



# Prioritization of K–12 World Language Education in the United States: State Requirements for High School Graduation

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**Abstract:** *In view of the importance of increasing multilingualism in the United States, the current study examined state policy for high school graduation requirements in the 50 states and the District of Columbia as an index of the way in which the study of world language is positioned and prioritized in K–12 education. Only seven states require the study of a world language other than English as a prerequisite for high school graduation for all students. The majority of states do not include world languages as a requirement for high school graduation, but almost half include world language coursework as an option of fulfilling an elective graduation requirement. Overall, while there are some positive developments, principally the Seal of Biliteracy initiative, world language education is not prioritized in state-level policies. Continued efforts, possibly at the federal level, are required to maintain and promote world language education in the United States*

**Key words:** *high school graduation requirements, K–12, state policy, world language education*

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## Introduction

In an increasingly global society, the demand for individuals with proficiency in languages other than English in government and industry is on the rise (Hunter, 2004; Malone & Rivers, 2013; McGinn, 2014; Stewart, 2007; Tochon, 2009). Increasing opportunities for students to learn a world language represents the key vehicle to meet this need. In the United States, the study of a world language has not been considered a critical component of education, at both the K–12 and higher education levels (Brecht et al., 2013). Indeed, K–12 world language instruction in the United States decreased over a period of 10 years ending in 2008 (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011), and, according to ACTFL, during the 2007–2008 school year, only 18.5% of all K–12 public school students were enrolled in a foreign language course (ACTFL, 2015, n.p.). Survey research conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics has shown a similar trend of declining enrollments at the K–12 level (Malone & Rivers, 2013). This contrasts sharply with the European Union (EU): A survey showed that in the 2009–2010 school year, 78% of primary school students in EU countries were learning a foreign language and 61% of students at lower secondary levels (ages 10–14) were learning two or more foreign languages (Baidak, Borodankova, Kocanova, & Motiejunaite, 2012, p. 10). This trend has also been observed in higher education in the United States. A recent report from the Modern Language Association indicated that at the national level, enrollments in world language courses and programs in institutions of higher education have declined (Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, 2015), indicating that decreasing numbers of students prioritize learning a world language. Noting the disparity between the need for highly proficient speakers of languages other than English (Hunter, 2004; McGinn, 2014) and the decline in enrollments, Brecht et al. (2013) concluded that the current education system in the United States is failing to provide opportunities for the majority of the

nation's youth to acquire critical language skills and related intercultural and 21st-century competencies. In 2001, the late Senator Paul Simon (D-IL) summed it up as follows: "Today, some 80 federal agencies need proficiency in nearly 100 foreign languages. While the demand is great, the supply remains nonexistent. Only 8 percent of American college students study another language" (Simon, 2001, p. A23). Despite the late senator's recognition of a fundamental gap in American education and the K–12 and postsecondary levels, in the ensuing 15 years this shortfall in human capital has continued to seriously impact our nation's economic competitiveness and national security.

Given the lack of a national world language education policy and the persistent importance of proficiency in languages other than English in the United States, this study sought to assess the prioritization, or lack thereof, of world language education by investigating state-based high school graduation requirements in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, focusing on what is required of, and/or available to, all students. In addition to graduation requirements, the study also examined state policy relating to the Seal of Biliteracy. The goal of providing this overview of state policy was to gain insight into the prioritization of world language in K–12 education and investigate the extent to which current state requirements are consistent with the needs of the nation.

