

A Study of High School Foreign Language Education: The  
Disparity Between Rural and Urban Schools

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## **Intro**

In 2015, Barack Obama enacted the Every Student Succeeds Act, increasing the accountability each state has for its schools. When describing this bipartisan bill, Barack Obama claimed that “with this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will” (“Remarks by the President”). This act has “spurred an important national dialogue on education improvement” (“Every Student Succeeds Act”). Many studies have been conducted discussing how math and science curriculums and requirements need to be improved to provide equal opportunities for all students, like in “National Science Education Standards”. I have chosen to add to this field of study with regards to foreign language education. In 1998, the Tennessee School Board Association initiated a policy stating that in order to graduate from a high school in Tennessee, a student must take two consecutive years of a single foreign language in high school (“World Language”). Several studies have examined the benefits of foreign language study, and concerns have arisen about the age at which children should begin learning a foreign language. However, no studies have observed the disparity between urban and rural school course offerings in the field of foreign language education. The foreign language education policy of Tennessee may not provide equal opportunity for all students in regards to differences between urban and rural environments. In this study, I will first create a list of select urban and rural schools across the state of Tennessee and the foreign language classes that each one offers. I will then administer a survey to students of Houston High School analyzing student motivations for taking advanced foreign language courses. Finally, using the results of both my data and my survey, I will conclude whether or not a change in policy should be made and how my survey may be able to reduce the problem.

## Literature Review

There is more than one answer when contemplating the purpose of gaining a public school education; however, according to one study conducted by the National School Boards Association, 42.6 percent of people that took part in its survey believe that helping students achieve their full potential is the most important goal (Peifer). In today's rapidly globalizing society, many believe foreign language is more important than ever for the future success of high school students. The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Auburn University emphasizes that to educate is "to lead out of confinement and narrowness and darkness," (Latimer). Although many believe English will soon become the world's lingua franca, language is more than just a tool for communication; it is a ticket to international culture and connection (McWhorter). As shown in the following paragraph, learning a foreign language can provide mental and academic benefits as well as advantages when applying for colleges or jobs. For many high school students, foreign language education plays a large role in achieving his or her full potential.

Many studies have been conducted observing the effect of foreign language study on academics. Vermont Royster, editor of the Wall Street Journal, believed that foreign language study "forces us to think why" (qtd. in Weatherford). This analytical thinking that foreign language study (FLS) fosters helps students improve in many academic areas aside from foreign language. In *The Modern Language Journal*, Thomas Cooper shows a connection between FLS and SAT Verbal scores. According to Cooper, students who have had two foreign language classes received SAT Verbal scores 51 points higher than students without any foreign language classes; meanwhile, students with four foreign language classes received scores 116 points higher than students without any foreign language classes. The results of this study not only shed

light on the benefits of FLS, but also the differences between students with two years of FLS and students with four years of FLS. Although two years of FLS did improve the average SAT Verbal scores, students with four years of FLS more than doubled the amount of points that students earned. Two educators from San Antonio, Carolyn Kessler and Mary Ellen Quinn, compiled studies done throughout the past century about the effects of bilingualism on students' cognitive abilities. In 1957, the Alabama Polytechnic Institute conducted a study that compared college freshmen performance in "mechanics of expression, effectiveness of expression, reading comprehension, American history, math, and a psychological examination" (qtd. in Kessler). Freshmen were split into two groups— those who had taken a foreign language in high school and those who had not. On average, students who had taken a foreign language scored higher than non-foreign language students in each of the aforementioned subject tests, showing that the study of a foreign language improves students' cognitive abilities in several academic fields.

