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Why N.J. students dominate the U.S. in learning foreign languages

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Bonjour! Salaam! Ni hao! Guten tag! Namaste! Konnichiwa! Merhaba! If your child goes to a New Jersey school, chances are they will know the meaning of at least some of those words.

New Jersey, known for its strong education system, has a highest number of K-12 students learning a foreign language in school, according to a [report by the American Councils for International Education](#). Compared to other states, we're off the charts. A whopping 51 percent of New Jersey students are enrolled in foreign language classes, compared to 20 percent nationwide. The Garden State's followed by Washington, D.C., at 47 percent, and Wisconsin, at 36 percent.

"In our changing demographics, especially in New Jersey, learning a foreign language is an important attribute," said Marty Abbott, the executive director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "The more diverse communities we have, the more awareness we can build."

And New Jersey is most certainly diverse. Nearly a third of New Jersey residents now speak a language other than English at home, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That's driven by the continued growth in the state's immigrant population. The Garden State now ranks fourth in the number of non-English speaking residents behind only Texas, New Mexico and California.

A total of 312,642 students are enrolled in Spanish classes in New Jersey, by far the most popular choice, followed by 61,269 in French, according to the report.

New Jersey's success can be attributed to its statewide curriculum standards established in 1996, which sought to educate students such that all could speak at least one language other than English, said Michael Yaple, a spokesman for the state Department of Education. The effort viewed learning foreign languages as key to the state's economic success.

"It was expected that children would start learning a world language in the early grades, not just a few years of a world language in high school, and it was expected that it would be more involved than just teaching elementary students to count to 10 in Spanish," Yaple said.

Still, New Jersey and the U.S. still lag their counterparts across the Atlantic Ocean.

About 92 percent of students in European countries learn a foreign language in school, according to [Eurostat](#). That's because most European countries mandate national-level, compulsory foreign language education.

If you weren't lucky enough to learn multiple languages when you were in school, you can start with this article. The words at the beginning of the story all mean 'hello' in French, Persian, Chinese, German, Hindi, Japanese and Arabic, respectively.

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