



Why High Schools Should Require Foreign Language Study

High schools should require students to study a foreign language for many of the same reasons they require history, civics, and government. Those subjects help young people understand their place in their community, their country, and the wider world. Learning another language provides similar cultural benefits, along with several less obvious academic and practical advantages.

Strengthening English-Language Skills

Studying another language can improve a student's understanding of English. Romance languages such as French and Spanish, for example, have recognizable rules governing verb conjugation, pronouns, gender, and subject-verb agreement.

Comparing these rules with English grammar encourages students to think more carefully about how language works. Some may even discover gaps in their understanding of basic English grammar when they begin learning another language. Addressing those gaps can strengthen their reading, writing, and communication skills in both languages.

Developing Cultural Awareness

Language and culture cannot be separated. Learning how people communicate provides insight into their customs, values, expressions, and ways of organizing ideas.

Even something as basic as syntax—the order in which words appear—can be instructive. Spanish, for example, sometimes places words and pronouns differently from English. Examining such differences challenges students to think analytically and recognize that familiar ideas can be expressed in unfamiliar ways.

This experience can help students become more attentive to cultural differences and less likely to assume that their own language and customs represent the only natural way of viewing the world.

Discovering New Abilities

Studying a foreign language can have an awakening effect on students. Some discover an aptitude for languages that they did not know they possessed. Others find that language study gives them a new way to use abilities they have developed through music, mathematics, reading, memory, conversation, or analytical reasoning.

A required language course also brings together students with different academic interests and strengths. Students who excel in mathematics and science study alongside those drawn to English, history, and the social sciences. This mixture can produce a valuable exchange of perspectives that many students might otherwise not experience until college.

Preparing Students for the Real World

Foreign-language study connects education with the social and economic realities of the United States. Millions of Americans speak a language other than English at home, and Spanish remains especially prominent in families and communities throughout the country.

The ability to communicate across languages can help students participate more fully in an increasingly diverse society. It can also prepare them to work with customers, coworkers, patients, students, and neighbors from different backgrounds.

Competing in a Global Economy

Modern business operates across national boundaries. Employers value professionals who can communicate with international clients and colleagues or understand the cultural expectations of overseas markets.

Fluency requires years of effort, but even a basic knowledge of another language can distinguish a job applicant and provide a foundation for further study. Language education can therefore become both an intellectual asset and a practical career advantage.

Making Travel More Rewarding

Most countries south of the United States use Spanish as an official or widely spoken language, while Portuguese is the primary language of Brazil. Even a modest command of Spanish can be enormously helpful to American tourists and travelers.

Knowing another language makes it easier to ask questions, understand directions, and interact respectfully with local residents. More importantly, it transforms travel from simple observation into a deeper cultural experience.

Requiring Students to Look Beyond the Familiar

High school students do not always recognize which subjects will prove valuable later in life. That is one reason schools establish academic requirements rather than allowing students to study only what immediately appeals to them.

Requiring foreign-language study asks students to move beyond the familiar. It strengthens their communication skills, broadens their cultural understanding, reveals previously undiscovered abilities, and prepares them for a diverse and interconnected world.

Students may not initially choose that challenge for themselves. A sound education should nevertheless provide it.