
World Language Standards

The Background:

State Board Policy 2.103 – High School Policy requires that students study a foreign language in order to graduate from a Tennessee high school. The policy states:

(I) Students must complete two (2) credits of the same Foreign Language. The credit requirement for foreign language may be waived by the local school district for students, under certain circumstances, to expand and enhance the elective focus.

In addition, select Tennessee elementary and middle schools offer foreign language studies in immersion or elective programs. State Board Policy 3.209 – Standards Review requires that the Board review academic standards at least every six (6) years. The world language standards were previously reviewed more than nine (9) years ago.

In fall 2016, a committee was selected to review and revise the Tennessee World Language Standards. The educator advisory committee, assembled through a competitive process, was composed of current K-12 world language teachers and district-level coordinators. These nine (9) educators from across the state brought expertise in numerous languages, including: French, German, Latin, Mandarin, and Spanish. Prior to the first committee meeting, an online survey created by the State Board in conjunction with the committee was posted on the State Board’s website, to capture educator opinions on the current world language standards; this preliminary stakeholder feedback and data helped guide the committee’s vision and goals for the revision work.

The educator committee convened in January 2017 and finalized the first draft of the world language standards over the next few months. From May 16, 2017 through June 5, 2017, the first draft of the world language standards was posted to the State Board website for public feedback. During that time, around 100 reviewers left feedback on the draft standards. Additional edits and revisions were made to the standards based on those comments.

During the review process, the standards were revised for both modern languages and classical languages. While modern languages (e.g., French, Spanish, etc.) are living languages currently spoken in day-to-day communication, classical languages (e.g., Latin, Greek) are ancient languages taught with a focus on the written and not on the spoken word. Thus, the standards for modern and classical languages are, by necessity, separate and slightly different.

The Tennessee World Language Standards document is divided into two (2) distinct sections: modern languages and classical languages. Each set of standards is then subdivided into five “cornerstones” that comprise the primary aspects and focus of language learning: (1) communication; (2) culture; (3) connections; (4) comparisons; and (5) communities. There are standards that span grades K-12 for both modern and classical languages.

The framework and design of the draft standards was heavily influenced by the guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The revised standards provide a description of the competencies a Tennessee language learner should demonstrate at three performance levels (novice, intermediate, and advanced), as defined by the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and Performance Descriptors for Language Learners. These guidelines are a description of what students are able to do with language at the three levels in the areas of speaking, writing, listening, and reading. The revised standards represent a shift toward the facilitation of language learning toward more functional, communicative, and intercultural goals, rather than those of language structure and cultural fact. The revised standards aim to equip students with the skills needed for real-world language acquisition. The focus is no longer on *what* students know, but *what they can do* with what they know.

Unlike in some subject areas, performance targets for world languages are based on a learner's ability to use a language that has been learned and practiced in an instructional setting. The performance targets were set with the standard level (i.e., Spanish I) course in mind. Some performance targets do not change over multiple successive levels due to the amount of time it takes to acquire the language skills required for that performance target. These were designed to take into account that proficiency takes time to develop.

Additionally, the committee sought to improve certain aspects of the standards. The revised standards are not intended to be taught individually, but rather combined from across the five cornerstones to create rich learning experiences. The committee was careful to utilize clear and user-friendly language and examples, keeping both teachers and students in mind. Also, the revised standards allow for multiple entry points, and they are designed to meet the unique needs of Tennessee students.

Finally, there is a major difference in visual presentation between the previous world language standards and the proposed draft. The standards are now arranged in charts based on the cornerstones and color coded for readability. The previous standards were essentially a listing of about five (5) statements, followed by bulleted grade-level/course state performance indicators (SPIs). Now, there are no SPIs; the smallest unit required of students is a standard.

The world language standards proposed in this item represent the skill, content, or behavior outcome of the student at the completion of a level or course. Creating developmentally appropriate learning experiences that meet the standards is the responsibility of the world language teacher and in alignment with school district resources.

The Recommendation:

The Department of Education recommends acceptance of this item on first reading. The SBE staff concurs with this recommendation.