

*"Accelerating Learning of Heritage Speakers in our World Language Classrooms:
our Students of Promise."*

Agnès Ndiaye Tounkara
(Coordinator of the French Heritage Language Program)

The Department of Multilingual Learners of the New York City Department of Education has just released a report entitled "[*Accelerating Learning for Heritage Speakers in our World Language Classrooms: our Students of Promise*](#)"¹ in which it identifies heritage programs as a way to improve high school graduation rates for Hispanic populations in particular (more than 60% of ELLs) but also for all students with a heritage language.

The report gives recommendations based on several points:

- the priorities given to schools by the DOE for the next decade in a report entitled "[Pedagogical Leadership Framework](#)" in which it calls on all schools to improve the content of academic programs for all students, based on a common and curriculum of inclusive all cultures and sensitivities represented in schools.²³
- the great diversity of students in New York where 43% of the students speak another language at home.
- the COVID-19 pandemic presented as a unique opportunity to differentiate education and give these students an academic experience tailored to their needs and profiles.
- the research that has shown that the placement of bilingual students in foreign language classes is not optimal for their academic performance and does not take into account their knowledge and intellectual abilities in their native languages. Research also suggests that heritage language classes by strengthening students' skills in their native languages have an impact on their English learning and can thus contribute to better success rates on the high school graduation rates, better college access and also the retention and success rate in high school. (Potowski, 2018)
- two main statistics⁴ the low number of ELL students (6.21%) who are in bilingual programs; the disproportionately high rates of drop-outs among Spanish-speaking students (53%) and Blacks (28%) where these rates are 7% among white students and 9% among Asian students. (Cohort of 2015).

The report argues that these trends could be reversed by giving students with a heritage language more opportunities to develop their academic language skills and their conference and writing levels thus to fulfill the promise of quality education for all by using their linguistic and cultural heritage as a capital and a springboard for their academic success. It is a call for of equity and equal access to rigorous academic programs for these students based on their linguistic and cultural heritage in order to maximize their personal investment in their academic careers.

¹ " Accelerating the learning of heritage speakers in our global language Classrooms: Our Promising Students" , DOE, Multilingual Learners Division, October 2020.

² Pedagogical Leadership Framework : <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-year-20-21/return-to-school-2020/welcome-to-the-2020-2021-school-year/equity-and-excellence-our-continued-commitment>

³ Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework : <http://www.nysed.gov/bilingual-ed/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework>

⁴ ELL Demographic Report 2018-2019: <https://infohub.nyced.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/ell-demographic-report.pdf>

The report is based on a relatively broad definition of the heritage speakers and insist on the difference in needs between these learners and the L2 learners and did not forget the socio-emotional needs of the heritage learners.

1. Students with a complete oral command and a level of academic literacy in the native language
2. Students who are fluent in their original language, but their written level and academic language are not developed
3. Students who may speak their language of origin to a limited degree (e.g., second- and third-generation immigrants), but may not be able to express themselves fully, orally or in writing.

The report calls on schools to use existing mechanisms to capitalize on the students' linguistic assets to help them graduate high school and give them access to rigorous courses.

Among its recommendations:

- Create heritage language programs, not foreign language classes, with the objectives of maintaining the language, adding formal and professional registers to students' vocabulary and celebrating their linguistic and cultural heritage, acquiring and developing their general culture and appreciating their own culture.
- Facilitate access to the "Comprehensive LOTE" exam (aligned with Checkpoint B) that students can take after a foreign language course. By passing this exam, heritage students can meet one of the criteria required to finish high school. (cf. 1 Pathway to graduation)
- Offer students opportunities to take rigorous classes that allow them to present the New York State Seal of Biliteracy.
- Encourage students to take the AP exam and/or offer AP classes, especially for black and Hispanic students who have very little access to it, as part of [the AP for All initiative](#) to facilitate access to this exam for highly under-represented populations (Blacks and Hispanics).⁵
- Encourage them to complete a Capstone (CBP) project to prepare for the Seal: *as a comprehensive advanced project that guides students to read, write, research, and discuss a global issue and sets them well on the path towards NYSSB, often asynchronously, it is an excellent way to teach students how to do research, read, write and debate on global topics.*
- Design all of these programs to build their literacy skills, with inclusion of their cultural heritage in mind ,as suggested in the "CR-SE framework", using a curriculum with many narratives and voices from the students' backgrounds and cultures.
- **Find local cultural institutions to assist students in maintaining their heritage languages.**

All these recommendations reaffirm the work we are doing in community schools and confirm its relevance; the space we are creating for heritage speakers is often the only one (except their families) where their linguistic and cultural assets. Most of the times, they have to leave part of who they are outside of the classrooms: how is that for equity?

This report calls for an approach in terms of asset and not deficit that emphasizes the linguistic and cultural heritage of our students and relies on this capital to offer them quality educational and cultural programs, which celebrate their cultures and prepare them for a professional future and a successful integration into American society. This is what we do every day and we are the "*local cultural institutions*" with which the DOE invites schools to collaborate to help students maintain their heritage language, when they don't have the resources to create Heritage Language classes

⁵ AP for all initiatives (<https://apforallnyc.com/>)