

Garcia: Help kids succeed: Teach Trilingualism

By David Garcia

My Turn

Fri Jun 14, 2013 6:21 PM

Arizona has a wealth of untapped resources to lead the global economy, if we choose to take advantage of them. I was reminded of this by a recent *New York Times* article, touting how Utah's dual-language efforts are preparing their students for a global economy.

Utah has it right. And Arizona is not just poised to follow suit, we are in a position to best our neighbors to the north and the rest of the country.

The best way to prepare Arizona students for a global economy is to prepare them to be global — teach them three languages. That's not a typo. With regard to language, Arizona has a competitive advantage. Unlike Utah, and most other states in the country, Arizona is already highly bilingual. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, one in 10 Arizonans already speaks English and Spanish.

To prepare Arizona students, we need to chart our own course. Current state and federal education policies focus on preparing students to compete in a global economy by passing a standardized test. But the global economy is too fast and too fluid to be captured by a test.

We need to take an additive approach to education. The global economy demands more, not fewer, skills, so that our students are more agile, more creative and more resourceful than their competitors. Arizona policy makers, on the other hand, have taken a subtractive approach by eliminating Spanish at every turn. But in today's flat world, knowing multiple languages is global currency.

Arizona public education should not only embrace Spanish as a human resource, but we should consider adding another world language, such as Mandarin. The educational benefits of speaking two or three languages are incalculable; the world opens up — literally — for those wanting to locate businesses here, and for our students wanting to live and work abroad.

Arizona's global students, those who communicate in three world languages, would be able to communicate with approximately 2.6 billion people in their native language. Arizona's global students would be highly coveted by employers, and our opportunities to bring Fortune 100 companies to Arizona would increase substantially.

The broader economic impact will be staggering when thousands of students graduate from high schools proficient in English, Spanish and Mandarin. These are the types of innovative educational outcomes that would attract worldwide attention and business investment to Arizona.

There are some who think that everyone should only learn English because it is the language of business. But communicating in the native language provides a distinct advantage over a monolingual English speaker. To quote Nelson Mandela: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

Arizona must take note of how our world is changing. We have the raw materials to make Arizona a trilingual state. What we lack is a vision that goes beyond standardized education and the public will to make it happen.

David R. Garcia is a public-school parent and professor of education policy at the ASU Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. He announced last week an exploratory committee for a 2014 campaign for state superintendent of public instruction.