

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ENROLLMENTS IN K–12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS: Are Students Prepared for a Global Society?

SECTION I:

Introduction

Since 1968, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has conducted regular national foreign language enrollment surveys of U.S. K–12 public schools. Several government agencies use this information, particularly those involved with the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI): the Department of Education, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. This study can identify gaps between the current state of foreign language education and the desired state.

Data Background

In 2007, to investigate current foreign language enrollment status, ACTFL began a three-year project, as part of a U.S. Department of Education grant, to provide more detailed and accurate information than previous projects. This project targeted the 2007–08 school year for data collection due to the time it takes states to release data, with many releasing this information one to three years after collection. To investigate changes in foreign language enrollment, the project also collected data from the 2004–05 school year; therefore, throughout this report, all references to enrollment changes refer to the change from 2004–05 to 2007–08.

Data collected needed to meet project specifications. The project gathered data on public school students in grades kindergarten (K) through 12 enrolled in specific language courses (e.g., Chinese), as opposed to non-specific language courses (e.g., Exploratory World Language). Twenty-four states did not provide 2004–05 data, and 17 states did not provide 2007–08 data. For these states, foreign language course enrollments were estimated.¹

SECTION II:

K–12 Public School Foreign Language Course Enrollment

This section presents the total foreign language enrollment results, including national totals, the percentage of students enrolling in foreign language courses, and state totals.²

National Foreign Language Course Enrollment

In 2004–05, 8.6 million K–12 public school students enrolled in foreign language courses (Table 1), representing 18.0% of students. By 2007–08, this enrollment increased by 3.1%, reaching 8.9 million students, or 18.5% of all students.

¹ Please refer to the Study Methodology section (Appendix A) for a thorough discussion of data collection, processing, analysis, and estimation modeling.

² Total foreign language enrollment is the sum of Spanish, French, German, Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Latin, and Other Languages totals.

TABLE 1.

National Foreign Language Enrollment by Year.

Year	Foreign Language Enrollment	Overall Student Enrollment	Percentage of Students Enrolled in Foreign Languages
2004-05	8,638,990	47,983,788	18.00%
2007-08	8,907,201	48,112,069	18.51%

Foreign Language Course Enrollment for Each State

In 2004–05, nearly one-third of foreign language students lived in one of four states, each with over 400,000 enrolled students: California, Texas, New York, and Florida (Table 2). In 2007–08, Pennsylvania joined these states in reporting over 400,000 foreign language enrolled students (Table 3), and combined these five states represented approximately 40% of foreign language enrollment.

Despite a national increase in foreign language enrollment and in contrast to the five largest states, enrollments decreased in 17 states (Table 4). Half of these states were located in the Northeast region, while the rest were scattered across the country (Figure 1).

Percentage of Students Enrolled in Foreign Language Courses for Each State

In addition to comparing the number of foreign language students in each state, the percentage of the state’s students enrolled in foreign language courses was calculated. This provides a comparison to account for total student enrollment differences across states and years. In most states, 10 to 30% of K–12 students enrolled in foreign languages during each of these two years. In 2004–05, five states enrolled less than 10% of their students in foreign language courses: Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, and Utah. By 2007–08, only Alabama, Mississippi, and Nevada still enrolled less than 10%.

Despite a national increase in the percentage of students enrolled in foreign languages, 19 states decreased from 2004–05 to 2007–08 (Table 5). Among these 19 states, three states (Arizona, North Carolina, and Oklahoma) increased in foreign language enrollment; however, their total student enrollment grew at a faster rate so proportionally fewer students studied foreign languages. Hawaii, on the other hand, decreased in foreign language enrollment, but had a larger decrease in total student enrollment, resulting in proportionally more students enrolled in foreign language courses.

FIGURE 1.

Change in Foreign Language Enrollment by State.

