

Global Competence Is a 21st Century Imperative

The 21st century isn't coming; it's already here. And our students have the opportunity and challenge of living and working in a diverse and rapidly changing world. Public schools must prepare our young people to understand and address global issues, and educators must re-examine their teaching strategies and curriculum so that all students can thrive in this global and interdependent society.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

There is widespread recognition that a thorough understanding of global issues is critical to the United States' efforts to promote democratic principles and social justice, improve our economic competitiveness, and provide leadership in innovation and creativity. The National Education Association (NEA)

believes public education, the cornerstone of our republic, is the only avenue through which today's students—tomorrow's workers—can attain global competence.

Our increasingly interconnected and interdependent global society mandates that American students be educated to develop habits of the mind that embrace respect for others, a commitment to cooperation, an appreciation of our common humanity, and a sense of responsibility—key elements of global competence. However, not enough is being done in public schools and classrooms to expose students to global issues. Research shows that most American students, low-income and minority groups in particular, lag behind their peers in other countries in their knowledge of world geography, foreign languages, and cultures.¹

What is global competence?

Global competence refers to the acquisition of in-depth knowledge and understanding of international issues, an appreciation of and ability to learn and work with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, proficiency in a foreign language, and skills to function productively in an interdependent world community. This definition contains four basic elements:

- **International awareness.** This constitutes the knowledge and understanding of world history, socioeconomic and political systems, and other global events. This awareness includes the understanding that local and national events can have international implications. An individual who is aware of the broader world environment also recognizes that one person's actions can affect others beyond one's own borders.
- **Appreciation of cultural diversity.** This entails the ability to know, understand, and appreciate people from other cultures along with the capacity to acknowledge other points of view about pressing world issues. Awareness and appreciation of cross-cultural differences, and the willingness to accept those differences, opens doors for opportunities to engage in productive and respectful cross-cultural relations.
- **Proficiency in foreign languages.** The ability to understand, read, write, and speak in more than one language enhances cross-cultural communication skills. The knowledge of additional languages opens doors to the understanding of other cultures and people who speak those languages.
- **Competitive skills.** The ability to compete globally entails the acquisition of extensive knowledge of international issues. To be able to compete, students need high-level thinking skills that enhance creativity and innovation. Students who gain a thorough understanding of the economic, social, and technological changes taking place across the globe enhance their ability to compete in the worldwide marketplace.

Promoting global competence for students

It is important that American students—pre-school through college—begin developing a deeper understanding of the world’s economic, social, and political issues. A coalition for international education cautions that “global competence in the 21st century is not a luxury, but a necessity. Whether engaging the world, or our culturally diverse homeland, the United States’ future success will rely on the global competence of our people. Global competence must become part of the core mission of education—from K-12 through graduate school.”²

Why is this becoming such a pressing concern for public education? There are many factors, such as these:

Economies are becoming more interdependent. The U.S. economy is becoming more globally connected. Today, one in five jobs in this country is tied to international trade,³ and this trend is expected to continue.

American society is now more diverse. American society is becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse. In 2006, minority student enrollment in public schools rose to 43 percent of the total student population—up from 35 percent a decade earlier.⁴

Global challenges are becoming more complex. Increasing global health and environmental challenges, such as HIV/AIDS and H1N1 flu, natural disasters, global warming, poverty, etc., call for coordinated global responses. With the outbreak of H1N1 flu, for example, we have witnessed coordination of governments and civil societies to address this issue. Offering timely responses to such challenges requires an understanding of other languages and cultures to facilitate easy communication.

Global competence enhances overall academic achievement. Students acquire global competence through the study of a second language, which is also linked with enhanced cognitive development, higher-order thinking, and creativity. Research shows that students who study a foreign language score higher in both the math and verbal portions of the ACT than their counterparts who do not, and that students across all socioeconomic levels who take a foreign language perform better on the verbal section of SAT, with more years of foreign language study

associated with higher scores.⁵ In addition, mastering the vocabulary of a foreign language enhances students’ comprehension and abilities in reading, writing, mathematics, and other subjects.⁶ This implies that students taking a foreign language—at the elementary level through secondary school—are likely to graduate with better foreign language proficiency and higher scores than their counterparts without foreign language study.

NEA’s partnerships to promote global competence

The National Education Association is committed to strengthening the capabilities of America’s public schools to teach our students about global issues. We are working in collaboration with many other respected organizations to address this issue:

- **Partnership for 21st Century Skills:** The P21 brings together the business community, education leaders, and policymakers to define a powerful vision for 21st century education to ensure that every student is given the opportunity to succeed as a worker and citizen in the 21st century.
- **Partnership for Global Learning:** NEA, the Asia Society, and five other national education organizations are partners in a global learning network that provides leadership and structure to help move international education to the mainstream of American public education. By connecting policy and practice, the partnership aims to better prepare American students to thrive in our interconnected world.

