

Foreign Language Course Offerings in Pennsylvania School Districts

July 2010

Learning a second language can offer many benefits to today's students. It can help expand their understanding of the world in which they live, help to counter stereotypes and increase their future hiring potential.

An analysis of education data by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania indicates that rural secondary students do not have as many opportunities as urban secondary students to learn a foreign language while they are in school.

During the 2006-2007 school year, rural secondary schools (7th to 12th grades) offered fewer types of foreign language courses and fewer advanced language classes compared to urban secondary schools. In addition, the percentage of rural students taking a foreign language class was significantly below the urban rate.

Method

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania compared foreign language student enrollment, types of language courses and course levels among rural and urban school districts. The analysis focused on secondary students in grades 7 through 12 during the 2006-2007 school year.

The Center used the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office of World Language data on enrollment, course types, and course levels. However, the Center was unable to determine how these courses were delivered—whether by classroom teacher or through distance learning technology. The analysis did not include sign language courses, cultural awareness courses, or introductory level courses.

The Center defined rural school districts as those with a population density below the statewide average of 274 people per square mile. School districts at or above the statewide average were defined as urban. In this analysis, there were 242 rural districts and 256 urban districts. Three districts -- Saint Clair Area, Midland Borough, and Bryn Athyn -- were not included in the analysis because they did not have secondary students.

Because 2006-2007 data for the Interboro School District and the Mid Valley School District were missing, the Center substituted data from the 2005-2006 school year.

Findings

Enrollment

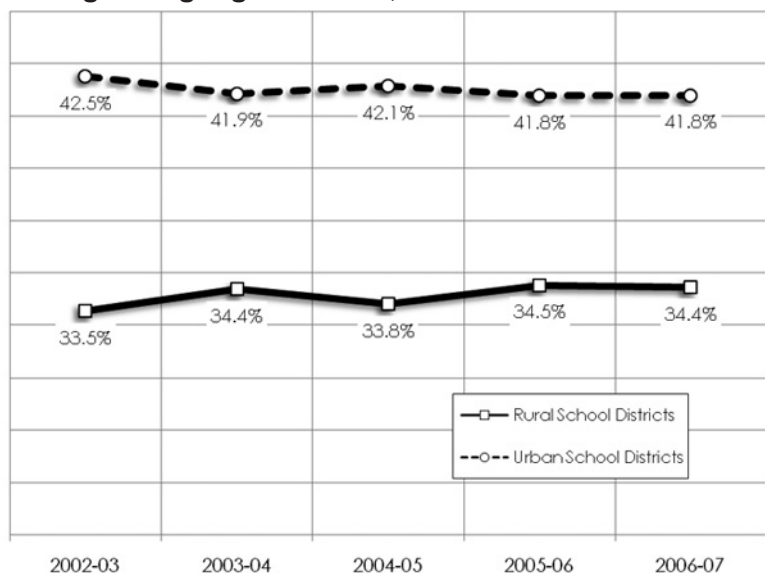
During the 2006-2007 school year, 85,465 rural secondary students, or 34 percent of

all rural secondary students, were enrolled in a foreign language course. As Figure 1 shows, from the 2003 to 2007 school years, rural foreign language enrollment remained relatively flat.

Among urban school districts, 249,984 secondary students, or 42 percent of all urban secondary students, were enrolled in a foreign language course. As Figure 1 shows, the percent of urban students enrolled in foreign language courses was relatively flat.

