In a profession that prizes connections to other cultures and subject areas, a growing number of language educators are strengthening and multiplying the points of contact among themselves.

Teachers in Wisconsin have embarked on a mission to educate the public—and those in their own flock—about the role language study plays in boosting student literacy. In Maine and North Carolina, teachers trained in proficiency are gearing up to bring a uniform message of standards-based instruction to colleagues across the state.

In each case, state language association and state department of education officials have linked arms with ACTFL, tapping the organization’s expertise and unique perspective on the national scene.

Opportunities for professional collaboration have ballooned thanks to Web-based technologies that allow cross-country sharing of resources and best practices with a click of a mouse. Such outreach also is driven by economic and bureaucratic pressures, as financially strained districts cut language programs and disciplines with standardized tests get primary attention.

Furthermore, with teacher evaluations likely to depend at least in part on measurements of student progress, language education professionals have more reason than ever to adopt standards-based assessments based on tested models. Technology-based collaboration offers quick access to such resources, allowing teachers to avoid reinventing the wheel and instead focus on achieving proficiency results among their students.

“You have to have good assessments, good training, and multiple ways for teachers to assess their students,” says Thomas Soth, a Spanish teacher taking part in the North...
Carolina initiative. "And it needs to be in a way that teachers aren't spending 100 hours creating an assessment."

The 2012 ACTFL Annual Convention in Philadelphia has “One United Voice” as its theme, an effort to highlight the cooperation and communication among state, regional and national organizations representing all language educators, as well as those specific to a particular language.

Unlike many other countries, the United States has no reigning language policy, so a strong local or state-based initiative always has the potential to become a national model.

“We have a lot of grassroots efforts, and that can be a positive because there’s often more passion and buy-in at the local level,” says Paul Sandrock, ACTFL’s Director of Education and a collaborator in the three partnerships described in this article.

North Carolina: Proficiency 101

ACTFL began working with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) last year on a program aimed at moving more teachers to standards-based instruction. The focus is modeling curriculum goals by proficiency levels and building strategies for putting them into place in classrooms.

That reflects a common challenge. “There is familiarity among teachers with the standards but the practices in the classroom don’t always follow,” Sandrock says.

North Carolina’s effort, dubbed Proficiency 101, evolved through a mix of face-to-face meetings and virtual sharing sessions. That led to six summer institutes run by the NCDPI and the Foreign Language Association of North Carolina (FLANC), with the goal of training teachers who could do the same for others in their home districts. The project leaders selected teachers they knew as skilled presenters who “could jump right in and do the job,” Sandrock says. Much of the impetus came from North Carolina’s revised standards, the 21st Century Skills Map for World Languages, and reflection on what language students should be able to do at the proficiency levels targeted at each course.

Participants have begun designing assessment tools and sharing ideas online with the goal of creating a public site. Soth, a high school instructor at Northwest Guilford High School, finds that the work involved in designing and grading performance assessments often deters teachers from adopting proficiency-based methods.

“When I bring up what I do for assessments, people say, ‘That takes forever to grade,’” he says. “But really, just because it’s an assessment doesn’t mean it will be a grade or that it has to take hours and hours to go over.”

The Proficiency 101 project is in its infancy. Proficiency 101 team members offered information sessions at the FLANC fall conference in October and summer institute participants plan to lead professional development sessions in their districts.

“We’re trying to get teachers to think about the bigger picture, about students continuing on to the next class or the next teacher,” Soth says. “We want to move kids up proficiency levels, and for each student that might look different.”

Ashley Velazquez, a Guilford County Spanish teacher who also will be training other teachers, says it’s not enough to simply tell teachers they need to embrace proficiency-based instruction.

“Switching to proficiency standards is a big mindset change for many teachers,” she says. “There’s a huge need for training, and I see great receptiveness to getting that assistance among teachers.”

An expanded group of teachers is working in this second year as the Proficiency 201 team, gathering performance assessments and other materials such as unit plans, lesson plans, and pacing guides developed by districts. Velazquez says a certain degree of territorial attitude is expected, but cooperation has generally prevailed—particularly given the background of financial restraint that has hurt so many language programs.

Velazquez knows firsthand about the need for mutual support: She now teaches at the high school level after losing her elementary position to budget cuts. “As teachers, we need to come together so we can provide the best experience for our students,” she says.

“...You have to have good assessments, good training, and multiple ways for teachers to assess their students.”
“Plus, it adds excitement when we see what other teachers are doing.”

Maine: Implementing Standards

World language standards have been in place in Maine since 1997. “But there have always been questions and concerns about: ‘How do we do this? How do I actually implement standards in the classroom?” says Don Reutershan, World Languages Specialist at the Maine Department of Education.

Recognizing that need, Reutershan reached out to the Foreign Language Association of Maine’s (FLAME) advisory board last year. Organizers modeled their resulting program on one created for state art teachers, with additional guidance from ACTFL.

As in North Carolina, the starting point was to define what constitutes a standards-based approach to language teaching. Teacher leaders from around the state were invited to take part in a training seminar over the summer, during the academic year they will run four-hour regional workshops for their colleagues in Maine, a local-control state where districts have a high degree of autonomy.

“Statewide, the goal is to create an environment where standards-based instruction and assessment become an integral part of all work K–12 language teachers do,” Reutershan says.

The program dovetails well with a recently passed state law that will require a proficiency-based diploma in all subject areas. Some in the state believe that could help spur creation of state assessments for world languages.

“For now, I don’t feel the future is too bright for that,” Reutershan says. “In the meantime, we’re talking about sample assessments that teachers could use.” Resources aren’t yet available online—volunteers have begun working on units and assessments but want to test them internally before making them public.

Wisconsin: Common Core Connections

What is the role of language study in developing common core literacy? That is the question language professionals are answering for themselves and the public in the state of Wisconsin.

“Most of the focus in the Common Core Standards is English language arts and reading, and within that focus is a strong debate about literacy,” says Gerhard Fischer, International and World Languages Education Consultant for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. “We’re talking here about how to better communicate the value of language learning in that goal.”

Fischer has worked closely with the state’s world language association, which reached out to individual instructors last summer and helped created a website to pool comments. Teachers used ACTFL’s Common Core Crosswalk document, which explains the alignment of world language and core content standards, to guide their discussions and then shared what literacy-based initiatives had been developed in their home districts.

“We always have to justify our existence in terms of what we do for other disciplines,” Fischer says. “We take this as an opportunity to reach out to teachers, but also administrators who don’t always know what we’re doing. It’s a way of saying, ‘This is what we’re about. We teach these things all the time.’”

Participants plan to take their message to the Wisconsin Association for Language Teachers (WAFLT) state conference in early November. Indeed, Fischer says having a strong language association is a key ingredient of success for professionals looking to pursue a similar path in their own state.

“Our conference has about 1,000 people attending every fall,” he says. “If you don’t have sufficient membership and that structure in place, it can be hard to get the message out.” And that, he says, is the bigger take-home: Collaborating ultimately helps the profession survive and thrive.

“You can’t just tune out and stay in your classroom. It’s not good enough,” Fischer says. “We need to be honest as a profession about how seriously we deal with professional development. World language teachers have to focus on where they fit into the curriculum and to make clear our methods are content-based and standards-based. We all have an important role to play in spreading that awareness.”

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