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National Standards in Foreign Language Education: Next Steps

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As state frameworks and local curricula across the country begin to reflect the five goal areas of the national standards, it becomes increasingly important for classroom teachers to understand how to connect the generic statements of a state or local curriculum with their assessment and instructional practices. In this age of educational accountability, it is essential that curricula be structured so that short-range and long-range goals are evident to teachers and to students and that instruction leads students to the accomplishments of these goals. As student performances in all subject areas become more common, it is critical that student involvement in the learning process be considered a vital part of any program.

Educational reform efforts in foreign language begin with the National Standards for Foreign Language Education as an organizing principle. In 1993, a coalition of four national language organizations (the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the American Association of Teachers of French, the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, and the American Association of Teachers of German) received funding to develop standards for foreign language education, grades K-12.

This was the seventh and final subject area to receive federal support to develop national standards as part of the Bush Administration's America 2000 education initiative, which continued under Goals 2000 in the Clinton Administration. An eleven-member task force, representing a variety of languages, levels of instruction, program models, and geographic regions, was appointed to undertake the task of defining content standards*--what students should know and be able to do--in foreign language education. At each stage of development, the task force shared its work with the broader profession and the public at large. The resulting document represents an unprecedented consensus among educators, business, leaders, government, and the community on the definition and role of foreign language instruction in American education.*

The standards do not describe the current status of foreign language education in this country. While they reflect the best instructional practice, they do not describe what is being attained by the majority of foreign language students. The Standards for Foreign Language Learning *will not be achieved overnight; rather, they provide a gauge against which to measure improvement in the years to come.*

The standards are not a curriculum guide. While they suggest the types of curricular experiences needed to enable students to achieve the standards, and support the ideal of extended sequences of study that begin in the elementary grades and continue through high school and beyond, they do not describe specific course content, nor recommended sequence of study. They must be used in

conjunction with state and local standards and curriculum frameworks to determine the best approaches and reasonable expectations for the students in individual districts and schools.

Since the development of the generic standards, language-specific national organizations have undertaken the task of adapting the standards to meet the needs of students and teachers of their languages. Available only recently are specific standards for Chinese, Classics (Latin and Greek), French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. These language-specific standards will assist, in particular, teachers of the Less Commonly Taught (LCT) languages and the Classics in developing realistic and similar goals as those in the other languages.

Following is an abbreviated sample of the goals and standards for grades four, eight, and twelve as they appear in "Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century."

Goal 1: Communication

Standard 1.1

Students engage in conversation, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.

This standard focuses on interpersonal communication, that is, direct oral or written communication between individuals who are in personal contact. In most modern languages, students can quite quickly learn a number of phrases that will permit them to interact with each other. In the course of their study, they will grow in their ability to converse in a culturally appropriate manner.

Standard 1.2

Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.

Standard 1.2 involves one-way listening and reading in which the learner works with a variety of print and non-print materials. The context in which the language is experienced and the ability to control what they hear and read may impact students' development of comprehension. As a result, the ability to read may develop before the ability to comprehend rapid spoken language. In addition, content knowledge will often affect successful comprehension, for students understand more easily materials that reflect their interests or for which they have some background.

Standard 1.3

Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

This standard focuses on the formal presentation of information, concepts, and ideas in spoken and written form and is concerned, in most cases, with one-way speaking and writing. Students with little or no previous language experience are likely to produce written and spoken language that will contain a variety of learned patterns or will look like English with words in the other language. This is a natural process and, over time, they begin to acquire authentic patterns and to use appropriate styles. By contrast, home-background students will write in ways that closely resemble the spoken language.

Goal 2: Cultures

Standard 2.1

Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.

This standard focuses on the practices *that are derived from the traditional ideas and attitudes (*perspectives*) of a culture. Cultural* practices *refer to patterns of behavior accepted by a society and deal with aspects of culture such as rites of passage, the use of forms of discourse, the social "pecking order," and the use of space. In short, they represent the knowledge of "what to do when and where."*

Standard 2.2

Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.

