



Q&A INTERVIEW

with
Secretary of Education
Arne Duncan



Secretary Duncan, on behalf of the members of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, we thank you for your willingness to speak with us today on current issues concerning foreign languages and their role in the agenda of the Obama Administration.

Q: As former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), you have been a strong supporter of language education. CPS claims to have more students studying Mandarin Chinese—over 7,000—than any other school system in the United States and the district also has plans to expand its language curriculum to include even more students studying Chinese, as well as Arabic and Russian. Chicago Mayor Daley has made language education a top priority in the city's schools and you have worked to ensure the vision of Chicago as a truly international city is accomplished through innovative language and international studies programs.

Now that you are Secretary of Education, what will you do to encourage an emphasis on language study nationally, as you did locally in Chicago? Why do you believe this is important for American students and our nation's future?

A: There is no doubt that learning foreign languages is critical for our nation's students, and for a variety of reasons. Foreign language skills contribute to our economic competitiveness and national security, and to solving global challenges in areas like health and the environment. In addition, studies have shown that students who learn foreign languages in school actually realize other cognitive benefits that can make a difference in their academic performance.

So I am a proponent of language learning and exchange programs, both for K–12 students and teachers, as well as university students and their professors. During my short tenure at the Department of Education, I have had the privilege to meet with many countries' education ministers and/or ambassadors. Already, the department has agreed to promote language learning and exchange programs between the United States and other countries as diverse as China and Mexico.

Q: President Obama made several comments during his campaign that indicated his support for language learning, including that he believes every student should know two languages and that he intends to push for more funding for foreign language programs. Secretary of State Clinton has also declared that “learning a foreign language has never been so rewarding or important.” What kind of plans does the Obama Administration have for pursuing an agenda that supports the learning of foreign languages and about foreign cultures?

A: I know that Secretary Clinton and I look forward to working with one another on these issues. And, as Secretary of Education, I also look forward to using my official position to promote foreign language study and to pursuing relevant legislative opportunities, particularly through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. As you well know, the recently reauthorized Higher Education Act provides us with some opportunities as well.

Q: Last year, Rep. Holt of New Jersey introduced the International Education Leadership Act (HR 5179) that would establish the position of Assistant Secretary of International and Foreign Language Education at the U.S. Department of Education. Would you support the establishment of a position of a high-level individual with the responsibility to encourage and promote the study of foreign languages and cultures within the Education Department?

A: The Higher Education Act passed this summer did provide authority for a Deputy Assistant Secretary of International Education. However, at this point in time, the Department will not seek a separate Assistant Secretary position. I am concerned that creating an Assistant Secretary position could stovepipe our international activities in a manner that does not consider what’s going on with the rest of the department from a policy and programmatic standpoint. Our administration has a vision and a plan for moving forward in education. A cross-cutting function like international affairs should not be fashioned into a silo on its own. Already, Dr. Marshall Smith, who was Under Secretary during the Clinton Administration and is now serving as my Senior Counselor, has convened the Department’s International Education Coordinating Committee to stimulate conversations across offices and assist us in the development of a comprehensive strategy for the international activities and functions. In addition, his team is reaching out to well-known practitioners and experts in the field (like ACTFL) with key questions to help set priorities for our strategy. This strategy will be used for decision-making related to the budget and programs.

Q: In 2006, President Bush announced the National Strategic Language Initiative (NSLI) as a plan to further strengthen national security and prosperity in the 21st century through education—and particularly through the development of foreign language skills. The initiative has made some notable strides in this area. The STARTALK program, for example, recently funded summer language programs for a projected 6,400 students and teachers in the summer of 2009 in Chinese, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, and Persian. What is the future of the STARTALK initiative under the current administration and given the current economic climate?

A: As you know, the Department of Education does not have responsibility for this program. However, my staff has spoken to counterparts at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and other agencies about the need for NSLI partners to move forward in a cooperative manner on the programs and activities in each of our portfolios. Hopefully, as all our agencies become more fully staffed, that can happen sooner rather than later.

