

The ACTR Nationwide Survey of Russian Language Instruction in U.S. High Schools in 2009¹

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Introduction: Purpose of the Study

Adequate access to extended sequences of instruction across a range of world languages in the U.S. K-12 system can provide the “early start” in language learning, which is essential for a new generation of Americans who will compete in the highly globalized economy of the 21st century.² The study of Arabic, Chinese Japanese, Persian, and Russian have attracted particular attention among U.S. policymakers, given the importance of these and other major world languages for long-term U.S. national security interests, scientific and cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and the preservation of U.S. economic competitiveness around the world.

Pre-college Russian programs are an important determinant of the overall health of the Russian field in the U.S.; the support and understanding of quality teaching and learning at this level is a legitimate concern of the profession as a whole. It is difficult, however, to assess the state of the field and the potential of the U.S. educational system to strengthen capacity in the study and teaching of less commonly taught languages like Russian, when critical baseline data on actual numbers of students, teachers, and programs are missing. For example, it has been impossible to state with certainty how many Americans study Russian in the schools, how many teach the language, where the instruction is taking place, and what levels of language study are offered. The best known effort in recent years to track Russian high school enrollments is that of the Committee on College and Pre-College Russian (CCPCR), which was established by the three national professional associations, AAASS, AATSEEL, and ACTR in 1984.³ The Russian programs, updated regularly by the schools themselves. The limitation of the survey is that it depends entirely on the voluntary self-reporting by the schools. While a core group of schools participate in the survey on an annual basis, there has been no means of verifying the number or status of those programs which do not take part in the CCPCR study.⁴

Periodic surveys conducted by the Center of Applied Linguistics (CAL) have been valuable to the profession in establishing enrollment trend lines across languages, and in estimating the probable share held by one or another language as a percentage of the whole.⁵ For example, the relative shares of the total K-12 enrollment represented by Chinese and by Russian have essentially changed positions over the past 20 years. In 2008, Chinese is now accounting for 4.0% of all secondary school foreign language enrollments, and Russian accounting only for 0.3% of the total.⁶ But the total K-12 enrollment remains unspecified, and it unclear whether the absolute number of students and teachers of Russian has decreased, increased, or remained the same over this period. The continued support of the field of Russian (and of the other critical languages) in the U.S. requires reliable empirical data on the distribution of students and programs, levels of available instruction, information on alternative learning options, such as afterschool programs, online programs, or weekend programs, and, of no less importance, information on all institutions offering instruction.

The present study reports the results of the first 50-state census of secondary school Russian programs in the U.S. It is part of a larger study of all critical languages in U.S. schools, which will be released by American Councils later in 2010.

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1. The present study was made possible by a grant to American Councils from the National Security Language Program (NSEP) and the Language Flagship.
 2. “Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century.” Russian Specific Standards, National Standards for World Languages, Allen Press, 2006, 433-474.
 3. In 2009, CCPCR reported that enrollment was stable across the 81 pre-college programs that participated in the annual survey, 34 reported an increase in K-12 numbers, 38 a loss, and nine programs remained at the same enrollment levels.
 4. www.CCPCR.org/reports/ accessed February 1, 2010.
 5. The New York Times, January 20, 2010, A-20.
 6. Rhodes, Nancy C. and Ingrid Pufahl. 2009. “Foreign Language Teaching in U.S. Schools: Results of a National Survey.” Washington: D.C. Center for Applied Linguistics.

Methodology

The study sought to identify as closely as possible the total actual number of public, private, and parochial schools where Russian is taught, and to collect basic data on Russian language instruction in the U.S. to support an ongoing effort to further strengthen education of critical foreign languages.

Data collection started in April 2009 using a mixed-mode approach (telephone and Internet) of 27,210 U.S. high schools in 50 states. The schools were initially contacted by mail, and asked to complete the survey online. The nonrespondents were then contacted by telephone, and given an option to complete the survey either by telephone or via the Internet. Up to ten attempts were made to contact the non-respondents. Data collection took three months (April 2009 through June 2009).