This standard focuses on the products *of the culture studied and on how they reflect the* perspectives *of the culture. Products may be tangible (e.g., a painting, a piece of literature, a pair of chopsticks) or intangible (e.g., an oral tale, a dance, a sacred ritual, a system of education). Whatever the form of the product, its presence within the culture is required or justified by the underlying beliefs and values (perspectives) of that culture, and the cultural practices involved in the use of that product.*

Gaol 3: Connections

Standard 3.1

Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.

Learning today is no longer restricted to a specific discipline; it has become interdisciplinary. Just as reading cannot be limited to a particular segment of the school day, so too can foreign language build upon the knowledge that students acquire in other subject areas. In addition, students can relate the information studied in other subjects to their learning of the foreign language and culture. Foreign language instruction thus becomes a means to expand and deepen students' understanding of, and exposure to, other areas of knowledge. The new information and concepts presented in one class become the basis of continued learning in the foreign language classroom.

Standard 3.2

Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.

As a consequence of learning another language and gaining access to its unique means of communication, students are able to broaden the sources of information available to them. They have a "new window on the world." At the early levels of language learning, students can begin to examine a variety of sources intended for native speakers, and extract specific information. As they become more proficient users of the foreign language, they can seek out materials of interest to them, analyze the content, compare it to information available in their own language, and assess the linguistic and cultural differences.

Goal 4: Comparisons

Standard 4.1

Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.

This standard focuses on the impact that learning the linguistic elements in the new language has on students' ability to examine English and to develop hypotheses about the structure and use of languages. From the earliest language learning experiences, students can compare and contrast the

two languages as different elements are presented. Activities can be systematically integrated into instruction that will assist students in gaining understanding and in developing their abilities to think critically about how languages work.

Standard 4.2

Students recognize that cultures use different patterns of interaction and can apply this knowledge to their own culture.

As students expand their knowledge of cultures through language learning, they continually discover perspectives, practices, and products that are similar and different from their own culture, and they develop the ability to hypothesize about cultural systems in general. Some students may make these comparisons naturally, others may not. This standard helps focus this reflective process for all students by encouraging integration of this process into instruction from the earliest levels of learning.

Goal 5 - Communities

Standard 5.1

Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.

This standard focuses on language as a tool for communication with speakers of the language throughout one's life: in schools, in the community, and abroad. In schools, students share their knowledge of language and culture with classmates and with younger students who may be learning the language. Applying what has been learned in the language programs as defined by the other standards, students come to realize the advantages inherent in being able to communicate in more than one language and develop an understanding of the power of language.

Standard 5.2

Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

Each day millions of Americans spend leisure time reading, listening to music, viewing films and television programs, and interacting with each other. By developing a certain level of comfort with their new language, students can use these skills to access information as they continue to learn throughout their lives. Students who study a language can use their skills to further enrich their personal lives by accessing various entertainment of and information sources available to speakers of the language. Some students may have the opportunity to travel to communities and countries where the language is used extensively and, through this experience, further develop their language skills and understanding of culture.

It is important to remember that the development of the standards above was just the first step in educational reform efforts in foreign language. The content standards listed above--what students should know and be able to do--must now be aligned with performance standards--how well are students performing at each level of development. A recent project of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) yielded the K-12 Performance Guidelines *which use the three modes (Interpersonal, Interpretive, and Presentational) of the Communication Goal to outline expected student performance levels at the end of grade 4, grade 8, and grade 12. Similar to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines in their effort to assess performance levels, the K-12 Guidelines are different in that they reflect the "learned" language that students in a classroom setting can produce. A subsequent ACTFL project will produce actual performance assessment units to assist teachers in assessing the performance level of their students.*

It will not be sufficient to just base curriculum on the five goal areas. There must be a way to align the curriculum with expected outcomes for students and to assess those outcomes. As a result, classroom instruction will change in order to focus on moving students along the language learning continuum in a fashion in which their language development is assessed through their performance in the language and not just on traditional paper and pencil testing.

The foreign language profession must stay focused on our common goal: to provide language learning opportunities for all students in an environment in which they can be successful. Basing the program goals on the national standards will radically change the learning environment in our classrooms and will motivate even the most reluctant learner to communicate in the target language. In time, we will reach our national goal of citizens who can speak more than one language and who understand other cultures.