the way we teach and learn language? (p. 1–2)

The future of American foreign language education will depend largely on how the educational establishment and the nation at large respond to these questions. My own answers to these questions do, unfortunately, not reflect the rather optimistic predictions made by Brecht.

*Will residents of this country need Languages Other Than English (LOTEs) to lead productive and rewarding lives?* It is difficult to give an unequivocal answer to this question. While there is no question that this country needs extensive competence in LOTEs for its political, economic, scientific, technical, and military needs and cultural

exchanges, I believe that residents of this country can continue to lead productive and rewarding lives without learning languages other than English. Many millions have done so, and many millions will continue to do so. Could a life be potentially more productive and rewarding if an individual were able to interact with members of another culture on their turf? Or if an individual could access information in more than one language? Or if an individual could enjoy the perspectives, practices, and products of another culture directly, without the filter of a translator? The answer is, unquestionably, yes!

*Will our schools and universities continue to serve as the primary providers of language instruction, or will continuing education and the private and government sectors become the environments of choice for language learners?* Here, a prediction is difficult. It will clearly depend on the goals of instruction and what we — the teachers — can accomplish in a classroom setting. Already, the private sector promises to do in 30 days what, according to the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K–12 Learners (Swender & Duncan, 1998) will take at least 12 years of formal schooling.

As Met (2001) states, “Part of the demand for language instruction currently met by proprietary language schools is created by the low level of proficiency that K–12 schools produce” (p. 35). If, indeed, reaching a specified level of language proficiency is the sole, or even the main goal of formal language instruction, as the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* and the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners* lead us to believe, and if, indeed, 12 years of continuing, articulated instruction in our schools produce in the majority of cases only an Intermediate-Mid speaker of the language, I will join David Maxwell, the President of Drake University, who recently advocated that his institution close down its foreign language courses and send its students abroad instead. I have no doubt that the government and the private sector can be more efficient and cost effective in delivering linguistic survival skills to motivated adult learners than the schools can in the traditional 50-minutes per day (or less) format, in classes populated by 25 and more youngsters of varying levels of ability, interest, and motivation, who are often taught by teachers who themselves do not rate above an Intermediate-High on the ACTFL Proficiency Scale.

Before we can conjecture a response to this important question, we need to re-examine the goals and purposes of foreign language education, particularly in the framework of general education for our youth. Is oral skills development the most appropriate goal and the longest-lasting educational product of a two-year foreign language sequence? Do we see foreign language education strictly as skill development, or are there processes and content areas unique to language study that can and should be explored for the purpose of general education and cognitive development?

*Will the number of LOTE's taught in schools decline dramatically as the popularity of Spanish as our nation's second language continues to grow?* My answer is, unfortunately, yes. According to Branaman, Rhodes, and Rennie (1998), in the decade between 1987 and 1997, Spanish instruction in the United States increased tremendously. Ninety-three percent of secondary schools now offer Spanish. In contrast, according to Brecht (2001), about 25% of high school Russian programs were eliminated between 1998 and 2000, and German and French programs suffered as well.

Without doubt, there are numerous arguments that can be made for providing a choice of languages to learners. The facts are that we share a border with a Spanish-speaking country, that Spanish is a world language spoken in numerous nations, that Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the United States, and that most learners (not to mention their parents) will opt for a language that they see as immediately or potentially useful. I am convinced, that the better — or financially better endowed — schools will continue to offer extensive programs in several languages to meet students' needs and interests. However, high-quality language instruction is expensive in that it needs lengthy, articulated sequences to bring worthwhile and lasting results. Given the demand for Spanish, many school systems will have financial difficulties in offering articulated K–12 instruction in a number of languages, or even instruction in grades 4 to 12, grades 6 to 12, or, minimally, grades 8 to 12, even if there were not already a teacher shortage in foreign languages. Thus, the answer to this question will not so much be determined by what could or should be, but (like so many issues in education) by what is affordable.

