

A world of benefits:

Hola

**studying global
languages**

**Guten
tag**

Bonjour

By Marissa Orbanek





The French Honor Society at Hempfield Area High School inducted new members during National French Week.

Twelve years ago, Jack Johnson was a kindergartener when his parents registered him for Southern Lehigh School District's Spanish Immersion Program.

After making it through the lottery and securing a spot in the program, Johnson joined a cohort of classmates to receive instruction for his main subjects completely in Spanish from talented multilingual educators as a first grader. Beginning in sixth grade, Johnson and his classmates continued to take courses in Spanish, but on a more limited basis.

Now, the Southern Lehigh School District senior will graduate this spring, completely bilingual and fluent in the nation's second most common language. Jackson earned a perfect score on the Advanced Preparatory Spanish exam and has been able to put the second language to use overseas on a school trip to Spain and here in Pennsylvania.

"I often think about how incredibly talented and patient our elementary school teachers were for being able to teach a second language to kids that barely have a grasp on their first language," Johnson said. "Even though all of our learning was in Spanish, we never skipped a beat when it came to rejoining the rest of the grade in English in sixth grade."

Southern Lehigh School District was the first school district in Pennsylvania to offer its students a total language immersion program, which spans grades 1-12. Since the program launched in 1989, roughly 750 students have completed the program, which has a waiting list due to its popularity.

"We get more applicants than we are able to meet, so we have a lottery for those to make sure it's a fair process," said Southern Lehigh School District Superintendent Michael Mahon. "There is no question that in Lehigh Valley, where Spanish is widely spoken, that there is both an intrinsic value and practical application with respect to employment and engagement to be able to speak Spanish with fluency."

While the district offers Spanish for all students in addition to French and Chinese, the



immersion program is much more intensive by nature, as students in grades 1-5 learn all of their core subjects in Spanish. Research shows that children learn foreign languages more easily than adults, so an early start makes sense. The same cohort of students continue together through 12th grade.

"The idea that students can acquire a second language is very much a reality for all of our students. All students who come out of the program are fluent in Spanish, that's 100% true," Mahon said.

While Southern Lehigh School District was the first to offer an immersion program, other school districts in Pennsylvania also have similar offerings, including Manheim Township, Philadelphia and Fox Chapel Area. The programs benefit both native and non-native Spanish speakers because they enhance students' intellectual growth, celebrate other cultures, and improve thinking and listening skills.

Beyond immersion programs, the state also boasts other exemplary world language programs. Kaitlyn Krause is currently spending her senior year in Germany, thanks to the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange (CBYX) scholarship. This competitive scholarship provides motivated high school students with a full learning experience living with a host family and attending a German high school.

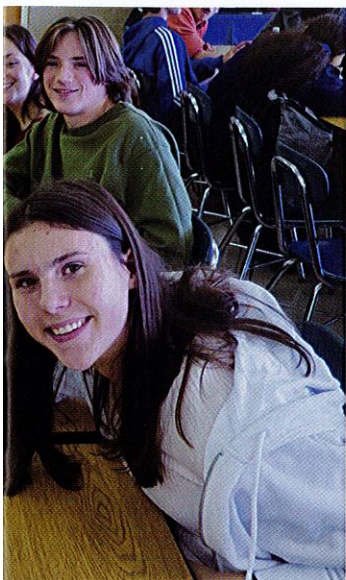
"I've absolutely always wanted to see the world beyond my little bubble in Pennsylvania, but I never thought this dream would be able to come to fruition, as foreign exchanges are expensive and my family would not be able to afford it," said Krause. "It's been amazing, and I can't express how meaningful it truly has been for me. An exchange is really a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I am endlessly grateful for it. It has pushed me so far out of my comfort zone and has completely changed the way I view the world around me."

Marissa Orbanek is a communications officer for the School District of Philadelphia.



Advanced French students at Hempfield Area initiated activities celebrating the language, including playing traditional French games and holding trivia contests during lunch.

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Hempfield Area students prepared a French language lesson at the district's preschool.

She credits Hempfield Area School District, which has been recognized by the Pennsylvania State Modern Language Association (PSMLA), with preparing her for the experience.

