

Making Your Voice Heard is Important

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Promotion. Public relations. Advocacy. Language policy. These terms are frequently heard at foreign language meetings, but what do they mean to you? What impact do they have on language programs in your school? More importantly, how can they help us convince decision-makers of the importance of the study of languages?

Education is a state and local issue on which the federal government has traditionally had little impact. However, we have all seen the ways in which legislation such as No Child Left Behind can affect programs, funding, teacher training, and curricular decisions at the local level. There should no longer be any doubt that federal policies can have a direct impact on the language classroom. It is up to each of us to see that that impact is a positive one.

For the first time in decades, U.S. legislators are taking a serious interest in languages. For some in Congress who have long been our champions, it is a question of a quality education to create knowledgeable citizens who can function in an ever-shrinking world. For others, it is a question of economic competitiveness. Now, for many, it is an issue of national security. Whatever the reasons, the language teaching profession needs to mobilize in order to ensure that the programs created are sound and the money spent benefits students, teachers, and communities.

While current interest in U.S. language capacity may seem sudden and alternately encouraging or worrisome, the need has been recognized for decades. Over twenty-five years ago, a Presidential Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies (PFLIS), created by President Jimmy Carter, concluded that lack of knowledge of other languages and cultures in the U.S. was “scandalous.” Among PFLIS’ recommendations for addressing this situation and our nation’s language inadequacies was the creation by the language and international education communities of a “Washington presence.” This entity was to propose policies and represent the interests of international understanding and language competence to Congress and the federal government.

Since 1980, the Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL) and the National Council for Languages and International Studies (NCLIS) have provided the Washington presence that the Commission recommended. JNCL is a non-profit education association concerned with creating, developing, and implementing policies that affect languages and international studies in the U.S. NCLIS is a not-for-profit professional association, officially registered under the Federal Regulation to Lobby Act, engaged in advocacy for these language policies. Together, they represent over sixty professional and scholarly associations dealing with language teaching, acquisition, research, and professional development. JNCL-NCLIS represent all languages from English to the classics, commonly and less-commonly taught languages, American Sign Language across all levels from pre-kindergarten to adults.

As the elder of the two sister organizations, JNCL acts as a coalition of associations seeking agreement on major policy concerns that impact languages. For example, the proficiency and standards movements were conceived and initiated at JNCL meetings. Without professional unity and policy agreement on fundamental issues,

developed and fostered in a forum such as JNCL, it would be impossible to provide national programs or gain federal support.

The actual responsibility for turning policies into programs, projects, and funding rests with NCLIS. To cite a few examples over the last two decades, NCLIS was a major actor in the creation of the Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBERs), the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), the National Security Education Program (NSEP), and the National Foreign Language Resource Centers (NFLRCs). These are federal programs with long and distinguished records. Other federal programs such as the Critical Languages and Area Studies Consortia and the Foreign Language Teaching Initiative have been short-term with specific agendas. On a more subtle level, our work may only involve efforts to have a sentence or phrase included in or deleted from a piece of legislation. It may seem relatively insignificant, but such efforts can, for example, determine whether language programs may receive funding under a specific program.

It is also important to note that the policy process is an ongoing, incremental endeavor that actually only just begins when Congress passes a law or an agency initiates a program. Annually, funding for programs must be passed in the form of appropriations. A program may exist in law, but if no funding is appropriated it will in fact cease to exist. Every few years, programs have to be reauthorized, and often the more visible or successful a program is, the more likely it is to be amended or changed by friend and foe alike.

The successful policy and advocacy efforts of JNCL-NCLIS have been the direct result of the unity and cooperation of its member associations. Nationally, like-minded organizations exist to support exchanges and study abroad, the social sciences, the humanities, and international higher education and there is considerable cooperation among the organizations on a wide variety of issues. However, in order to be truly successful, there has to be grassroots organization at the state and local levels.

Those of us who have had the opportunity to participate actively in JNCL-NCLIS activities have lost our nonchalance about our inability to affect legislators' decisions. When you have established and developed a relationship with a legislative aide responsible for education policy and have seen that individual's knowledge and appreciation of the issue grow over time or when you have waited for an appointment in a Senator's outer office and heard the receptionist fielding calls about an issue or when a Congressman has called his office four times because he is late for a meeting with you and finally invites you to meet him on the steps of the Capitol because he can't be absent from an important vote long enough to return to his office, you realize that your individual voice does count. Even when the person you are talking to is hostile or, worse yet, totally uninterested, there is a job to do finding a rationale that will sway him or her or learning an important fact that will allow you to develop a better counter-argument. Teachers represent an important and educated constituency, and they have the ability to influence the opinions of colleagues, parents, and future voters. If you haven't yet recognized the importance of making your voice heard at the national level, it becomes even more clear when we address issues at the state and local level where even more crucial decisions affecting your classroom occur.

Most of JNCL-NCLIS' member associations now have advocacy committees and outreach programs. JNCL-NCLIS does its utmost to provide the initiative, the expertise,

information, alerts, talking points, advocacy training and workshops to those who are advocating for languages in their state capital, to their state department of education, or to the local school board. Ultimately, however, it is the members' actions, visits, letters, calls, and involvement that makes the difference between success and failure, between thriving, well-funded programs in many languages and no program. Unfortunately, it is too often the case that teachers must advocate just to maintain the status quo or to prevent a program, even a successful one, from being eliminated. We need to redouble our efforts in these areas, as well as to create a fledgling language program in a school which never before saw the need or to convince a school board to add another language to their offerings. Together, JNCL/NCLIS, its member associations, and individual member teachers have already impacted language programs in the U.S. and can continue to do so.

In the current political climate since the horrendous terrorist attacks of 9/11, foreign languages and international studies have received greater attention from the national media and policy makers than ever before. The nation may be experiencing what Congressman Rush Holt has termed a "Sputnik moment." In the late 1950s when the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, Sputnik, and America was behind in the space race, Congress created the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). NDEA was a major national effort to advance math, science, and foreign language education. Last year, the 108th Congress considered eighteen bills dealing with our national language needs, including two that were 21st-century versions of NDEA. Perhaps the 109th Congress will actually pass such legislation. Certainly, JNCL-NCLIS will be there to help.

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