Of the total number of high schools contacted, 23,830 respondents completed or partially completed the survey: 21,139 (89%) were complete through telephone interviews and 2691 (11%) via web-based data collection. For the purposes of this study, a compilation of 27,210 high schools in the U.S. along with their contact names, mailing addresses, telephone numbers, and email addresses (if available) constituted the subject population. The survey instrument was developed for ACTR by the research department of American Councils for International Education to elicit information on the following aspects of Russian language instruction in U.S. high schools: format of classes offered, number of levels offered, number of years offered, number of students, number of full-time teachers, number of part-time teachers, Prototype AP® Russian courses and Prototype AP® Russian Exam. The questionnaire was designed so that it could be administered either through an Internet-based option or telephone survey.

All interviewers received project-specific training, which included background information, the purpose of the study, definitions, and a review of the questions and content of the survey. All interviewers participated in practice sessions and started calling only when considered knowledgeable of the study and data collection instrument.

During data collection, interviewers were asked to speak either with the principal, an assistant principal, associate principal or another administrator with knowledge of the foreign languages taught at the high school, such as a foreign language coordinator, if available. Call attempts were made on different days of the week and times of the day to increase the probability of reaching the appropriate respondent. If an interviewer called at an inconvenient time for the respondent, the interviewer attempted to schedule a specific time to re-contact the school for an interview.

Initially, American Councils mailed 27,210 prior notification letters to high school principals in the U.S. via first class mail, asking them to complete the Internet survey. The letter explained the purpose of the survey, and included the web survey link and a unique access code.

For a limited number of schools where email addresses were available, a personalized email message was sent with the same invitation to complete the questionnaire. This second contact thanked respondents if they had already completed the questionnaire and asked them to do so if they had not yet completed it. The third contact was a postcard sent to non-respondents from the first two contacts to ask for their participation. The postcard included a brief statement of purpose, the weblink, and contact information. Lastly, telephone interviews were conducted with a total of 25,567 non-responders.

To facilitate cooperation and increase response rate, a number of procedures were also implemented during the data collection period. These included: a) the provision of a toll-free number to address any queries by respondents; b) leaving answering machine messages at high schools, providing contact information (toll-free number and a weblink) for respondents to call in or complete the survey by telephone or online; c) email notification and fax paper questionnaire option. We also provided a paper response option for those who preferred not to use the telephone or Internet to complete the survey; and d) case tracking and locating strategies. For high schools without valid contact information, the interviewers initially attempted directory assistance or Internet searches. If a new number was located on the Internet, the number was called to confirm that the high school could be reached at that number. To facilitate online administration, the online survey instrument allowed survey respondents to exit the survey at any time and return to complete it. The respondent could re-enter their unique access code and pick up where they had left off.

The response rate is the ratio of completed interviews over the total number of cases for completed interviews, refusals and no response. The response rate for this study is 91.8%. The cooperation rate is the ratio of the number of completed and partially completed interviews to the number of completed, partially completed, and refusal cases, which for this survey is 99.4%.

Two separate data validation steps were conducted for the telephone survey. The first step occurred via the computer software used for conducting telephone interviews. Data validation during the interview was handled by the computer assisted telephone interview system where the system accepted only valid responses and promoted the interviewer for such responses when out-of-range answers were detected. The second validation step took place at the data management phase, which consisted of ensuring that all completed cases in the survey had data records.

The data generated through the nationwide survey of high schools was supplemented by adding other listings using lists maintained by ACTR on schools that participate in various activities, such as the National Russian Essay Competition, the Laureate and Olympiada programs, as well as ACTR professional development alumni lists. In addition, data from publicly available sources such as the Center for Applied Linguistics were added to include Russian immersion programs in the U.S., as well as the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota.

Russian Language Classes in U.S. High Schools: Current Status

The present study has identified schools offering Russian in 46 states, about half of which have five schools or fewer. The distribution of schools offering Russian classes are distributed across the country, with the highest concentration along the northeast Atlantic corridor, where four of the top ten states (in terms of numbers of schools are located) followed by two states on the West Coast (California and Washington), and lastly, Pennsylvania and Minnesota. In addition, Alaska shows a relatively high concentration of schools offering Russian. See Figure 1 for the distribution of schools offering Russian by state.