Although foreign language education could significantly impact a student's cognitive abilities, there is an equally important benefit to taking a foreign language in high school: college and job applications. The College Board states that "many colleges require at least two years of study in the same foreign language, and some prefer more." When applying to colleges, students with more foreign language classes have a notable advantage. Knowledge of a foreign language can also allow for more in-depth research. Research is conducted all over the world in all different languages, and knowledge of a foreign language increases the availability of relevant information (Jackson). According to the National Research Council, the lack of emphasis on foreign language education in the United States is threatening the "security of the United States as well as its ability to cope in the global marketplace and produce an informed citizenry" (National Education Association). In 2005, the Department of Defense adopted a policy

requiring all military officers to become proficient in a foreign language and every field to include at least one soldier with “cultural competence and some functional language ability” (Jackson). Foreign language also cultivates international relations; several government positions, such as diplomats and security agents, require the capability to communicate with mass audiences or important individuals (Jackson). In addition, foreign language education can enhance the connection between speaker and listener and project a message to a wider audience. Christina Grosse, member of the Department of Global Business at Thunderbird School of Global Management, conducted a survey to determine how alumni felt their foreign language education affected their career success. Over half of the respondents reported that their foreign language and cultural knowledge gave them a significant advantage in the workplace.

Through analyzing various studies concerning foreign language study, it is obvious that knowledge of a foreign language is greatly beneficial for students. However, when considering the amount of foreign language education that should be offered at the high school level, one other factor plays a significant role: student motivation to take a foreign language. In order to offer advanced foreign language classes, students must want to take the advanced foreign language classes. To account for this variable, I created and administered a survey to 100 students in advanced foreign language classes at Houston High School. The results of this survey will be discussed in the Results section.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study is to determine whether Tennessee policy should be amended to better fit the needs of all students under its jurisdiction. When approaching my topic, I began by using a qualitative approach in order to determine student motivations to take an advanced foreign language course. I then built upon this research by conducting a quantitative study with

some tenets of a correlational analysis through connecting the location of the school with the number of foreign language courses offered. A mixed methods study is crucial in answering the research questions I have set in place and will attempt to answer these questions by first establishing a clear connection between location of a school and course availability and then by highlighting how students feel their advanced foreign language courses will benefit them. In other words, the data will indicate whether a disparity exists among urban and rural schools, and the survey will convey what benefits students wish to gain from their foreign language study. The data obtained from this study will determine whether or not a problem exists, and the survey will be a key component of creating a solution to the problem. If, after analyzing the data, a disparity does exist among rural and urban schools and a change of policy is necessary, my survey could provide schools with insight into how to market foreign language classes to students. I aim to answer the following questions in my research process:

1. Is there a disparity between foreign language classes at schools in rural areas and schools in urban areas?
2. Why are students motivated to take more than the required number of foreign language classes in high school?
3. Should Tennessee policy be modified to better fit the needs of all students across the state, and if so, how could it be modified?

The state of Tennessee was chosen because I am familiar with the surrounding schools, and it currently has a two-year foreign language requirement. I chose to analyze a state with an existing foreign language requirement because all students must have some exposure to a foreign language throughout high school. My survey only analyzed students who had previous exposure to a foreign language, and I could not necessarily apply the statistics found in my survey to

students with no previous exposure to a foreign language. Because all students in Tennessee will at some point be exposed to foreign language education, I was able to apply the findings in my survey to all students in Tennessee. Due to time constraints placed on this study, I used a cluster sampling method to evaluate the availability of foreign language classes across Tennessee. The Tennessee Advisory on Intergovernmental Relations conducted a study in which they classified each district of Tennessee as rural, urban, or somewhere in between. The study created several maps of Tennessee, each of which took into account several different variables. For the purpose of this study, I chose to utilize the map that followed guidelines set in place by the Economic Research Service (ERS). The ERS utilizes Rural-Urban Continuum Codes in order to divide counties into nine categories. The nine categories take into account “metropolitan and nonmetropolitan distinctions made by the Office of Management and Budget, population, urbanization, and proximity to metropolitan areas,” (Roehrich-Patrick). This study is focused on the differences between courses offered in urban and rural areas, therefore I created a comprehensive list of Tennessee public high schools in the first category, metropolitan counties in metro areas with total populations of one million or more, and the ninth category, completely rural counties and those with less than 2,500 urban population, and compared their foreign language course offerings. There were a total of seventeen counties in the first category and sixteen counties in the ninth category.

