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Peter Swanson
Georgia State University, peters@tribcsp.com

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Building and Sustaining Our Profession

Pete Swanson

Following World War II, leaders in the United States and Canada called international attention to the need to increase the number of world language teachers in order to arrest the decline in the number of teachers in both countries (Flattau et al., 2006; Ray, 1978). After the launch of Sputnik, the U.S. government passed the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which provided funding to improve American schools and to promote postsecondary education. Again, second language learning was a focal point as congressional leaders noted a need to support the country’s educational system to meet the demands posed by national security requirements. However, decades later a shortage of language teachers continued (Swanson, 2008), and the shortage of language and cultural experts is even more pervasive today as teacher shortages are prominent in Africa, Australia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas (Swanson, 2010).

Research has indicated that multiple factors play a role in the language teacher shortage, including teacher retirements, attrition, increased student enrollments, legislation at the state and national levels, and perceptions of the profession to name just a few (Swanson, 2013). In the first meeting of a foreign language teacher retention institute at Georgia State University in June 2014, a fifth-year Spanish teacher who recently left the profession explained to the researchers that she felt a total lack of support from school administrators and parents, which echoes what the Survey of the American Teacher (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2001) reported at the turn of the 21st century. That is, 28% of middle and high school teachers felt alienated at their schools, and 27% reported that what they thought about teaching did not count for much in the eyes of the administrators. As Ingersoll noted, there is a revolving door of teacher turnover in the United States that costs our school districts billions of dollars annually (Owen, 2015).

While there is a dearth of research on the annual attrition of world language teachers, Konanc (1996) reported that in North Carolina the attrition rate of world language teachers after two years of service was higher (22%) than with teachers in other content areas (15–18%). When examined by content area, world language teachers had the highest rate of attrition after the second year (21%), the fifth year (38%), the 10th year (49%), and the 15th year (57%). She noted that males and high school language teachers were more likely to leave the profession. Nearby in Georgia, where I live presently, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (2006) reported that the rate of attrition for world language teachers was lower (11%) than the rate in North Carolina. Nevertheless, the language teacher attrition rate remains higher than the rate of attrition for other content areas in the state including math, science, and special education.

In recent studies, I have found that teacher attrition is linked to one’s sense of efficacy in teaching languages (Swanson, 2012a, 2014) and the congruence of a language teacher’s professional interests to the work environment (2012b). I have also found that the recruitment of new language teachers into the profession is linked to one’s beliefs about the profession, the match between a person’s vocational interests and the workplace (i.e., schools), and a genuine interest and passion for language learning (Swanson, 2013).
As ACTFL president, I am deeply interested in identifying, recruiting, and retaining quality language teachers. I believe that in-service language teachers and professors need to be proactive agents whereby we recognize talented individuals in our classes and communities and begin to mentor them into the profession. By socializing future teachers, we can begin in earnest to develop a sustainable population of highly effective language teachers. On a daily basis, we are having an impact on the next generation of Americans by working in close proximity with them, and our sphere of influence is much more than many of us realize. By encouraging language learners in our classes in middle school, high school, and college to consider joining our ranks and mentoring them into the profession, we can begin to ease the shortage of language teachers and develop future teacher-leaders. This year I encourage everyone to identify and begin mentoring at least one new future teacher to join our ranks. Over the next year, I plan to work collectively with the ACTFL board and other language organizations to develop national efforts aimed at building the next generation of language teachers. Please join me.

References


