

The Impact of National and State Policy on Elementary School Foreign Language Programs: The Iowa Case Study

Marcia Harmon Rosenbusch
Iowa State University

Abstract: *This article reviews selected national policy recommendations and examines their impact on state policy making in Iowa, specifically in terms of the number and quality of Iowa elementary school foreign language programs and teacher qualifications from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. Understanding the effect that these policies have had on early language programs in Iowa may help the profession determine the impact of national policy on state educational programs. This study suggests that future research on the impact of national policies in other states can help professionals design strategies for shaping policies in support of foreign language programs that begin in the early grades and continue through secondary school, building skills across levels.*

Introduction

Historical Perspective

A historical review of U.S. elementary school foreign language programs in the last half of the 20th century reveals that, although these programs grew rapidly in popularity and number in the 1950s and early 1960s (Andersson, 1969), many disappeared in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the early 1980s, encouraged by the report of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (1979), support for early language programs revived. As new programs were established, educators who had examined research on earlier programs urged schools to avoid the mistakes of the past. These mistakes included beginning programs without well-defined curriculum content, articulation across levels of instruction, program evaluation, and funding; and hiring unqualified teachers (Curtain & Pesola, 1994; Heining-Boynton, 1990; Lipton, 1988; Rosenbusch, 1992).

Recent Interest

In a major breakthrough for the foreign language profession, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) named foreign languages as one of the core curricular areas. This resulted in the development of student standards that encouraged a long sequence of instruction from early elementary school through high school and college (National Standards, 1996, 1999). Brain research provided new insight into language learning, and articles in popular magazines, such as *Better Homes and Gardens* (Holman, 1998) and *Child* (Dumas, 1999), that address this research intensified parental interest in foreign language study. A 1997 survey provided clear evidence of the growing interest in early language learning, reporting an almost 10% increase from 1987 (22%) to 1997 (31%) in U.S. elementary schools offering foreign language instruction (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999).

Although Met and Rhodes (1990) and Tucker (1999) suggested priorities for research in

Marcia H. Rosenbusch (PhD, Iowa State University) is Adjunct Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Foreign Languages and Literatures at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.