"I went into my exchange with a pretty strong base in German, and of course I'd never even know about the opportunity of studying abroad without Ms. Shafran's yearly presentations," said Krause, who plans on pursuing either political science or international relations when she graduates. "My absolute dream is to one day work for the UN! I definitely think my exchange year has helped a lot - it has widened my worldview and, overall, kindled my love for all things international."

Hempfield Area School District earned its second PSMLA's Exemplary Program (PEP) Award during the 2018-19 school year. The PEP Awards provide outside validation and showcase high-quality Pennsylvania high school language programs, while also enabling schools to use PEP materials as a blueprint to spur meaningful and measurable improvements to impact learning outcomes. The district also just received a Recognition for Outstanding Partnership in International Education award from AFS, a nonprofit supporting intercultural learning programs.

Hempfield Area Assistant Superintendent Dr. Matthew Conner credits the district's extremely active group of teachers, wide variety of activities, ability to provide world languages as an interdisciplinary program, and partnerships with outside groups for the recognition. "We really believe that we need to prepare students to be global citizens, and world language is such a valuable part of that," he said. "Our world language staff is excellent, go-getters in not just this department and classes, they are leaders for us for the entire district."

Hempfield German teacher Erica Shafran has been in the district for 18 years and serves as one of the two world language department chairs. "When kids graduate and go off to college, we want to make sure they are ready to go into the world," Shafran said. "Language supports so many other aspects, it really makes you more well-rounded and culturally well-rounded. It gives kids a cultural aspect they wouldn't get otherwise."

Shafran said she and other teachers try to connect students with cultural opportunities outside of the classroom, including trips, guest speakers, multimedia projects and culinary experiences that provide them with exposure to authentic language, cuisine and culture. The district also offers various

activities, such as French, German and Spanish clubs, as well as French, German or Spanish National Honor Society.

Hempfield Area has had success securing grants and matching students with scholarship opportunities abroad, like Krause's experience. "One of the biggest benefits I've seen so far is just being able to see the world. I've grown to view the world in such a different way, and I will definitely be leaving Germany with a much more open mind and appreciation for the world around me," Krause said. "Also, the process of pushing myself to learn German and be able to basically survive in my day-to-day life in a foreign language has taught me so much about my own perseverance and boundaries. I've had to constantly break past my own limits in order to simply communicate, and it has taught me a lot about hard work. And now I can speak German, which I think is definitely very cool."

A growing emphasis

Learning a second language benefits everyone. Research shows that language learning correlates with higher academic achievement on standardized test measures, is beneficial in the development of students' reading abilities, improves cognitive skills, helps children demonstrate empathy better and may result in higher academic performance at the college level.

What is the Pennsylvania Seal of Biliteracy?

Launched in March of 2022, the Pennsylvania Seal of Biliteracy (PASB) is an award presented by a school or district to recognize students who have attained intermediate-high proficiency in English and one or more additional world languages upon high school graduation. By establishing the PASB, the commonwealth:

- Encourages college and career readiness
- Affirms the value of cultural and linguistic diversity in our schools and communities
- Provides employers and universities with a way to identify bilingual candidates

High school students who earn the PA Seal of Biliteracy and attend college may also earn college credits through ACE (American Council on Education) institutions.

