



## Q&A INTERVIEW

### *Lisa Murkowski*

*U.S. Senator  
from Alaska*



*Thank you, Senator Murkowski, for your willingness to speak with the membership of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) about the importance of language learning.*

Thank you for inviting me to talk about my commitment to language education. This is a very important topic, not just in Alaska, where more than 100 languages are spoken and where some of the languages of Alaska's Native peoples are in danger. Across the country, we are seeing languages disappear and communication between different groups of Americans and with the world suffer because too many of us are monolingual.

**Q:** You are not only a United States senator from Alaska, but you are also a mother and former PTA president. When the Anchorage School District opened the first two-way bilingual immersion program in Alaska in 1993, you were a "pioneer parent" of children in the Spanish program. Why do you believe that language learning is important for students today? What advice do you have for parents who are trying to decide if they should enroll their children in a foreign language program at an early age?

**A:** All parents want the best education for their children. Our neighborhood school in Anchorage had instituted a two-way Spanish immersion program just a few years before our sons entered kindergarten. I was intrigued by the concept of learning core subjects in a second language but concerned that it might compromise their education somehow. Would they have the same level of competency in reading, writing, and math as a student who was not instructed in a second language? I was willing to try the program out for a year but afraid to "experiment" with my sons' education. After the first week of school, I was sold on the benefits of early language instruction. After all, what was being taught in our neighborhood school wasn't an experiment—look at the schools in other countries where children are immersed in multiple languages at very early ages.

Now that my boys are in high school, I can tell you that I'm glad we made the commitment to early language learning. They are completely bilingual, and they've done very well in their academic careers so far. The benefits for my sons and their classmates have been many. They can not only communicate with and learn from a broader cross-section of Americans, they have a richer understanding of Hispanic cultures.

In general, my experience has reinforced my belief that being able to speak multiple languages can only benefit Americans and our nation's connections to the international community of nations. Research shows that learning a second language truly does expand the brain and has a beneficial effect on students' academic achievement in all subjects. Learning a second language also improves a student's ability to understand and appreciate his or her first language in a deeper and more meaningful way and increases self-confidence and mutual respect.

**Q:** You introduced the School Accountability Improvements Act (S. 1236) to fix some of the problems schools have had in implementing the No Child Left Behind Act. One of the provisions in your legislation involves giving flexibility to schools that want to provide an Alaska Native language immersion program. Why did you include that in your bill? Do you believe it is important that children preserve their heritage languages and cultures? Why?

**A:** The reason my bill provides for flexibility for Native American language immersion programs is both philosophical and practical. Philosophically, I believe it is vital for our indigenous peoples to be able to preserve their languages and cultures. While I do believe that English ties our country together, our first peoples' languages are inextricably tied to their communities' cultures and their individual identities. For too many Native Americans, however, the languages of their grandparents are dying. When the last fluent speaker of a language dies, something important and inherent in that community dies, too. Native language immersion programs are designed to ensure that there is never a "last fluent speaker."

On the practical side, the No Child Left Behind Act measures student proficiency by tests, and those tests are most often in English. While it is possible to provide an assessment in many languages other than English, it is often impractical or even impossible to do so for Native American languages. So, children who are learning, for example, in Yup'ik, are being tested in English. That is—as the test experts say—neither valid nor reliable. In other words, by testing Yup'ik speakers in English, the results do not accurately show what the child really knows. If the students cannot demonstrate that they are proficient, the school is placed under increasingly severe sanctions which may or may not be necessary or appropriate.

So my bill would allow Native language immersion programs to make Adequate Yearly Progress if students in grade 3 meet the requirement for participation rate and if students in grades 4–7 show that they are on track to be proficient in reading, writing, and math by the time they reach eighth grade.

**Q:** Increasing our knowledge of foreign languages and cultures is considered a critical issue with regards to current national security and global economic circumstances. However, students in the United States lag far behind those in other countries in terms of multilingualism and international education. Do you see this as a major problem? How can we address this issue?

**A:** I do see this as a major problem. We need speakers of Chinese, Farsi, and Arabic. We need citizens who understand the points of view of others around the world. That is why I have supported the expansion of federal financial aid to students who learn languages that are important to our national security in high school and who major in those languages in college.

**Q:** You serve on the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee. What do you envision in the future for funding foreign language and culture education? What will be your priorities as a lawmaker in this regard?

**A:** While the HELP Committee authorizes programs and funding levels for programs related to foreign language and cultural education, it is the Appropriations Committee that actually provides the money. Unfortunately, President Obama's budget request for the Department of Education has not demonstrated a commitment to the expansion of foreign language study. The budget proposes to flat-fund foreign language studies in both U.S. and international postsecondary institutions as well as foreign language teacher training. The budget also proposes to flat-fund the Foreign Language Assistance Program, which supports the establishment, improvement, and expansion of elementary, middle, and high school foreign language programs. As a member of both committees, I will work to ensure that the authorization of and sufficient funding for such programs is provided in context with the many other needs of our children, our communities, and our national security.

I would like to close by thanking our nation's foreign language teachers. Your jobs are important, and your contributions to our nation are recognized and appreciated. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this valuable discussion. I wish you a productive and enjoyable school year! Quyana!\*

\* Yup'ik for "Thank you"