## Background

In the United States, world language instruction in public education typically does not begin until high school (Pufahl, Rhodes, & Christian, 2001). Indeed, in their survey of 1,835 public elementary schools, Pufahl and Rhodes (2011) found that only 15% taught world language in 2008, a figure that represented a significant decline from a previous survey they had conducted in 1997, while 91% of high schools surveyed offered world language

instruction (p. 261). This contrasts with the known benefits of starting world language education earlier in children's educational trajectory, as is done in many other countries (Pufahl et al., 2001; Tochon, 2009). In 1999, the Educational Testing Service Policy Information Center reported that, based on a national sample of students who graduated from high school in 1994, 74% of high schools represented in the study did not require any world language course work for graduation (Finn, 1999, n.p.).<sup>1</sup>

The realization of K–12 world language education is underpinned by education policy. In contrast to the EU, which recently adopted a union-wide policy that “children are to be taught two foreign languages at school from an early age,” (Györfi, 2015, p. 1), in the United States, this type of education policy is not under federal control; rather, decision-making with respect to K–12 world language education policy is done first at the state level (Brecht, 2007; Lambert, 1993; Wiley & García, 2016). Though experts in the field of world language education policy have advocated for comprehensive federal policy, including provisions for starting instruction at early ages (Brecht, 2007; Brecht et al., 2013), it currently falls to the states to craft policy pertaining to world language education.

Given that K–12 world language education in the United States is mostly taking place at the high school level, high school graduation requirements provide an important indicator of the level of priority given to world language education in each state. It is important to note that despite the existence of state-level policies, final policy decisions with respect to graduation requirements are typically set forth at the local district or school level. State policy on high school graduation requirements represents minimum thresholds; thus, school districts and individual schools may adopt more stringent requirements than those found at the state level. For example, while the state of New Jersey mandates that one year of world language is required for graduation, the

Newark (NJ) public schools require two years (Newark Public Schools, 2014). In states without requirements, the decision to include world language instruction in the curriculum and overall set of graduation requirements is made entirely at the local level. For example, in Massachusetts, there are no world language requirements for graduation, nor does the state require public schools to offer world language education in any form. However, Springfield Central High School in Springfield, MA, requires all students to take two consecutive years of the same language (Springfield Central High School, n.d.). Therefore, state policies on high school graduation requirements are an indicator of the prioritization of world language education at the state level but do not paint the entire picture.

While it does not represent a graduation requirement, the Seal of Biliteracy initiative has, in the past 5 years, emerged as a force in state K–12 world language education. The Seal of Biliteracy is an award given to individual students at high school graduation as recognition that they “have studied and attained proficiency in two or more languages” (Seal of Biliteracy, 2016). The goal of this grassroots effort is to encourage students to pursue studies in world languages by honoring their accomplishments. In order to receive the Seal of Biliteracy, students must demonstrate, at minimum, Intermediate Mid proficiency based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (Abbott, 2015; Seal of Biliteracy, 2016). The seal is documented on students' transcripts and represents a “statement of accomplishment for future employers and for college admissions” (Seal of Biliteracy, 2016). The Seal of Biliteracy movement began in California in 2008, and California was the first state to adopt the seal in 2011. The following spring, state seals were awarded to more than 10,000 graduating seniors. Since then, 21 states have adopted the Seal of Biliteracy. Given its rapid and pervasive influence, state policy relating to the Seal of Biliteracy is included in the current analysis.

While the federal government cannot mandate state policy with respect to world language education, it does, however, make efforts to promote world language education at the state and local levels. These initiatives take the form of grant programs, the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) being a prime example. From its inception in 1988 until it was discontinued in 2012, the FLAP program provided grants to establish, improve, and expand world language programs in elementary and secondary schools (Richey, 2007). A bill for a similar program was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in June 2015. H.R. Bill 3096 (World Language Advancement Act), if passed, would promote high-quality world language instruction programs via competitive, three-year grants to state or local educational agencies (World Language Advancement Act, 2015). While these efforts indicate that the federal government takes the issue of world language education seriously, such programs have been criticized as “piecemeal initiatives” that do not support a comprehensive plan for world language education in the United States (Lambert, 1993, p. 3). In order to address the nation’s world language proficiency needs, Brecht et al. (2013; see also Brecht, 2007) proposed such a plan for world language education policy, based on “the assumption that everyone should learn a second language” (Brecht, 2007, p. 264) and proposed a framework for world language education starting in kindergarten.

