

An early affinity for language

Benefits of learning a second language at an early age:

- Positive effect on intellectual growth
- Enriched and enhanced mental development
- Increased flexibility in thinking, greater sensitivity to language, and a better ear for listening
- Improved understanding of child's native language
- Ability to communicate with people the child would otherwise not have the chance to know.
- An appreciation for other cultures and people from other countries
- A head start in language requirements for college
- Increased job opportunities in careers in which knowing another language is an asset

Source: Center for Applied Linguistics

By Kate Cahow '08 MA

When John Edmunds arrives at Oak Hill Elementary, or one of three other elementary schools where he teaches German, his students greet him with phrases like, "Guten Morgen, Herr Edmunds," and "Wie geht's?"

"These kids have a great attitude about learning language. And they really retain the information," said Edmunds, one of Burke County's 26 foreign language teachers involved in a partnership between Appalachian State University and the county's school system to enhance its foreign language programming in part by extending it to middle and elementary grades.

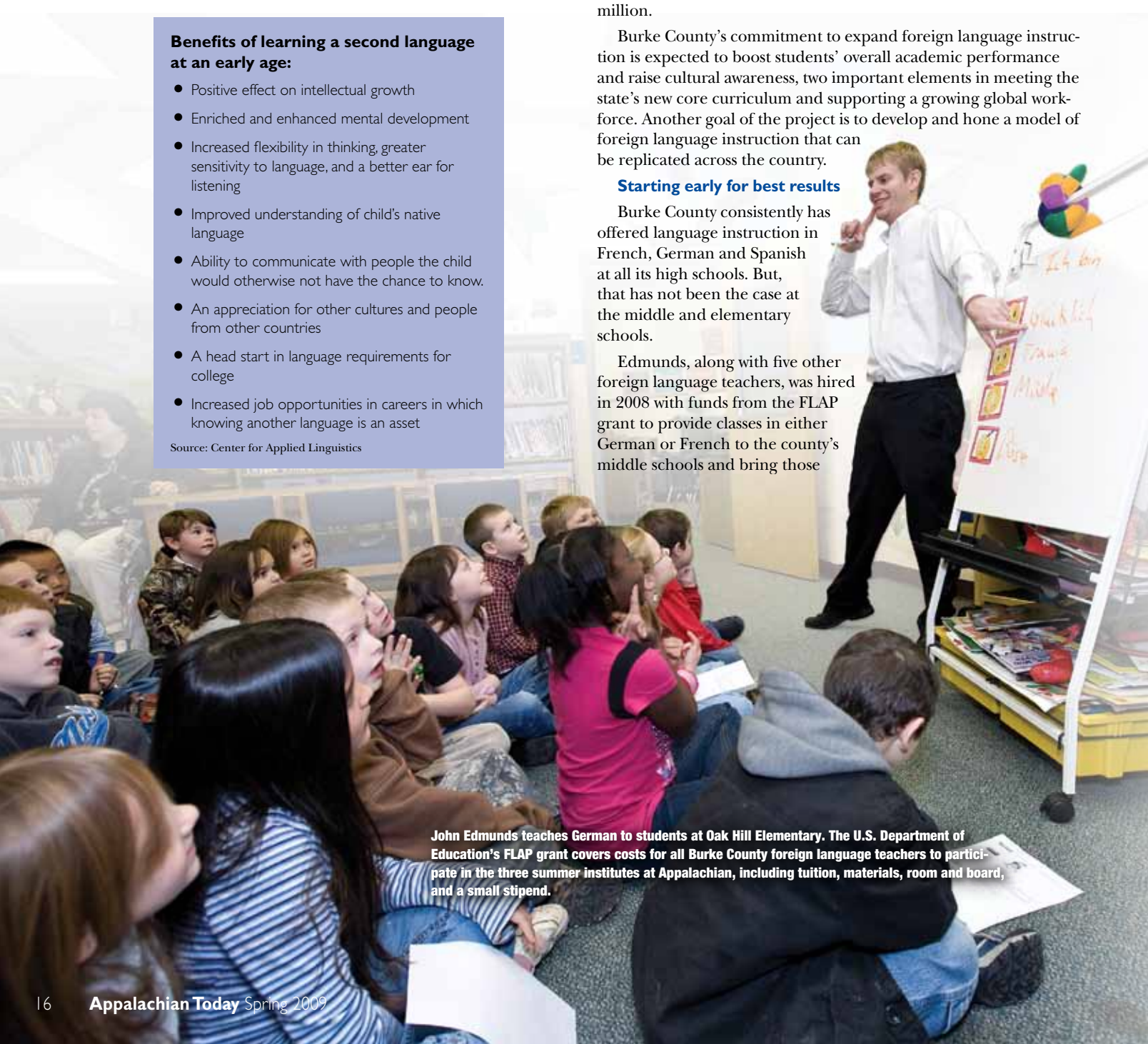
The project is supported by a U.S. Department of Education grant of \$500,000 through its Foreign Language Assistance Program, or FLAP. Matching funds from Appalachian and Burke County bring the budget for the three-year project to more than \$1 million.