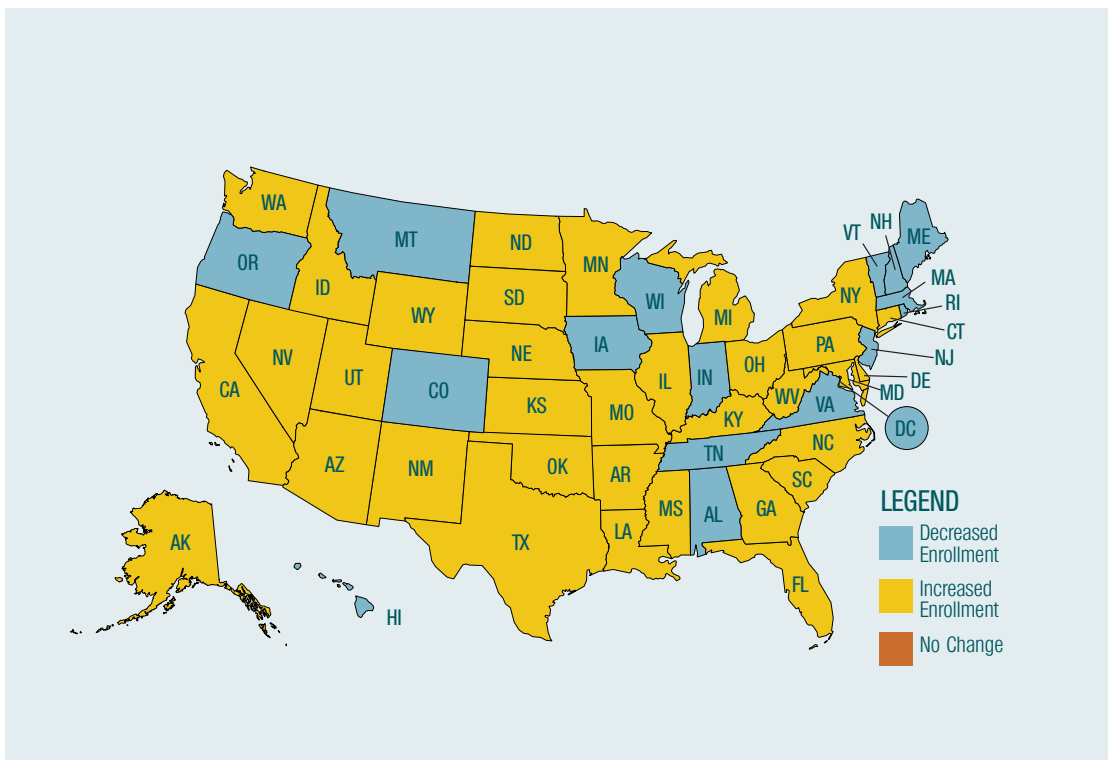


TABLE 4.

Change in Foreign Language Enrollment by State.

State	2004-05	2007-08	Change	Percent Change
ALABAMA	69,185	54,557	-14,628	-21.14%
ALASKA	23,113*	29,056*	5,943	25.71%
ARIZONA	119,423*	121,925*	2,502	2.10%
ARKANSAS	50,827	53,930	3,103	6.11%
CALIFORNIA	871,229	917,074	45,845	5.26%
COLORADO	122,657*	120,639*	-2,018	-1.65%
CONNECTICUT ³	100,576	102,431	1,855	1.84%
DELAWARE	16,729*	24,872	8,143	48.68%
FLORIDA	439,329	466,414	27,085	6.17%
GEORGIA ¹	267,481	298,795	31,314	11.71%
HAWAII ¹	23,113*	20,885	-2,228	-9.64%
IDAHO	25,902	30,164	4,262	16.45%
ILLINOIS	303,516*	311,038*	7,522	2.48%
INDIANA	160,176	160,123	-53	-0.03%
IOWA ³	83,885	78,779	-5,106	-6.09%
KANSAS	71,759*	77,684*	5,925	8.26%
KENTUCKY ¹	80,065	115,031	34,966	43.67%
LOUISIANA	60,322	103,405	43,083	71.42%
MAINE	59,044*	50,200*	-8,844	-14.98%
MARYLAND	210,244	210,539	295	0.14%
MASSACHUSETTS	314,782*	222,173*	-92,609	-29.42%
MICHIGAN	223,184*	243,595*	20,411	9.15%
MINNESOTA	154,865	166,346	11,481	7.41%
MISSISSIPPI	38,559	40,917	2,358	6.12%
MISSOURI	148,287	175,103	26,816	18.08%
MONTANA	34,713*	20,165	-14,548	-41.91%
NEBRASKA	63,210	72,637	9,427	14.91%
NEVADA	36,702*	40,166*	3,464	9.44%
NEW HAMPSHIRE	51,650*	29,079*	-22,571	-43.70%
NEW JERSEY	383,235*	350,622*	-32,613	-8.51%
NEW MEXICO	48,934*	57,313	8,379	17.12%
NEW YORK	714,134	771,767	57,633	8.07%
NORTH CAROLINA	321,779	325,393	3,614	1.12%
NORTH DAKOTA	20,573	25,688	5,115	24.86%
OHIO	322,345	349,017	26,672	8.27%
OKLAHOMA	95,004	96,115	1,111	1.17%
OREGON	86,509*	82,395	-4,114	-4.76%
PENNSYLVANIA ²	377,553	404,185	26,632	7.05%
RHODE ISLAND	40,245*	23,824*	-16,421	-40.80%
SOUTH CAROLINA	164,824	174,247	9,423	5.72%
SOUTH DAKOTA	28,356*	29,338*	982	3.46%
TENNESSEE	128,657	107,931	-20,726	-16.11%
TEXAS	768,686	912,054	143,368	18.65%
UTAH ¹	38,875*	85,711	46,836	120.48%
VERMONT	29,916*	15,540*	-14,376	-48.05%
VIRGINIA	318,898*	215,651*	-103,247	-32.38%
WASHINGTON	179,352*	186,153*	6,801	3.79%
WASHINGTON, D.C. ¹	20,865*	6,524	-14,341	-68.73%
WEST VIRGINIA	47,101	58,630	11,529	24.48%
WISCONSIN ¹	265,168	256,593	-8,575	-3.23%
WYOMING	13,454*	14,788*	1,334	9.92%
TOTAL	8,638,990	8,907,201	268,211	3.10%

