

NJDOE News

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DOE Receives Federal Grant for World Languages Testing

The New Jersey Department of Education has received a \$434,072 federal grant for an innovative three-year project to assess the progress eighth graders are making in learning other languages.

DOE plans to test 60,000 students studying French, Spanish, German, Italian, Chinese and Japanese. Approximately 20,000 students will be tested at the end of each school year.

The results will be used as baseline data in the development of a statewide world languages assessment and to create professional development programs for educators to help them teach languages more effectively.

Officials estimate that about half of the state's 600 school districts will participate in the assessment at some point during the project. In three pilot districts – Englewood, Newark and Millville – eighth grade language students will be tested every year for the next three years.

New Jersey's proposed project was the largest of eleven state awards recently funded by the US Department of Education's (USED) Foreign Language Assistance program.

"Our project will be the most ambitious, wide-ranging world languages testing program underway in the country," said Acting Governor Richard J. Codey.

"There was a great deal of competition for this grant money and we are very pleased that the federal government judged our application so favorably. We think the results we get from these assessments will make a real difference in the way teachers teach and students learn other languages in this state," the Governor said.

Commissioner of Education William L. Librera noted that it is "generally acknowledged that here in the United States, we don't pay enough attention to the way we deal with the teaching of languages other than English. That means we are not giving our students all the tools they will need to compete in the global economy that will exist when they are ready to join the workforce.

"In other countries, instruction in world languages is a high priority, and they know how to do it very well. We have a lot of catching up to do, and this grant should be a major asset to our efforts," Commissioner Librera said.

Janis Jensen, DOE's World Languages coordinator, said another problem is that the quality and effectiveness of language instruction curricula and teaching, both in New Jersey and throughout the country, varies widely.

"Too often, students who have received high grades in French or Spanish for several years can read and write, but they still can't speak well enough to have a real conversation in Paris or Mexico City," she said. "The results of this assessment will help determine which instruction protocols have the most positive impact on actual student achievement."

One of the most innovative aspects of New Jersey's plan is the testing method that will be used.

The STAMP (Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency) assessment is administered on-line, and includes a speaking component that engages students in real-world situations, challenging them with authentic texts and oral tasks. It was developed by the Center for Applied Second Language Studies in Oregon, one of 14 USED National Foreign Language Resource Centers.

"We field-tested it with 500 students last spring and they loved it," Jensen said. "It's not some old-fashioned mechanical test. It's the kind of real-time, interactive experience that young people today find very natural, thanks to video games and on-line activities.

"They get a chance to speak, not just write, and their progress in learning the language is rated according to national guidelines, not just against the performances of the other kids in their own classes. There is also a quick turnaround in reporting very detailed results, so that both teachers and students can see how well they did," she

said.

DOE officials are currently establishing the procedures under which districts can participate in the larger program. Jensen said the details will be available in September and that the actual testing of the first 20,000 students will take place in the late spring of next year.

The USED grant application also required the states to partner with specific school districts for pilot projects to generate in-depth analysis of the methods used in the teaching and learning of world languages. DOE selected Englewood, Newark and Millville as three districts in different parts of the state with different student demographics and different types of established language programs to be part of the pilot.

"We will be working closely with these districts' language departments and testing their eighth-graders every year," said Jensen. "This will provide us with very valuable longitudinal information that can measure changes in proficiency as we adjust the instructional protocols."

For more information on the content of this news release, please contact the New Jersey DOE Office of Public Information at 609-292-1126.