School districts in urban areas tend to have jurisdiction over more schools than school districts in rural areas (“Status of Rural Education”). For this reason, a random sampling was necessary in order to compare similar numbers of schools and avoid skewed percentages. In the category of urban schools, there were a total of 102 schools, and in that of rural schools, there was a total of fifteen schools. In order to reduce the number of urban schools, I first organized

the schools by county alphabetically. Then, I assigned each school a number from one to one hundred two. In order to conduct my random sampling, I used Randomizer, a web-based service that offers random sampling and random assignment for researchers, to randomly select fifteen numbers between one and one hundred two; the numbers Randomizer produced were 24, 51, 17, 94, 11, 80, 86, 3, 99, 29, 12, 39, 28, 2, and 66. I then analyzed the data from the schools that correlated with the numbers given. I used all of the schools in the counties in rural areas.

To create the list of schools, I used Tennessee Department of Education's State Report Card. This database takes into account all public schools in Tennessee. This project is focused on the motivations of students between the ages of 14 and 19, therefore adult high schools in Tennessee were excluded. In addition, only high schools with grades 9-12 were included in order to eliminate independent variables throughout my research. Finally, alternative schools have different course requirements, so I did not include them either. After creating the list of schools that I would include in my study, I found updated course catalogs of many of the school websites.

Using this information, I calculated the percentage of schools that offered four or more years of foreign language education. It should be noted that I counted the total number of foreign language courses offered at each school rather than counting the foreign language with the most courses. For example, if a school had French I, French II, Spanish I, and Spanish II, the school would be categorized as having four foreign language classes.

In order to ensure that location was the factor that affected availability of foreign language education, I researched two other variables: the percentage of economically disadvantaged students and the number of students enrolled in each school.



After conducting the research, I developed a survey for students in advanced foreign language classes at Houston High School. In this paper, the term “advanced foreign language class” is used to describe any foreign language class a student takes after completing Tennessee’s foreign language requirement. After creating the survey, I met with Houston High School’s Executive Committee in order to gain approval to administer the survey to students. Prior to taking the survey, each participant was required to have a parent sign an informed consent document explaining the study’s purpose. Once returned, students were given the option to take the survey online or on paper. After retrieving the paper surveys from the foreign language teachers, I manually entered the data into an online database.

The goal of this survey was to highlight the most prevalent reasons students decide to continue with foreign language study after completing Tennessee’s foreign language requirement. These will later be used in creating a solution to the disparity between urban and rural schools, if one is found to exist. For this purpose, I created and separated the questions into two categories: academic interests and personal interests. The advanced language courses in which students filled out the survey included French III and AP, German III and AP, Latin III and AP, and Spanish III and AP. First, students were asked a question that determined whether they were qualified or not to take the survey. The first question asked if the student had already completed the foreign language requirement, and if he or she answered “no”, the survey ended. Students who responded “yes” to the first question were given ten statements and rated each statement on a four-point scale from Very Important to Not Important. Students were required to give a response for every statement.

To analyze my results, I weighted each rating and calculated the highest scoring statements. Very Important had a weight of 4, Important had a weight of 3, Indifferent had a

weight of 2, and Not Important had a weight of 1. I then ranked the statements from most popular to least popular.

### **Limitations**

When I began my research, I planned on including all schools in Tennessee in my study. However, with the given time constraints, it would have been quite difficult to analyze all 480 of Tennessee's public high schools. Therefore, I analyzed only the most urban and most rural schools as described in my methodology section. I was also limited by the fact that not all course catalogs could be found online. For several schools, I had to contact teachers, counselors, and principals through email to obtain the current foreign language offerings. In some cases, it was quite difficult to establish contact with a knowledgeable source from the target school. In addition, this study would be further supported if I had access to the schools' budgets to compare how much extra urban schools were spending on foreign language education, however not all schools publicized this information, and I could not add this information to my study. I would have also liked to extend my survey to other schools from different locations in order to gain more accurate and widespread results, however my survey was conducted only to attempt to provide evidence that students with access to more foreign language courses felt that they were improving their cognitive abilities or their competitiveness as a college applicant. Therefore, my survey served its purpose.

### **Results and Analysis**

When analyzing my results, I aimed to answer the questions stated in my methodology section. Section I of my results section will discuss the findings of my quantitative study. Section II will analyze the results of my survey.

### **Section I**

In reviewing the data on course offerings across the state of Tennessee, several important statistics were discovered.