*—Estimated total; 1=Grades 6–12 only; 2=Grades 7–12 only; 3=Grades 9–12 only

Languages Studied by K–12 Public School Students

This section shows enrollment totals for seven major languages: Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Latin, Russian, and Spanish, along with the category “Other.”³ Select languages included in Other are also provided along with the number of states reporting each language and the total enrollment based only on these states. National and state totals for 2004–05 and 2007–08 are discussed, along with the change between the two years.

National Enrollment in the Eight Major Language Categories

Spanish, studied by over 70% of foreign language students, dominated language course enrollment (Tables 6 and 7). French, a distant second both years, represented 14% to 15% of foreign language enrollment. All other languages were studied by 5% or less of foreign language students, with the fewest students enrolled in Russian.

TABLE 6.

2004–05 Foreign Language Enrollments by Language.

Language	FL Enrollment	Percent CI	Percent of FL Enrollment
SPANISH	6,295,512	+/- 1.33%	72.87%
FRENCH	1,296,249	+/- 2.35%	15.00%
GERMAN	365,040	+/- 2.65%	4.23%
OTHER	362,462	+/- 1.15%	4.20%
LATIN	225,372	+/- 2.61%	2.61%
JAPANESE	61,981	+/- 2.84%	0.72%
CHINESE	20,292	+/- 3.57%	0.23%
RUSSIAN	12,082	+/- 4.25%	0.14%
TOTAL	8,638,990	+/- 1.04%	

FL=foreign language; CI=confidence interval

TABLE 7.

2007–08 Foreign Language Enrollments by Language.

Language	FL Enrollment	Percent CI	Percent of FL Enrollment
SPANISH	6,418,331	+/- 1.75%	72.06%
FRENCH	1,254,243	+/- 2.93%	14.08%
OTHER	489,356	+/- 0.68%	5.49%
GERMAN	395,019	+/- 1.81%	4.43%
LATIN	205,158	+/- 1.67%	2.30%
JAPANESE	72,845	+/- 1.37%	0.82%
CHINESE	59,860	+/- 2.13%	0.67%
RUSSIAN	12,389	+/- 2.96%	0.14%
TOTAL	8,907,201	+/- 1.33%	

FL=foreign language; CI=confidence interval

This ranking of the most commonly studied languages remained consistent, except for German and the category of Other. In 2004–05, German was the third most commonly studied language followed by Other, but by 2007–08 Other switched places with German. Driving this were approximately 127,000 more students enrolled in Other courses (Table 8), representing the largest increase in students across all languages.

Other was one of six language categories to increase in enrollment, along with Chinese, Japanese, German, Russian, and Spanish. While Other had the largest increase in students, Chinese had the largest percentage growth, increasing by 195%. Despite this large growth, Chinese remained the seventh most studied language. In contrast to these increases, French and Latin enrollments declined by 3% and 9%, respectively.

TABLE 8.

Change in Foreign Language Enrollment by Language.