Foreign language course enrollment varied among rural school districts. During the 2006-2007 school year, 39 percent of rural school districts had language course enrollment below 30 percent, 46 percent had enroll-

Figure 1: Percent of Secondary Students Enrolled in Foreign Language Courses, 2002-2003 to 2006-2007



Data source: Pennsylvania Department of Education

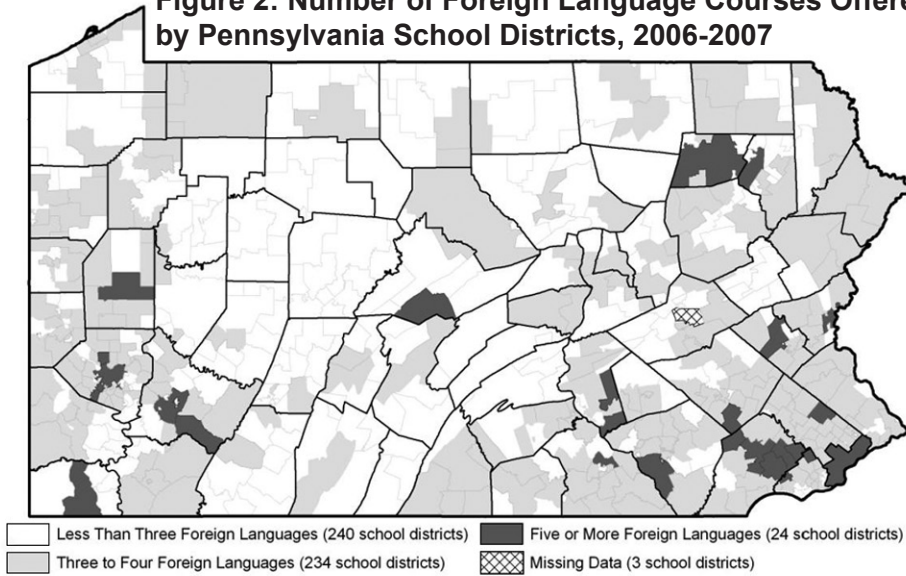
ment levels between 30 and 39 percent, and 15 percent had enrollment levels at 40 percent or higher.

Enrollment also varied among urban school districts, but enrollment was opposite that of rural districts: 15 percent of urban districts had enrollment levels below 30 percent, 33 percent had enrollment levels between 30 and 39 percent, and 52 percent had enrollment levels above 40 percent.

When comparing rural school districts with low language course enrollment (under 30 percent) to districts with high language course enrollment (40 percent or higher), the analysis found the following differences:

- Rural districts with low enrollment in foreign language courses had lower percentages of students that scored “advanced” in the math and reading sections of the Pennsylvania State School Assessment (PSSA) than districts with high course enrollments. The same was true for SAT scores.
- During the 2006-2007 school year, 58 percent of graduating seniors in rural districts with low foreign language course enrollment planned to enroll in a postsecondary degree program after graduation. In districts with high enrollment, 70 percent of graduating seniors were planning to enroll in a postsecondary program.
- Among rural districts with low foreign language enrollment, 37 percent of the students were eligible for the Free and Reduced School Lunch Program. (Eligibility for this program is based on financial need.) Among rural districts with high enrollment, 26 percent of the students were eligible.
- Rural districts with low foreign language course enrollment received more revenue from state government sources than districts with high enrollment, 49 percent and 37 percent, respectively. The state education subsidy is, in part, based on a school district’s wealth: the less wealth, the higher the subsidy. Interesting, there was no statistically significant difference between low and high enrollment districts and the total school district expenditure per student. In 2006-2007, both types of districts spent between \$11,320 and \$11,550 per student.
- In school districts with low foreign language course

Figure 2: Number of Foreign Language Courses Offered by Pennsylvania School Districts, 2006-2007



Data source: Pennsylvania Department of Education

enrollment, 12 percent of adults (age 25 years and over) in the district had a bachelor’s degree or higher. In districts with high enrollment, 18 percent of adults in the district had a bachelor’s degree or higher.

- In 2000, the most current data available, the average value of owner-occupied homes in a school district with low foreign language course enrollment was \$92,300. In districts with high enrollment, the average value was \$119,000. There was a similar pattern for household income.

Types of Language Courses

During the 2006-2007 school year, rural school districts had an average of about two types of language courses available. Urban districts had an average of about three different courses available. As Figure 2 shows, the distribution of courses is not even across the commonwealth.

