

**Resurrecting elementary school foreign language education in  
Lexington.**

Andrei Radulescu-Banu

Jan 12th, 2010

Dear Superintendent Paul Ash,  
Dear School Committee,

As you are planning for next year's school budget, I would like to ask you to not overlook the situation of foreign language education in Lexington elementary schools.

Our district offers a foreign language program for students in middle and high schools. It used to also offer a Grades 3-5 Spanish Language Program, but that has been eliminated four years ago part of school budget cuts<sup>1</sup>.

I am sure everybody agrees that teaching young students a foreign language starting with the earliest grade is an essential part of a child's education. There are a number of reasons for this:

- (1) Foreign language fluency takes years to develop, for which reason study is best started at the beginning of the elementary school.
- (2) Learning to read, write and communicate in a foreign language exercises cognitive skills that transfer to other disciplines, and in particular to reading and writing in the native English language.
- (3) Study of a foreign language brings the added benefit of a wider view of the world.

It is a standard practice in elementary schools around the world to begin a first foreign language early on, in the first or second grade, and add a second foreign language by the 5th or 6th grade. The state of affairs regarding foreign language education in our U.S. schools, however, is not very encouraging in this respect.

The National K-12 Foreign Language Survey<sup>2</sup>, made public by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), indicates that between 2007-2008 the overall number of U.S. elementary school foreign languages programs has decreased significantly. In 2008, the CAL study indicates that only about 25% of U.S. public elementary schools were still offering a foreign language program. And unfortunately, Lexington is part of the other 75%.

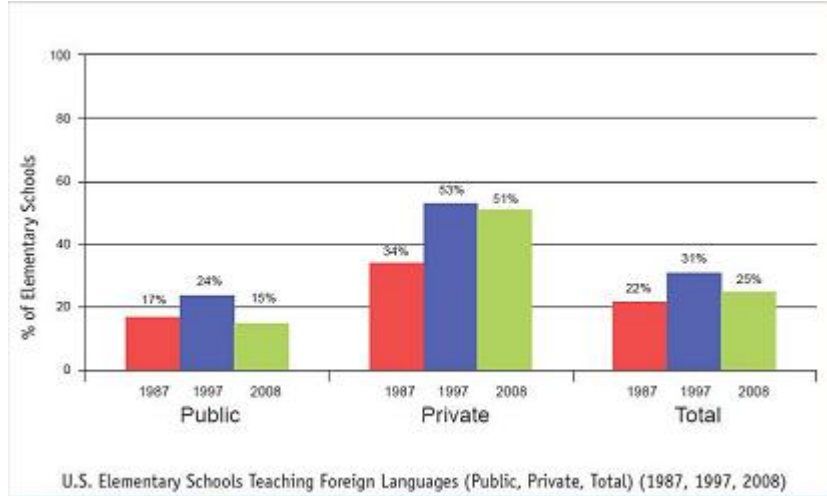
Other school districts in Massachusetts have suffered as well. Springfield, Mass. used to have a model elementary foreign language program<sup>3</sup>. From an Education Week, Mar 4 2009 article<sup>4</sup>, we learn that:

*"The Springfield, Mass., district is among those that have greatly pared back foreign-language programs in its 32 elementary schools. About a decade ago, Spanish or French was offered in all elementary schools.*

*"Azell M. Cavaan, the chief communications officer for the 25,000-student urban district, said the program was reduced because "there has been a shift in focus to math, science, and English-language arts." She didn't elaborate on whether the*

district was responding to provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act that require testing only of mathematics, science, and English-language arts.

*“In 2004, elementary schools in Springfield employed 25 foreign-language teachers; now, four are on board, said Ms. Cavaan. The number of foreign-language teachers in middle schools has decreased from 28 to 18 since then, though foreign-language offerings at the high school level have been maintained, she said.”*



U.S. Elementary Schools Teaching Foreign Languages<sup>5</sup>

**What are the root causes of the decline in U.S. elementary school foreign language programs?** One could think of three reasons.

Firstly, the advent of elementary school standardized testing in Math and English Language has put the spotlight on these disciplines at the expense of elementary school Music, History, Geography and Foreign Languages. In our state, the MCAS may well be considered one of the better standardized school test, but it is little more than a blunt instrument that detects some education problems and misses others. When a foreign language program is eliminated, or when History and Geography are neglected in the curriculum, it will not show on the MCAS - and the community will not have a sense of the urgency of the problem.

The second reason for the decline stems from school budget limits. Quoting Nancy C. Rhodes, CAL director of foreign-language education, when she speaks of the foreign-language program decline, "A lot of schools are telling us [it] is for budget reasons"<sup>6</sup>. And as constraints on school budgets force new priorities, it is easier to eliminate foreign language programs than to put them back in.

