When elementary and secondary schools and colleges around the country open for the fall semester, millions of students will not be studying a foreign language. Not necessarily for lack of interest. They won’t be able to.

In a shrinking world this reality constitutes a threat to our national security. “To prosper economically and to improve relations with other countries,” U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan declared in 2010, “Americans need to read, speak and understand other languages.” Unfortunately, Duncan pointed out, only 18% of Americans report speaking a language other than English, while 53% of Europeans (and increasing numbers in other parts of the world) can converse in a second language.

More and more students and their parents understand the need to communicate with friends and foes in other countries, and not just on our terms. Demand for and enrollment in foreign language courses is at its highest level since 1968. At public K-12 schools, course enrollment in 2007-2008 reached 8.9 million individuals, about 18.5 percent of all students; between 1995 and 2009, it increased 47.8 percent at colleges and universities.

At the same time, however, schools at every level are balancing their budgets and offsetting reductions in government allocations by cutting their offerings and/or eliminating foreign language requirements.

Consider this:

- The percentage of public and private elementary schools offering foreign language instruction decreased from 31 to 25 percent from 1997 to 2008. Instruction in public elementary schools dropped from 24 percent to 15 percent, with rural districts hit the hardest.

- The percentage of all middle schools offering foreign language instruction decreased from 75 to 58 percent.

- The percentage of high schools offering some foreign language courses remained about the same, at 91 percent.
About 25 percent of elementary schools and 30 percent of middle schools report a shortage of qualified foreign language teachers.

In 2009-2010, only 50.7 percent of higher education institutions required foreign language study for a baccalaureate, down from 67.5 percent in 1994-1995. And many colleges and universities, including Cornell, have reduced or eliminated instructional offerings in “less popular” languages.

We should care – a lot – about our foreign language deficit. We need diplomats, intelligence and foreign policy experts, politicians, military leaders, business leaders, scientists, physicians, entrepreneurs, managers, technicians, historians, artists, and writers who are proficient in languages other than English. And we need them to read and speak less commonly taught languages (for which funding has recently been cut by the federal government) that are essential to our strategic and economic interests, such as Farsi, Bengali, Vietnamese, Burmese and Indonesian.

There have been some positive recent developments:

- Over the past decade, the Chicago Public Schools have expanded instruction in Chinese to include 43 schools and serve 12,000 students. Many of these students are Hispanic and will be trilingual.

- The Arlington, Virginia, public schools offer after-school instruction in Chinese and Arabic to middle and high school students.

- Columbia, Yale and Cornell are developing video-conferencing courses to share – and spread – instruction in less-taught languages.

But we need to do more. Much more. We ask parents to urge their children to attain proficiency in a foreign language, whether or not schools require them to do so; PTAs to lobby school boards; faculty members and deans in colleges and universities to re-visit foreign language requirements; readers of *Forbes* to write to their elected representatives.

The message is simple: in 1957, after the Russians launched Sputnik, Congress passed and President Eisenhower signed the National Defense Education Act, which provided federal support for foreign language instruction as well as science education. We may not be quite as frightened as we were during the height of the Cold War, but we must be just as resolute in designing a comprehensive approach to foreign language acquisition that will prepare the next generation of Americans for success in a highly competitive, tightly interconnected world.