

To the teachers and their students, Filipino classes offer more than vocabulary and grammar. They preserve students' heritage.

Schools need to recognize cultural diversity by offering such classes, said Ed Lim, who teaches Filipino at Bonita Vista High School in Chula Vista. Having Filipino classes strengthens Americans' ability to communicate with one another and the world, Lim said.

Students themselves have lobbied for Filipino classes. A student group called the Philippine-American Youth Organization recently held a fund-raiser in National City to help focus attention on the plight of Filipino language instruction. There's a long-established Filipino community in National City, where Filipinos make up 17 percent of the city's population.

Most of the students in Ferrer's classes at Otay Ranch High are Filipinos.

Andrew Jocson, a 14-year-old ninth-grader in Ferrer's class, is a typical student. His parents were born in the Philippines and his dad served in the U.S. Marine Corps.

His parents speak Filipino. Andrew doesn't. He listens in frustration when he hears his name in their unintelligible conversation. There are other language choices at Otay Ranch High, but he chose Filipino.

"It would be weird for me to learn Spanish when I don't even know my own language," he said.

But this sentiment is by no means universal among Filipinos. Even some Filipino families want schools to teach their children the languages of commerce before the language of heritage.

Andrew's parents recommended that he take Spanish. It's more practical for life in Southern California, they told him.

A couple of high schools in the San Francisco area have recently stopped offering Filipino classes, not because of the teacher-credentialing problem but because not enough students enrolled.

The credentialing issue is about more than just the one language, said Norman Leonard, director of outreach for San Diego State University's Language Acquisition Resource Center. It's about training a generation in a multitude of languages for future needs. For example, the country's lack of Arabic translators has become an issue of national security.

"I look at it as something that's absolutely essential if America is going to pull itself out of the Middle Ages as far as language centrism. California has set a bad pattern of Spanish-only," he said. "I think it's myopic to concentrate on only English and Spanish."

To state administrators, it's a question of economics.

They make no judgment on the relative value of Filipino as a school subject. The public policy issue is that creating a test for teachers to prove their competency in Filipino will cost an estimated \$200,000.

If Filipino gets a test, what about Italian? Portuguese? Hmong?

The state's Commission on Teacher Credentialing, which administers the tests, is trying to figure out what to

do about less common languages.

The Filipino teachers lobbying for their language on cultural grounds have been met with a cold, hard economics question from state credentialing administrators: Before the state supplies a Filipino test, where is the demand?

Almost entirely in San Diego County, according to Lim's research. He canvassed the state in search of schools that offer Filipino classes.

Of the 18 schools he found, 14 of them are in San Diego County. Eight are in Sweetwater, four in San Diego city schools and two in Poway Unified School District.

It doesn't seem right to teachers of Filipino language that there is no state certification exam for their language while there's one for Russian. There's even one for Punjabi.

It doesn't seem right to students, either, that their choices could be limited. Roxanne Bangalan, 14, a ninth-grader in Ferrer's class, said: "There's French and Japanese. They should be able to offer this class, too."

In fact, it's partly because there's a test for Punjabi that the state is balking at developing one for Filipino.

Typically, the cost of developing a test is recovered in fees paid by test takers.

But the Punjabi test has had almost no takers. Since 1998, only 10 people have taken the test. Over the same period, 40 have taken the Russian test.

Larry Birch, a credentialing commission administrator, wrote in an e-mail that it is "unlikely" that the number of Filipino test takers would be high enough to pay for the cost of developing the test.

Faced with this fiscal reality, Lim jokingly refers to the need for Filipino educators to pull off a "Punjabi maneuver." In the 1990s, a legislator from Northern California introduced a bill in the Legislature to develop a Punjabi test. The Commission on Teacher Credentialing then agreed to develop the test and the legislation was dropped.

Lim said teachers of Filipino have approached several local legislators in hopes of finding a champion for their cause. None has agreed to carry legislation yet.

"In a way," Lim said, "it's our closest thing to a civil rights movement."

If the teachers use crusade rhetoric, it's because they feel their subject has long been under siege.

"It's always been difficult to add (Filipino) classes because they'd get flak from the administration," said Gretchen Donndelinger, a retired Chula Vista elementary school principal and a member of the board of the Filipino American Educators Association of California.

Teachers of Filipino have had to make the case to administrators that the class is really needed, Donndelinger said, unlike teachers of more traditional subjects. The teachers have flown to Sacramento at their own expense to meet with credentialing commission staff members.

And they're exploring another way to prove the expertise needed to be designated highly qualified – a major

in Filipino language. But to local educators' knowledge, the University of Hawaii is the only university in the country to offer a bachelor's degree in the subject.

Administrators at San Diego State have held talks about the benefits of establishing a major but have not committed to pursuing it.

Typically, the local teachers of Filipino have solid qualifications, just not ones that meet the letter of the law. They typically have a credential in another subject, years of teaching experience and a native speaker's fluency in Filipino. Ferrer, for example, was born in the Philippines, has been teaching in the United States for nine years and is credentialed in math. They get special permission to teach out of their subject areas.

There's another way for veterans such as Ferrer to prove themselves highly qualified without a credentialing exam or going back to college. But the arcane rules make it unclear even to state officials how a new teacher of Filipino would come up through the ranks of schools of education.

"What about the next group of teachers after us? And we're not very young anymore. Who will be teaching the classes after us because there is no system of credentialing?" said Sally Idos, a Filipino language teacher at Morse High School in San Diego.

If the money to develop a test doesn't materialize or the credentialing system isn't changed, the outcome could be fewer foreign language options in public schools.

And it leaves state public schools with an odd set of winners and losers in language instruction that may represent more the importance of timing and early advocacy than a judgment on what's important to know.


Librarians Amanda Boushey and Merrie Monteagudo contributed to this report.

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