The third reason for the decline may not be recognized publicly, but nevertheless deserves to be paid attention to. In the last decade, U.S. elementary school class sizes have gone down dramatically. This has had the positive effect of bringing more individualized instruction to young children.

However, what is often not recognized is that as classes become smaller, schools need to afford a higher teacher student ratio, and the effect is that elementary

schools end up with fewer teacher specialists - precisely the ones needed to teach Music, Art, History, and foreign languages.

In effect, there is a trade-off between smaller class sizes and a higher number of specialized teachers. Students need individualized attention - and they need teacher specialists as well. This is an observation that incidentally also applies to Math specialists - it could be that Math education in Lexington elementary schools would benefit if taught by specialized Math teachers, at the expense of slightly larger overall class sizes.

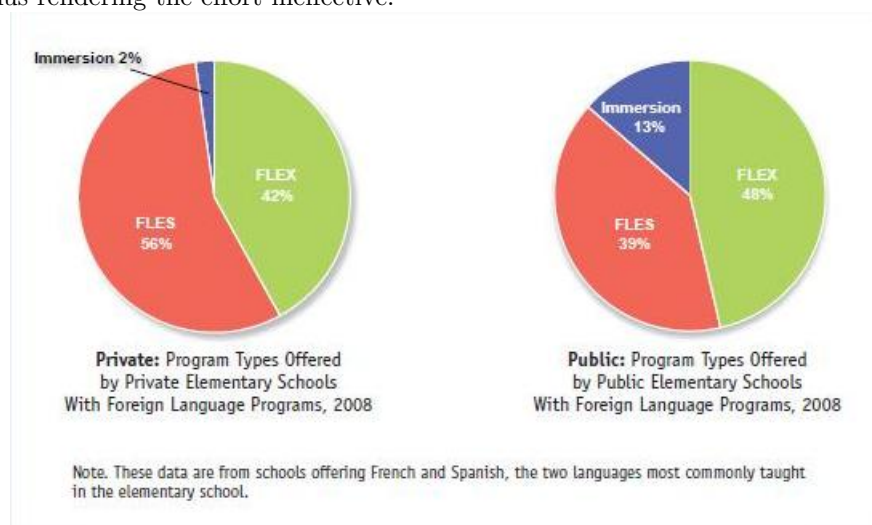
For an entrypoint to the literature of the trade-offs in U.S. elementary school class sizes, see the Brookings Institute paper by Peter Schrag on the effects of class size reduction in California initiated during the tenure of Gov. Pete Wilson in the 1990's<sup>7</sup>.

### What types of foreign language programs exist for elementary schools?

A good introduction to this topic is provided by Massachusetts Foreign Languages Curriculum Framework<sup>8</sup> of Aug. 1999.

First of all, the school foreign language program should be made *integral part of the curriculum*. This is in line with the mandates of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and also required by the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* of 1994.

A parent-paid, after-hours program substitute would not be desirable for a number of reasons. Such a program would not be afforded by some of the families a fact that would raise fairness issues. A separate student end-of-day dismissal scheme would be required, which would make it prohibitive to families who rely on school bus transportation and to METCO students. Families would be free to sign up for some years, and not for others, making it impossible to have define well the program requirements and expectations. And the program would result in students of uneven levels of preparation entering the existing middle school language program, thus rendering the effort ineffective.



Source: The National K-12 Foreign Language Survey Snapshot Brochure<sup>9</sup>.

Most curriculum based foreign language programs fall into three categories:

- (1) FLEX (foreign language exploratory), which aim at providing students a general understanding of culture and language
- (2) FLES (foreign language in the elementary school), which provide students listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in addition to exposure to culture.
- (3) Immersion programs, taking at least 50% of class instruction time.

The Massachusetts Curriculum Framework indicates that a FLES type program is desirable. A FLES program demands 10-20% percent of instructional class time, with a minimum of 30-40 minutes per class, 3-5 days a week. Class time in a FLES program is spent in learning the actual language.

The brochure *Establishing high-quality foreign language programs in elementary schools*<sup>10</sup> lists a number of model early foreign language programs that were available in 2000: (some of these programs are not anymore available)

## MODEL EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS

### Bay Point Magnet Elementary School

Gaye Lively, Principal  
Sylvia Amaya, Lead Teacher  
62nd Avenue South  
St. Petersburg FL 33712  
Tel: 727-893-2398  
E-mail: Sylvia\_Amaya@places.pinellas.k12.fl.us  
Web sites:  
<http://members.aol.com/jschw6/FLES-mainpage.html>.  
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8714>

### Springfield Public Schools

Dr. Kathleen Riordan, Foreign Language Director  
195 State Street  
P.O. Box 1410  
Springfield MA 01102-1410  
Tel: 413-787-7111  
Fax 413-787-6713  
E-mail: riordank@sps.springfield.ma.us

