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### The world language shortage can be solved

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**Title:** The World Language Shortage Can Be Solved

Several years ago, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2017) reported that approximately 48.1 million K-12 students entered US public elementary and secondary schools with an additional 5.7 million students expected to matriculate into private schools. While the number of students continues to grow, “enrollment in teacher education programs is down significantly (Long, 2016). Each year school districts scramble to find certified teachers, especially in world languages (WLs) (Hanford, 2017; Koerting, 2017). Unfortunately, in many cases, administrators end up hiring faculty on emergency credentials where these individuals test ideas by “trial and error, one day at a time” (Gonser, 2016, p. 1). It is clear that hiring uncertified teachers who are testing uninformed hypotheses about teaching and learning can lead to poor student achievement outcomes (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016).

For almost two decades, I have been researching the WL teacher shortage and have been calling attention to the same issue that President of the United States Dwight D. Eisenhower and Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson were concerned about since the end of World War II (Swanson, 2008, 2014). Study after study has shown me that WL teachers, much like teachers in other content areas, are prone to leave within the first few years on the job (e.g., Kearney, Hildebrandt, & Swanson, 2018; Swanson, 2008). While some attrition can be good at times because some people may not be a good fit for the job (Swanson, 2008, 2012), constant attrition becomes problematic. As a profession, we need to avoid what is known as the revolving door conundrum where prospective teachers join our ranks only to leave after a few years on the job. Up to 2021, my studies consistently show that WL teacher attrition typically varies between 6-11% annually (e.g., Swanson, 2010, 2014), which is higher than the attrition rate in teaching in general (Swanson & Huff, 2010).

However, as the COVID-19 global pandemic was emerging and teachers were forced to teach online overnight, I conducted a national survey of WL teachers ( $N = 497$ ) to examine their sense of efficacy (confidence) in terms of teaching in a traditional face-to-face setting vs. teaching remotely (Swanson, 2022). While not surprising to find that WL teachers’ sense of efficacy dropped significantly when having to teach remotely, I was shocked to learn that 22% of

the participants reported that they were slightly likely to highly likely to leave teaching languages due to having to teach online. As I read stories of journalists reporting that the rapid transition to teaching remotely resulted in educators feeling stressed, anxious, overwhelmed, lonely, and socially isolated (e.g., Henebery, 2020; Hughes, 2020), I knew that some of our colleagues would look at other professional options or even retirement as a way out of the chaos. However, I did not think the attrition rate could double.

While I do not have data on the exact number of those who chose to leave the profession, I do have faith that we can arrest the decline of WL teachers and our Pre-K-16 programs. For years, I have advocated in favor of grassroots programs to identify our middle and high school language students who express an interest in becoming a language teacher. Studies have shown that we can change adolescents' misconceptions about teaching and successfully recruit them into teaching languages (Swanson & Moore, 2006). ACTFL has partnered with Educators Rising, a US-based organization focused on working with adolescents to provide hands-on teaching experience helping them sustain interest and cultivate skills to become successful WL teachers. This initiative seeks to have in-service high school classroom teachers identify and induct language learners into the profession.

However, we need to do more than recruit people into our profession; we need to retain the teachers we have in classrooms now. One such successful attempt to address the challenges in retaining experienced WL teachers was the *Language Teacher Retention Project* at the Center for Urban Language Teaching and Research at Georgia State University. After an initial roundtable that helped to identify strategies to effectively support language teachers during the first year of the project, a series of workshops for teachers was presented the second year. In-service language teachers were equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to support them in the field, as well gaining access to professional mentoring networks, which continued beyond the workshops.

If each and every one of us identified a couple of students in our classes that expressed an interest in language learning and then mentored them from that moment until they became certified to teach, we could make a significant dent in the shortage. We could help them identify teacher preparation programs, put them in touch with program directors, and remain in contact with them as they moved through their undergraduate work. Moreover, it is to our advantage and theirs to invite them to serve as student teachers in our classrooms, connect them to our networks via state, regional, and national organizations while providing guidance as they navigate the pathway toward becoming highly effective teachers. As we know, noting and bemoaning the shortage will not solve the problem. We have to become proactive agents. I urge you to help identify and mentor the next generation of language teachers.

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