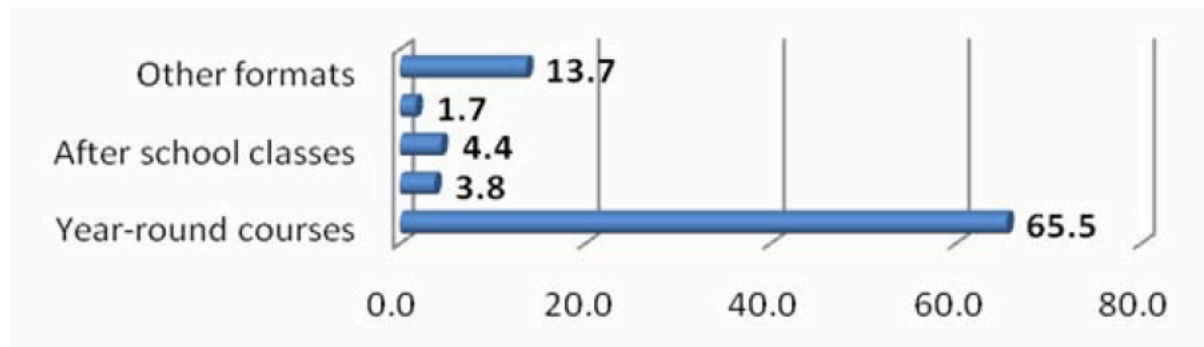
According to the latest U.S. census, Russian-speaking households experienced the largest proportional increase, from 242,000 persons who speak Russian most frequently at home to 706,242 persons in 2000, i.e., the number of people in Russian-speaking households nearly tripled in ten years.⁷ This amounts to about 0.3 percent of the overall population. The vast majority (72 percent) of these households are located in seven states, as shown in Table 1. The use of Russian as the most frequently spoken language at home is most prevalent in the State of New York, where 31 percent of all individuals who speak Russian at home are located.

It was observed that the states listed in Table 1 also have the higher numbers of schools offering Russian. New York is ranked second in number of schools with Russian, and New Jersey is ranked ninth; California is ranked seventh in number of schools, while Illinois is ranked twelfth in that category. Pennsylvania is ranked fourth in number of schools with Russian, and Massachusetts is ranked fourteenth, while Florida is nineteenth in number of schools. (See Appendix A for the distribution of schools offering Russian language classes across all states.)

State	Percent of total number of persons speaking Russian at home
New York	30.98%
California	16.76%
New Jersey	5.46%
Illinois	5.39%
Massachusetts	4.61%
Pennsylvania	4.56%
Washington	4.44%

7. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000, Summary File 3, Table PCT10. Internet release date: February 25, 2003.

Figure 4. Types of Courses Offered (Percent of Schools)



About 12 percent of high schools reported that they offer the Prototype AP® Russian Exam, while ten percent of the schools reported that they offer Advanced Placement classes. Slightly over one-quarter of high schools offer four years of Russian, followed by two levels (19 percent).

Decisions to offer Russian were associated with the demand for Russian, rather than the size of the student body. Note in the table below that, with the exception of schools with 500 or fewer students, most schools tended to have one full-time teacher regardless of size.

	None	One	Two	Three	
Less than 500 students	62.1%	32.8%	3.4%	1.7%	100.0%
501-1,000 students	44.2%	51.9%	3.8%	.0%	100.0%
1,001-1,500 students	42.6%	51.1%	6.4%	.0%	100.0%
More than 1,500 students	42.7%	52.0%	5.3%	.0%	100.0%

The number of levels of instruction in Russian at schools is reflected in the number of years that high schools offer. The largest proportion of U.S. schools (21 percent) offer four levels of Russian, while 19 percent report offering two levels of Russian. Schools report that they rely on both full- and part-time teachers to cover their Russian language courses. Based on all school reports, the authors estimate that there are currently approximately 402 active teachers of Russian teaching during the 2008-2009 school year at U.S. high schools: 243 part-time and 156 full-time teachers. Slightly under half (47 percent) of schools reported having one full-time teacher of Russian, while one-third (33 percent) reported that they have one part-time teacher of Russian.

