

Evaluation: Arlington Public Schools English Language Arts Program

Overview

The APS English Language Arts (ELA) program centers on teaching students to read, write and use language proficiently so they can think analytically, solve problems, communicate effectively, and collaborate with diverse groups. The Department of Planning and Evaluation worked on this evaluation with the ELA Office, other offices within the Department of Teaching and Learning, ELA teachers (including special education and ESOL/HILT teachers), school administrators, and parents.

Summary of Findings

Quality of Instruction

- Classroom observations show high levels of emotional support, classroom organization and student engagement, and teachers who are highly effective in best practices in ELA instruction.
- ELA teachers use multiple instructional strategies for students with different learning styles. An area of focus for professional learning includes use of multi-level texts at the secondary level.

Student Access and Participation

- Students report high rates of participation and feel interested and engaged in their English/Reading class. Most secondary students agreed that “My English and/or Reading class challenges me to think at a higher level or solve problems creatively.”
- Teachers and students agree that the literature they read in class has diverse authors and characters, and is relevant to students’ lives.
- Over the past three years, former English learners have been enrolled in advanced ELA coursework at rates very similar to their overall high school enrollment. Future efforts can be made to encourage students who are male, economically disadvantaged, have disabilities, or are Hispanic, since they made up a smaller proportion of students in advanced coursework in comparison to their overall APS enrollment.

Professional Learning Opportunities and Resources

- Teachers have a variety of professional learning opportunities in ELA and are positive about the impact this learning has on their practices. They identified a need for greater cohesiveness, more time to think carefully and additional opportunities to work with colleagues.
- Over half of elementary and middle school classroom teachers rated their classroom libraries as excellent or good in terms of variety of levels, number of books, current titles, and diversity of genres. Funding is needed to help keep these libraries up to date and continue meeting the needs and interests of students.

Student Outcomes

- More than 80% of APS students are passing the Reading SOL and Writing SOL assessments, with varying trends in proficiency during a time of change in state testing requirements. The pass rate for English learners on the Reading SOL test has improved, reducing the gap between them and non-English learners; the greatest gain is seen in Grade 7 where the gap dropped from 52 to 28 percentage points.
- The largest percentage of students to make a full year of growth in reading are those students initially rated “below basic proficiency” at any grade level and those in the Grade 6 basic, proficient and advanced groups.
- Most high school students enrolled in advanced ELA coursework stay on an advanced pathway. AP English Language & Composition exam scores have remained stable in the past 5 years, while AP English Literature & Composition exam scores have fluctuated. IB Higher Level Literature exam scores remain high (98%-100%) over time.

Recommendations

Recommendations are aligned with new state graduation requirements and the APS 2018-24 Strategic Plan in seeking multiple pathways to success for all students. These include:

- Continue to develop focused and sustained professional learning for K-12 literacy progression:
 - Increasing teachers’ content knowledge in foundational reading development, personalized reading instruction and differentiation of ELA strands
 - Creating professional learning plans in literacy for current teachers and a universal plan for new hires
- Adapt curriculum and instruction to each student’s needs by increasing access to reading specialists in high school.
- Manage available resources to ensure students have access to high-quality texts within ELA classrooms.