Policy approaches to promoting global competence for educators

To achieve global competence, America’s public education system must develop goals that provide equal education opportunity for all students to realize their full potential. Indeed, the Council of Chief State School Officers says that our students must have “complete access to a system of education that recognizes and incorporates best practices from around the globe, teaches skills and knowledge necessary for success in the 21st century, and utilizes high quality and rigorous curricula, including foreign languages and cultures.”⁷ Clearly, global competence can not be achieved without

concerted efforts to train, recruit, and support globally competent teachers and principals for every classroom and every school.

Here are some steps that districts, states, and the federal government can take to promote global competence among educators:

- **Align teacher preparation programs with global perspectives.** This alignment offers educators the opportunity to transfer the acquired skills into their classrooms and schools. Currently, a few universities such as Indiana University, Michigan State University, Ohio State University, and the University of Wisconsin offer teacher preparation courses with a global approach. At the state level, three states—California, North Carolina, and Ohio—are starting to integrate international perspectives into the classrooms.⁸
- **Design and support professional development programs with a global focus.** States and school districts must find ways to enhance educators' skills, pedagogical practices, and content related to global competence. Delaware, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin are in the forefront of providing such professional development programs and opportunities for teachers. In California, an international studies project aims to support teachers in their quest for global competence.⁹
- **Find new ways to foster international exchanges.** Relatively few students and teachers are afforded the opportunity to study abroad. In 2009, for example, less than one percent of America's high school or college students participated in a study abroad program, with students preparing to become teachers constituting a small percentage of that group.¹⁰ States and districts need to do more to promote virtual exchanges between students and teachers from other countries through the use of email and social media such as blogs and video conferencing.
- **Expand the teaching of foreign languages.** Increase schools' capacity to teach foreign languages, including languages that may be less commonly used but are considered critical to the nation's competitiveness and national security. A few states, such as Maryland, Minnesota, Oregon, and Utah, are stepping up support for foreign language study programs in public schools.

- **Benchmark educational systems and standards against high achieving countries.** The federal government can provide incentives to states and local school districts to internationally benchmark their education systems and standards against high achieving nations. The top performing countries have achieved universally high standards by investing in teacher and principal preparation and recruitment; by promoting equity, diversity, and individualized learning; and by combining universal standards with substantial autonomy for schools.¹¹

References

- ¹ National Geographic-Roper, *2002 Global Geographic Literacy Survey*. Washington, DC, www.nationalgeographic.com/roper2006/pdf/FINALReport2006GeogLitsurvey.pdf; The Asia Society, *Going Global: Preparing Our Students for an Interconnected World* (2008).
- ² Watch "U.S. Global Competence: A 21st Century Imperative," available on www.usglobalcompetence.org; "Putting the World into World-Class Education: A National Imperative and a State and Local Responsibility," www.nea.org/assets/docs/Recommendations_to_the_President_and_Secretary_of_Education.pdf
- ³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Exports from manufacturing establishments*, (2005), U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, DC, www.census.gov/mcd/exports/arp05.pdf
- ⁴ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2007*, Washington, DC, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008022.pdf>
- ⁵ S.A Olsen and L.K Brown, "The Relation Between Foreign Languages and ACT English and Mathematics Performance," *ADFL Bulletin* 23, 3 (1992); T.C. Cooper, "Foreign Language Study and SAT Verbal Scores" *Modern Language Journal* 71, 4 (1987) 381-387.
- ⁶ M. Savile-Troike, "What Really Matters in Second Language Learning for Academic Achievement?" *TESOL Quarterly* (1984), www.jstor.org/stable/3586690
- ⁷ Global Education Policy Statement, the Council of Chief State School Officers, November 2006, www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/Global%20Education%20FINAL%20lowrez.pdf
- ⁸ Asia Society and CCSSO, "Putting the World into World Class Education: State Innovations and Opportunities," www.asiasociety.org/files/stateinnovations.pdf

⁹ See California International studies project to develop teacher competence at <http://csmp.ucop.edu/projects>

¹⁰ Institute of International Education, "Open Doors 2009 Report on International Education Exchange," <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/page/25072>

¹¹ "Putting the World into World Class Education: A National Imperative and a State and Local Responsibility," www.asiasociety.org/files/nationalpolicyrecommendations.pdf

Resources

Council of Chief State School Officers

In the area of global education, the Council is focusing on cultural awareness and educational targeted policy exchange. www.ccsso.org/Projects/international_education

Facing the Future

Provides educators with curriculum resources on global issues. www.facingthefuture.org

Global Education Collaborative

The Global Education Collaborative is a community for teachers and students interested in global education. <http://globaleducation.ning.com>

International Education and Resource Network (iEARN)

iEARN uses social networks to connect schools and youth organizations to engage in global issues. http://us.iearn.org/professional_development/multimedia/index.html

Partnership for 21st Century Skills

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills is a leading advocacy organization focused on infusing 21st century skills into education. www.21stcenturyskills.org