



Herricks Union Free School District

Leadership in International Education

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The case studies in this series provide an opportunity to hear directly from school districts that are actively working to integrate global competence into their schools. This series is meant to illustrate strategies and provoke discussion in your district. Each case study begins with the definition of global competence, followed by an in-depth look at the past and current programs for international education in the district. After reading these examples, you can use the District Planning Rubric to plot a strategy for your own district.¹

Global Competence Defined

The term global competence is used to refer to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students need in the 21st century to be successful. Before examining district policies designed to ensure students are successful in the 21st century, let's first look at what makes a student globally competent. Globally competent students must have the knowledge and skills toⁱⁱ:

Investigate the World. Global competence starts with the capacity to investigate the world—that is, to be aware of and interested in the world and its workings. This ability involves formulating and exploring globally significant questions that address people, places, events, and phenomena that may be rooted anywhere from a local community to a faraway country. This also includes the skill of identifying, collecting, and analyzing information in response to important issues. The goal of investigating the world is to create a coherent response that considers multiple perspectives and draws useful and defensible conclusions about diverse topics, such as an economic or political problem, a scientific query, or a work of art.

Weigh Perspectives. Globally competent students recognize that they have a particular perspective, and that others may or may not share it. They are able to articulate and explain

the perspectives of other people, groups, or schools of thought. They can also identify influences on these perspectives, including how differential access to knowledge, technology, and resources can affect people's views. Their understanding of others' perspectives is deeply informed by historical knowledge about other cultures, as well as by contemporary events. They can compare their perspectives with others and integrate their own and others' viewpoints to potentially construct a new point of view.

Communicate Ideas. As in so many areas of life, an aptitude for communicating ideas is essential. Global competence entails effective communication—verbal and nonverbal—with diverse audiences. Modes of communication must be adjusted to reach different groups, since audiences differ on the basis of culture, location, faith, politics, socioeconomic status, and other variables. Globally competent students are proficient in English (the world's common language for commerce and communication) and at least one other language. They are also skilled users of media and technology within a global communications environment.

Take Action. Beyond recognition and adaptability, global competence calls for students to take action. They should not only learn about the world but also feel empowered to make a difference in it. Globally competent students see themselves as being capable of making a difference, and are aware of opportunities to do so. They're able to weigh options based on evidence and insight, assess the potential for impact, consider possible consequences for others, act whether individually or in a group, and reflect on those actions.

In all of these steps toward global competence, students acquire and apply disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge, expertise, and skills. Simply put, content knowledge is just as important to global competence as it is to

other areas of study. Students learn to think like scientists, mathematicians, historians, and artists by using the tools and methods of inquiry typically used in each of the disciplines. Knowing content is important, and being able to effectively apply it to situations and ideas that can make the world a better place is at the heart of global competence.

One District Begins Its Journey

Increasingly, local school boards and district superintendents are recognizing the need to prepare their graduates for the 21st century, and are exploring steps to integrate an international dimension into their schools. Districts can have a considerable impact by beginning with a few small initiatives, or by “going global” on a comprehensive, districtwide basis. Herricks Union Free School District, in Nassau County, on Long Island, New York, is an example of the latter: Leaders and teachers have taken a holistic, grassroots approach to embrace the concept of an international education for all students.

When Dr. John Bierwith (more commonly known as “Jack”) began as superintendent in 2001, his approach was slightly different from that of other superintendents. He began by speaking with people in the community—as well as with staff and teachers—to find out what their visions for the district were. What he discovered was a common desire to ensure students would graduate with the ability to apply their knowledge and understanding to complex, real-world problems, and with the ability to communicate their findings.

Simultaneously, David T. Conley of the Center for Educational Policy Research published his book, *Standards for Success*. According to Conley’s research, the types of skills and knowledge desired by universities closely align with those that the Herricks community saw as priorities for their students. Conley’s

publication also underscored the idea that these types of knowledge and skills should not be taught as a new course or program, but rather included as part and parcel of regular class work.

As a result, the district more formally adopted the goal of global competence for all students. Together with his staff, Bierwith formulated a working definition of global competence:

- A broad general knowledge of the world, including but not limited to history, geography, political systems, religion, culture, and current events.
- Knowledge of the perspectives of others. (For example, how would people with different perspectives view a piece of U.S. literature, history, or culture?)
- The ability to communicate effectively in more than one language.
- The ability to place oneself outside of one’s own perspective(s) and see history, culture, political systems, and so forth from the vantage point of others. (Ideally this ability should extend to a wide variety of perspectives and should include seeing the reciprocal vantage points of two worlds outside of one’s own. For example, could an American student understand how someone in Mongolia views someone in Russia, and vice versa?)
- The ability to use those perspectives effectively in a variety of settings.
- An understanding of how to function as part of a multiracial, multiethnic, multifaith team.
- The ability to apply skills and knowledge from a variety of areas to the solution of real-world challenges, wherever they occur in the world.
- A sense of responsibility for people in other countries, cultures, and circumstances.