Figure 3 shows that the courses most frequently offered by both rural and urban school districts were Spanish, French and German.

Among both rural and urban school districts, there was a positive correlation between the number of foreign language courses offered and student enrollment. That is, as the number of different language courses increased, so did enrollment.

When comparing rural school districts that offered less than three different types of foreign language courses with districts that offered three or more, the analysis found the following differences:

- As a percentage, districts that have one or two different language courses had fewer minority students (non-white and/or Hispanic) than districts

Figure 3: Types of Foreign Language Courses Offered in Pennsylvania's Rural and Urban School Districts, 2006-2007

| | RURAL | | | | URBAN | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|---------|-----------------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|-----------------------------|---------|
| | School Districts* | | Secondary Students Enrolled | | School Districts* | | Secondary Students Enrolled | |
| | # | % Total | # | % Total | # | % Total | # | % Total |
| Spanish | 242 | 100 | 56,085 | 66 | 256 | 100 | 159,113 | 64 |
| French | 191 | 79 | 15,888 | 19 | 233 | 91 | 45,786 | 18 |
| German | 94 | 39 | 10,308 | 12 | 168 | 66 | 28,536 | 11 |
| Latin | 37 | 15 | 2,540 | 3 | 92 | 36 | 10,975 | 4 |
| Russian | 5 | 2 | 222 | .3 | 5 | 2 | 227 | .1 |
| Italian | 2 | 1 | 152 | .2 | 16 | 6 | 2,844 | 1 |
| Chinese | 1 | .4 | 107 | .1 | 5 | 2 | 893 | .4 |
| Japanese | 7 | 3 | 80 | .1 | 22 | 9 | 1,290 | .5 |
| Other Languages** | 4 | 2 | 83 | .1 | 3 | 1 | 320 | .1 |
| Total | 242 | 100.0% | 85,465 | 100.0% | 256 | 100.0% | 249,984 | 100.0% |

*Sum of school districts does not add up to reported total because districts offer multiple language courses. **Includes languages such as Greek, Hebrew, Swahili, etc. Data source: Pennsylvania Department of Education.

that offered three or more courses (4 percent and 9 percent, respectively).

- Financially, districts that had one or two different language courses received more in state revenues (\$5,823 per student) than districts that had three or more language courses (\$4,657 per student).
- Districts with one or two different language courses had lower percentages of students scoring “advanced” on the reading portion of the PSSA test (29 percent) than students in districts that had three or more courses (32 percent). There was, however, no statistically significant difference between the two types of districts on the math proportion of the PSSA.
- Districts with one or two different language courses had a lower percentage of adults (25 years old and older) in the district with a bachelor’s degree (13 percent) and lower average housing values (\$91,100) than districts with three or more courses (16 percent and \$111,300, respectively).

Language Course Levels

There are various levels of foreign language courses. Although the content within each level varies by school district, all levels are progressive and are designed to enhance listening, reading, speaking, and writing abilities in that language. Level 1 is a primary course for any foreign language and is used to build vocabulary and to begin to give students insight into the culture of the language. Level 2 is slightly more advanced and builds on knowledge and vocabulary gained in Level 1. Levels 3 and 4 allow students to learn advanced vocabulary and to read complex forms of writing. Levels 5 and higher continue to build upon knowledge of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Conversation courses focus on speaking skills in the foreign language and are intended to give students a working knowledge of the language. Advanced Placement courses are for students who have already completed a substantial amount of course work in the language and are designed to help students become more fluent in written and spoken communication.