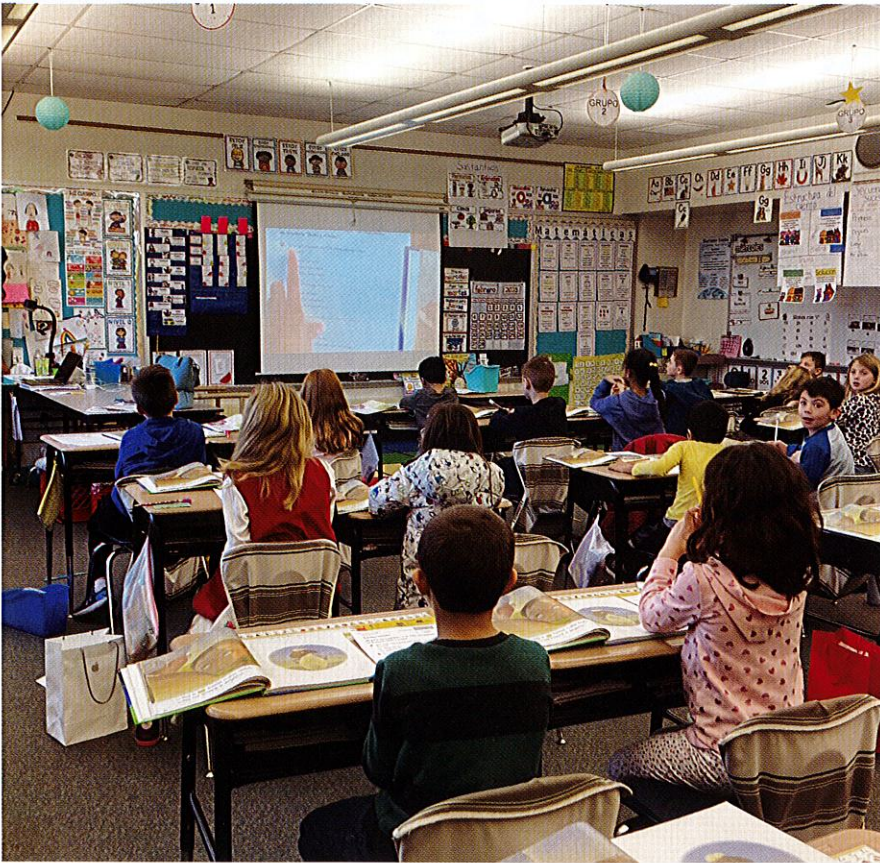


There's also the employability factor. A 2019 report from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) found that language skills are in high demand among U.S. employers across industries and functions. In fact, 9 out of 10 U.S. employers rely on employees with language skills other than English, and 1 in 4 U.S. employers lost business due to a lack of language skills. And the need is only expected to increase; 56% say their language demand will grow in the next five years.

Despite the benefits, studying a foreign language has become less popular. According to the 2017 *National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey Report*, just 20% of students study a foreign language at the K-12 level. That may soon change. In January, U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona announced the Education Department's "Raise the Bar: Lead the World"

initiative, which emphasized the need for schools to provide greater opportunities for students to learn multiple languages. Pennsylvania state regulations require schools to offer world languages, but do not mandate that students take one.

There are various resources available to districts throughout the state looking to grow their world language programs. One organization is PSMLA, which provides resources and advocacy to promote world languages education at kindergarten through postsecondary levels. The organization provides networking opportunities, publications, professional development opportunities and the Global Scholars Program, a new initiative to recognize students in Pennsylvania who participate in interdisciplinary studies and activities that are global in nature. The group also worked to bring to fruition the Pennsylvania Seal of Biliteracy (PASB) in 2022 (see sidebar for details).



Students are taught core subjects in Spanish in a Southern Lehigh language immersion classroom.

"We understand that the best thing is to start a world language early because, in educational terms, you are able to integrate language in many of its iterations the younger you are, and that builds over time," said Mina Levenson, past president for PSMLA. "It's a long process to really become capable and an expert at having both the language skills and knowing all of the cultural nuances that go with it."

Levenson currently serves as the group's advocacy consultant and chair for the PEP Awards. "There are a lot of exemplary programs throughout the state, and we play a part in recognizing them," Levenson said. "We provide hard data so schools can improve and give students a better education with more skills of being adept to understanding different people and cultures — those skills are tremendously helpful."

Levenson was a teacher for more than 45 years and credits learning a second language at an early age as one of the reasons she became an advocate for second-language learners. "I saw it as a wonderful way of learning about the world and other people. The people whom I have met, with whom I have interacted, and from whom I have learned in the course of my language learning and travels have impacted who I am and what I do in life," Levenson said. "The value is immeasurable."

Jackson agrees: "*El español ha tenido un papel muy importante en mi educación.* Spanish has played a very large role in my education." He plans on pursuing a degree in international business. "I know I have a skill that not a lot of other kids have, and I can take advantage of it in my future." **B**

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