Figure 5. Number of Years Russian is Offered (Percent of Schools)

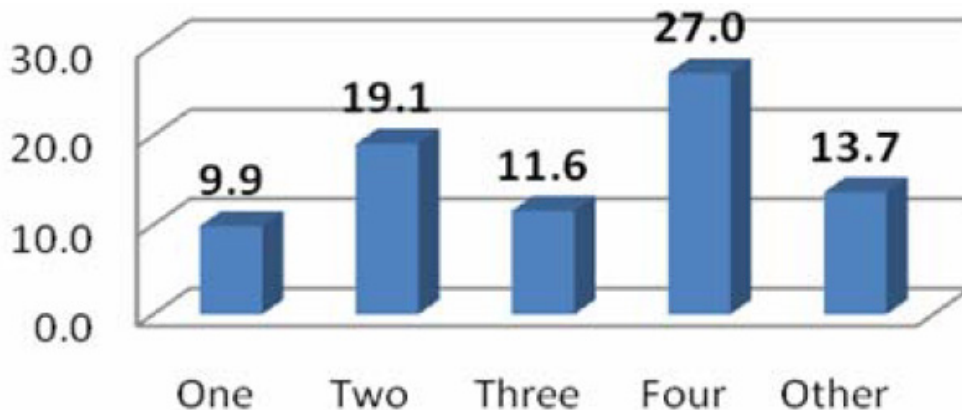
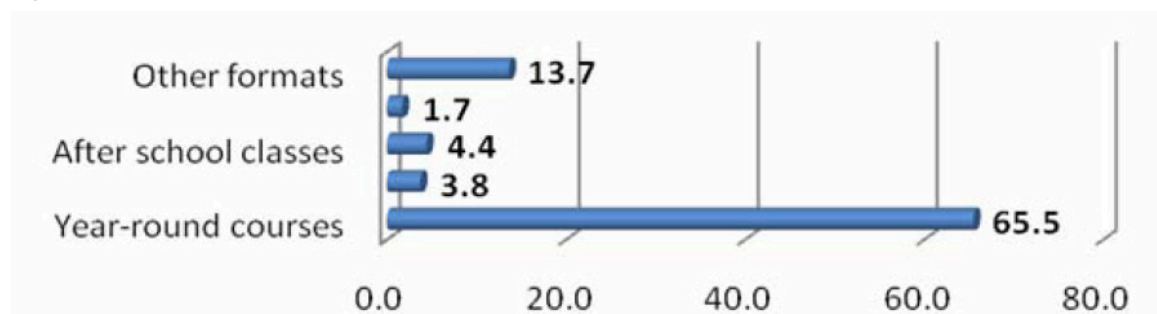


Figure 6. Number of Levels of Russian Offered (Percent of Schools)



The teacher-to-student ratio in high schools offering four levels of Russian language classes was 25 students per teacher. Taken together, these schools have on average 0.8 full-time teachers and 0.4 part-time teachers to cover their course offerings. Private and public high schools reported the same mean number of part-time teachers (0.4), while the latter tended to rely more on fulltime teachers (0.6 in public schools compared to 0.4 full-time teachers in private schools). Private schools had a lower teacher-to-student ration (17 students) compared to 28 students in public schools. Schools offering the Prototype AP® Russian Exam tended to rely more heavily on full-time teachers, where the mean number of teachers was 0.9, and to a lesser extent, part-time teachers (0.4 teachers). Both private and public schools offering the Prototype AP® Exam tended to rely equally on full-time teachers (mean full-time teachers was 1.0), although private schools also used more part-time teachers (1.0 teachers in private schools compared to 0.4 in public schools).

Why Do U.S. High Schools Offer the Languages They Do?

A number of issues that influence schools' decisions about offering foreign languages and the choice of which languages to offer were identified by respondents to the present survey.