### Ephesus Road Elementary School

Carol Orringer, French Teacher  
1495 Ephesus Church Road  
Chapel Hill NC 27514  
Tel: 919-929-8715  
Fax: 919-969-2366  
E-mail: corringerr@chccs.k12.nc.us  
Web sites:  
<http://www.sunsite.unc.edu/-ephesus>  
<http://www.media-international.net/ethno>

### Glastonbury Public Schools

Christine Brown, Director of Foreign Languages  
232 Williams Street  
Glastonbury CT 06033  
Tel: 860-652-7954  
Fax: 860-652-7978  
E-mail: cbrownglas@aol.com

### Prince George's County Public Schools

Dr. Pat Barr-Harrison, Foreign Language Supervisor  
9201 East Hampton Drive  
Capitol Heights MD 20743-3812  
Tel: 301-808-8265 ext 227  
Fax: 301-808-8291  
E-mail: pbarr@pgcps.org

### Larchmont Elementary School

Jeffrey Hanthorn, Principal  
Maria Martinez, Spanish Teacher  
1515 Slater Street  
Toledo OH 43612  
Tel: 419-476-3787  
Fax: 419-470-6552  
E-mail: j.hanthorn@tps.org

### Richmond Elementary School

Deanne Balzer, Resource Teacher  
Japanese Magnet Program  
Rebecca McWaters, Principal  
2276 SE 41st Avenue  
Portland OR 97214  
Tel: 503-916-6220  
Fax: 503-916-2665  
E-mail: dbalzer@pps.k12.or.us  
Web sites:  
<http://www.oyanokai.org>  
<http://www.moshihola.org>

### What steps can be taken to bring foreign languages back to elementary schools?

The Guidelines for Starting an Elementary School Foreign Language Program authored by Marcia Rosenbusch, June 1995<sup>11</sup> suggest the forming of a steering committee tasked with investigating the various options available for the implementation of a foreign language program in elementary schools. The committee should consist of all parties that have a stake in the process: parents, teachers, school administrators, community and business members.

The steering committee should be tasked to:

- Clarify the reasons for implementing an elementary school foreign language program, and the desired outcomes of the program
- Consult with language professionals, read the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework, the current literature and research on the topic, and visit existing programs
- Explore how the elementary school language program would be integrated with the middle and high school programs
- Explore school, parent, community and business support for the program

The steering committee should seek to build community consensus about the necessity of an elementary school foreign language program, and should identify the budget trade-offs.

The *a choice* of foreign languages for the program should be left at the end, as such a determination may end up being divisive. In some sense, it does not matter which languages are made part of the program - as long as the program is put into life, ideally with a choice of at least two languages in the offering. In the words of Marcia Rosenbusch:

“If the steering committee determines that the central goal of the district’s program is that students attain a high level of fluency in the foreign language, the committee will choose the earliest possible start for the study of the language, maximize the time and intensity of the program at every level, and provide an articulated program that flows across levels without interruption. Students will be able to continue their study of the language throughout every level and will have the opportunity to add a second language or change languages at the beginning of middle or high school. All students will study a foreign language *regardless of learning style, achievement level, race/ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, home language, or future academic goals*. The teachers involved in the program at all levels will have excellent language skills, be well informed about current teaching strategies, and work together as a team to provide a carefully developed, articulated curriculum.”

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Source: *Our Schools*, Feb 15 2007, Paul B. Ash, Ph. D., Superintendent of Schools  
<http://lps.lexingtonma.org/Current/OSBudgetImpact2.15.07.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>*The National K-12 Foreign Language Survey Snapshot Brochure* can be retrieved at  
<http://www.cal.org/flsurvey/prelimbrochure08.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>The Springfield, Mass. Elementary School Foreign Language program was listed as a model by the *Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University* in its Dec. 2000 pamphlet, *Establishing High-Quality Foreign Language Programs in Elementary Schools*, <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/perspectives/PerspCal.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>*Elementary Foreign-Language Instruction on Descent*, by Mary Ann Zehr, Education Week, Mar 4 2009, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/03/04/231language.h28.html?qs=foreign+language>

<sup>5</sup>loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Education Week, loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup>*Policy from the Hip: Class Size Reduction in California*. Peter Schrag. [http://www.brookings.edu/gs/brown/bpepconference/Schrag\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/gs/brown/bpepconference/Schrag_Paper.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>Available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/foreign/1999.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>Retrieved at <http://www.cal.org/flsurvey/prelimbrochure08.pdf>

<sup>10</sup>The brochure was published in Dec 2000 by the *Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University*, and can be retrieved at <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/perspectives/PerspCal.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>Retrieved at <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/rosenb01.html>

Andrei Radulescu-Banu  
86 Cedar St, Lexington MA 02421  
781 862-5854  
andrei@alum.mit.edu