

Majority of Floridians support requiring Spanish in public schools

July 9 2015, by Colleen Porter

Two-thirds of Floridians support requiring Spanish language instruction in Florida public schools, according to a new University of Florida survey.

"Overall reactions to the notion that Spanish should be a required subject in public schools was far less polarized and more popular than we imagined," said Chris McCarty, director of the University of Florida Survey Research Center at the Bureau of Economic and Business Research, which conducted the survey. "As immigration and the Hispanic vote will be front and center in the 2016 presidential election and Florida a swing state, we can expect this to be a topic of discussion."

The questionnaire was designed to gather opinions about requiring Spanish instruction without focusing explicitly on that subject. The questions asked by professional telephone interviewers included five topics of instruction, with emphasis on requirement: "The next questions are about REQUIRED classes in Florida [public schools](#). For each class, please tell me if you think it should be REQUIRED."

The highest support was for basic computer skills, with 95 percent saying "agree" or "strongly agree." Next was "a second [language](#) of student's choice" with 81 percent agreement, followed by Florida history (77 percent) and geometry (75 percent).

The magnitude of support for requiring Spanish (67 percent) is important because a constitutional amendment requiring Spanish

instruction would need 60 percent of voters. However, the survey did not ask about funding, which may pose a barrier to implementation.

"We expected support for requiring Spanish to vary considerably by characteristics of the respondent, but this was not the case," McCarty said. Age differences were not significant. Of those age 18-59 years, 68 percent agreed, compared with 65 percent of those age 60 and older.

While the highest level of support was in Southeast Florida (72 percent), there were majorities in every area: North Florida (66 percent), Central Florida (63 percent) and Southwest Florida (62 percent).

There was no difference in support by income level. Hispanic respondents were more likely to agree that Spanish should be required (84 percent) than non-Hispanics (62 percent). Democrats were more supportive (76 percent) than Republicans (65 percent).

Ester de Jong, a professor at UF's School of Teaching and Learning, said, "These are encouraging data that show Floridians are understanding that technology and the ability to communicate with and work with others from diverse backgrounds needs to be a priority to prepare our K-12 students for the 21st-century world."

A landmark 2013 study published by the Pew Research Center estimated that 11.7 percent of the U.S. population (37 million people) speak Spanish. The number of Spanish speakers is projected to grow as a percentage of the population over the next two decades. Florida is unique among all U.S. states in that the large Hispanic population is not primarily Mexican. Miami-Dade County is home to the nation's largest Cuban, Columbian, Honduran and Peruvian communities.

Most states in the U.S. do not require any foreign language as a condition of graduation from the public K-12 school system. Several states, such as

Florida, require some credits in a foreign language as a condition to entering their university system, although many allow substitution of credits in other courses, such as technology or performing or fine arts.

Between 1997 and 2008 there was a decrease from 31 percent to 25 percent of U.S. elementary schools offering foreign languages, and from 75 percent to 58 percent among middle schools as an option, although about 91 percent of all high schools offer foreign languages. The result is that in 2010 only 18 percent of Americans spoke a language other than English. By contrast, 53 percent of Europeans spoke at least two languages.

"As we know from research, bilingualism has many advantages—cognitive, educational, sociocultural, and economic. It is increasingly recognized that intercultural competence and multilingualism has the future competitive edge," de Jong said. "I hope these data will lead to advocate for more funding and policies that support strong, well-designed dual language programs where students develop the level of proficiency in two languages needed for the workplace. This is a growing trend nationally with excellent academic and language outcomes."

The questions about the Spanish language requirement were added during the April implementation of the monthly Florida consumer survey. Interviews were conducted with 506 respondents on their cell phone; 6,245 telephone numbers were attempted, for a response rate of 9 percent.

Provided by University of Florida

Citation: Majority of Floridians support requiring Spanish in public schools (2015, July 9) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-07-majority-floridians-requiring-spanish->

[schools.html](#)

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.