Q: Many people, among them language educators, are concerned that some current efforts to support language learning—however well-meaning—can serve to diminish the importance of excellent long-established programs in traditionally taught languages such as French and German. Often when a new language, such as Chinese, is added to the curriculum, another language, like French, is eliminated. Can you speak to the importance of supporting all language learning in the United States at all levels, rather than pursuing a narrow focus only on a few currently deemed “critical” languages?

Q: Every administration is different from its predecessor and President Obama has made it clear that he does not agree with many of the previous Bush policies in different arenas. What actions might we expect that would change course, with regards to language education? Many educators believe that the No Child Left Behind Act has hurt language programs due to its sole emphasis on standardized testing in reading and math. What should we expect to see with regards to such policies during the Obama Administration?

Q: You have called educational reform the “civil rights fight of our generation.” What did you mean by this? Coming from one of our nation’s largest city school districts, you no doubt have an educated perspective on the challenges that many large urban schools face. What is the role of international studies and foreign language learning in helping students to connect with a global community and to see a world larger than their own neighborhood?

A: The importance of critical languages to both national security and economic competitiveness will likely remain with us for the foreseeable future. However, neither the Department nor the Congress wants to see a phasing out of traditional language programs. It’s clear that learning a foreign language—any language, whether it’s considered critical or traditional—contributes to students’ academic success, helps learners gain a better understanding of their native language, and proves useful in future career pursuits.

I should add that, regardless of the target language, I also think it’s important to highlight the value of heritage language speakers in our schools and communities. And, to the extent that it’s possible, it makes sense to develop academic fluency in students’ home languages. In my role as Secretary, I look forward to promoting the importance of foreign language learning for all students, from preschool through postsecondary and continuing education.

A: While the previous administration placed a focus on the learning of critical foreign languages, the Department of Education’s main program to fund K–12 programs, the Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP), was zero funded for several years. In the process of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I think you will see the Department of Education putting more emphasis on the importance of foreign languages through increased funding.

A: Education is the civil rights issue of our generation in that every single child deserves the very best education possible, and it’s our job to give it to them. Ultimately, the promise of education is that, if you work hard, you can go anywhere. Just look at Barack and Michelle Obama. Both came from humble backgrounds but rose to where they are today because of education.

Within the broader context of ensuring a quality education for every student, international education and foreign language study are vital to giving those students full access to the world around them, a world that we all know is getting smaller every year. By better understanding, and being able to communicate effectively with, their peers around the world, U.S. students and the nation as a whole will face a brighter future.

Q: The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), passed in February in an effort to stimulate the economy, includes over \$100 billion for new investments in early learning, K–12, and postsecondary education. Some of these funds will have little impact on language programs, while others may include languages within larger efforts. With the overall funding provided through ARRA, and the \$5 billion discretionary incentive fund as a part of the ARRA, doesn't it make sense—and do you have plans to target money—to support foreign language learning specifically?

A: The priorities for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) are:

- Adopting rigorous college- and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments;
- Establishing data systems and using data for improvement;
- Increasing teacher effectiveness and equitable distribution of effective teachers;
- Turning around the lowest-performing schools; and
- Improving results for all students, including early learning, extended learning time, use of technology, preparation for college, and school modernization.

However, the Invest in What Works and Innovation fund provides \$650 million in competitive grants to LEAs and non-profits that have made significant gains in closing achievement gaps to be models of best practices. It would certainly be possible to include models where foreign language instruction and international education strategies were employed.



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NSLI is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and eligible to US high school students who are 15-18 years of age and have at least a 2.5 GPA or are recent graduates. Previous language experience is not required, but students should have a passion for communicating across cultures, learning languages, and living abroad.

Application deadline is: December 4, 2009. For more information, students can email nsliy@americancouncils.org or go to nsliforyouth.org to apply.



nsliy@americancouncils.org

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