The goal of the current study was to provide an overview of the state-based high school graduation requirements and related world language education policy for the 50 states and the District of Columbia in order to gain insights into the prioritization of world language education in state policy in light of the increasing demands for a multilingual workforce through education. Of primary interest was what was required and/or available to all students, not just the college-bound, with respect to world language education.

## Methods

Information on states’ high school graduation requirements was collected from the Web sites of each state’s department overseeing education. If the information was not available online at the department’s Web site or if there were questions concerning policies and requirements, researchers contacted the departments directly via phone or e-mail (Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, Rhode Island, and Vermont). Information from Connecticut and Delaware came from legislative/regulatory documents that were not linked to department of education Web sites. States were then organized into three categories: world language coursework required for graduation, world language coursework as an option for fulfilling graduation requirements, world language education not included in graduation requirements. The categorization reflects the policies that were in place at the time this research was conducted, although in some states the policy has yet to take effect (e.g., starting January 1, 2018, Maine will require that students demonstrate proficiency in a world language) while in others the policy is currently being reconsidered (Michigan). Unless otherwise noted, one academic year of study at the secondary level equaled one unit or credit, the notable exceptions being New Jersey and New York.

## Results

### *High School Graduation Requirements by State*

A summary of general state world language high school graduation options and requirements is shown in Table 1, and additional details are offered in Table 2. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, seven states and the District of Columbia required some amount of coursework and/or demonstration of proficiency in a language other than English for graduation from high school. Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Indiana, New York, and Tennessee required 2 years of coursework in a language other than

**TABLE 1**

**Summary**

| High School Graduation Requirement   | States   |
|--|--|
| Coursework or proficiency in a world language is required for graduation                           | Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee  |
| World language is included as an option to fulfill a fine arts or professional studies requirement | Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, Washington    |
| No world language requirement  | Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming |

English. Michigan also had a 2-year requirement but indicated that other coursework in the visual and performing arts or career and technical education could fulfill one of the

years of language study, resulting in a true requirement of one year. In Delaware, students had the option to forgo coursework if they could demonstrate a Novice

**TABLE 2**

**States That Require World Language Study for High School Graduation**

| State                | Requirement   | Seal of Biliteracy |
|----------------------|---|--------------------|
| Connecticut          | Two years of world language study                       | In progress        |
| Delaware             | Two years of world language study                       | In progress        |
| District of Columbia | Two years of world language study                       | Yes                |
| Maine                | Demonstrated proficiency in at least one world language | In progress        |
| Michigan             | One year of world language study                        | In progress        |
| New Jersey           | One year (five credits) of world language study         | Yes                |
| New York             | Two years (one unit) of world language study            | Yes                |
| Tennessee            | Two years of world language study                       | In progress        |

*Note:* Information for Connecticut came from <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2015/act/pa/2015PA-00237-R00SB-01059-PA.htm>. Information from Delaware came from <http://regulations.delaware.gov/AdminCode/title14/500/505.shtml>.

High proficiency level as defined by the ACTFL (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003). In Tennessee, the requirement existed but could be waived for students who were not college bound. In New York, students were required to earn at least one unit of “diploma credit” in a world language in order to graduate. Earning this credit involved 2 years of language study, beginning no later than eighth grade. New Jersey required 1 year of world language study, which could be waived if students demonstrated Novice High proficiency on either the Standards-Based Measure of Proficiency test, Oral Proficiency Interview, or a locally designed test approved by the state department of education. In Maine, students had to demonstrate proficiency in a world language, although there were no explicit course requirements. Maine’s department of education indicated that students should achieve Intermediate Mid proficiency, as defined by the ACTFL, in order to obtain the high school diploma (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003).

