

Arlington Public Schools
World Languages Program Evaluation
Focus Group Research
with Teachers and Guidance Counselors
in Arlington Public Schools

March 22, 2020

Background

As part of a larger evaluation of the World Languages Program, Arlington Public Schools (APS) convened two focus group discussions—one with middle- and high school guidance counselors and one with teachers who teach Spanish for Fluent Speakers (SFS).¹ This qualitative data collection complements other methods being used in the evaluation including surveys, classroom observations, and assessing student outcomes.

Research Purpose

This research is part of an overarching effort to assess the strengths and limitations of the current World Languages program. The specific purposes that guided discussions with the two audiences were:

Guidance Counselors	To understand counselors’ perspectives and the guidance they provide on students’ language instruction path choices.
SFS teachers	To learn about teachers’ experiences in the SFS program and identify ways to strengthen it for both teachers and students.

Research Method

Two focus group discussions were convened, each lasting 90 minutes. Seven middle- and high school (MS and HS) counselors and eight SFS teachers participated. Both discussion guides are attached as Appendix A. The guides were developed in collaboration with the World Languages Program and the Department of Planning and Evaluation. In brief, the discussion guides explored:

¹ The original research plan for this project includes focus groups with parents of English Language learners (ELs students) and ELs high schoolers. The March 2020 school system closure due to the novel coronavirus pandemic has delayed focus group discussions with parents and students. This report is being submitted in the spirit of moving forward with the information we have. It may be updated with input from those audiences in the future. The purpose of potential future discussions with these parents and high schoolers will be: To understand parents’ decision-making for ELs students’ Spanish-language instruction, particularly why parents do or do not choose immersion, and; to understand why ELs students choose the Spanish-language instruction path they do and how they perceive their experiences on that path.

Among counselors:

- How language learning factors into course selection (e.g., how counselors work with rising 6th graders and rising freshmen, what considerations counselors have in mind when they make recommendations, what factors they believe affect students' choices)
- Counselors' perceptions of their influence on students' language learning choices
- Counselors' suggestions for the World Languages program

Among SFS teachers:

- Experiences in SFS (e.g., pros and cons, any barriers experienced, factors that make a positive difference).
- Insights on why ELs students choose a particular pathway and how APS can help
- Thoughts on the degree to which APS shows the school system values students' heritage language
- Teachers suggestions for the World Languages program

In interpreting the findings presented in this report, it is important to note that focus group discussions are a qualitative research method. While the discussions produce rich, detailed information about the perspectives of those interviewed and opportunities to further explore relevant new perspectives, the findings are descriptive in nature and cannot be generalized due to sampling approaches and small sample sizes. Moreover, these findings will be most meaningful when considered together with findings from other facets of APS's World Languages Program evaluation, such as surveys, classroom observations, and student outcome data.

Findings

Middle- and High School Counselors

Middle school counselors said that they give most of their language-related guidance after students are already middle schoolers. In other words, when students are rising from elementary to middle school the topic of choosing a language or setting a language learning path for the coming years is not a major focus. Rather the topic comes up in 6th grade, when planning for 7th. The reason is that most middle schools offer full year language instruction starting in 7th grade. One exception was that students in an IB middle school must take a language in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade—with 6th grade focusing, at least in part, on exposure to several languages so that students can choose what suits them best.

[Choosing a language and how to pursue learning it] doesn't start till 7th grade. So we already have the students in our building when they're making the choice to start a world language. Part of the process of helping them choose classes is we explain to them graduation requirements and have them map out what they think they want to do. So, we're looking at, "Well, if I start with a language in 7th grade, there are these implications. If I wait and start in 10th grade, there are other implications."—MS Counselor

When we go out to the elementary schools we talk about the different levels of Spanish, so for a rising 6th-grader, if they're going to take a language in 6th grade and they're in the traditional program, they're going to take half a year of Spanish, and it's going to be [at one of] three different levels. I've noticed a transition [to more options at APS] over the last couple of years. Now they have Intro to Spanish, Transitional Spanish—that's for students who had Spanish in elementary as part of the Foreign Language at Elementary Schools (FLES)—then you have SFS for students who are fluent speakers. So there's three different levels, and then they take a semester of that in 6th grade and then a semester of reading.—MS Counselor

Conversely, the high school counselors visit rising freshmen at their middle schools, typically in February. During these visits, counselors orient students to the choices they have coming up. But, the counselors say they do not yet play a pivotal role in helping individual students with specific choices. The steps the counselors described are:

- High school counselor visits middle school and gives group presentations on topics like the available courses and how to use the APS Course Request Form (CRF).
- Students collect course recommendations from teachers.
- Students meet with middle school counselors and complete the CRF, taking into account teacher recommendations and any other relevant factors.
- Students and parents sign the coursework planned for the next year and the middle school staff provide the documentation to the high school.

We do our spiel at the middle school, but then the kids meet with their middle school counselor and all their teachers to get recommendations for what classes they should choose for the following year. Then it's presumably signed by the student and the parent, and then given to us.—HS Counselor

Counselors emphasized the far-reaching implications of language learning choices that students must make at very young ages. In fact, counselors repeatedly emphasized this topic and said that it can be tough to get an 11- or 12-year-old to engage the idea of such distant implications. For example, in 7th grade, a student who may one day wish to complete the International Baccalaureate (IB) program must choose to learn a language offered at the IB level and stick with that language—specifically, Spanish, French, or Chinese. By 10th grade, that student needs to be in Level 4 of their chosen language to be eligible for IB. Committing to a language path in 7th grade is especially important to students who live outside the IB school's boundary (Washington & Liberty) and know they want to attend that in-demand school by entering the IB program. In this context, the rising popularity of one middle school's American Sign Language (ASL) program is causing challenges. ASL is not an IB-completion option. Thus, pursuing it through middle school eliminates the option of IB in high school unless the student also pursues a spoken language.

