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## English Learners an Asset for Global, Multilingual Future (<http://www.ed.gov/blog/2014/02/english-learners-an-asset-for-global-multilingual-future/>)

*This op-ed originally appeared in the [Los Angeles Daily News](http://www.dailynews.com/opinion/20140219/english-learners-an-asset-for-global-multilingual-future-arne-duncan-and-libia-gil) (<http://www.dailynews.com/opinion/20140219/english-learners-an-asset-for-global-multilingual-future-arne-duncan-and-libia-gil>).*

Over the last several days, 230 American men and women competed against and socialized with athletes from 87 other nations at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

The Olympics are not only a test of individuals' athletic prowess, but also a test of nations' good will, collaboration and diplomacy — and ability to find a common language.

As the late Nelson Mandela said, “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.”

To provide our children an excellent education, and to keep America competitive economically, we would do well to heed his words.

Today, a world-class education means learning to speak, read and write languages in addition to English.

In an interconnected, interdependent global economy, we must prepare our children for a future in which their social and economic success will depend on their ability to understand diverse perspectives and communicate with people from other cultures and language groups. This isn't a matter of getting ahead — it's a matter of catching up.

It is common for students in other countries to be required to study two or three languages in addition to their own.

In our country, we have a valuable yet untapped resource within the estimated 4.6 million students learning English — the fastest-growing student population in our schools. These students come to school already speaking a variety of home languages, most commonly Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic or Hmong.

These languages are significant not only to our economic competitiveness but also to our nation's security. The heritage languages our English learners bring to school are major assets to preserve and value.

Many schools and communities across the country have



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established programs to encourage mastery of multiple languages. In effective dual-language classrooms, English learners and English-proficient classmates are provided opportunities to learn academic content while simultaneously becoming proficient in both languages.

That's why our department is encouraging innovations in education of English learners, in part by making it a priority in the federal Investing in Innovation (i3) program.

The extraordinary opportunities — and needs — of our English learner population were the focus of the three-day National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) conference, which convened last week and drew over a thousand participants.

There, leaders from our department described the department's commitment and met with international leaders to improve cross-border educational coordination.

Educating speakers of other languages in English, and encouraging mastery of multiple languages, has long been important to America's competitiveness — and will be increasingly vital in the years to come.

We challenge our schools and communities to invest in our future leaders with biliteracy and multiliteracy skills.

*Arne Duncan is U.S. secretary of Education. Libia S. Gil is assistant deputy secretary of the Office of English Language Acquisition in the Department of Education.*

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