Burke County's commitment to expand foreign language instruction is expected to boost students' overall academic performance and raise cultural awareness, two important elements in meeting the state's new core curriculum and supporting a growing global workforce. Another goal of the project is to develop and hone a model of foreign language instruction that can be replicated across the country.

Starting early for best results

Burke County consistently has offered language instruction in French, German and Spanish at all its high schools. But, that has not been the case at the middle and elementary schools.

Edmunds, along with five other foreign language teachers, was hired in 2008 with funds from the FLAP grant to provide classes in either German or French to the county's middle schools and bring those



John Edmunds teaches German to students at Oak Hill Elementary. The U.S. Department of Education's FLAP grant covers costs for all Burke County foreign language teachers to participate in the three summer institutes at Appalachian, including tuition, materials, room and board, and a small stipend.

languages up to par with the schools' existing Spanish program. He is also part of the project's teacher-sharing effort to extend all three languages to the elementary schools.

"Many of my students are from rural areas where they don't hear other languages spoken, so they find it fascinating. Especially the elementary kids," Edmunds said. "You can sing songs with them in German like 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes,' and they remember the words and the associations. At this age they have an excellent aptitude for picking up languages."

According to Beverly Moser, director of the project and an associate professor of German in Appalachian's Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, starting early and sticking with a language for several years delivers the best results. She affirms Edmunds' claim that young children have an affinity for language, and that foreign language instruction enhances and strengthens cognitive and academic growth.

"Because young children don't have as much left brain/right brain dominance, they are more flexible in their ability to learn languages," Moser said. "Research shows that children who learn a second language at an early age do better academically than those who are monolingual."

"There is good evidence that foreign language skills support all other academic skills. So foreign language instruction can play an essential role in a school system's core curriculum," she said.

Cultural awareness and acceptance is another important benefit of learning a foreign language – and a critical characteristic for a global workforce.

"Foreign language instruction isn't just about learning grammar and pronunciation these days," said Moser. "Students learn about other cultures, and this provides opportunities for them to participate in being citizens of the world."

"In this era of globalization the ability to make connections to other peoples, their languages and cultures is critical not only for our children but for all of us. Americans need to become good foreign language learners, period," she said.

With help from Pollyanne Frantz in Appalachian's Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Moser developed the FLAP proposal in collaboration with several Burke County educators.

During the 2007-08 school year, Moser met with the county's foreign language staff to make plans for the new curriculum, build support for the program within the schools and with parents, and to hire the six new teachers, including Edmunds.

In the fall of 2008, courses in French and German were offered for the first time at all five middle schools in Burke County and at four of its 17 elementary schools.

During the final year of the project, 2009-10, contact hours for middle grade students in all three languages will be doubled, preparing them to take a level II language course in high school. Contact hours at the elementary schools will also be increased to meet standards for a model program designed to enable students to obtain a high level of proficiency in their chosen language.

"We're working to realize all the goals of the project, but this year it's about planting seeds," said Moser. "We want to get the younger children excited about foreign language, and to let them and their parents know they will have three languages to choose from all the way through high school."



“Research shows that children who learn a second language at an early age do better academically than those who are monolingual.”
Beverly Moser, associate professor of German

Support from the top

Burke County has a large Hispanic population, a Hmong population for which the foreign language of choice is French, and a growing German contingent due to the German-based companies that have located in the area.

This combination of population diversity and the county's commitment to expand foreign language instruction to its schools make it the perfect partner for the FLAP project, in large part because of the support the project receives from its top administrator.

"We see the need for foreign language instruction at all grade levels, especially with the emphasis of the state's new core curriculum," said **David Burleson '82**, superintendent of Burke County Public Schools. "To graduate from high school in the college prep track, a student must have at least two years of a foreign language."

According to Burleson, the project has also offered Burke County's foreign language staff opportunities for networking and further education they would not have had otherwise.

"Many of our teachers are the sole instructor at their school for their particular language, so the networking component of the project has been tremendous for them," he said. "I think the opportunities provided through this program for further training and professional development of foreign language teachers would be enticing for all public school systems."

To support Burke County and its teachers in implementing the project, Appalachian hosted the first of three summer institutes on campus last summer. Burke County's core group of teachers participated, but foreign language teachers across North Carolina were invited, too. The same is planned for the 2009 and 2010 institutes.

Participants of the first institute engaged in discussions about curriculum development and assessment, learned innovative teaching techniques, and took a graduate level course in their target language. Because they were housed together according to language specialty, teachers got ample opportunity to practice their language skills throughout the evening hours as well.

"We're delighted that funding through this grant has enabled us to offer a summer institute each year not just for Burke County teachers, but other interested foreign language teachers from across the state," said Moser. "The institute has also been a terrific opportunity for Appalachian faculty members to make an impact on foreign language instruction across the state and the country."

And what of the impact of the project on the Burke County teachers? Edmunds, who along with five other new teachers in Burke County owes his job to the FLAP grant, says the professional support provided through the project has been invaluable.

"In addition to helping me improve my German speaking ability, the inspiration and support we've received has provided invaluable resources for our classrooms, and provided a great group of individuals for networking," said Edmunds. "I can't thank Appalachian and the FLAP staff enough for this opportunity." ■

To learn more about the 2009 summer institute contact Beverly Moser, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, at moserba@appstate.edu or 828-262-2303.