**Table 1:**  
**Foreign Language Education Availability by Location**

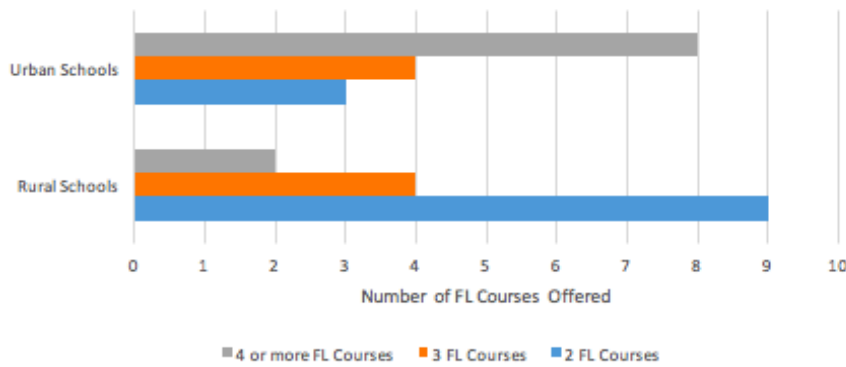
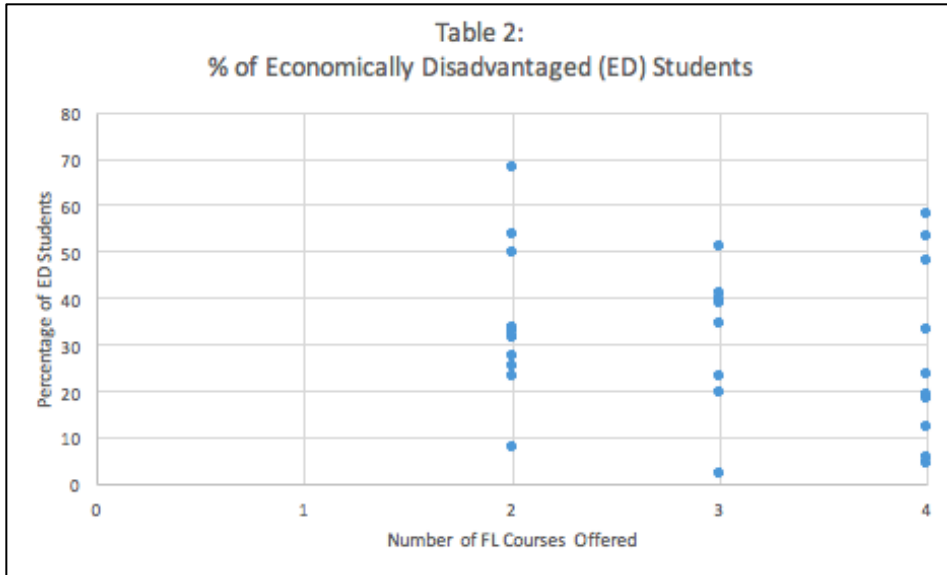


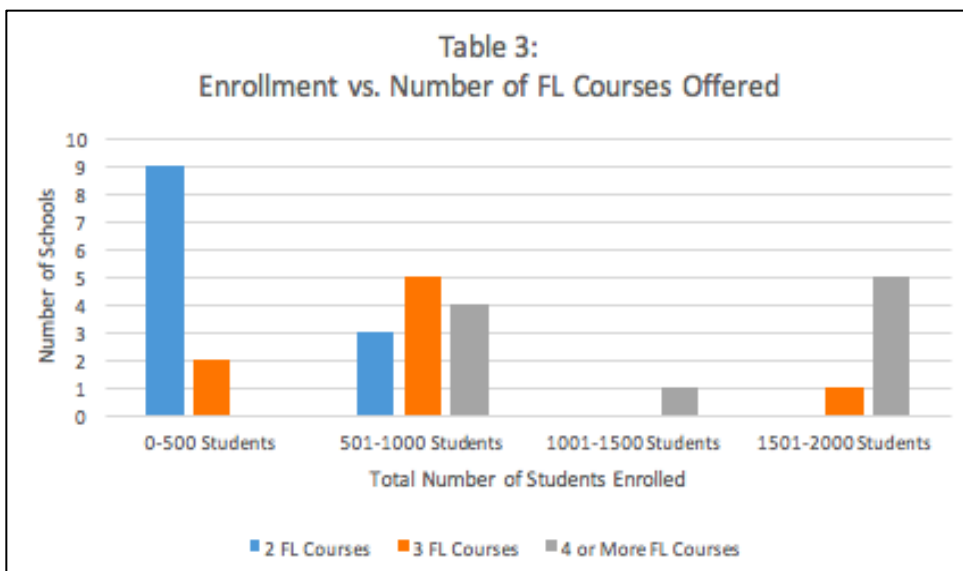
Table 1 shows the relationship between the location of a school and the number of foreign language (FL) courses offered. Out of the fifteen urban schools analyzed, eight schools offered four or more years of a foreign language. In contrast, only two of the fifteen rural schools offered four or more years of foreign language study. Nine of the rural schools offered only two years of foreign language study whereas three urban schools offered only two years of foreign language study. As shown through these numbers, there is a large disparity between foreign language education availability in urban and rural areas.