[Thinking years into the future is] very important, because we have to push [decisions] at 6th grade going into 7th grade so that parents don't come at the end of 8th grade saying, "Hey, you never told me about [IB requirements] and now my child doesn't have that option.—MS Counselor

- MS Counselor 1: *I just want to tack on to what [another counselor] said a while ago, the frustration with the kids taking the languages in middle school. I want to add that I too share that frustration because I think they're making these big decisions at younger and younger ages. Really for us, 5th grade. What language do they do an intro to in 6th grade?...which then sets them up for being successful in 7th and 8th grade. They get in this track, and then we're saying, "It's really not a good idea to change at this point" ...Then like [another counselor] said, now you're in high school and you've taken all this language. Maybe you're like, "I hate it," and you can't change. You can't even take the one you really want to.*
- MS Counselor 2: *I have a lot of conflicted feelings. It's good for them to learn the languages in middle school for their education...
for their brain development...*
- MS Counselor 3: *It's tracking them.*
- HS Counselor 1: *It's tracking.*
- HS Counselor 2: *It's tracking.*

High school counselors said a common challenge they face is trying to convince college-bound students to “take that fourth year” of a language. The group made clear that colleges strongly prefer applicants to have completed through level four of language coursework. They described a few different strategies for encouraging students to reach level four. For example, high school counselors encourage students to call colleges and ask for themselves. Middle school counselors try to help. One has started describing the three-year language path to students as “meeting only the minimum requirement.” A few others said they treat the fourth year as a foregone conclusion, having students who are writing their academic plan “fill out the language line all the way to level four.” The high school counselors acknowledged that students who are truly uninterested or struggling with a language can still craft a compelling college “package” of coursework, but the counselors prefer that students complete the four-year path if they can. Most importantly, the counselors want to make sure they have alerted parents and students to all they need to know about language and college admissions in order to avoid future complaints. Much to the shock of the counselors at the table, one HS counselor recounted a student whose application was recently rejected by the University of Delaware (UD) for not meeting minimum requirements because he had taken two of his three years of a language in middle school. Although the middle school courses earned high school credit, UD did not recognize them. It was the first and only time this issue had come up for this longtime counselor. But, it was unsettling.

... one thing that I constantly hear is a lot of our students start in 7th grade, so they take Level 1, Level 2. They take Level 3 in 9th grade, and they want out after 9th grade. Obviously, we also have a lot of college-bound kids, and ... I've got to tell you, the discussions I have with parents that are like, "Well, but they've done their three years of a language." And, I'm like, "Well, they have, but certainly college reps tell us they will want to see them continuing." And the parents are like, "Well, do you think it would be a bad thing if they didn't go on to level four?" And I [have to say again], "I think that they should. If [college is] what you're concerned about, yes, we always recommend that you continue if you're doing well in it."—HS Counselor

Language teachers also help get the word out about World Language program offerings and participate in helping students know whether they are ready to continue to the next level. Specifically, they talk with their classes about what they can do next.

And I think our language teachers have been really good. I like to include them too. I know a lot of times they'll talk to their classes when it's scheduling time. They'll talk to their classes and be like, "Hey, look, this is why you should take Spanish 4. If you do take Spanish 4, these are the skills that you should have."—HS Counselor

Although it was not a strong theme, two high school counselors lamented the fact that starting any language but Spanish in high school is generally not possible because Level 1 is simply not offered.

HS Counselor 1: *I get so frustrated, because I know it's a staffing thing and we're looking at that. But just sometimes it's hard because I feel like because we have so many kids in Arlington that do start their languages in middle school. I have found that we're not running the "Level 1s" as much as we were at the high school level, and if we do they're really small or combined.*

HS Counselor 2: *And, there's one section of them-... which then starts to really hurt the rest of their schedule.*

Several counselors agreed that they often recommend Latin for special education students, saying students are more successful in Latin. For these students, one advantage of Latin is that it is entirely written and not spoken. Moreover, learning Latin also supports English skills, so counselors especially steer students with reading or writing deficiencies toward Latin. Similarly, ASL classes have been very attractive to students in general and to students with special needs in particular. The counselors attribute ASL's popularity to the fact that using sign language is active. It is also possible, the counselors said, that a student's IEP may have requirements such as instructional studies or reading that mean their schedule allows no room for a language course.

We have a great Latin teacher now. We've got such a little clique of kids who just love Latin, and she's always doing fun, interesting stuff. I love when that happens, because I feel like that appeals to some of these kids where it's not just going to be rote memorizing vocab and ... For those kids that do struggle a little bit, it makes them feel like they can find success in that and it's not going to be such a struggle.—HS Counselor

Although the counselors do not quite think of language courses as "core" courses, they think of them as nearly core. For example, one middle school counselor tells students language classes are "required electives" and others say they present language classes as a foregone conclusion as opposed to an option when help students plan schedules. One middle school counselor even said she "thinks of language classes more like core classes," in that she tries to avoid over-enrolling language classes despite the fact that enrollment is not capped as it is for core courses. Sometimes, she does have to enroll extra students and she thought capping the number of students would improve instruction.