*Will technology change our educational structures, that is, will technology replace the teacher and the WorldWide Web supplant the classroom?* There is no question that technology will affect our educational structure and its potential delivery system. However, technology will not replace the teacher or the classroom except in exceptional circumstances. The beginning and intermediate-level language learners populating our classrooms will benefit — at most — from the use of technology as a supplement to traditional instruction, but not as a replacement for such instruction. All but the exceptional learner will continue to require face-to-face interaction with a competent teacher, in a supportive environment, engaging in guided interactions (be they communicative or of the practice variety) with other learners. That is not to say that computer-assisted instruction, or computer-assisted practice, or computer-assisted assessment, or computer-aided communication cannot offer very useful opportunities and supplementary resources for language learning. But if we are talking about self-contained distance education, its major use will be for adult learners in nonrequired or optional contexts, such as

for language maintenance purposes or for graduate or special-interest courses — in other words, for highly motivated learners who already have an adequate level of communicative competence to use the language for purposeful interaction. The motivation, task orientation, and self-discipline required in a self-paced distance course, where the learner remains relatively anonymous and which lacks the richness of face-to-face interaction, accountability, and week-to-week deadlines will be hard to sustain over time except for exceptional learners.

Also, contrary to popular belief, developing and delivering high-quality distance courses is very expensive in term of required expertise and instructor time. The cost factor for a high-quality distance program is reflected, for instance, by the cost differential at Stanford University between a traditional MA in engineering and a web-based master's degree. According to Grosse (2001), the tuition for the campus-based program is \$26,000 whereas the tuition for the virtual degree is \$45,000.

*Will the demands of new learners, together with new technology and new scientific knowledge, radically change the way we teach and learn language?* My answer is yes, if foreign language instruction is to maintain a valued place in the school curriculum.

There are as yet much ignorance, uncertainty, controversy, and contradictory theories and findings about how second or foreign languages are learned or should be taught. Two citations illustrate these contradictions. Walqui (2000), for instance, tells us that:

Language learning does not occur as a result of the transmission of facts about language or from a succession of rote memorization drills. It is the result of opportunities for meaningful interaction with others in the target language. Therefore, lecturing and recitation are not the most appropriate modes of language use in the second language classroom. Teachers need to move toward more richly interactive language use, such as that found in instructional conversations and collaborative classroom work. (p. 1)

Fillmore and Snow (2000), however, question the practice and theoretical underpinnings of this naturalistic view of language learning without instructional intervention (i.e., without appropriate form-focused explanations or feedback) popular during the past two decades. Inherent in the pedagogical recommendations of Walqui above is the belief that:

Direct instruction can do nothing to change the course of language development, which is determined by internal language-acquisition mechanisms that allow learners to sort things out eventually. (Fillmore & Snow, p. 24)

While Fillmore and Snow focus on ESL teaching, their stated conditions for classroom language acquisition apply to the LOTEs as well:

[Children] must interact directly and frequently with people *who know the language well enough* to reveal how it works and how it can be used. During interactions with English learners, *expert speakers* not only provide access to the language at an appropriate level; they also provide *ample clues as to what the units in the language are and how they combine to communicate ideas, information, and intentions*. Learners receive corrective feedback as they negotiate and clarify communicative intentions. The acquisition process can go awry when the conditions for language learning are not met, especially *when learners greatly outnumber people who know the language well enough to support acquisition, as in schools and classrooms with high populations of English language learners*. When there is no direct instruction in such situations, children can either make little progress learning English, or they can learn it from one another. The outcome is “learnerese” — an interlanguage pidgin that can deviate considerably from Standard English. Students who speak this variety, sometimes called “ESL Lifers,” have settled into a variety of English that is fairly stable and that many of them speak fluently and with confidence. *They are no longer language learners, because they are no longer working out the details of English.* (p. 24, italics added)

Citing recent brain research, Genesee (2000) concurs that both attention to meaning and attention to form — i.e., the whole and parts of language — play roles in language learning.

In our anxious search for effective teaching approaches, we tend to jump on theories or research findings that appear to have implications for teaching and learning. But numerous earlier theoretical and pedagogical dogmas, ranging from the mythology of “subconscious learning” to “left brain” and “right brain learning,” to the undesirability of negative feedback now show that they were based on premature and greatly simplified conclusions regarding exceedingly complex phenomena. What we minimally need to do as teachers, theorists, and researchers of language learning and teaching is to re-examine the role of explicit grammar instruction (how, when, and for what purpose a focus on form may be appropriate), the role and type of feedback we provide, the role of interaction and the type(s) of interaction we offer our learners, and the role(s) of instructional grouping, including the type(s) of activities used for grouping.

