

### By Star-Ledger Editorial Board

Foreign language education has been something of a stepchild in American schools. It's never been a priority the way it is in, say, Europe.

Travel abroad and you're likely to meet college students in places such as Spain who speak English and French, for example. Despite lip service about the "global economy," few public officials here have committed educational resources on a scale to prepare students to take their place in the new economic order.

That's why it's good to hear Rep. Rush Holt (D-12th Dist.) and Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) propose legislation that gives \$50 million to support foreign language education across the country — from kindergarten through high school. Thomas Seay, a Holt staffer, said this is the third time the bill has been introduced, but the first time with a Senate version, which "makes it more credible." It's still a long shot, given the economy's continuing doldrums.

The money attached to the bill is nowhere near enough, especially after federal and state cuts have taken a chunk out of education budgets around the country. But it is a good placeholder for a time when those cuts are restored, and a reminder that foreign language education is important. The new proposal will support teacher recruitment, high school study abroad scholarships, language certification and supervisors for new programs.

Mastering another language has many benefits beyond the obvious. It's important for students who want a leg up in a global economy, of course, and who will need to hold conversations in another language, not just order from a ristorante menu with the proper accent. And it's of critical importance for national security: The 9/11 Commission urged the CIA to hire more bilingual operatives to prevent future attacks.

It also turns out there are advantages for health. Recent Canadian studies have shown that elderly bilingual people who have Alzheimer's are higher functioning for a longer period of time, despite the onset of the disease. In other words, that crossword puzzle won't do your aging brain as much good as learning a new language — and the earlier, the better. This foreign

language bill is a true investment in our economic and physical well-being.