Perceptions of utility of language:

Some schools explain that they offer languages that they think are of maximum utility to students such as Spanish and French, as their perception of 'how far students can go with these other languages' is limited. "With the limited resources we have, we concentrate on the foreign languages that our students will probably need to be familiar with at some point in their lives," explained an administrator at an Alabama high school. German and Russian are being dropped, as they are viewed as "not useful." Counselors sometimes steer students away from less commonly taught languages, and push them into the main classes for Spanish and French. This raises the issue of the need for increased awareness among administrators and educators on potential opportunities for students in languages other than French and Spanish. An administrator from a California school district explained the difficulty in enrolling students in languages other than Spanish adding, "It has been very difficult to expand our program because counselors continually encourage students to take Spanish instead." The role of counselors and school administrators is critical to students' ability to continue learning their language of choice, particularly as students of Russian have recognized the value and richness of their learning experience, as well as short- and long-term benefits of having a second language.⁹

Even in states with a large number of schools offering Russian, some struggle to enroll students and maintain a sustained level of interest and demand over time; as explained by the principal of a Massachusetts private high school: "We are a boarding school where students are required to take foreign language instruction. We do not require students, however, to take a particular language so we are, to a degree, dependent on student interest. We DID offer Russian for several years and we also offered German. Both these languages died from lack of interest. The interest factor as well as the expense of adding faculty as well as the long-term financial implications determine what languages we do and do not offer." An Ohio high school reported that "we have offered Russian in the past." The same fate befell the Russian program in an Arkansas school where the administrator added that "In the past, we have taught Russian and Latin," but these programs no longer exist.

9. For more information on the experience of Russian language learners, see Davidson, Dan and Susan Lehmann, "A Longitudinal Survey of the Language Learning Careers of ACTR Advanced Study Students of Russian: 1976-2000." *Russian Language Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 180-82, 2001-2005: pp. 192-221.

Different enrollment from one year to next:

Schools in which the number of students who enroll in a specific language fluctuates have tended to rely on the use of web-based programs, as they cannot justify use of resources when there is no enrollment. These programs would have otherwise been cancelled. In a New York State public school, the principal regrets the loss of these programs explaining "We had a Russian program for over 20 years, but the last year we offered Russian was 2007-2008. Low enrollment forced the program out of existence. Very frustrating and a real loss!" Another Ohio high school administrator explained that with varying enrollment from one year to the next, they are prepared to offer languages only when they have an appropriate number of students requesting the language. "We have a licensed teacher who can teach French and/or Russian. We offer it when we have appropriate enrollment."

Resources/funding:

One of the recurrent issues among all schools (those not offering any languages, only two-three main languages primarily Romance languages or offering less commonly taught languages) is the availability of funding for foreign language classes. This is particularly problematic for public high schools and those who have to meet No Child Left Behind requirements and standards, as they tend to give priority to those subjects. Smaller private or parochial schools also cite limited resources. Current budget limitations are also forcing administrators to make choices about which languages they can continue, if any. Some school systems cannot provide enough teacher units to provide desired instruction. Schools across the country are struggling with pressures of budget constraints and limited resources. In Colorado, an administrator at a magnet school explains: "We offer Spanish and French. As a performing arts magnet school 6-12th grade, we have scheduling limitations. Although we would love to offer Russian or Chinese, the constraints of our schedule structure, graduation requirements, and budget, we will never be able to expand in this direction. In fact, we may have to only offer Spanish at some point." Across the country, schools in Virginia and Maryland face the same budget constraints. In a Virginia high school, the administrator adds: "It is increasingly difficult to maintain foreign language classes unless teachers are willing to teach multi-level classes. Upper-level classes are suffering under budget restrictions in all languages offered at our school (French, German, Latin, Russian, Italian and Spanish)." Pressure of limited resources is also felt by private schools where an administrator in Maryland adds: "We offer six languages: Spanish, French, German, Russian, Chinese, Latin. The pressure to cut back is significant; it is burdensome to sustain the small class sizes."

