Heritage Languages Framework Study Summary

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education contracted the Center for Applied Linguistics as an independent, third-party research organization to conduct research on existing U.S. heritage language (HL) programs and curriculum frameworks. The purpose of this study was to support DESE in determining if and how to adopt or develop a Heritage Languages Curriculum Framework; how to create and expand HL programming in schools or districts; and how to support existing HL programming in schools or districts. Three research activities were conducted as part of this study: a literature review; a comparative analysis of HL programming and supports from states, nationally-recognized language organizations, and a select number of individual districts or programs; and an analysis of Massachusetts educators' practices and perspectives related to HL education comprising three focus groups, a statewide survey, and ten interviews with educators who have experience working with heritage language learners (HLLs).

Research Questions

1. What is the landscape of HL programming in the U.S.?
2. What, if any, U.S. HL program models, elements, and practices in schools, districts, and states are associated with positive outcomes for students?
3. What are the existing Massachusetts HL practices and dispositions?

Literature Review

Findings from the literature review show that HLLs are a diverse group of students, and the types of language programs serving them are also diverse, as are the ways in which these students and their languages are defined. The most common definition of HLLs in the literature comes from Valdés (2000)[1]: "a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language" (p. 388), though some other researchers have noted that this definition may exclude individuals who have a cultural connection to the heritage language even if their proficiency is limited, and it does not account for the many different ways in which people may identify in relation to their languages. To effectively support HLLs in the classroom, it is important to first define this group of students using an assets-based approach that is inclusive of different experiences with and degrees of connection to the heritage language. HL courses/programs, dual language programs, and developmental or maintenance bilingual programs tend to be more effective than transitional bilingual programs or general world language classes in addressing the unique needs of HLLs and advancing their linguistic and cultural proficiency. While it may be helpful to use heritage-specific standards, curriculum frameworks, and/or proficiency guidance when working with this group of students, these resources do not currently exist on a national level and their development requires time, expertise, and funding. Heritage-specific learning goals may be helpful for planning instruction and assessment, and it is recommended that approaches to teaching and learning value HLLs' linguistic and cultural knowledge and lived experiences. Educators working with HLLs would benefit from additional resources, training, and opportunities for collaboration across courses and levels, and programs can benefit from conversations with parents, community members, and administrators to promote the importance and value of HL education.

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[1] Valdés, G. (2000). Teaching heritage languages: An introduction for Slavic language-teaching professionals. In O. Kagan & B. Rifkin (Eds.), *Learning and teaching of Slavic languages and cultures: Toward the 21st century* (pp. 375-403). Slavica.

Comparative Analysis

Findings from this analysis indicate that while just over half of states and a few organizations have a definition of "heritage languages" and/or "heritage language learners," and these definitions share some common characteristics, there is no single way in which these terms are defined. Broadly speaking, states define HLLs with regards to three areas: (1) acquisition of the HL outside of school (e.g., at home or in the community); (2) some degree of cultural connection to the HL; and (3) some degree of linguistic proficiency in the HL. State definitions of HL programs also vary, and there is little information available about the extent to which these definitions are used for official purposes and the extent to which these programs are offered. A total of 17 states provide definitions for this type of program, and these states include all or some of the following components in their definitions of HL programs: (1) student population; (2) program structure; (3) program goals/focus; (4) program language and/or grade levels; and (5) inclusion of ESL/ELD services. In addition, some states list these programs as part of their world language education offerings, while others list them as a type of English learner education program. Decisions about HL programming are often made at the local level, and course or program information can be found on the websites of several of the districts/programs analyzed, most of which only offer Spanish for Spanish speakers courses at the secondary level. Finally, available resources for HL education include a number of state-developed expected proficiency outcomes for different types of HL courses and sequences as well as supports for instruction and programming provided by various organizations. Most professional learning opportunities for educators working with HLLs consist of short courses, workshops, or webinars and only five heritage-specific teacher training programs are currently being offered at U.S. institutions of higher education.

> **By the Numbers**
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> *Literature Review*
> 140 books, articles, and reports
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> *Comparative Analysis*
> 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico
> 123 organizations
> 33 districts and programs
> 5 teacher preparation programs
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> *Educator Practices and Perspectives*
> 14 focus group participants
> 142 survey responses
> 10 interviews

Analysis of Massachusetts Educators' Practices and Perspectives

Findings from the focus groups, survey, and interviews showed that many Massachusetts educators strive to celebrate the assets that HLLs bring to their schools and classrooms. HL programs (more so than world language and English Learner Education programs) are rated by educators as being relatively successful in supporting students to develop linguistic and cultural proficiency in their HL as well as self-confidence, though there are still many areas for improvement within these programs to better meet the needs of the students they serve. Participants noted that other stakeholders do not always recognize the value of HL education, and numerous barriers prevent students from receiving services, including limited opportunities for students to access appropriate heritage-specific programming across languages, age/grade levels, and proficiency levels. Teachers working with HLLs also must spend a great deal of time to create locally-developed HL curricula and find appropriate resources for instruction and assessment. Instructional guidance, programming guidance, assistance with staffing, tools for advocacy for the value of HL education, and support for finding resources would all help schools/districts create or expand programs to better serve HLLs. If accompanied by such resources and guidance, a Massachusetts Heritage Languages Framework could be a valuable tool to guide educators in the development, implementation, and evaluation of HL programming.

Recommendations to Support Heritage Language Education

The following recommendations, implemented over time and in the most practical order given available resources, would help support heritage language education in Massachusetts:

1. **Advocate for the value of HL education** with a campaign that informs educators, administrators, and community members. Consider policy changes to support young learners and English learners by expanding language programming and adjusting how HL classes can fit EL requirements, as well as to provide support for appropriate staffing.
2. **Develop a HL curriculum framework** that celebrates HLLs; provides guidance for identification and placement; includes information about culture, identity, and proficiency; and provides best practices for curriculum and instruction in different types of programs.
3. **Provide targeted resources and sustained professional development opportunities** to support educators in meeting HLLs' needs.

Recommended resources include:
- implementation guidance for the HL framework
- HL leadership networks with school/district leaders across the state
- sample scope and sequence for common HLs and guidance on adaptation for Indigenous or minoritized languages
- model curriculum units
- guidance on creating and sustaining partnerships with HL communities
- assistance with finding authentic resources from different regions where the HL is used
- expected proficiency outcomes for different types of HL education programs

Recommended professional development topics include:
- developing locally-designed curricula
- differentiating instruction for HLLs of different proficiency levels
- supporting HLLs in traditional world language classes
- translanguaging and providing support for students to develop their full linguistic repertoires
- language arts and other types of content instruction in the HL
- teaching decoding in the HL and leveraging students' existing literacy skills

For more research and a full bibliography for this summary, see the
Massachusetts Heritage Languages Framework Study Report.