Language	Change	Percent Change	Percent Change CI
CHINESE	39,568	194.99%	[184.81%; 205.73%]
OTHER	126,894	35.01%	[33.54%; 36.50%]
JAPANESE	10,864	17.53%	[14.41%; 20.69%]
GERMAN	29,979	8.21%	[5.36%; 11.17%]
RUSSIAN	307	2.54%	[-1.79%; 7.05%]
SPANISH	122,819	1.95%	[0.07%; 7.05%]
FRENCH	-42,006	-3.24%	[-6.22%; 0.18%]
LATIN	-20,214	-8.97%	[-11.28%; -6.53%]
TOTAL	268,211	3.10%	[1.63%; 4.60%]

CI=confidence interval

Enrollment in Select Other Languages

The category of Other included several less frequently reported languages offered by states that provided data. Table 9 lists a selection of the languages included in Other for the states that provided 2004–05 data, as well as how many states offered each, and the enrollment for that language. American Sign Language and Italian had the largest enrollments, greater than the 2004–05 national Chinese, Russian, and Japanese (only for Italian) enrollment totals.⁴ Korean and the category of Native American Language were both studied by more than 2,000 students, despite each only being reported by a few states. While only reported by one state, more than 1,200 students enrolled in Vietnamese. Even though more states provided 2007–08 data, the resulting trends for Other languages were very similar (Table 10). In addition, two new languages were each reported by one state: Filipino and Hindi.

TABLE 9.

2004–05 Select Other Language Enrollments for States Providing Data.

Language	States Reporting	Enrollment
AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE	15	41,579
ARABIC	5	852
HEBREW	6	836
ITALIAN	14	65,058
KOREAN	4	2,093
NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE ¹	5	2,623
POLISH	1	123
PORTUGUESE	5	1,243
SWAHILI	1	74
TURKISH	1	43
VIETNAMESE	1	1,230

¹Native American Language includes Native American, Native American Language, American Indian, and Ojibwe.

⁴ American Sign Language and Italian could not be nationally estimated because they were reported by too few states. The seven languages nationally estimated were reported by all or nearly all states that provided data.

TABLE 10.

2007–08 Select Other Language Enrollments for States Providing Data.

Language	States Reporting	Enrollment
AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE	22	66,887
ARABIC	10	2,369
FILIPINO	1	2,532
HEBREW	9	1,064
HINDI	1	94
ITALIAN	18	78,273
KOREAN	4	2,833
NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE ¹	9	8,610
POLISH	2	285
PORTUGUESE	5	1,368
SWAHILI	3	195
TURKISH	1	239
VIETNAMESE	1	1,580

¹Native American Language includes Native American, Native American Language, American Indian, Navajo, Ojibwe, and Ute.

Comparing only the 27 states that provided 2004–05 and 2007–08 data, enrollment increased in each of these select Other languages (Table 11), supporting this category’s large national growth. Turkish, which was only offered in one state both years, had the largest percentage increase. Arabic, Swahili, and Polish each also had considerable percentage growths. Finally, American Sign Language and Italian had the largest increases in the number of students.

TABLE 11.

Change in Enrollment for Select Other Languages.¹

Language	2004–05	2007–08 ²	Change	Percent Change
AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE	41,579	59,333	17,754	42.70%
ARABIC	852	2,318	1,466	172.07%
FILIPINO	0	2,532	2,532	.
HEBREW	836	1,044	208	24.88%
HINDI	0	94	94	.
ITALIAN	65,058	77,615	12,557	19.30%
KOREAN	2,093	2,832	739	35.31%
NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGE ³	2,623	3,810	1,187	45.25%
POLISH	123	285	162	131.71%
PORTUGUESE	1,243	1,364	121	9.73%
SWAHILI	74	195	121	163.51%
TURKISH	43	239	196	455.81%
VIETNAMESE	1,230	1,580	350	28.46%

¹ These figures reflect only those 27 states that reported enrollment data for both 2004–05 and 2007–08 so that comparisons could be made.

² Totals may be different than Table 10 because of only including states that provided both 2004–05 and 2007–08 data. This leaves out enrollment totals for 7 states that provided only 2007–08 data.

³ Native American Language includes Native American, Native American Language, American Indian, Navajo, Ojibwe, and Ute.

Student Enrollment by Language and State

As mentioned, most languages increased in national enrollment (with the exceptions of French and Latin), however, individual state enrollments sometimes followed a different trend (Appendixes B and C). National maps for each language indicate which states decreased in enrollment (shaded blue), which increased in enrollment (shaded yellow), and which did not change (shaded orange) (Figures 2–9). While there were large percentage changes in the other seven languages, changes in Spanish often had the strongest influence on foreign language enrollment change. For example, of the 17 states that decreased in foreign language enrollment, 14 decreased in their Spanish enrollment. In the exceptional cases where changes overall and changes in Spanish did not go in the same direction, changes in the Other category tended to offset the mismatching changes. For example, Arizona, New Mexico, and Illinois each decreased in Spanish enrollment but increased in foreign language enrollment, presumably from their increases in Other enrollment.

FIGURE 2.

Change in Chinese Course Enrollments by State.