- HS Counselor 1: *I know when we go do our middle school presentations, I pretty much start off with, "You're going to take math, science, English, history..."*
- MS Counselor 1: *And that's the core.*
- HS Counselor 1: *"... health or PE, most of you guys are probably taking a language so..."*
- MS Counselor 2: *"You get one elective."*
- HS Counselor 1: *"... that's your one elective."*

Counselors' dislike of virtual formats for language learning was universal and came up spontaneously, without being asked. The primary complaints were that language learning in a virtual environment is extremely difficult and that students ultimately feel less invested in the language. A couple counselors acknowledged their sense that Level 1 and 2 courses are increasingly face-to-face at APS, saying that they hope having the in-person instruction early on will help students feel a level of investment that will carry them through.

And to do it virtually...I just worry about this push towards the virtual classes, because ... I don't know. I don't like them. I think kids find them so difficult, and they're not invested, and I've found that the kids that take them virtually don't really continue. I don't think we see a high rate of these kids continuing.—HS Counselor

- MS Counselor 1: *Personally I think they need to shy away from the online, the virtual language [instruction]. I just don't think it works, and I think...if you're looking at longevity in kids, it's hard to make that happen... Sure, I think you need to have a commitment to say, "Look, we're going to find a sign language teacher for every school. We're going to find a Chinese teacher for every school..."*
- MS Counselor 2: *I think that's the plan.*

Credit by exam was also largely disliked. However, counselors did not wish to do away with it entirely. Most importantly, credit by exam was thought to be most valuable for students who are proficient in languages that APS doesn't teach. And, although not commonly done, some students will earn credit by exam in the language they speak at home and then learn a *third* language for credit. A few wondered what motivated the credit by exam policy, thinking at the time that it was introduced as a way to either scale back the World Languages Program by decreasing demand or as a way to increase the number of advanced diplomas APS awards.

One of my favorite college-bound Latinas, I told her, "Stay in Spanish, take it during the year. Take it all the way through high school, get your advanced placement credit. [Let's agree] that's the plan." She went behind my back, talked to the mom, got her four credits. I'm like, "I have to drop you from Spanish for Fluent Speakers now. [Because you can't double-count credits.]"—MS Counselor

The other part of it is, for whatever reason the test is given in November...the kid will sign up for French 1 or whatever, and then take credit by exam and get two French credits. I'm like, "Well,

then what's the purpose...?" So it blows up our schedule in November [another agrees]... which is not a good time for kids ... Elective classes are already full.—MS Counselor

Well, we have so many non-Spanish-speakers taking credit by exam. I've always thought of it as a positive, but I'm thinking more of the non-Spanish-speakers... You speak Mongolian at home, and now you have to take French to get an advanced diploma, it's nice for that. But if we offer the language [for which credit by exam is available], yeah, that's where the conflict I think is.—MS Counselor

I know 7th, 8th and in high school. Then [credit by exam is] always the option. But I know some kids are fluent in Spanish, but then they're like, "Oh, I want to learn French," so they get the Spanish credits and then they take French through high school.—MS Counselor

Holding classes that combine ability levels was a third negative the counselors identified. In fact, the topic came up spontaneously when the counselors were asked for any final thoughts or suggestions as the discussion concluded. They were sympathetic to the issues that make combination classes necessary, but still pointed out the downsides.

... [combination classes] make students not want to continue, because some kids are like, "Well, I did all this last year." And then other kids are like, "Well, I'm not in AP, I'm in Spanish 5." I feel bad for the teacher because the poor teacher has to balance two groups of kids in one classroom. It never works. The kids get super frustrated. The teacher gets annoyed.—HS Counselor

These counselors feel as if they have some influence, but not overly much on students' choices.

When asked to use a 1 to 10 scale where 10 is total influence and 1 is none at all, most counselors chose 4, 5, or 6 to describe their level of influence. Language teachers and parents also have much influence, possibly more than the counselors. Teachers' recommendations on the CRF help determine what students can and cannot take. When speaking of parents and students, the counselors described two categories: "Tell me what to do" and "I'm doing what I want regardless of what you say." Parents' influence was said to typically be a driving force—either overshadowing the counselors' influence or complementing it. What students want certainly comes into play and some students take a stand on what they will and will not do. But overall, counselors, teachers, and parents hold considerable sway.

We can do our part, but then when they take those course request forms, the CRF says "teachers," the teachers have a say in what they can do for next year.—HS Counselor

... maybe your conversation sometimes with half the kids is, "Well, you're doing okay, but you may have to repeat," and then the kids get like, "Well, do I really want to continue in this? Maybe I'll just finish this year and be done with it." So there's a lot of different things that go into it. But it can also be the opposite, where the teacher's like, "You're doing great, I think you should do the AP and IB stuff," and then they can really help push them towards those higher level classes that would be right for them to continue all four years of a language in high school.

So it can go either way, but I feel like the teachers and teaching styles also have a big impact on those kids.—HS Counselor

The idea of a repeating a course at the same level in order to improve or establish a better foundation for the next level was usually a nonstarter, counselors said.