School size:

Administrators at smaller schools indicate that their small number of students renders it impractical to offer any foreign language classes, since they need a certain minimum number of students to open classes. Across the country, administrators of smaller schools (defined as having around 150 students) cite school size as a constraint to adding more language classes. In Connecticut, for example, a principal explains "We are very small (150 students) we can only manage two full languages (Spanish and French), some Latin, and the semester offerings of a taste of Russian and Arabic." In Sacramento, another administrator adds "We are a small school offering Spanish and French. If we were able to offer another World Language, it would probably be Russian." Administrators explain that even when they are interested in offering more foreign languages, the size of their schools imposes limits on their abilities to act accordingly. Another New York high school administrator explained: "To move away from the traditional French and Spanish to Chinese, Arabic, or another non-western language presents staffing and scheduling issues that we are finding difficult to solve as a small school." Recognizing the limited resources they have at their school, yet committed to offering foreign language, an administrator in Wisconsin refers to alternate methods to provide students with these opportunities, explaining that "We only have Spanish at the present time, but we have had Russian for limited students through a neighboring school in the past, and have offered German and French at times over our long-distance network. We are a The ACTR Nationwide Survey of Russian Language Instruction small school and don't have the resources or students to go beyond and add additional languages."

Difficulty in finding teachers and teacher retention:

Finding teachers capable of teaching less commonly taught languages is difficult for the majority of schools, particularly those in smaller towns and rural areas. Schools report that they just offer the “traditional languages” (French and Spanish), but are open to others if they had teachers. Schools that are currently offering Russian expressed concern about finding teachers. A teacher in Texas recognizes that scarcity of qualified teachers may jeopardize the continued existence of a language program: “My school is quite small. We currently offer three languages. Maintaining these languages is quite difficult already. As I am the only teacher in the area with any Russian; if I leave, they would not be able to sustain the program. The biggest inhibitor of language programs for us is simply sustainability. Finding any language instructors is extremely difficult under the best of circumstances. When moving into the less common languages, it becomes next to impossible.”

Administrators are concerned about turnover among teachers; both those moving on to other jobs or relocating, as well as those who retire. Administrators report, for example, that when certified teachers retire they may not be able to replace them. In Alaska, a principal explains: “This is a school that teaches Russian Old Believer students. We are very lucky to have a certified teacher that is able to teach Russian. When our current teacher retires, which is soon, we will have an extremely difficult time filling the position. Without a certified Russian teacher, we will likely lose our secondary Russian program, because we won’t have a teacher [who is] highly qualified.”

Teacher retention becomes a more critical issue when considered with declining enrollment. In Massachusetts, a principal reported, “We used to teach Russian, but do not have enough staff to continue it when so many more students choose Spanish, French or Latin.”

In more remote or sparsely populated rural areas, attracting a foreign language teacher poses a challenge to some schools, as mentioned by an administrator in Indiana: “How can I attract someone to teach Russian to rural Indiana? I have a hard time finding someone that is qualified to teach Spanish.” An Arkansas high school had to cancel its Russian program, as their choice of which foreign language to offer is “based on the availability of instructors.” This position is also expressed by a major urban New York school: “Our instruction depends on the area of expertise of the teachers.”

Limited or lack of demand/interest by students:

Limited demand leads to cancellation of classes. As students’ interests move to other subject and languages, schools restructure their foreign language programs. In a private school in Maryland, an administrator sheds light on their decision to offer a particular language: “We offered Russian to our students, but no one was interested.” An administrator in New Jersey notes the role of the school community in determining what languages will be offered: “The languages offered is typically a result of what the community is asking us to provide. If there is a demand for a certain language, and there are enough students to fill the class, our district will do what we can to include it in our curriculum.”

Conclusions

The 2009 ACTR Survey of Russian in U.S. Secondary Schools has shown that there are approximately 16,500 students of Russian in all public, private, parochial American high schools today, including after-hours programs.

Just over 400 full and part-time teachers working in 537 programs support these students. Russian is taught in schools in 46 of the 50 states, with the concentration of programs and enrollments greatest in the northeastern U.S., Texas, California, and the upper Middle West. These findings are of importance for those seeking to understand better the study and teaching of Russian in the United States, as well as for universities, government organizations, and professional associations seeking to support the study of Russian in the years ahead.

In comparing the reports of school administrators concerning the factors affecting the decision to include Russian or other less commonly taught languages within local school offerings, one cannot help but be struck by the lack of reference to globalization processes, internationalization of curriculum, U.S. national capacity, or economic competitiveness. The pre-occupation with preparing a generation for the globalized economy of the 21st century in the foreign affairs community of the U.S., and in virtually every world center today from Beijing and Brussels to Moscow, Shanghai, Seoul, and Tokyo appears to have left most of the American heartland untouched.