In 22 states, a world language was not required for graduation, but state law mandated that students could use courses in world languages as one way to fulfill a requirement (see Table 3). In this model, a world language was typically grouped with arts (including fine arts, performing arts, and music) and/or career-related course work (i.e., career technical education [CTE]). For example, Illinois required students to take 1 year of art, music, world language, or vocational education. California required 1 year of visual/performing arts, world language, or CTE. All but two states (Idaho and Washington) grouped world languages with CTE-type coursework. Seven states (Arkansas, Maryland, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Texas) paired world languages with CTE alone. In Idaho, world languages were grouped with arts and humanities only, whereas in Washington, students could fulfill the elective requirement with either world language courses or a group of electives that reflected a specialization. While most states did not require

that students take more than one world language course, if students opted to study a world language in Hawaii, Maryland, Oklahoma, and Texas, they were required to complete a 2-year sequence in the same language.

As can be seen in Table 1, the remaining 21 states had no world language requirements for high school graduation. This does not necessarily mean that world language courses were not offered, but rather that they did not figure into the state requirements for high school graduation. For example, in some states (e.g., Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont), even though there was no graduation requirement at the state level, schools were required to offer courses in world languages. Similarly, in other states without graduation requirements for a standard high school diploma (Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, West Virginia, and Wyoming), courses in world languages were required to receive a diploma with an advanced designation, indicating a more rigorous academic program. Finally, some states (Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Mississippi) did not require world language study but recommended it as preparation for college.

Finally, as previously mentioned, 22 states had adopted the Seal of Biliteracy (see Table 4). This group includes states that had a high school graduation requirement (New York, New Jersey, District of Columbia), states in which world language courses were an option for fulfilling a graduation requirement (California, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Washington), and those that had no world language education requirement (Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, Utah and Wisconsin). An additional 15 states were working toward establishing the Seal of Biliteracy, including states that had a high school graduation requirement (Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Michigan, and Tennessee), states that included world language as an option

**TABLE 3**

**States That Allow World Language Courses to Fulfill Elective Requirement**

| State          | Total elective course requirement | Options grouped with world languages | Seal of Bilingualism |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Alabama        | Three years                       | CTE, Arts                            | In progress          |
| Arkansas       | Six years                         | CTE                                  | In progress          |
| California     | One year                          | CTE, Arts                            | Yes                  |
| Georgia        | Three years                       | CTE, Arts                            | Yes                  |
| Hawaii         | Two years                         | CTE, Arts                            | Yes                  |
| Idaho          | One year (two credits)            | Arts, Humanities                     | No                   |
| Illinois       | One year                          | CTE, Arts                            | Yes                  |
| Indiana        | 2.5 years (five credits)          | CTE, Arts, additional core courses   | Yes                  |
| Maryland       | Two years                         | CTE                                  | Yes                  |
| New Mexico     | One year                          | CTE                                  | Yes                  |
| North Carolina | Two years                         | CTE, Arts                            | Yes                  |
| North Dakota   | Three units                       | CTE, Arts                            | No                   |
| Ohio           | Five units                        | CTE, Arts                            | In progress          |
| Oklahoma       | Two years                         | CTE                                  | No                   |
| Oregon         | Three years                       | CTE, Arts                            | Yes                  |
| Pennsylvania   | Five years                        | CTE, Arts                            | No                   |
| South Carolina | One year                          | CTE,                                 | No                   |
| South Dakota   | One year                          | CTE                                  | No                   |
| Texas          | Two years                         | CTE                                  | Yes                  |
| Virginia       | Two years                         | CTE, Arts                            | Yes                  |
| Washington     | Two years                         | General electives                    | Yes                  |

*Note:* In this analysis, the term *CTE* encompasses courses in computer science, business, vocational, or workplace skills, as well as service learning and internships. *Arts* includes fine arts, performing arts, and music. *Humanities* refers to courses in literature, history, philosophy, architecture, and comparative world religion. *Core courses* refers to courses in math, science, social studies, and English language arts.

for fulfilling a requirement (Alabama, Arkansas, and Ohio), and states with no requirements (Alaska, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island). While the seal does not impose a requirement, the existence of an official statewide mechanism to acknowledge the value of proficiency in a language other than English to graduating seniors does represent a state policy to

encourage multilingualism in the United States.