HS Counselor 1: *I always laugh when a teacher's like, "FYI, I talked to this kid and I recommended that he repeat level 2," and no kid ever [likes the suggestion]... when you're like, "Hey, great news, you can repeat it next year." That is such a turn-off for them because they're always like [no]... Of course you're like, "Well, build skills," but they're always just like...*

HS Counselor 2: *[laughing] "No way am I going to take it all again next year."*

Several agreed that one of their goals is to capitalize on the fact that some native Spanish speakers, who might never otherwise be able to take an Advanced Placement (AP) class, can take AP Spanish. Middle school counselors in particular said at times they recommend language learning choices specifically to set students up to enjoy that particular achievement and opportunity in the future.

So, there are different things that come up, and it's hard because you really want kids to be able to get to AP, especially if they may not be able to go in English, science, or social studies. For me, that's the struggle, because I became a teacher because I wanted to see all kids do well, but especially minority students be able to get to advanced placement classes. Some of them, if they're struggling in English, science or social studies, math..... that might just be it. So I want to make sure that there's at least ... They have a route to get to AP. So I fight with them a lot, probably more than I should, but it's really important to me.—MS Counselor

One of the things that I struggle with...a lot of the native Spanish speakers, they don't want to take Spanish, and it drives me crazy. So I spend a lot of time arguing with the parents and arguing with the kids in class, "If you're a native Spanish speaker, yes, you can take French, there's nothing wrong with French. I took French. It's a beautiful language. But you have a comparative advantage in Spanish. It'll get you...advanced placement classes. Please, please consider it."—MS Counselor

While the counselors clearly tend to encourage students to start early, aim for and reach the highest level of language learning possible, they acknowledged that in cases where a student who is not able to achieve at the higher levels should not take higher level classes.

And I think [my school]...and probably some of the other schools have this too, but they're very high-achieving, affluent areas where there's a lot of keeping up with the Joneses. So a lot of families want their kids to take what their friends' kids are taking, and they don't necessarily make the best decisions based on their own students' needs and strengths. So we have to have those delicate conversations.—HS Counselor

The counselors all acknowledged that the quality of teachers can greatly increase or hinder students' interest in a school's language offerings.

Part of our challenge too ... [the SFS teacher]...does not provide a great program. I had someone tell me about [another MS's] program and they're like, "...the Spanish for Fluent Speakers teacher, they're doing this and that," and I'm [envious] like, "I want to steal that teacher." So, I'm somewhat conflicted about pushing [SFS] because I'm like, they're not [getting] the best education there, and it's such a disservice to those kids.—MS Counselor

And, I'm with you. We're usually privy to the reputation of the teacher, the teaching style. So of course when you have a really engaging teacher who "makes" the class, they learn but it's also fun, and we see the growth in the program. And then I hate to say it, we've all seen programs that have gone down when you just don't have the right fit.—HS Counselor

When they were asked if any particular class specifically competes with World Languages, middle school counselors resoundingly answered that band and orchestra most often compete, and reading or instructional studies sometimes do. The issue tends to occur with "singleton" offerings—that is languages such as Chinese or Latin 2 for which only one section is offered at a middle school. **Likewise, similar conflicts occur in high school. Counselors said that as a generalization, AP courses are more likely to be in conflict.** For example the school may have just one section of AP Biology. If a student wants to take that and a language for which the only section is at the same time, the student has to choose.

These counselors said that most students continue with immersion when they move from middle to high school. One estimated 80% continue with immersion. Most students who do not continue were said to be deciding based on convenience, specifically choosing a high school nearer to them. In other words, counselors do not believe the students are rejecting immersion, rather they are choosing their local school. They were impressed by study findings about immersion the World Languages program provided for the focus group—which showed the high level of reading performance students achieve in two-way, dual language programs like immersion. The content that was shared is shown in Appendix B.

We'll get a handful of kids every year...who went to immersion for elementary school. But they really want to go to their neighborhood school...because they're starting to be with those kids on sports teams and things, and they just want to be closer to home, they want the social aspect.—MS Counselor

As the counselors' group concluded, one counselor noted the success that some language teachers have had with standards-based grading.

I actually don't like standards-based grading, but I feel like it works in a language class. What I like from a language perspective is that the kids are able to be like, "Oh, hey, I did this. I did this and this." Two of our ... teachers who teach the upper levels have done it really well. I think it's taken away a little of the stress, and I'm thinking, "Huh, okay. The kids have had a little more buy-in in taking those upper levels." They're like, "Oh, they do standards-based grading. You do

a portfolio.” It’s not so much worrying about, “Oh, I’m not going to know how to conjugate the verbs and I’m going to fail the test.” That’s actually been kind of helpful.—HS Counselor

SFS Teachers

These teachers’ main message was that they wish for more continuity and structure than they feel the program has today. Many believe SFS teachers across APS are doing *similar* lessons, readings, testing, etc., but still feel more unity would be helpful—both for more seamless transitions between schools (including when families move and when students advance to middle- and high school) and to help reduce teachers’ workload. The fact that SFS teachers are typically working solo—as the only such teacher in their school—makes continuity and structure all the more important, they said.

