

Summary of Program Evaluation Themes

Prepared for Arlington Public Schools

July 2013



In the following report, Hanover Research describes commonalities and key takeaways across the five program evaluations completed for Arlington Public Schools. Specific priorities that APS should address are also identified.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

Below, Hanover Research summarizes the key takeaways and commonalities across five recent program evaluations conducted for Arlington Public Schools, and then identifies specific priorities on which the district should focus its efforts. This summary is intended to assist APS in prioritizing work that will ultimately establish a plan for improvement, support student learning, and ensure the success for all students. The five programs included in this project are as follows:

- English Language Arts, June 2013
- World Languages, April 2013
- Services for Students with Special Needs, January 2013
- ESOL/HILT, September 2012
- Mathematics, February 2012

In identifying key themes and priorities, Hanover reviewed program evaluation reports and school board presentations for all five programs, focusing specifically on the strengths, opportunities for improvement, recommendations, and staff responses/actions described in the report executive summaries. The commonalities presented below are intended to clarify trends across the five program evaluations, and, as such, are organized by type of finding (strengths, opportunities for improvement, recommendations, and responses). As an overall summary of the findings, the priorities for central systemic adjustments that will serve multiple programs and purposes are listed first before exploring the more diverse themes.

As an appendix to this document, we have also included an Excel spreadsheet that summarizes and compares strengths, opportunities for improvement, recommendations, and responses across all five program evaluations.

PRIORITIES

Our research uncovered the following priorities on which APS should focus to ensure the success of all students:

- At the division level, there is an overall need for **cohesiveness and consistency between schools, programs, and grade levels**. The lack of consistency was a key area of concern identified in several of the program evaluations that can best be improved from the top down. APS can serve multiple programs and purposes by helping individual schools and programs become more consistent in their curricula (particularly program quality and features), services for students with special needs, instructional support, and assessments.

- Second, it is clear from the program evaluations that **educators need more support in the form of professional development and specialized training**. In particular, APS' educators need assistance in using student performance data for data-driven decision-making, meeting the needs of specific subgroups, and using specific instructional practices that will elevate student learning.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND COMMONALITIES

Below, we describe the main themes identified across the five programs' strengths, opportunities for improvement, recommendations, and staff responses.

STRENGTHS

Overall, **educators in all five programs are viewed as highly effective** and committed to providing high-quality instruction in their respective discipline. Furthermore, student performance was highlighted as a key strength across all five programs. Indeed, the five program areas have each had a positive impact on students' SOL passage rates, standardized test scores, AP exam participation and results, proficiency expectations, and attendance. Most programs have also been effective at closing the achievement gap for specific economic or racial subgroups.

Another common theme across program evaluations was support for staff, students, and families. Staff in most of the program areas indicated that **APS supports their efforts through training, communication, and various resources**. Meanwhile, a key strength highlighted in several of the evaluations was that APS' programs support student learning through special programs, strong curriculum, and communication. Finally, parent outreach was highlighted as a strength within the ELL and special education programs, such that these programs are very effective at keeping families informed of the services provided to their children.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

One opportunity for improvement mentioned in most of the program evaluations related to overall program effectiveness. Though the specifics varied by program, the overall takeaway is that all of the program areas have room to improve in their ability to educate students. In addition, evaluations of the ELL and special education programs indicated that **program quality and features are not consistent across grade levels and schools**, and that APS could make the programs more cohesive within schools and within the district as a whole.

Student performance was also cited as a main area of improvement. In some programs, APS students are not meeting performance expectations on SOL exams, AP tests, and the SATs. Furthermore, achievement gaps exist between subgroups, both in terms of performance data and course enrollment. A related issue was that accountability processes could be improved, particularly as they related to monitoring performance data and intervention effectiveness.

Finally, the evaluations noted that, although support for educators is considered a strength, there is also room for improvement across all five programs, particularly in the areas of **professional development and assistance in meeting the needs of all students**. Instructional support was also cited as an area in need of improvement on some of the evaluations. Finally, support for (and communication with) parents and families appears to be an issue specifically in the ELL and special education programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Four key themes were evident across all five program evaluations. First, all of the programs were given recommendations regarding their **curriculum**. In particular, the recommendations for curricular improvements stressed consistency, alignment with standards, and responsiveness to the needs of all students. Second, it was recommended that all five programs improve their **assessment and progress monitoring systems**. Doing so would allow APS to make data-driven decisions regarding curriculum design, interventions, and other instructional practices. Third, all five programs were given a recommendation to **increase efforts to deliver more effective interventions** and to improve support systems for students with disabilities. Finally, **professional development** was cited as an area that could be improved, particularly in enabling educators to meet the diverse needs of students.

RESPONSES¹

We found considerable overlap in current and future efforts to address the recommendations outlined in the program evaluations across a variety of areas. Overall, the ELA, world languages, and mathematics offices appear to be focusing their efforts most on **making improvements to the curriculum, expanding progress monitoring systems, and enhancing professional development and training resources**. In terms of curricular improvements, APS programs are working to redesign their curriculum to be more aligned with SOL and AP expectations. To further monitor student progress, the three programs are working to identify new assessments and find new ways to use student performance data to inform instruction and target students who require additional support.

The third theme of **professional development and training** was the most pervasive across the three sets of responses to the recommendations. All three programs pledged to work harder to prepare educators to use a wider array of instructional techniques in the classroom, to better serve the needs of all students (including ESOL/HILT, students with special needs, and disadvantaged subgroups), to differentiate instruction, and to better understand how to use student performance data.

¹ Note that responses are only summarized across the ELA, world languages, and mathematics program evaluations because responses were not included in the full evaluation reports for the ESOL/HILT and services for students with special needs programs.

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