American schools in general tend to reflect our national outlook, which is introspective. There really isn't as much emphasis on international affairs, geography, and social studies as there ought to be.

—Noel V. Lateef, President and CEO,
Foreign Policy Association

Supporting Teacher Growth

Building support for the new vision began with teachers. Bierwith explains, “We don’t have a strategic plan on global education which came down from the top. Collectively we set a goal and then gave teachers the latitude and support to figure out how to get there.” Teachers in the district have ample leeway to experiment, and they feel confident in doing so. The district administration believes its role is to encourage teachers to think outside the box—and over the years, this has become integral to the culture: Teachers taking a chance are supported and are not micromanaged.

For example, teacher Neepa Shah decided to set aside one afternoon a week to talk about current events with her 5th grade class. When she found that students were bored and not paying attention, she began integrating international themes into every lesson. By connecting the curriculum to the lives of the students, she found them much more engaged. For instance, during the U.S. presidential elections, students learned about other elections taking place around the world and compared them to each other, using the BBC website as a resource. A study of the American industrial revolution lent itself to comparisons of countries currently undergoing changes to their labor force. A look at child-labor laws was fascinating to Herricks students as they pondered the questions: Why are other countries just now putting into place laws that the United States has had since 1938? And why

do some countries continue to ignore the plight of child laborers?

As a component of their contracts, teachers receive professional development to build their capacity to teach for global competence. This adds no extra costs for the district since it fulfills professional-development hours required of all teachers. It is a matter of setting priorities. Also, the district teacher center makes a concerted effort to offer (nonmandated) courses in different cultures and specific courses in cultural awareness. All teachers are encouraged to apply for Fulbright and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grants. If they receive a grant, the district ensures that they can go—even if it means covering the cost of a substitute.

Having all of the resources of New York City less than an hour away is another invaluable resource. The district’s relationship with the Foreign Policy Association allows teachers, and sometimes students, to attend events on current topics in international affairs. These events enrich the knowledge of the teachers as well as the ensuing classroom discussions. The members of the district’s Board of Education are also invited to attend these events as a way to enhance their knowledge of international affairs and their understanding of the need for students to be globally competent.

Bringing Languages to Life

One student falls to the floor in a faint. Another grips his head and groans, while yet another rubs her stomach with a pained expression. Is it a sudden outbreak of *E. Coli*? No, these third-year students of Mandarin Chinese are learning about health through an interactive lesson—by acting out scenes as the teacher speaks only in the target language. This is the kind of interactive, engaging instruction you will see if you wander into any language class at Herricks—whether it be Italian, Spanish, French, or Mandarin.

As global citizens, proficiency in at least one language other than English is critical. Learning a second or third or fourth language enhances our State's global competitiveness and the global and intercultural competence of our students. Research also shows that learning another language helps our students to learn their first language more effectively and deeply, and gives them a broader worldview for college and career readiness.

—Jean C. Stevens, Associate
Commissioner, Office of Curriculum,
Instruction and Standards, New York
State Education Department

Learning world languages has always been a priority in the district, with languages offered beginning in 7th grade—much earlier than many schools across the country, which begin in 9th grade or later. However, in 1999, when the district was really honing its global education focus, it instituted a five-year foreign-language requirement, beginning with 6th grade students. Today, every 6th grader is enrolled in one of four languages, and they will study that language through 10th grade. Upon reaching the 9th grade, many students will add an additional language or two to their rosters. And many students do not stop studying their target language after grade 10, when they meet their requirement; more than one-third continue to study their target language until graduation.

Knowing that beginning students of any language need regular, daily instruction, Herricks has found a unique way to balance the demanding curriculum of the middle-school students. For the first semester of the 6th grade, students have a daily language class. However, to meet their art requirement in the second semester, students must alternate between art class one day and language class the next. To build back in the daily language lessons, Lori

Langer de Ramirez—the district's chair of the ESL and World Language Department—decided to approach the art teachers with a unique idea: Why not have the art class team-taught by the art teacher *and* the world language teachers? In this way, students would still be utilizing their second language on a daily basis, and the cultural aspect of the language could be emphasized through art. While initially the staff did not wholeheartedly embrace the idea—which required more work up front to collaborate on lessons—today it is a smooth-running program. All teachers involved appreciate the fact that both subjects are reinforced and made more meaningful to students through the team-teaching approach.