We are like the USA. Every single “state” [meaning] every single school, has their own things that they teach. We have a pacing guide but if a student moves from one school to another school, it’s completely different.—SFS Teacher

When asked to describe more specifically what would be helpful, the teachers said:

- **Ideally, SFS should have a curriculum.** A couple said one was attempted by a teacher team years ago, but the team ultimately produced a pacing guide. The guide is a necessary start, they said, but on its own is not as robust as a curriculum would be. A couple teachers in the group were careful to recognize the work of the teacher team and the fact that some guidance and resources are available to SFS teachers. A teacher who was present for the curriculum work said that the group specifically decided to *develop* a curriculum instead of adopting one. And, several agreed that even if having a curriculum is not possible, adding more structure and guidance would still be helpful. Two teachers gave the example of using a song to teach
- **They wish for a textbook.** Several made it a point to say, “We recognize a textbook is just a tool.” They explained that textbooks would provide structure and reduce their workload—for example, building grammar into the topics in the pacing guide without the teacher having to develop lessons and materials whole cloth. Likewise, a teacher who was present for discussions of an SFS textbook in the past acknowledged that several were reviewed and thought not to work well for fluent speakers, although the textbooks are useful for other language learners such as those in regular Spanish or Immersion.

I really love my language... I’m native speaker. I’m from [country] and I love my language. I love my culture. I love to teach Spanish and my culture. But I see that we don’t have a curriculum here...we were working for a curriculum but we just did kind of pacing guide. That’s it.—SFS Teacher

We have to be articulate in order that the students can move from any school in our district. Then, we don’t have... We don’t have a textbook then we don’t have a way to teach the grammar, according with the topics that we are teaching them. It’s more work for us. We have to spend a lot of time to teach

*[I agree], there **are** some things that were created. We have units, they have names. There are standards; there is a chart that says, “These are the 10 grammar points you're supposed to do.” But there are no unified readings and there's no cohesion between the unit theme, the readings, and the grammar...And also, the whole push of having pull-out sessions for students has to do with having standardized or some kind of unified tests, that you can kind of measure each other's actual results and figure out how your teaching changes. I mean that's what all of Arlington does. There's absolutely none of that happening between us. We give all different quizzes.—SFS Teacher*

... we can overlap. Then when we are planning something [we might want to say to a teacher who has students two years before us], “No, but I do this song... I'm using that song for Spanish Fluent Speaker Three.” And they may say, “But I'm sorry, I'm using also from a different perspective for Spanish Fluent Speaker One.” And, then we... We need desperate a textbook.—SFS Teacher

There are [resources] there [available to SFS teachers]. I can see it—like for each level, the grammar that you need to do. And I can see a lot of sample activities for the lessons. I know it's not everything, but at least it's a point to start.—SFS Teacher

[If not a curriculum], at least [specific guidance like], “These are the readings, these are the grammar points and these are the months that we use them in.”—SFS Teacher

Several teachers in the focus group proposed that an already professionally developed curriculum could be superior to a teacher-created one, although they thought that option would be more expensive. They expressed the sense that while teachers could help design curriculum, experts whose entire vocation is curriculum design may be better suited to solve the current problem. For example, these experts may be better able to align curriculum with AP test expectations to help ensure students are well-prepared. They indicated that the possibility of adapting the curricula used for Immersion 9 and 10 to SFS 1 and 2 had been discussed, but that it would not work because SFS students need to focus on different skills—specifically grammar as well as writing skills such as developing a main idea and supporting points.

We need to move faster, speed the process [of curriculum development]. Doing the curriculum this way [developing it ourselves], we cannot compete as a district with companies who are investing tons of time developing... And I can tell you, we went to [a conference where curriculum developers were present] and they developed a lot of different strategies and they are well-developed and well-aligned.—SFS Teacher

I agree completely. Teaching is challenging and creating the curriculum is challenging, but there are some experts on curriculum. And we are not... I mean we are teachers, we know something about curriculum, we know something about everything, but we are not experts...I don't know, they might be very expensive.—SFS Teacher

The group was mixed on the question of quizzes and tests, with some saying having these provided would be beneficial and others, while agreeing, saying these items are a lower priority than items like curriculum and textbooks.

I think what I hear everybody asking in most meetings is like, “Well, what are the readings, what are the grammar points?” I’ll make my own tests. It’s fine. But as long as I get the other stuff... because once we make a test we have it forever. [On the other hand] technically we should have some kind of unified tests, and the only unified tests we have are our midterm and final because this is a high school level class. That’s the worst part about it. This should be super structured. This going for college... For kids to go to college or whatever else, and it’s like we have a midterm and a final. The midterm and the final right now is a speaking proficiency and a writing proficiency, which I think is adequate and good. But we don’t have in-between quizzes and tests and so forth.—SFS Teacher

A few teachers made a point of noting that the issues they raised were specifically about SFS, and not about “regular” Spanish or Immersion.

We’re only talking about Fluent Speakers.... Because the other ones follow a book. Regular Spanish follows a book. They have everything [provided]. And, Immersion, they follow a book also. In Fluent Speakers we don’t follow... We don’t use a book.—SFS Teacher

Some materials for SFS teachers on Google Drive are not filed and linked correctly, which it makes it hard to find what one needs.

