

# Foreign Language Squeeze

BUDGET CUTS REDUCE CHOICE OF LANGUAGES, BOOST CLASS SIZE

*Eugene public schools have been hit hard by budget cuts. Since the 2008 financial crisis, 4J has made more than \$32 million in budget cuts and spent nearly \$37 million in reserves. It's difficult to conceptualize what such continuous loss in school budgets means. To supplement the anecdotal evidence, EW is publishing this column to draw attention to the cuts, compare current conditions to that of past school years, and highlight programs that attempt to fill some gaps.*

One Eugene high school used to offer seven foreign languages. Today, it offers three. Three of the eight middle schools in 4J don't offer any foreign language classes, and one offers only one language.

And although research suggests that foreign language is best learned in small classes, some high school classes here have more than 40 students.

As in many districts across the U.S., budget cuts have forced 4J schools to make stark decisions about funding — and foreign languages have borne the brunt.

"Decision makers often don't understand how critical it is for our students' future to know other languages and understand other cultures," says Martha G. Abbott, executive director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which promotes the study of foreign languages and cultures. "It is no longer something nice to have, but something necessary to have in working and living in our new global economy."

Oregon is one of 19 states in which the percentage of students enrolled in foreign languages has declined, going from 15.7 percent in the 2004-05 school year to 14.6 percent in the 2007-08 school year, the latest year for which ACTFL has data. Although 4J doesn't compare language enrollment over the years, discussions with school administrators and teachers here suggest that numerous languages and classes have been cut over the last decade.

For example, Churchill High School is phasing out French and its feeder middle schools no longer offer foreign languages. Madison Middle School phased out Spanish several years ago, and Spencer Butte Middle School cut French last year.

To graduate from high school, students in Eugene are required to take any combination of arts and foreign languages. To get into an Oregon University System school, they have to take two years of a foreign language. International High School students have to take three. And other colleges have different requirements regarding foreign language instruction.

So as long as all 4J high schools offer at least one foreign language, why does it matter that they're cutting other options?

"It's almost the same as [asking] why should we offer any choices in other disciplines?" says Randy Bernstein, principal at South Eugene High School, which used to offer seven languages and now offers three. "Students' interests vary quite a bit. While Spanish certainly is a practical language around here given the need for bilingual professionals and people in business and trades as well, there's a lot of kids whose life plans might take them in other directions."

"To siphon them all into just one language just isn't desirable," he continues. "When kids have choices, they're more engaged in classes." Bernstein says, "We could just offer drawing [to fulfill the arts requirement],

but some students like to sing."

Moreover, Bernstein notes, offering languages like Japanese that have totally different alphabets "exercises the mind in a different way, not to mention where a student might take that in terms of business and trade."

The narrowing of options has other effects, according to Catherine Wiebe, who teaches French at Roosevelt Middle School. It's harder to offer classes in other languages at the University of Oregon, she notes, because kids are afraid to start a new language in college and tend to take what they've already had. "The less exposure you have early on, the less interest and knowledge you have later."

Decisions to cut courses — and whole languages — are made by administrators on a school-by-school basis and reflect student interest amid fiscal realities.

At Churchill, when students were asked in the spring to forecast which languages they wanted to take in the fall, French didn't fare well, according to Principal Kim Finch, who says the school will offer the language to a handful of IB students next year, then phase it out. In its place, Asian languages are gaining momentum in the region, spurred by Churchill's new STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) program.

At Sheldon High School, "course offerings, many times, really depend upon the demand," explains Christopher Engstrom, who has been teaching Spanish at Sheldon for 17 years. If only a handful of students sign up for a class, it isn't feasible to offer it — even if research suggests that learning a foreign language is best done in small classes.

At South, where administrators have phased out German and are offering less French because of declining enrollment, "these days, unfortunately, when classes get down to 20 or less, it's hard to justify offering the class," according to Bernstein.

Which is ironic, because ACTFL recommends language classes of no more than 15, citing the value of developing students' ability to communicate and the importance of "opportunities for frequent and meaningful student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction, monitored practice, and individual feedback during instructional time." Both the National Education Association and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages echo the recommendation.

The reality in Eugene is much different. "The main way that budget cuts have affected our classes has been with class size," notes Julie McCauley, a Spanish teacher who has worked for 27 years at North Eugene High School, which phased out German in 1989 and French last year. She says that when she first started "It was rare to have a class larger than 20." Today, she says, "classes typically start in the high 30s and low 40s."

As a result, she says, "It's easy for the students to not get the individual help they need to be successful when they are in such huge classes." And as her department anticipates teachers going from three classes a day to four next year with the new district schedule, she says, "there will be even less time to help those struggling students as our teaching time, number of preps [times allotted for preparation], and number of students increases, and our planning and open time to help students decreases."

Mary O'Connor, a Spanish teacher at South, has 39 students in her second year Spanish class. Language instruction today is more focused on oral communication than it was when she started teaching in the late 1970s. Today, with larger class sizes, she says, "There is less one-

on-one contact and less getting to know the students."

In addition, large classes are more likely to use such tools as partner practice, where students learn with another student, not just from the teacher, and not all students take to this type of learning. Finally, O'Connor says, "We do go a little bit slower," which she conceded can be difficult for students who learn at a faster pace.

Sheldon's Engstrom also has seen class sizes rise. He says that her first few years at Sheldon, his average class size would be between 27 and 32: "You know, manageable," he remembers. "Now it's at 40," a number he says he could never have imagined when he first started teaching. One Spanish class at his school has 48 students.

"I have found that it is relatively easy to keep 25 students on task at all times," he says. "It is nearly impossible to do so with 37 to 47 students and one teacher," given the greater number of disruptions during class. He adds that there are a "greater number of instructional minutes lost," Engstrom says, as it takes more time to complete activities, catch up those who have been absent, take attendance, get the class's attention, check homework, return written evaluations and pass out work.

"The hardest thing with the bigger classes, obviously, you have more kids fall through the cracks. It's harder to manage the class," he says. "I've had to become more severe," and adds, "In a foreign language class, you want to be more relaxed and to have [the students] let their guard down because you want them to experiment with the language." Engstrom says, "The more apprehensive kids are because of the numbers, and maybe the teacher [has to be stricter], the harder it is for them to acquire the language."

Engstrom also says that although he doesn't think instruction has changed that much, he can't cover as much material. "I have to cut out an activity maybe every couple of days." He estimates that he's accomplishing similar goals, but perhaps with less depth.

At the end of each year, he measures students' proficiency on written and spoken evaluations and has seen a decline in proficiency. "Class grade averages have dropped nearly 1 percentage point per year, even though the material, instruction, expectations, evaluations, requirements, grading scales, etc. have remained extremely consistent." While many factors could account for this drop in students' performance, Engstrom says, "Intuition and research tell me that class size is a significant player in this finding."

*Note: This column deals with issues related to foreign language instruction outside of immersion programs. Educators in Eugene say that the immersion programs — which operate in three of the four regions — have also been stretched.*

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