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How the State Seal of Biliteracy Is a Game Changer

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by guest blogger **Linda L. Egnatz**

This week is International Education Week and also the annual ACTFL convention when thousands of language educators across the country gather to learn from each other and exchange ideas. Linda Egnatz, a Spanish Teacher, at [Lincoln-Way North High School](#) in Frankfort, IL and the [ACTFL 2014](#) national language teacher of the year, shares how her state is recognizing the need for more language speakers through a Seal of Biliteracy.

When *Chicago Tribune* reporter Diane Rado asked my students why the new Illinois Seal of Biliteracy was important, one responded, "When I tell someone that I got a 4 or 5 on the Spanish Advanced Placement Exam, they say, 'That's nice.' They don't really know what that number means or how hard the test was. When I say that I received the Seal of Biliteracy, they understand that I have skills in two languages—even my boss gets it and is impressed."

The need for my students to be bilingual is great. Multiple [studies](#) provide evidence to the cognitive benefits. More than half of Europeans are multilingual where second language study begins in elementary school. In Asia and Latin America, children also begin language learning early. In Illinois, language is not a graduation requirement and most programs are not offered until high school. The result is a competitive disadvantage in the workplace. At the Foreign Language Summit in 2010, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, "For too long, Americans have relied on other countries to speak our language, but we won't be able to do that in the increasingly complex and interconnected world."

I believe the Seal of Biliteracy can change that. It's an award given to high school seniors upon graduation in recognition of having achieved the state-determined level of proficiency in English as well as one or more additional languages, be that language a native language, heritage language, or a language learned in school or another setting. The award becomes part of the high school transcript or diploma for these students and certifies their biliteracy for employers and universities. It's a statement of accomplishment that helps to signal evidence of a student's readiness for career and college, and to engage as a global citizen.

I first read about the Seal after it was signed into law by New York's Governor Andrew Cuomo. New York was following California's initiative where it became law in 2011. Because I'm always looking for ways to build intrinsic motivation in my learners, the concept excited me. Language learning takes time and practice, and students often stop taking language courses after only two years. I thought that if Illinois adopted a Seal of

Biliteracy, my students would have a strong incentive to continue their language study in order to acquire the level of proficiency required to use their language in the workplace. *Language should no longer be viewed as a college entrance requirement, but rather a LIFE entrance requirement.*

In January of 2013, Illinois Senator Iris Y. Martinez introduced the Seal of Biliteracy into legislation. I was privileged to testify on its behalf before the Senate Education Committee. In May, the bill passed both legislative houses unanimously and was later signed into law by the governor. The law's [text](#) clearly identifies the goal of Illinois legislators as economic:

- *"Proficiency in multiple languages is critical in enabling this State to participate effectively in a global political, social, and economic context and in expanding trade with other countries."*
- *"The benefits to employers in having staff fluent in more than one language are clear: access to an expanded market, allowing business owners to better serve their customers' needs, and the sparking of new marketing ideas that better target a particular audience and open a channel of communication with customers and businesses in other countries."*

At the time, I mistakenly thought that passing the law would be the biggest hurdle. I am learning, however, that implementation is not so easy. New York passed its law in 2012 and is only beginning pilot programs this 2014-15 school year. In Illinois, the law officially goes into effect this school year, but our rules are still not finalized. Issues to be considered are myriad. First, what did the legislators mean by "high level of proficiency"? How and when will that be assessed and documented? What about character languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean? What about non-spoken languages such as Latin and American Sign Language, or those Native American languages without written forms? Students with disabilities? How to recognize students? What about testing in less common languages? The list goes on.

To serve districts excited to adopt the program, my Lincoln-Way Community District #210 created a 2013-14 pilot program. In April, we awarded a District Seal of Biliteracy to 88 students, comprised of both English Language Learners and traditional foreign language students. Our legislators proudly provided us with a beautiful Illinois State Certificate. Of note was the tearful appreciation expressed by proud parents of our ELL students. This group is critical, because they often discourage their children from using their home language, which must be supported not just by casual conversation but through reading and writing for these students to certify as "biliterate." Chicago Public Schools, the third largest district in the country, addressed this by including parents and community leaders in its bilingual Kick-Off Event.

Our Lincoln-Way pilot received a lot of attention, including a television interview with Univisión Chicago and a [Chicago Tribune](#) front-page article. But more importantly, our parents and students realize that they are advocates for increasing the global competence of Illinois graduates. As the ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year, it is exciting to play a role in the adoption of an educational policy that focuses on student learning. I hope that other states will follow Illinois' lead and advocate for language programs that increase student opportunity.

Practical Advice:

To those states considering adoption of the Seal: I encourage you to evaluate current language policies, increase K-16 articulation, and implement early language programs that lead to higher levels of language proficiency than can be acquired in a traditional four-year high school curriculum. Through these efforts, we can change the stereotype of the "monolingual American" and support the heritage languages of the many students who contribute to our rich, culturally diverse nation.

As more states make plans to offer the Seal, the [Illinois Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages](#) offers a hashtag, #2bilit2quit.