

# R.I. can be national leader in language education

By **Sigrid Berka** and **Andrew Corsini** - April 26, 2019 1:13 am



*Sigrid Berka*

In this global economy, local companies are looking for a multilingual workforce with cultural intelligence, flexibility to move across borders and the ability to solve engineering or business problems through culturally reflective approaches. Multinationals in R.I. have a global footprint in China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico and Spain. They depend on multilingual and culturally competent hires for technology transfer to and from subsidiaries or mother companies abroad. Technical sales across borders, the reality that business gets done daily with vendors around the world, and the need to navigate a diverse workforce require empathy with employees and business partners who might be very different from one's own culture. At Supfina Machine Co., the German machine tool builder in North Kingstown, finding this linguistically and culturally competent workforce locally has allowed the company to remain and grow in R.I., rather than moving back to Germany or elsewhere in

the U.S.

With nearly a 100% job-placement rate, the University of Rhode Island's flagship five-year dual degree international engineering program combines a B.S. in an engineering discipline with a B.A. in a language [Chinese, French, German, Italian and Spanish or a minor in Japanese]. It has graduated candidates who have joined and have added value to local and global companies for over three decades. The IEP and similar signature dual-degree programs, such as the Chinese language flagship program and the international business, computer science, pharmacy, textile and marketing, and most recently the international studies and diplomacy programs, at URI serve as efficient models to market languages for global professionals.

*Andrew Corsini*

They also serve as a destination for bilingually prepared students to continue their language studies in higher education. Aside from better marketability of bilingual graduates, there are many cognitive, social and academic benefits inherent in world-language learning. The liberal arts foundation students receive by learning the language, literature and perspective of another culture builds not only intellectual skills such as critical thinking and novel approaches to problem-solving, but also emotional intelligence, empathy and altruism.

***R.I. is one of only three states with an increase in language enrollment.***

While colleges across the country are closing language programs, language enrollment at URI is booming. R.I. is one of only three states with an increase in language enrollment, according to a 2019 report by the Modern Language Association.

Having a strong pre-K through 12th grade dual-language and world-language pipeline would benefit these innovative language programs that have an impact on the R.I. economy and society. It seems that we are getting it right on the postsecondary level by thinking big with respect to anchoring language education in interdisciplinary educational models.

Rhode Island is ready to move language education to the next level and become a nationwide leader in dual-language and languages-for-the-professions education.

In 2012, a group of leaders in business, government and education across our state developed the Rhode Island road map to language excellence, which set forth this vision: "Rhode Island strives to create a multilingual, culturally savvy, globally competent Rhode Island community and workforce by creating well-articulated language-learning programs emphasizing proficiency and biliteracy."

We have gained ground on some of the key recommendations of the roadmap by developing and implementing a public-awareness campaign promoting the benefits of multilingualism, by creating new K-16 dual-language and world-language programs, and by implementing the seal of biliteracy in high schools across the state. We are ready for the next steps:

- Establish the position of Rhode Island state supervisor for world-language education.
- Establish the Rhode Island Center for Language Teaching, Learning and Culture.

Help us to advocate for these remaining recommendations and support the World Language and Dual Language Immersion Act in the General Assembly. The bill would establish a dual-language program fund and a world-language and dual-language immersion-specialist position at the state level to lead and coordinate efforts.

Contact your legislators and follow the Rhode Island Foreign Language Association [[rifla.org](http://rifla.org)] for updates.

*Sigrid Berka is executive director of the URI international engineering program. Andrew Corsini is CEO of Supfina Machine Co., in North Kingstown.*

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