High school enrollments are affected by the advice to students given by advisors and school counselors, who play a central role in directing student interest in foreign languages. To the extent that advisors have limited knowledge about critical language programs at the college level or potential career opportunities with these languages, they tend to steer students away from these fields, in some cases even those with keen interest. The practice curtails student access to opportunities, but may also distort the apparent levels of demand for less commonly taught languages, in some cases jeopardizing the very existence of some language programs. The need for a substantial outreach and training program for high school counselors and administrators to help familiarize these important professional groups concerning the centrality of languages in preparing American youth for the highly competitive market place of the 21st century market place must become a national educational priority.

The results of the present study also indicate an emerging trend in foreign language instruction across U.S. high schools; increased use of and reliance on technology based tools and instructional material. As more schools face budget constraints and resource scarcity, they move away from offering regular language classes and opt for the adoption of computer-based tools. In some cases, students do not meet regularly with teachers if they are at all available.

Lack of or limited interaction with teachers and other language learners in a classroom environment has long term implications for pedagogy and teacher training and retention in the near future.

Finally, it is clear that the future of Russian in the schools is also closely tied to the capacities of American universities for preparing qualified Americans for teacher certification and placement in school districts and private schools as teachers well-qualified for teaching Russian as a foreign or a second language.

Many of those schools who have preserved the study of Russian in U.S. schools over the past decades entered the field in the immediate post-Sputnik era, and are now nearing retirement. A new generation of teachers will be needed to carry on this work in the much changed context of preparing citizens for the workforce of the 21st century.

Appendix A: Distribution of Schools Offering Russian Language Classes Across States

	State	Number of schools	Percent
1	Texas	43	8.0%
2	New York	37	6.9%
3	Ohio	30	5.6%
4	Pennsylvania	27	5.0%
5	Maryland	26	4.8%
6	Washington	26	4.8%
7	California	25	4.6%
8	Alaska	23	4.4%
9	New Jersey	23	4.3%
10	Minnesota	22	4.1%
11	Virginia	22	4.1%
12	Illinois	19	3.5%
13	Utah	16	3.0%
14	Massachusetts	15	2.8%
15	Tennessee	15	2.8%
16	Michigan	13	2.4%
17	Connecticut	12	2.2%
18	Colorado	11	2.0%
19	Florida	11	2.0%
20	Oklahoma	11	2.0%
21	Iowa	10	1.9%
22	Missouri	9	1.7%
23	Kentucky	8	1.5%
24	Alabama	7	1.3%
25	Arizona	7	1.3%
26	North Carolina	7	1.3%
27	Indiana	6	1.1%
28	Louisiana	6	1.1%
29	Wisconsin	6	1.1%
30	Kansas	5	0.9%
31	Maine	5	0.9%
32	New Mexico	5	0.9%
33	Nebraska	4	0.7%
34	Oregon	4	0.7%
35	Idaho	3	0.6%
36	Montana	3	0.6%
37	Arkansas	2	0.4%
38	Washington, D.C.	2	0.4%

39	Georgia 2 0.4%	2	0.4%
40	Mississippi 2 0.4%	2	0.4%
41	New Hampshire 2 0.4%	2	0.4%
42	Vermont 2 0.4%	2	0.4%
43	Wyoming 2 0.4%	2	0.4%
44	Rhode Island 1 0.2%	1	0.2%
45	South Carolina 1 0.2%	1	0.2%
46	West Virginia 1 0.2%	1	0.2%
		539	100.0%

Appendix B: Questions included in the nationwide survey of U.S. high schools

1. In 2008-2009, did your school offer instruction in Russian?
2. Do you have any interest in offering instruction in Russian?
3. Which of the following do you offer in Russian? (Year round courses, summer courses, afterschool classes, Saturday classes, or other formats)
4. For how many years do you offer Russian?
5. For how many levels do you offer in Russian?
6. How many students of Russian do you have at your school?
7. How many full-time teachers of Russian do you have at your school?
8. How many part-time teachers of Russian do you have at your school?
9. Do you offer AP courses in Russian?
10. Do you offer Prototype AP® Russian Exam?

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