I’ll click, “Okay Unit Two Fluent Speakers Two” on the Google Drive. That’s who-knows-where, and I search forever, and it’ll show me the same file that goes with Fluent Speakers One. They’re linked to old files, they’re not all linked correctly within the actual unit.—SFS Teacher

So what she’s saying, the pacing guide is a framework that we started and I understand that that’s how a curriculum has to develop. So there’s an overarching framework that is based on standards, right? So right now they’ve developed like three or four units for each Fluent Speakers, but...One is a little bit more developed and it has some readings underneath there. Once you find it, I don’t know if anybody has access to that. Well, I know we all do, but it’s difficult to find. And because most of us don’t have another Fluent Speakers counterpart at our own school, we never have anyone to talk to about this.—SFS Teacher

When it comes to the question of how fluent speakers know SFS is available and any guidance they receive that helps them access the classes, teachers said:

- Morning announcements at school
- Teachers identify students on an ad hoc basis and let them know
- Students coming from an immersion setting are very likely to know about SFS because they were typically told at their previous school

These teachers acknowledged that one unique challenge of SFS is the diversity of students' abilities within each class. One suggested a placement test to enter the class given her experience with students who can function at home speaking Spanish (e.g., asking for food), but haven't sufficient experience and skill to watch and understand a video in class or learn from a teacher who speaks only Spanish to the students. Another said her school does have a placement test—typically used when immigrant students arrive from Spanish-speaking countries—but, that the test is too simple. The group agreed that placement issues are more easily solved in high school—where a student may be able to move to a new class at the next level—than in middle school where a class at the next level may not be offered. One teacher had taught an 8th grade class of SFS 2 and SFS 3 together and had also taught SFS 1 and 2 together, saying effective teaching in those circumstances is “very difficult.” Teachers said that the schools' struggle is that the number of fluent speakers who could make up an SFS class in middle school is so small that splitting each level into its own class cannot be justified.

We need to know that students...if they are fluent, they can at least watch a video and they can understand. But they don't. They don't. They are completely lost. Then now, I have my Spanish Fluent Speaker One and I need to teach it like it is Spanish One regular. [Because] the thing is that I am speaking Spanish, and they barely understand Spanish. Then, there are other ones in class that are native speakers and it sucks for them. Then I have many levels, why? Because we don't have a placement test.—SFS Teacher

A couple teachers emphasized their concern that their struggles reflect a lack of true commitment on the part of APS to the SFS program. They wished for improvements like curriculum and textbooks not just for their academic value, but to better convey to students who know Spanish that they are valued for what they know. One described her students' excitement at using a set of brand new books she had found in a school closet. They were amazed at the perfect books and interpreted receiving them as a nod to the value of the students themselves. Teachers said that students may be struggling in other classes and SFS is place to shine.

We need more leadership, not only in World Language, and county-wide, that really puts Latinos and fluent speakers and Hispanics in the top, or [if not] the top, the second [tier priority]. Invest some money in us about training, about books we need... [The students] they are the ones that are suffering because they deserve and they want a good quality of education. And if they know Spanish, personally I think they need to excel, they need to be outstanding in that. Because in math, in science, in the other classes, sometimes they are not that good...we need the resources, we need leadership, we need to help them to transition to this new world.—SFS Teacher

I think the priority is they need to have the will to spend money in our program, one. Second thing is, we need [APS to] give us quality and quantity training. After that, we need a textbook...—SFS Teacher

This is a contradiction. We teach belonging and they don't feel they belong to their school system.—SFS Teacher

A few teachers shared concern that one barrier to elevating Latino students' concerns is cultural, namely that their parents do not aggressively advocate for change. Rather, many feel grateful or are overworked or are unsure how to even approach making a demand for change. One warmly received suggestion was to offer a class for parents, especially those new to US schools, to cover topics such as the grading system, the school, the principal's role, who they need to talk to if they have a question or problem, and who they need to contact if their child will be out sick. The teachers also acknowledged that Spanish-speaking counselors had also been added to school teams and were helping strengthen communication with parents.

They need to educate those parents. Even offering a class for them will be nice even to show them... to teach the parents the system. When the report cards go home, what the [grading] letters mean, because one student tell me once, and I will never forget, "Oh I have an E, but I tell my parents as excelling."—SFS Teacher

Conclusions

- **In general, counselors tend to encourage students to invest substantially in language learning.** College applications are a key driving factor for counselors to encourage learning paths that extend at least four years.
- **Counselors are one part of a three-part adult influencer package that includes teachers and parents as well.** Counselors see themselves as just one of the three—describing themselves as somewhat influential but not entirely. In particular, MS counselors' role has far reaching implications for language learning and those MS counselors in this small study clearly recognized that. They described strategies like saying "three years of a language is the minimum requirement" and presenting four years of a language as a foregone conclusion, rather than up for debate.
- **Two moments were singled out as particularly important for decision-making for students' language path.**
 1. **When rising 7th grade students plan their schedules.** Many students set their path at this point. Decisions made at this point can impact whether a student interested in IB would meet the language requirement to be eligible in high school.
 2. **After students complete Level 3 in their chosen language.** HS counselors said "getting students to take that fourth year" is a common challenge.
- **Counselors lamented the fact that such far reaching decisions about language learning must be made when students are very young.** While there may be little opportunity to change because much of the planning is geared toward college applications, acknowledging that the situation is not ideal may be helpful.
- **Latin and ASL have a special place among APS language offerings—particularly for students with special educational needs.** Latin learners must develop the ability write it but need not be able to speak the language and learning Latin can directly benefit students' reading and writing abilities.

ASL is “more active” than other languages because it is physical. This facet is very appealing to students who appreciate the ability to move around more during language learning.