## Recent Positive Developments

Do we have any quantitative or qualitative indicators that matters related to foreign language education are improving? The increase in FLES programs for language awareness raising has been mentioned. In addition, the number of schools offering Advanced Placement (AP) programs has slightly increased.

Study abroad has attracted increased national attention. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that study abroad enrollments doubled between 1985 and 1993 (Rubin, 1996), although the majority of students go abroad for a semester or less.

A study of predictor variables for success in postsecondary study abroad programs in Russian showed that age, grammar, and reading knowledge prior to departure and language learning aptitude were statistically significant in predicting the amount of gain in the language made during the study abroad experience (Brecht et al., 1993, reported in Wilkinson, 2001, p. 91). These findings would justify a high-quality classroom foreign language learning experience before departure, rather than a sink-or-swim approach of sending novice language learners abroad. In other words, the more students know about the language before departure, the more they gain in language proficiency while abroad.

It is generally accepted, and documented by research, that few learners will be able to jump the hurdle from an Intermediate to an Advanced rating on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Scale without an experience abroad. I am certain that we all can add to the thousands of anecdotal reports that a stay in the target culture provides the important (and for most learners essential) breakthrough in language acquisition. While a stay abroad is no guarantee of reaching high levels of proficiency, reaching such levels of language competence is impossible without such a stay. This finding is of particular importance to the development of teachers. At present, an initiative is underway to get the U.S. Congress to support a low-interest or forgivable loan program for prospective foreign language teachers to enable them to study in a target language country.<sup>2</sup>

Other positive developments include foreign languages being added to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), with actual student assessment to begin in 2003 (but unfortunately limited to Spanish). In addition, the development of an electronic Language Network (LangNet), initiated by the National Foreign Language Center, should go a long way in alleviating what Brecht (2001) calls the “veritable inundation of information and resources that overwhelms the best of our teachers and learners, and accordingly, enters the teaching and learning arenas virtually without any assurance of quality” (p. 10). McGinnis (2001) describes the planned LangNet as “a web-based on-line catalog and search engine

for quality-assured language learning and teaching resources... for 17 different languages or language areas.” He optimistically predicts that “by specifying the needs of a particular learner via parameters including language modalities, proficiency levels, and content areas, LangNet can deliver truly customized language learning resources” (p. 55). If LangNet delivers on its promises, it would indeed be a major contribution to foreign language education.

Things also appear to be changing for the better in the area of teacher education, although Finn (1997, reported in Glisan, 2001)) states that more than a third of teachers teaching core subjects (including foreign languages) neither majored nor minored in the field. Glisan (2001) believes that “lack of subject area competency is a critical obstacle to embracing today’s exciting new paradigm for language education” (p. 170). A number of states have implemented performance-based assessment for teacher certification. The National Board for Professional Teacher Standards has included foreign languages among its assessments to obtain certification for “accomplished teachers.” The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), created by the Council of Chief State School Officers, is in the final stages of developing national standards for entry-level foreign language teachers. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has asked ACTFL to propose foreign language standards for inclusion in its certification criteria for teacher education programs.

There are some who do not see the emphasis on standardized, national assessments as a positive move toward solving our educational problems. However, a nation with the mobility rate of the United States needs some national guidelines and support to equalize opportunities and ensure that both students and teachers gain the competencies needed for life in the 21st century.

It is gratifying to see increasing attention paid to heritage speakers of various languages. Brecht (2001) estimates that about 100,000 children who speak a LOTE at home are presently enrolled in after-school or weekend programs to help them maintain their family language.

Although foreign languages are a relative latecomer to the service learning movement, service learning and community involvement have become important components of a number of programs, particularly in Spanish, but also in other languages. Advanced learners, for instance, teach in elementary programs or serve as translators for tourist information or as volunteer guides (see Curtis & Baskerville, 2001).

The Foreign Language Across the Curriculum (FLAC) programs instituted at several postsecondary institutions are another curricular innovation that has received laudatory comments in the professional literature (for a review see Adams, 1996). FLAC courses are specialty courses in

various disciplines, such as history, philosophy, or music, with an optional foreign language component for students with some competence and interest in maintaining a particular language. These courses offer optional readings in the field in the target language and are often team-taught by a faculty member in a foreign language department who serves as discussion leader for the FLAC segment of the course. FLAC courses appear to be particularly useful for language maintenance purposes, but can also serve to introduce students to specialized vocabulary for various professions.