This focus on world languages took on a new dimension in the fall of 2010, when an elementary immersion program began. Team-taught by a Spanish-speaking teacher and an English-speaking teacher, kindergarten students are taught regular content for half a day in Spanish and half a day in English. This immersion program will continue to expand: An additional year of bilingual instruction will be added every year until the program extends through grade 12, giving students a full pipeline to fluency. In a time of budget cuts, gaining such a program was seen as a major triumph.

Measuring Success

Although there are, as of yet, no formal instruments for assessing global competence, the district can point to multiple demonstrations of student skills. In 2006 the district's fifteen-year-olds participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an exam that tests critical-thinking skills. Herricks was one of only a few districts in the United States to do this, and it

had to actively seek out the opportunity (it is not usually offered to an entire district; a sample from a state is usually selected). But Bierwith felt that “if we were really serious about benchmarking ourselves on a global rather than a U.S. level, and we could do so on an assessment which was far better constructed than standardized assessments available in the U.S. for the most part, we should pursue it.”

What better time to begin language study than when children are young, open to new experiences, and uninhibited learners of language? Our new immersion program is a breath of fresh air in a society that unfortunately doesn't always view plurilingualism as worth the effort. In an age where our world is becoming more and more connected, it is imperative that we all become more and more plurilingual. And with a deeper understanding of different languages comes greater empathy and insights into diverse cultural perspectives. Our department motto is ‘Monolingualism can be cured!’ Our immersion program is like preventative health care – no need for a cure!

- Lori Langer de Ramirez, Chair, ESL and World Language Department, Herricks Union Free School District

Other informal measures show that the district is reaching its goal of graduating students who can apply their skills to solve real-world problems. The district annually sponsors a team for WorldQuest—a contest that tests knowledge of international affairs, geography, history, and culture. The Herricks team has

placed as one of the best, not only in the state, but also in the country.

Another informal measure of assessment is student testimonials. High-school graduates have been very articulate about their readiness for college, says Bierwith. “[T]hey talk about how incredibly well prepared they are—even compared with elite boarding schools—about their ability to handle heavy workloads, about the fact that they have lived with diversity... and about their capacity to see their skills and knowledge in a broad context.” Graduates who return to the district to visit tell of scoring so well on screening tests that they “place out” of language offerings in college.

Teachers’ expectations of students to see history, literature, and culture from different global perspectives have risen each year. Students are increasingly challenged, and the literature being read is more difficult. Bierwith also notes that classroom discussions are evolving to incorporate different points of view.

Building a Foundation for the Future

Bierwith states, “It is always tempting to make meaningful changes quickly, but I have reminded myself throughout my career that the real measure of whatever I and my current colleagues do is what is still having an impact five to ten years after we are gone. Therefore, while I move as quickly as I can, I always try to build it on a solid foundation, [to] make sure all the pieces fit together, and make it as much a part of the culture as I can.” By carefully gaining the support of the community, parents, and teachers, Bierwith and his colleagues have built a foundation that will ensure that Herricks’ graduates are globally competent and ready for work and citizenship in the 21st century.

ⁱ To download a copy of the District Planning Rubric, please see: <http://asiasociety.org/node/12556>

ⁱⁱ For more information see Asia Society Partnership for Global Learning (PGL) and Council of Chief State School Officers’ EdSteps Project: <http://asiasociety.org/node/9179>

Multilingual Students

As noted above, it isn't uncommon for students at Herricks to study two or more world languages. Kripa, currently a senior at Herricks, began taking Spanish in the 6th grade. She has continued to study it, along with two other languages: Italian and Chinese. She explains why:

I am taking three languages because I am really interested in the whole process of learning a language and of understanding different cultures. When I first made the decision to take Italian, I didn't realize how my passion for languages would progress, but I'm so glad that I decided to continue and eventually triple up. I think it's really important to learn other languages, just to understand that there are entire groups of people across the world that we will likely never come in contact with if we don't even try to understand their cultures. Communication, after all, is really the basic way our society functions. So, for me, it seemed that the best way to try to understand the world around me was to first begin by understanding the cultures around me.

Unfortunately, I have not traveled internationally since I started learning my languages, but that doesn't mean I haven't had opportunity to speak with native speakers. As a matter of fact, when I attended the summer program for Chinese, one of our projects was to go out into Flushing and find certain places on a map. Being in an environment where a lot of people spoke the language helped us to understand quick directions and gave us a better sense of the speed and pronunciation that native speakers have. Plus, my community has a large population of Chinese students, so there are many times that I use my language skills to speak to parents and members of the community—if only just to tell them that I've taken an interest in their languages and their cultures. Many of the parents are immigrants, so I think they find it interesting that someone from a different culture is taking an interest in their own culture.

I think it's extremely valuable in the job market to know different languages. People can really appreciate someone who speaks their language, so for those who speak more than one language, the ability to communicate vastly increases, and it really helps, no matter what company or agency is hiring you.