- **Areas that counselors would suggest examining for potential improvements include: reducing or eliminating virtual language course** (they thought this work was underway), **considering the pros and cons of offering credit by exam only for languages not taught at APS, avoiding combining learning levels** such as Spanish 1 and 2 or Spanish 5 and AP in a single class (although they understood the reasons this situation happens).
- **SFS teachers wish for more continuity and structure than they feel the program has today.** Many believe SFS teachers across APS are doing *similar* lessons, readings, testing, etc., but say that more unity would reduce their workload, help them because they are usually the solo SFS teacher in their building, and also would help students with transitions between schools.
- **In particular, they wished for a curriculum and a textbook.** They debated the relative merits of a teacher-developed curriculum or one purchased by APS from professional curriculum developers. In general, they leaned toward the latter but were concerned about costs.
- **Even an initial step of checking on any potential issues with organization and correct links for material provided on Google Drive would likely be helpful to the teachers.** The SFS teachers acknowledged that material is available, but found much of it difficult to unearth.
- **These SFS teachers voiced concerns about that APS is not investing in them and their students to the same degree as other programs, thereby sending the negative message that they are not as valued as others.** In keeping with the theme of structure and continuity, the investments they would like to see include curriculum, textbooks, training, and classes that are not combined. These teachers were understanding about the financial demands on APS and appreciative of the currently provided material, but they were also emphatic about their feelings and needs. Some speculated that part of the problem is that many Latino parents do not complain either for reasons based in culture, overall appreciation for the education being provided, or because they are unfamiliar with the system and the mechanisms for voicing problems.
- **When it comes to the question of how fluent speakers know SFS is available, these teachers said the typical routes include:**
 - Morning announcements at school
 - Teachers identify students on an ad hoc basis and let them know
 - Students coming from an immersion setting are very likely to know about SFS because they were typically told at their previous school

APPENDIX A – FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDES

DISCUSSION GUIDE ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS (APS) Focus Group Research on World Languages Program Discussion Guide Middle School and High School Guidance Counselors²

November 2019

Research Purpose: To understand counselors' perspectives and the factors involved in the guidance they provide for students' language instruction path choices.

WELCOME/CONTEXT (10 minutes)

Welcome everyone. My name is _____. First, thank you for taking the time to join us. A word on our purpose today... Everyone here is a middle- or high school guidance counselor in Arlington Schools. Our purpose is to talk about your experiences in that role and learn from you in order to strengthen APS's World Languages program. Our discussion is part of a larger evaluation underway for that program. Before we begin, let me give you a few details so you have some context and know what to expect.

- **Open, honest opinions**—both positive and negative—are most important of all. That means, if everyone's opinion is going one way, but you feel differently or had a different experience, I want to know that.
- With your permission, I would like to **audiotape**. Afterwards, I have to write a report. I want to give you my full attention and not have to take a lot of notes. All answers are **confidential**. The tape will only be available to me to help me write my report. Once my report is accepted in final, I will delete the tape. I will not share it with anyone else. When I write my report, it will not identify anyone by name. Rather, I will use phrases like, "Several counselors expressed the opinion that _____." I will keep the tape and erase it once my report is accepted by APS. [If permission given, start recorder.]

Because we are taping, it is important that everyone tries to **speak one at a time**. I may occasionally interrupt if several people talk at once in order to be sure everyone gets a chance to share their thoughts and that I hear everything clearly.

- This focus group is unusual in that you may know one another or know people in common. I hope that you will feel comfortable sharing your opinions. And, I ask that you keep what is said here in confidence. That said, obviously I cannot bind anyone here to keep what they

² This discussion guide is for 1 group among the 4 that compose this series of focus groups. The series is one part of a larger evaluation study that includes other research methods including survey research and classroom observation.

hear confidential. Therefore, you may choose *not* to say some things. If that happens and you wish to share information with me later, please feel free to **talk to me after the group or contact me by phone or e-mail**.

- Please turn off your **cell phones**. The group will last only 90 minutes. Should you need to go to the restroom, please feel free, but it would help if just one person left at a time.
- I am **not an Arlington Schools employee**. I'm a professional moderator, and not an expert on teaching, school administration, or language learning partnerships. My job is to listen to you and convey your input to the Office of Planning and Evaluation and World Languages Program.

INTRODUCTIONS (5 minutes)

- Your first name
- Which school is "yours"?
- Your 30-second elevator speech about how you became a counselor.

INTRODUCTION DETAIL (10 minutes)

- What language(s) does your school offer?
- I understand APS has a few different delivery models, including what used to be called distance learning for languages and now has a teacher present and is a blended course, If examples are needed: German, Japanese and Arabic. (Arlington Tech at the Career Center are the only ones that has Arabic and Chinese as an online course where APS does not provide a teacher. Chinese is through Virtual VA an online provider but we provide a native Chinese speaking assistant.) Is this the case? Tell me what you know about that.
 - Does your school offer any form of language-instruction other than traditional classroom-style learning? (If so, what sort?)
- Tell me about how your role works logistically when you are counseling rising 6th graders entering middle school OR rising 8th graders entering high school (e.g., Do they visit you or you visit them? What one-on-one time do you get? Does the 6th grade reading class impact their decision-making?).

HOW LANGUAGE LEARNING FACTORS INTO OVERALL COURSE SELECTION (25 minutes)

- Walk me through the considerations you have in mind when you are deciding what path to suggest for a student?
 - How do you describe the options?
 - What are the realities you find yourself weighing? [Explore in detail what the factors are and how these factors influence the suggestions counselors make.]