In an attempt to show that there is a direct correlation between location and foreign language education availability, I did further research into two other variables that could affect foreign language education. First, I compiled a list of the schools and their percentage of economically disadvantaged (ED) students. Then, I graphed the results of this analysis in Table 2 and calculated the average percent of ED students to provide a full picture of whether or not this affects the number of foreign language course offerings.



As revealed by Table 2, there is no apparent correlation between the percentage of ED students and available foreign language courses. In the rural schools, the average percentage of ED students is 28.58%. In urban schools, the average percentage is 33.19%. The average number of ED students is actually higher in urban schools, however urban schools tend to offer more foreign language courses.

The second independent variable I analyzed was the number of students in each school. Table 3 shows the results of this analysis.



The average number of students per school in the fifteen urban schools analyzed in this study was 1060 students. The average for the fifteen rural schools I analyzed was 432 students per school. Because of the higher population densities within cities, urban schools typically have a larger number of students enrolled. Likewise, rural areas have a lower population density and, therefore, rural schools have lower numbers of students enrolled. However, with the information I have, I cannot conclude that the number of students has no effect on the number of foreign language classes available at a given high school. This information reveals the possibility that the difference in foreign language course offerings in urban and rural schools may simply be attributed to the number of students enrolled.

## **Section II**

My survey, taken by one hundred foreign language students at Houston High School, reflected the most important factors that students consider when deciding to continue taking a foreign language course after fulfilling the two-year requirement. Out of the one hundred students, thirteen were disqualified after the first question because they had not completed the foreign language requirement for Tennessee. The other eighty-seven students rated each statement on the four-point scale. Each statement in the survey was sorted into one of two categories: academic interests or personal interests. However, one statement fit in neither category because it was used to ensure that the choice to take a foreign language class was completely the students and not the parents or guardians. The statement “My parents/guardians want me to take the class” was included to rule out the possibility that enrollment in advanced foreign language classes was due to the parent’s desire for their student to benefit instead of the student’s desire to benefit his or her self. Below is a list of the statements included in the survey, not including the aforementioned statement. The statements are grouped by category.

## Foreign Language Education Survey Survey Statements

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### Academic

### Personal

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I want to make my college application more competitive

I want to be able to converse in a foreign language.

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I want to be prepared for my future career.

I like the teacher.

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I want to take the AP/IB course in the language I'm learning.

I like the language.

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I want to boost my GPA with an honors/AP language course.

I am interested in the culture.

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I liked my other language courses.

When looking at the categories as a whole, students tended to rate statements in the academic category lower than those in the personal category. The weighted average of the academic category was 2.8875 whereas the weighted average of the personal category was 2.992. The responses with the highest weighted response were 1) I want to make my college application more competitive, 2) I like the teacher, and 3) I like the language. The lowest weighted statement overall was “My parents/guardians want me to take the class” with 64 out of 87 students rating this factor as either “indifferent” or “not important”. This survey’s implications will be discussed in the Conclusions section and its application will be further discussed in the Solution section.

