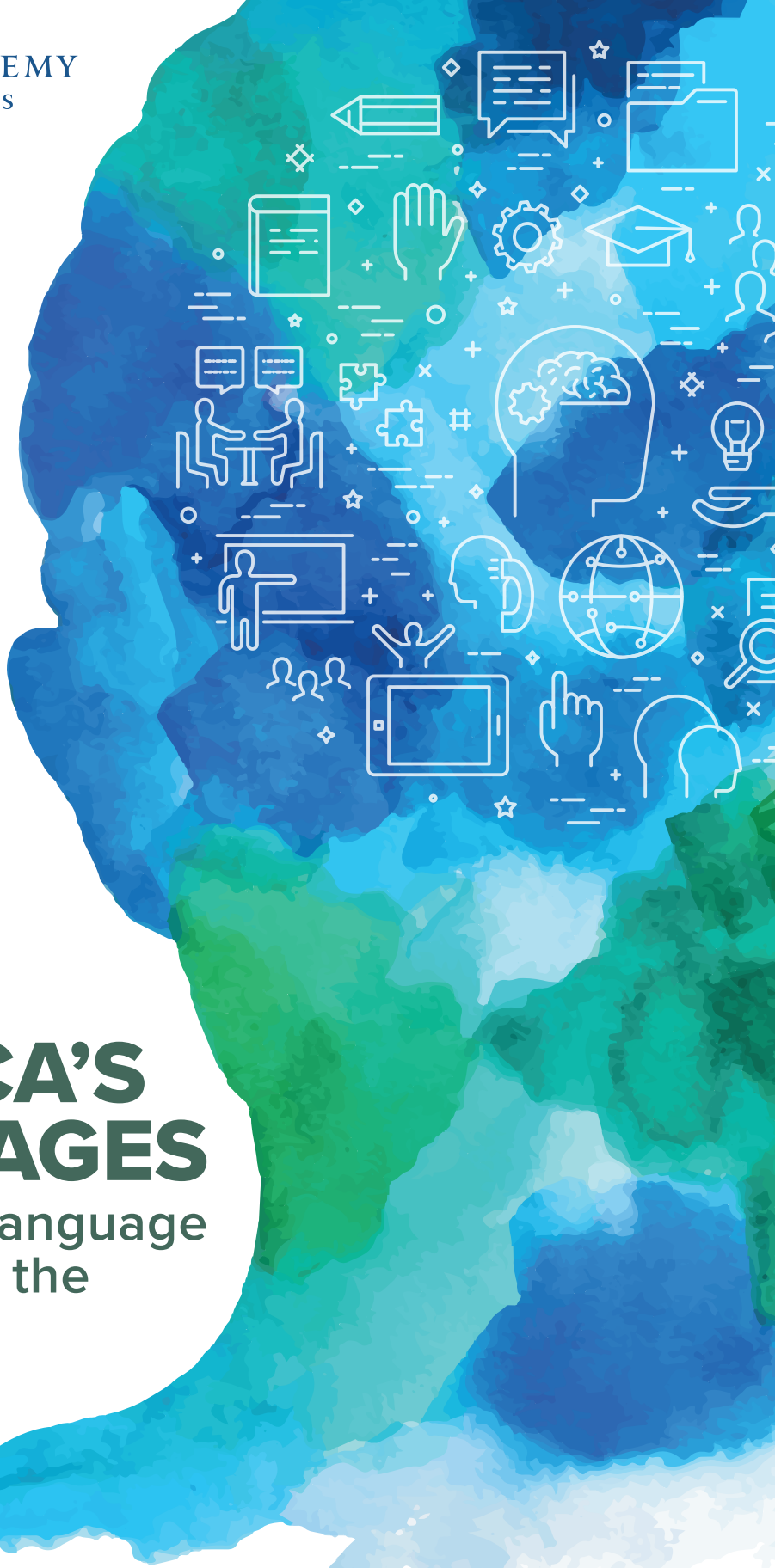


AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS & SCIENCES



AMERICA'S LANGUAGES

Investing in Language
Education for the
21st Century

COMMISSION ON LANGUAGE LEARNING



Executive Summary

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than sixty-five million U.S. residents speak a language other than English at home—a number that has been growing decade by decade since the 1970s. Nevertheless, that number represents only 20.7 percent of the total population, and only a fraction of this cohort speaks, reads, and comprehends a second language well enough to use it in their everyday lives.² The vast majority of American citizens remain monolingual.