Efforts have also been under way to modify state world language education policy. In Utah, senators introduced Senate Bill 219 (World Language Proficiency Recognition, 2015), which would require 2 years of world language study during grades 7–12 or proficiency sufficient to obtain the Seal of Bilingualism. In February 2015, the bill was

**TABLE 4**

**Seal of Biliteracy Status in the 50 States and the District of Columbia**

| State                | Seal of Biliteracy | State          | Seal of Biliteracy |
|----------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Alabama              | In progress        | Montana        | None               |
| Alaska               | In progress        | Nebraska       | None               |
| Arizona              | Approved           | Nevada         | Approved           |
| Arkansas             | In progress        | New Hampshire  | In progress        |
| California           | Approved           | New Jersey     | Approved           |
| Colorado             | In progress        | New Mexico     | Approved           |
| Connecticut          | In progress        | New York       | Approved           |
| Delaware             | In progress        | North Carolina | Approved           |
| District of Columbia | Approved           | North Dakota   | None               |
| Florida              | Approved           | Ohio           | In progress        |
| Georgia              | Approved           | Oklahoma       | None               |
| Hawaii               | Approved           | Oregon         | Approved           |
| Idaho                | None               | Pennsylvania   | None               |
| Illinois             | Approved           | Rhode Island   | In progress        |
| Indiana              | Approved           | South Carolina | None               |
| Iowa                 | In progress        | South Dakota   | None               |
| Kansas               | In progress        | Tennessee      | In progress        |
| Kentucky             | None               | Texas          | Approved           |
| Louisiana            | Approved           | Utah           | Approved           |
| Maine                | In progress        | Vermont        | None               |
| Maryland             | Approved           | Virginia       | Approved           |
| Massachusetts        | In progress        | Washington     | Approved           |
| Michigan             | In progress        | West Virginia  | None               |
| Minnesota            | Approved           | Wisconsin      | Approved           |
| Mississippi          | None               | Wyoming        | None               |
| Missouri             | None               |                |                    |

passed in Utah’s state senate but then failed to pass in the Utah House of Representatives. There have also been recently proposed bills to curtail world language requirements. In Florida, Senate Bill 468 (Computer Coding Instruction) would allow students to use courses in computer coding to fulfill the two-credit language requirement for the college-bound diploma designation. The bill, introduced in October 2015, would have also obliged institutions in the Florida college system to recognize computer coding credits as world language credits for admissions purposes. The bill was approved by the Florida Senate but was ultimately not voted on in the House

(i.e., it died in messages in 2016). A bill introduced in Michigan in 2013 to eliminate the world language high school requirement (Michigan House Bill No. 4102, 2013) met a similar fate (it was introduced but never voted on). Currently, a bill under consideration in Washington (Using Computer Sciences to Satisfy World Language College Admissions Requirements, 2016 [HB 1445]) would oblige public colleges to accept 2 years of computer sciences in lieu of 2 years of world languages for admissions. Given the current emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education in the United States, this could be the beginning of a trend

that would have a strong negative impact on world language education.

## Discussion

In spite of recognition at the federal level of the importance of world language education, the majority of states did not have graduation policies that required world language education, and those that did had fairly minimal requirements. Policy initiatives in various states aimed at diminishing the role of world language education in high school graduation requirements and college admissions are worrisome in terms of the future of world language education in the United States. However, the emergence and increasing influence of the Seal of Biliteracy initiative on state policy is an encouraging sign. It is also encouraging that most states did mandate that schools provide opportunities for world language education to students, even if there were no graduation requirements for world language study. It is clear that continued efforts will be required to maintain and promote world language education in the United States.