## Conclusions

I could not completely isolate my chosen variable as the cause of the disparity among foreign language course availability in the state of Tennessee due to the similar relationship between student enrollment and foreign language course offerings. However, this study did prove that there is, in fact, a sizable disparity. As shown in my study, rural schools offer significantly fewer foreign language courses than urban schools, and this disparity hinders the goals of the Every Student Succeeds Act. In reference to my literature review, experts in the field of foreign language have found many cognitive and social benefits to extensive foreign language study. In addition to expert opinions, students are also passionate about foreign language study for a wide variety of reasons. Both experts and students alike see the potential benefits of foreign language education. Although it may seem that this survey played a minimal role in proving my topic, it is integral to see the motivations behind students' decisions in order to identify what students themselves believe to be the benefits of foreign language education. It's one thing for schools to offer more foreign language classes than necessary; however it's a whole separate issue entirely to motivate a group of students to take the advanced foreign language classes offered.

### **Solution**

The final issue that my paper will attempt to address is how Tennessee could close the gap between urban and rural schools and, in the process, provide equal opportunity to schools across the state of Tennessee. Although at the beginning of this paper I wanted to create a specific policy to correct the problem, this would require several policies to change regarding money allocation, training, and basic school requirements. Instead, I have chosen to identify the disparity in foreign language education and offer a solution that could help close the gap between urban and rural schools. Several obstacles stand in the way of schools increasing their foreign

language course offerings, such as cost, teachers, and resources. In addition, a course must meet a quota of student enrollment in order for the class to be offered. For example, if only four students enroll in a foreign language class, the school would most likely not offer this class the following year. However, if the Department of Education in the state of Tennessee required all states to offer four years of a foreign language, every student would have equal opportunity across the board. Students would not be required to take four years of a foreign language, but they would be given the opportunity. In order to successfully implement this policy, the Tennessee State Department of Education could increase the amount each school receives under the Basic Education Program (BEP). On the other hand, if Tennessee implemented an unfunded mandate, this policy could have large adverse effects as schools would have to relocate funds for classes that students may not enroll in. First of all, if Tennessee were to begin a policy like this one, the Tennessee Board of Education would have to find a way to ensure the effectiveness of these additional classes. This would mean more evaluations, professional development, and other means of ensuring the validity of these extra teachers. Also, if a teacher was hired to teach advanced foreign language classes and no students sign up, the school is losing money by paying this teacher. In order to prevent this, the results of my survey could be very useful. My survey highlighted the most important benefits students see in their advanced foreign language education; therefore, their responses give insight into the best way to market advanced foreign language classes across the state of Tennessee. If rural schools were to offer four years of a foreign language, they could use the information in my survey to spark student interest. Students currently enrolled in a foreign language felt that the most important reasons they took the advanced foreign language class were the boost in the student's college competitiveness, the excellence of the teacher, and the enjoyment of the language. Therefore, when advertising



foreign language classes to students, the administration should emphasize these specific benefits to maximize the chances of students enrolling in an advanced foreign language course.

### **Further Research**

Further research into the availability of foreign language education is necessary to confirm the findings of this study. This study was not able to isolate a single variable in order to prove a direct correlation between location and foreign language education availability. Although there was strong evidence that the location of a school affected the availability of foreign language courses, there was also a correlation between the number of students and the number of foreign language classes. Urban areas tend to have more students enrolled in each school than rural schools (“The Condition Of Education”), however I was not able to prove in my study that the number of students had no effect on foreign language education. Therefore, other studies will need to focus on isolating location as a variable in order to prove that location is the reason for the lack of advanced foreign language classes. In studying this issue, a full correlational analysis would provide better data as to which variable actually effects the number of available foreign language classes. In addition, it would be worthwhile to address the effectiveness of the foreign language education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, many Americans believe the size of urban schools hinder the education of students. Although implementing a four-year foreign language requirement would give more students the tools they need to succeed, it would become very important then to ensure the efficacy of these classes. If classes are added without any new ways to enforce rigorous standards, the new foreign language requirement would have little to no effect. Further studies need to be conducted in order to determine the best way to enforce a rigorous foreign language curriculum. Finally, more research needs to be conducted in creating a solution. My paper was focused on identifying the problem through the

data collected. Although I provided a solution, I did not have access to each school's budget in order to make a more specific recommendation. More research will be required in the future to create a feasible plan for all schools throughout Tennessee. This plan would have to include a summary of where the money would come from to provide additional teacher training, evaluations, and materials for the additional courses as well as methods of attracting students to these new courses.

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