While English continues to be the lingua franca for world trade and diplomacy, there is an emerging consensus among leaders in business and politics, teachers, scientists, and community members that proficiency in English is not sufficient to meet the nation's needs in a shrinking world, nor the needs of individual citizens who interact with other peoples and cultures more than at any other time in human history.

In this report, the Commission on Language Learning recommends a national strategy to **improve access to as many languages as possible for people of every region, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background**—that is, to value language education as a persistent national need similar to education in math or English, and to ensure that a useful level of proficiency is within every student's reach. As children prove especially receptive to language education—they spend much of their time in educational settings and can develop language skills gradually throughout their lives—the Commission believes that instruction should begin as early in life as possible. Its primary goal, therefore, is for **every school in the nation to offer meaningful instruction in world languages as part of their standard curricula.**

As a corollary, the Commission urges two- and four-year colleges and universities to continue to offer beginning and advanced language instruction to all students, and to reverse recent programmatic cuts wherever possible. It also applauds recent efforts to create new undergraduate language requirements on two- and four-year campuses.

KEY FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT

- The ability to understand, speak, read, and write in world languages, in addition to English, is critical to success in business, research, and international relations in the twenty-first century.
- The United States needs more people to speak languages other than English in order to provide social and legal services for a changing population.
- The study of a second language has been linked to improved learning outcomes in other subjects, enhanced cognitive ability, and the development of empathy and effective interpretive skills. The use of a second language has been linked to a delay in certain manifestations of aging.
- The United States lags behind most nations of the world, including European nations and China, in the percentage of its citizens who have some knowledge of a second language.

- One of the biggest obstacles to improved language learning is a national shortage of qualified teachers. Forty-four states and Washington, D.C., report that they cannot find enough qualified teachers to meet current needs, but every school district in the nation responds to the teacher shortage in its own way (by cutting classes, by combining classes, by contracting before- or after-school enrichment programs, to name a few). We need better information about these district-level responses to attach a specific number to the national teacher shortage, and encourage any study that advances our knowledge of its size and scope.
- Technological innovations will play an ever more significant role in language learning, as a motivating factor for a new generation of students, as a means for providing educational opportunities to more students across the nation, and as an aid and reference for people in their everyday lives.
- Native American languages are distinct in political status and history, and are the object of school- and community-based reclamation and retention efforts aligned with the Native American Languages Act of 1990 (NALA).³

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMISSION

The report focuses on five capacity-building goals and includes many more specific recommendations:

1. **Increase the number of language teachers at all levels of education so that every child in every state has the opportunity to learn a language in addition to English.**
 - Encourage the coordination of state credentialing systems so that qualified teachers can find work in regions where there are significant shortages.
 - Attract talented and enthusiastic language teachers through federal loan forgiveness programs.
 - Develop and distribute online and digital technologies, as well as blended learning models, particularly in communities with a short supply of language teachers.
 - Provide new opportunities for advanced study in languages in higher education—for future language teachers as well as scholars in other fields—through a recommitment to language instruction, blended learning programs, and the development of new regional consortia allowing two- and four-year colleges and universities to pool learning resources.

2. Supplement language instruction across the education system through public-private partnerships among schools, government, philanthropies, businesses, and local community members.

- Draw on local and regional resources by working with heritage language communities and other local experts to create in-school and after-school instructional programming.
- Maintain support for state humanities councils and other organizations that create vital language and cultural resources for local communities.

3. Support heritage languages already spoken in the United States, and help these languages persist from one generation to the next.

- Encourage heritage language speakers to pursue further instruction in their heritage languages.
- Provide more language learning opportunities for heritage speakers in classroom or school settings.
- Expand efforts to create college and university curricula designed specifically for heritage speakers and to offer course credit for proficiency in a heritage language.

4. Provide targeted support and programming for Native American languages as defined in the Native American Languages Act.

- Increase support for Native American languages being used as primary languages of education, and for the development of curricula and education materials for such programs.
- Provide opportunities for Native Americans and others to study Native American languages in English-based schools with appropriate curricula and materials.

5. Promote opportunities for students to learn languages in other countries by experiencing other cultures and immersing themselves in multilingual environments.

- Encourage high schools and universities to facilitate learning abroad opportunities for students.
- Increase the number of international internships sponsored by businesses and NGOs.
- Restructure federal financial aid to help low-income undergraduates experience study abroad during the summer as well as the academic year.

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