The problem is that most of these innovative programs are small and the result of the extraordinary efforts of a few particularly committed teachers. Often, these efforts die out along with their special funding and the waning energies of the teacher(s) who started the program. In a few instances, however, such programs have become institutionalized through the support of visionary administrators who provide adequate and ongoing rewards to faculty for engaging in curricular innovation.

## Other Issues

To summarize, the state of the field of foreign language education in the United States can be seen as a glass half full or a glass half empty, depending on whether one is optimistically or pessimistically inclined. There are many important questions — some very basic — besides those posed by Brecht (2001) that need to be addressed in an ongoing dialog about progress in our field. What are some of these questions?

Despite the *Standards*, we still have no consensus about what defines elementary or intermediate-level courses. We still have no consensus about what constitutes the “contents” of foreign language education. Is it predominantly skills instruction without defined contents? Are we serving largely as service and support instruction for other fields in the curriculum, as implied by the standard called “Connections”?

If we are indeed concerned about foreign language study for all learners, or about making language accessible to all learners, or even just about teaching “something of value” about language and a particular target language and culture to all learners, is the goal of oral communicative competence (regardless of the level) a realistic goal? Should we have diverse goals for diverse learners?

If, indeed, usable levels of oral proficiency and literacy are the main goals of classroom foreign language instruction, is the 50-minute per day or 180 hours per year of formal instruction (delivered in traditional or block scheduling) the most efficient model for achieving such goals?

We know fairly well what it takes to get a learner to a (temporary) survival level of language proficiency in elementary and intermediate language courses, and the pro-

professional literature abounds with recommendations for this instructional level. What needs to be done to get learners to perform at Advanced and Superior levels?

And finally, there is the question of how to keep the rich linguistic resources of immigrants alive and thriving. Although there is no question that the priority for LOTE speakers who want to make America their home must be the mastery of English, we need to ask what we are doing — and are we doing enough — to explore, maintain, and further these national linguistic resources in our schools and universities.

These are just a few of the questions that must be addressed to make sure that changing perspectives in foreign language education lead to lasting positive outcomes for learners, the profession, and the nation at large.

## Notes

1. This article is an adaptation of a paper delivered at the Tucson-Area Foreign Language Teacher Symposium at the University of Arizona on September 15, 2001.

2. The following is the text of a letter distributed to foreign language teaching and support organizations in the United States. Currently, the AATG, the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association, and the Southwest Council on Foreign Languages have indicated formal support of the initiative.

A recent historical review of foreign language (FL) teacher education in the United States (Schulz, *MLJ*, 84, 4, 2000) revealed little agreement on what components high quality FL teacher development should include. Many professional colleagues agreed, however, that a major weakness in FL education is, that numerous FL teachers in the schools have neither the communicative competence nor the confidence to use the target language as means of classroom communication. The latter is a prerequisite, if functional language use is to be the goal of instruction.

One recommendation was unanimously reiterated time and time again over the past century: the need for prospective teachers to study in and experience the culture of a target language country. Given the minimal proficiency level of an ACTFL OPI rating of Advanced Low, recommended by a number of states, as well as by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), study abroad becomes more essential than ever, since few language learners can achieve such a rating by classroom instruction alone, without an immersion experience.

The greatest obstacle to requiring a study abroad component for all prospective FL teachers is, of course, a financial one. This is particularly true for students preparing to become teachers in public institutions.

I propose that all organizations with an interest in FL education in American schools come together to make a united effort to appeal to the U.S. Congress for the establishment of a low-interest, federal loan program, explicitly for the support of prospective FL teachers to study abroad. These loans could then be forgiven—or adjust-

ed—for those individuals who can document a high level of language proficiency and actually teach in American schools for a specified number of years.

Some of you may object that the proposed loan program should only be available for prospective FL teachers rather than to all FL majors. However, we know from past efforts that Congress is unlikely to approve a blanket federal loan program, since many graduates do not use their language skills for “the public good” (i.e., in educating American children).

While I, as a single individual, will be unable to stir legislative interest in the issue, a consortium of FL organizations, supported by JNCL, may well be successful in getting the issue before Congress. Given the current scrutiny and critique of the U.S. education system, and given the impending shortages of qualified teachers, this might well be the time to make our case. Which organizations are willing to join in the effort?

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