As Figure 4 shows, nearly all rural and urban school

Figure 4: Course Levels of Foreign Language Courses Offered in Pennsylvania's Rural and Urban School Districts, 2006-2007

| | RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT | | | | URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS | | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| | # Districts* | % Districts | # Students | % Students | # Districts* | % Districts | # Students | % Students |
| Level 1 | 242 | 100 | 37,397 | 44 | 256 | 100 | 106,025 | 42 |
| Level 2 | 242 | 100 | 26,726 | 31 | 256 | 100 | 73,046 | 29 |
| Level 3 | 234 | 97 | 12,753 | 15 | 253 | 99 | 40,263 | 16 |
| Level 4 | 204 | 84 | 5,560 | 7 | 238 | 93 | 18,506 | 7 |
| Level 5+ | 35 | 15 | 551 | .6 | 100 | 39 | 4,778 | 2 |
| AP Classes | 32 | 13 | 661 | .8 | 83 | 32 | 4,058 | 2 |
| Conversation | 10 | 4 | 1,817 | 2 | 23 | 9 | 3,308 | 1 |
| Total | 242 | - | 85,465 | 100.0% | 256 | - | 249,984 | 100.0% |

*Sum of school districts does not add up to reported total because districts offer multiple levels of language courses. Data source: Pennsylvania Department of Education.

districts have levels 1 through 3 of foreign language courses. Among rural districts, 90 percent of all students enrolled in a foreign language course were in levels 1, 2, or 3. Among urban districts, 88 percent of the foreign language students were enrolled these level courses.

Fewer rural school districts offer advanced-level language course than urban districts. In the 2007 school year, 28 percent of rural districts had some combination of Level 5 courses, AP classes, and/or conversation language classes. In urban districts, 59 percent had advanced-level courses.

When comparing rural school districts that have advanced-level foreign language courses with rural districts that do not, the analysis uncovered the following differences:

- Rural districts with advanced-level language courses had a higher percentage of students who took foreign language classes (39 percent) than rural districts without advanced classes (31 percent).
- Rural districts with advanced-level language courses received, on average, less revenue from the state than districts without advanced-level courses, (\$4,491 and \$5,771, respectively). There was, however, no difference in total expenditures per student for both types of districts.
- Rural districts with advanced-level language courses had a higher percent of students that scored “advanced” in the reading portion of the PSSA test (32 percent) than districts without advanced courses. Interestingly, there was no statistical difference between the two types of school districts in the math portion of the PSSA test and for the verbal, math, and writing portions of the SAT test.
- Rural districts with advanced-level language courses had higher average housing values (\$112,600), higher average household incomes (\$48,500) and a higher percentage of adults (age 25 years old and older) with a bachelor’s degree or more (16 percent) than districts without advanced courses (\$91,700, \$43,400, and 13 percent, respectively).

Conclusions

The analysis indicated that rural school districts have fewer students enrolled in foreign language courses, and offer fewer foreign language courses and advanced courses.

In general, rural districts that had low enrollment in foreign language classes and that offered fewer language courses had fewer students scoring “advanced” on the reading portion of the PSSA test, received more in state revenues, had fewer adults in the district with a bachelor’s degree, and had lower housing values in the district.

Rural districts that did not offer advanced-level language courses also received less revenue from the state, had fewer students scoring “advanced” on the reading portion of the PSSA test, and had lower housing values, lower household incomes and fewer adults with a bachelor’s degree than rural districts with advanced-level language courses.

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors

Senator John R. Gordner
Chairman

Dr. Theodore R. Alter
Pennsylvania State University

Representative Tina Pickett
Vice Chairman

Dr. Stephan J. Goetz
Northeast Regional Center
for Rural Development

Senator John Wozniak
Treasurer

Dr. Robert J. Pack
University of Pittsburgh

Dr. Nancy Falvo
Clarion University
Secretary

William Sturges
Governor’s Representative

Representative Tim Seip

Dan A. Surra
Governor’s Representative



The Center for Rural Pennsylvania
625 Forster St., Room 902
Harrisburg, PA 17120
Phone: (717) 787-9555
Fax: (717) 772-3587
www.rural.palegislature.us
1P0710 – 50