



German Heritage Language Schools in the United States

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German presence in the United States dates back to colonial times in the early 17th century. Many early immigrants initially came for religious reasons; later they came for economic reasons or as political refugees. At present, the U.S. has the largest concentration of German speakers outside of Europe (Ludanyi, 2010). According to the 2007 American Community Survey, German is the sixth most commonly spoken language in the U.S. other than English, though the number of German speakers declined by 11% between 1990 and 2000, and by 20% between 2000 and 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The teaching of German saw significant declines at both the elementary and middle school levels from 1997 to 2008: from 5% to 2% of schools teaching German at the elementary school level and from 24% to 14% at the secondary school level (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009).

A discussion of the history of the German language and culture in the U.S. would be incomplete without mentioning the discrimination against Germans and German-Americans in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1916, the National Council of Defense and numerous local council affiliates were established, including the Victoria Council of Defense in Texas, which in 1918 mandated that all people abandon the use of German in public and private life. In Findlay, Ohio, the town council imposed a fine of \$25.00 for the use of German in the streets (Kloss, 1998).

During World War II and later, there was heavy German immigration to the U.S., duplicating the patterns of arrival of Germans during 1830-1839 (Adams, 1993). During 1930-1939, 17% of immigration to the U.S. was from German-speaking countries; 1940-1949, 14%; 1950-1959, 23%. However, German did not regain its former status as a language spoken by a large portion of the U.S. population.

History of German Heritage Language Schools

As German disappeared from the public ear and declined in the American school system, parents of school-age children and friends of the German language created private solutions in the form of German *Sprachschulen*, mostly Saturday schools. Nearly half a million students attended private and public German bilingual schools in the 1880s (Toth, 1990). The oldest almost continuously operating schools were founded in Boston in 1874 and in New York in 1892; however, most opened after World War II. To generate cooperation and collegiality among these schools, the *German Language School Conference* (GLSC) was founded in 1977 under the

auspices of the Consulate General in New York. For more than 30 years, this professional umbrella organization has offered support in pedagogical and administrative affairs, conducted an annual conference with a teacher development component, and assisted in the establishment of new *Sprachschulen*. The conference has recently embarked on a project to build a common quality framework for these schools.

Currently, national student enrollment in German heritage language schools is estimated at 7,000 students, with larger schools in Atlanta; Boston; Stamford, CT; and Washington, DC teaching over 300 students. The majority of the students, from pre-school to adults, are U.S.-born, including first, second, and later generations. The schools also include a number of students born in German-speaking countries and an international clientele.

Features of German Heritage Language Schools

German heritage language schools are for the most part incorporated, tax-exempt, non-profit organizations. They teach the language and culture of the German-speaking countries of Europe to students with a wide variety of ages, needs, and proficiency levels. Most offer continuous instruction from pre-K or kindergarten through high school, based on the five Cs of the standards of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1996) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). Many schools offer a demanding C-level examination as a language prerequisite to enter German universities. Nationwide, students also take the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) tests, Advanced Placement (AP) tests, and SATs in preparation for applying to U.S. colleges and universities.

German heritage language schools have access to and are supported by their ethnic communities. They also offer adult education and culture classes that introduce or help reinforce the European heritage of the participants. They promote a sense of ethnic identity among the German-speaking communities by providing programs and offerings such as films, lectures, musical events, and cultural festivities. They serve the wider community as well with multi-ethnic information and resources.

What keeps German heritage language schools strong is the powerful commitment and support of the students' parents (Ludanyi, 2010; Toth, 1990). Parents create heritage language schools out of two desires: to teach and maintain German as part of their heritage and culture and to increase their children's occupational opportunities, as Germany is an important country in the global economy. Parents volunteer for administrative positions and tasks, donate money, raise funds, and support school activities.

German heritage language schools encounter a number of challenges. Students vary in language proficiency, and heritage speakers typically have stronger oral than literacy skills in German. The variety of ages, language proficiencies, learning levels, and learning needs puts a high demand on curriculum planning, choice and use of teaching materials, and teacher selection and development. McCarthy (1985)

argues that many community-based schools find it difficult to find teachers with the necessary linguistic abilities, pedagogical background, and dedication to the task of language maintenance and instruction required to be successful. Lack of appropriate meeting space and limited funding pose additional challenges. Study in these schools is often not recognized by U.S. education institutions. Finally, almost no research exists on these schools. For the first time, the GLSC has started collecting data on student and parent demographics (Mischner-Bang, 2005; Opoku, 2006) to highlight the strength of these schools and is presently involved in a follow-up study.

Conclusion

Although the German language and German heritage language education have a long tradition in the U.S., the future of German heritage language schools depends on a variety of factors, including professional, institutional, political, and financial support. What might contribute to the continuation of efforts to learn German in the U.S. is its international status. America's investment in Europe of \$1.2 trillion in 2006 was 53% of its total global investment. German-owned affiliates in the U.S. were selling \$343 billion in exports in 2005. Hamilton (2008) notes that transatlantic markets are the laboratory of globalization, and Germany is playing a key role. As a consequence, German-speaking persons will continue to arrive in the United States. Language maintenance and language acquisition remain essential.

As German language instruction in public and private schools decreases, the survival of the German independent community-based heritage language schools and their service to the language teaching community and their students will become even more important.

Search for [German heritage language programs](#) in the Alliance Heritage Language Programs Database.

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This Heritage Brief was prepared by Renate Ludanyi, Ph.D., and Na Liu, Ph.D., for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC, and was peer reviewed.

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