

# STORIES FOR ADVOCACY

## Rural Students Learn Foreign Language Via Satellite

As told by Elizabeth Hoffman, Nebraska Department of Education to Suzie Boss

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Back in 1989, a pilot program using satellite broadcasting offered students and teachers across 14 states a chance to participate in individualized instruction in Japanese language. The innovative program ended when it lost federal funding in 1996, but it has made a lasting impression on rural students who have found ways to stay connected with Japanese language and culture.

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The program was a collaborative effort by 14 state departments of education, local PBS stations, and their respective state education units. Goals were to provide equal access, quality learning, and equity for students to read, write, and speak Japanese, and increase their cultural fluency of Japan. Many students would not have had the opportunity to study Japanese without access to this program.

For the program to succeed, classroom teachers in the U.S. had to agree to be risk-takers. They agreed to learn a new language alongside their own students, with native speakers from Japan serving as teachers and facilitators. Satellite uplinks and multimedia instruction gave participants the chance to become independent learners. The structured curriculum was delivered five days a week, three days via live two-way interactive satellite and two days via telephone with native speakers, with teachers and students from around the globe taking part. The multimedia approach personalized the learning experience, and personalization brought out the best in students.

The benefits continued long after the program ended. Many students who participated continued to learn about Japan. Some pursued studies of Japanese language and culture in college.

One small rural school in Nebraska discovered how access to technology can transform lives. Every student from this school who took part in the Japanese language program went on to study Japanese, major in Japanese in college, work for a company that does business with Japan, or travel to Japan. For these students, learning a new and unfamiliar language at first posed many challenges. But they persisted, and soon found themselves on equal footing with students from other states. Their connection via satellite to a Japanese teacher made all the difference. They created strong friendships despite the distance, and their connection to Japanese language and culture has continued to enrich their lives.

### **Focus on Funding**

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