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Most schools don't offer foreign language to young students

Posted by [Tarryl Jackson](#) | [Jackson Citizen Patriot](#) December 02, 2007 02:24AM

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Dave Weatherwax / Jackson Citizen Patriot

Paragon Charter Academy fifth-grader Tyler Henson holds up a small sign with the Spanish word "El Martes," meaning Tuesday, while playing a game during class on Tuesday.

Students in the hallway greeted Annie Horner with "Hola" -- hello -- and "Buenos Dias" -- good morning -- as she walked to her next classroom.

She entered and asked about 20 first-graders "Como estan?" -- meaning "how are you doing?"

Many of them exclaimed "muy bien!" -- very good -- as they anxiously wiggled in their seats, waiting for the lesson to start.

"I hope they grasp (Spanish) and have a love for it now," said Horner, a Spanish teacher at Paragon Charter Academy. "I love just spreading the love of learning the language and the culture."

Paragon is one of a handful of Jackson County school systems that offer foreign language classes in elementary school. Most give foreign language instruction once a week, or on different days to different grade levels.

Research has shown that the earlier children learn a foreign language, the better the chance they become fluent.

But most school districts in the area only offer foreign languages -- commonly Spanish, French and German -- at their high schools.

Some school officials say this is due to a lack of funding and certified teachers, as well as a lack of time to teach foreign languages because of the need to teach core classes, such as math and reading.

Schools also have to prepare students for the Michigan Educational Assessment Program examination. With the MEAP, students are tested on core subjects, such as reading, math and science, but not foreign language.

Craig Raehtz, director of curriculum and operations at Western School District, said a K-5 foreign language program was offered a few years ago. But school officials thought there was a disconnect between the elementary and high schools since foreign language was not offered at the middle school.

The K-5 foreign language program eventually was replaced with a character education program.

Raehtz said it is difficult to offer foreign language while also trying to fit in other special classes -- such as physical education, art and music.

"There's no doubt that the need for foreign language is going to increase," he said. "Our highest priorities are around core subjects."

Area districts that currently offer elementary foreign language programs are Grass Lake, Hanover-Horton and Jackson Public Schools.

Jackson Arts and Technology Academy, Jackson Christian Elementary School, Our Lady of Fatima School and Trinity Lutheran School also offer foreign language at the elementary level.

Northwest Elementary School offers German to fourth- and fifth-graders in its gifted program.

Scott Koziol, curriculum director at Vandercook Lake Schools, said offering foreign language at the elementary school would require hiring another teacher, which he said is not feasible at this point.

He said he would like to see foreign language offered as an elective or non-core class -- like physical education or art -- in the future.

Susan Knight, chairwoman of the foreign language department at Central Michigan University, said schools need to emphasize foreign language programs for elementary students.

"I think they have to be good programs," Knight said. "Students have to meet more than once a week. And it has to be built upon."

Knight said foreign language needs to be part of the K-12 curriculum, but there is a shortage of certified world language teachers.

"We need to have the teachers before we have the programs," she said. "There's more of a demand than a supply."

The state Department of Education is requiring that this year's fourth-graders take two years of foreign language before they graduate from high school.

"There's a strong push for foreign language earlier," Knight said.

If students are older than 8 or 9, there's a slim chance that they will sound native-like when speaking the language, Knight said.

However, students do have the capacity to speak at the novice level if they start in the ninth grade.

"With the little bit you do know, you can go to a (foreign) country and work on it," she said.

Most school districts in Jackson County offer foreign language only at the secondary level.

Cheryl Hildebrandt Marks, who has been teaching French at Western High School for more than 25 years, said she tries to replicate a French atmosphere in her classroom.

She has the students stand up when she enters the classroom (a sign of respect to the teacher). She also does this to engage students in conversation.

"I find if I don't do that, they won't speak French to me," Marks said. "I try to talk as long as I can in French until I can tell we are not connecting."

Marks said she always gives students supplementary vocabulary to practice at home. She also makes sure they know modern French slang and terms to make the material relevant to the real world.

Students read contemporary French magazines to relate what they have learned in Marks' class.

"I want my students to have a global perspective," she said. "I truly believe we need to be cognizant of the fact that not everybody speaks English."

At Northwest High School, teacher Kim Bowen does not use a textbook when he teaches his German class.

Instead, he has students write stories and act out skits.

"That's a great way to learn and speak the language," Bowen said about his method. "If they actually do something with what they're doing, it hooks (the language) in the brain."

School officials agree that students who know a foreign language have an edge in the work world.

This school year, Columbia Central High School has an online Mandarin Chinese course through the Michigan Virtual High School. The school received grants for six students to take it for free.

The students have an interactive meeting with an instructor every Wednesday, but work independently the majority of the time.

Students also have to take an oral exam, where they interact with the instructor online.

"It's not just vocabulary," said high school counselor Karen Wilcox, who facilitates the course. "You have to engage in a conversation. They've actually come a long way."

Junior Scott Lu, who already knew how to speak Chinese, said he took the course to help other students, and improve his own skills.

At Paragon, Horner uses a method called total physical response and storytelling, where the students illustrate and act out stories about what they have learned.

"It's really cool because it gets them participating," she said.

She also gives students vocabulary to practice at home with their parents, and encourages them to bring in items related to Spanish language and culture.

"I just encourage them to practice what they know."

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