One key observation about the state-based graduation requirements for world language education is that they do not reflect the established best practices for cultivating second language proficiency. It is well known that in order for K–12 students to attain high levels of proficiency, they should start early in elementary education and continue in an articulated sequence, ideally with some form of immersion, through secondary school (Christian, 1996). Unfortunately, the maximum state requirement is 2 years of coursework, beginning at the high school level; while such experiences may motivate students to continue to study the language, they are not likely to attain high levels of proficiency. The lack of recognition by state policy makers of the basic parameters for successful language learning underlines the lack of prioritization for world language education, even in states that have requirements.

A prevalent trend observed in this study is the grouping of world language with fine arts and/or career-related coursework (CTE), which includes computer science, business, vocational, and workplace-type skills. With respect to fine arts in public K–12 education, the steadily increasing focus on core subject areas (e.g., reading, writing, and math) has led to the marginalization of fine arts in K–12 curricula and policy (Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010). Given the similar lack of prioritization of world languages, it is perhaps not surprising to see the two paired together. With respect to CTE, it is somewhat surprising to see world language as an alternative for CTE, which is often composed of coursework related to computer science. Computer science, as a STEM discipline, is highly prioritized in K–12 education policy and policy initiatives (Holdren, Lander, & Varmus, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), unlike fine arts and world language. More recently, a push to begin in K–12 to prepare students for careers in cybersecurity has gained force (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). Although the pairing of world language education with skills that are viewed as critical to the modern workforce seems positive, the resulting competition between world languages and computer science/cybersecurity does not bode well for world language. Indeed, this tension is perhaps at the root of the recent policy initiatives to substitute coursework in computer science for world language (Florida Senate Bill 468 and Washington House Bill 1445).

On a more positive note, the Seal of Biliteracy initiative has resulted in official, state-level recognition of students' proficiency in languages other than English in 22 states, and another 15 are working toward establishing the policy. This academic credential, which is awarded to qualified students based on demonstrated proficiency in a language, is therefore consistent with trend that began in the 1980s toward proficiency-based approaches in language assessment and away from requirements

based on seat-time or credits earned (Lis-kin-Gasparro, 2003; Salaberry, 2000; Schulz, 1989). In this respect, it differs from most of the state-based graduation requirements, which are mostly defined in terms of seat-time and which are not likely to result in high levels of proficiency. Given the generally paltry appreciation of world language as an area of study at the high school level in the United States, the Seal of Biliteracy may represent an increasingly important and powerful tool that can motivate students to study world languages and also provide them with a state-recognized qualification for use with university admissions and prospective employers. The Seal of Biliteracy initiative, therefore, is one positive step toward addressing the language needs of the nation.

## Conclusion

Overall, the results of the current study suggest that world language education is not prioritized at the state level. This is evident from the general lack of requirements, the minimal nature of extant requirements, and the lack of inclusion of established best practices for cultivating high levels of proficiency. This is unfortunate for the nation given the increasing need for multilingual individuals in the workforce, in both the public and private sector (Hunter, 2004; McGinn, 2014; Stewart, 2007). Furthermore, on an individual level, the lack of prioritization of world languages reduces the likelihood of students reaping the cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012) and has an important impact on their personal economic competitiveness. Taken as a whole, the state-level policy reflects the fragmentation that Lambert (1993) observed at the federal level and is consistent with Abbott, Brecht, Davidson, and Fenstermacher's (2013) conclusion that the current education system in the United States is not successful in providing opportunities for the majority of the K–12 population to

acquire language proficiency and intercultural competence, both of which are critical to learners' future success in our increasingly multicultural and linguistically diverse world. Given the lack of prioritization in state-level policy, these findings therefore support the proposal of Brecht and colleagues (Brecht, 2007; Brecht et al., 2013) that in order to meet the nation's needs, a comprehensive and strategic national language education policy is required.

## Note

1. This figure from Finn (1999) includes data from public and private schools, but private schools had higher enrollment rates than public schools (20% of public school students took no world language coursework, but this was true of only 4% of the private school students), suggesting that their requirements are more stringent than public schools (p. 3). If, therefore, private schools were excluded from the analysis and only public schools were counted, the percentage not requiring world language coursework would likely be higher.

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