- What other major factors do you see affecting students' choices of what language-learning to pursue and for how long?
- [If needed prompt] How does a student's heritage language factor in—if, for example, the student speaks Spanish at home what thoughts or questions does that set in motion for you? And, what other factors are you thinking about as well?
 - [If needed prompt] And, for students with special needs? Describe for me what you're considering when making recommendations.
 - I hear smaller proportions of students with special needs take world languages (8.9% of the population taking world languages have disabilities) compared to American Sign Language (ASL) (~24% of students in ASL) and that there are also relatively high proportion of students with special needs in Latin classes. Does this description ring true with your experience? How so or not?
 - If it rings true, what reasons are behind these patterns?
- In your mind, are language classes "core" classes? [Explore why/why not.]
- What do you know about (or, for high school *hear directly*) from colleges about how language factors into admission?

COUNSELORS' ROLE (15 minutes)

- I'm curious how much influence you feel like you have on students' language-learning choices. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is no influence and 10 is complete control, how influential do you think you are (at a population level)? [Ask for reason behind the number they selected.]
- [Show slide re: benefits of immersion.] Research shows that students who learn literacy in their heritage language, specifically Spanish, and English simultaneously perform very well (better) on their SOL assessments than other students.³ So, APS is working to learn what reasons some students who are native Spanish speakers *do* choose immersion or *do not* choose it.
 - Tell me your reactions to this information. [Believe the information? Find it interesting, compelling, or not?]

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS (10 minutes)

- What would you suggest to increase the numbers and longevity of involvement of students who pursue language-learning?

³ This version of the guide (11/15/19) was prepared without the research in hand. This brief summary will be revised to accurately reflect findings that will be shared with the discussion group.

- What courses, activities, or other barriers tend to compete with world languages courses among students?

CONCLUSION (10 mins)

- As we wrap up, do you have any concluding thoughts or advice to share with APS on the topic of encouraging students to pursue language-learning at the highest levels of achievement possible for them?
- And, any other thoughts or advice from your perspective on language instruction or the World Languages Program?

Thank you so very much for giving me your time today. The experiences and thoughts you shared will be such a big help to the World Languages Program.

DISCUSSION GUIDE ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS (APS)
Focus Group Research on World Languages Program
Discussion Guide
Teachers of Spanish for Fluent Speakers (SFS)⁴

November 2019

Research Purpose: To learn about teachers' experiences in the SFS program and identify ways to strengthen it for both teachers and students.

INTRODUCTIONS/WARM UP (10 minutes)

Welcome everyone. My name is _____. First, thank you for taking the time to join us. A word on our purpose today... Everyone here is an SFS teacher in Arlington Schools. Our purpose is to talk about your experiences in that role and learn from you in order to strengthen APS's World Languages program. Our discussion is part of a larger evaluation underway for that program. Before we begin, let me give you a few details so you have some context and know what to expect.

- **Open, honest opinions**—both positive and negative—are most important of all. That means, if everyone's opinion is going one way, but you feel differently or had a different experience, I want to know that.
- With your permission, I would like to **audiotape**. Afterwards, I have to write a report. I want to give you my full attention and not have to take a lot of notes. All answers are **confidential**. The tape will only be available to me to help me write my report. Once my report is accepted in final, I will delete the tape. I will not share it with anyone else. When I write my report, it will not identify anyone by name. Rather, I will use phrases like, "Several teachers expressed the opinion that _____." I will keep the tape and erase it once my report is accepted by APS. [If permission given, start recorder.]

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⁴ This discussion guide is for 1 group among the 4 that compose this series of focus groups. The series is one part of a larger evaluation study that includes other research methods including survey research and classroom observation.

you wish to share information with me later, please feel free to **talk to me after the group or contact me by phone or e-mail**.

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INTRODUCTIONS (5 minutes)

- Your first name
- Which school is "yours"?
- Your 30-second elevator speech about how you became a Spanish teacher.

INTRODUCTION DETAIL (10 minutes)

Let's spend an extra few minutes getting to know your involvement in language instruction in Arlington better before I ask my questions. This way, we'll know a little more about the different perspectives at the table.

- Tell me about what Spanish-language instruction programs you've been part of and/or what courses you've taught here in Arlington.

EXPERIENCES IN SFS (20 minutes)

Now, let's focus on SFS specifically.

- Describe your experiences generally.
 - What pros and cons would you share with another teacher who was considering teaching SFS in Arlington?
- Have you encountered any barriers that make it difficult to achieve as a World Languages teacher in the way you'd like to?
 - If so, what are/were the issues and what might help resolve them?
 - [If needed, prompt to explore:
 - Teaching strategies,
 - Materials, environmental matters such as space/combo classes/scheduling,
 - Students' own stressors,
 - Professional development,
 - Vertical articulation,
 - Planning time,
 - Opportunities to connect with other SFS and non-SFS colleagues,

- Any perceived needs around training to teach literacy, students with special needs
- How about what helps or makes a positive difference for you as a World Languages Teacher?

PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENTS' AND FAMILIES' LANGUAGE LEARNING CHOICES (15 mins)

- What, if any, insights have you gotten over time into why students who are English language learners (ELs) and their families choose a particular pathway (immersion, SFS)?
- Have there been students you've known who you wish had chosen a different path?
 - And, I ask for these stories because my next question is what, if anything, could APS do differently to help with these decisions?

PERSPECTIVES ON ARLINGTON'S MESSAGES ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING/INSTRUCTION (5 mins)

- How much would you say Arlington schools values students' heritage languages, particularly Spanish?
 - What kinds of things do you see or hear that give you that feeling?

CONCLUSION (10 mins)

- As we wrap up, do you have any concluding thoughts or advice to share with APS on the topic of SFS specifically?
- And, any other thoughts or advice from your perspective on language instruction or the World Languages Program?

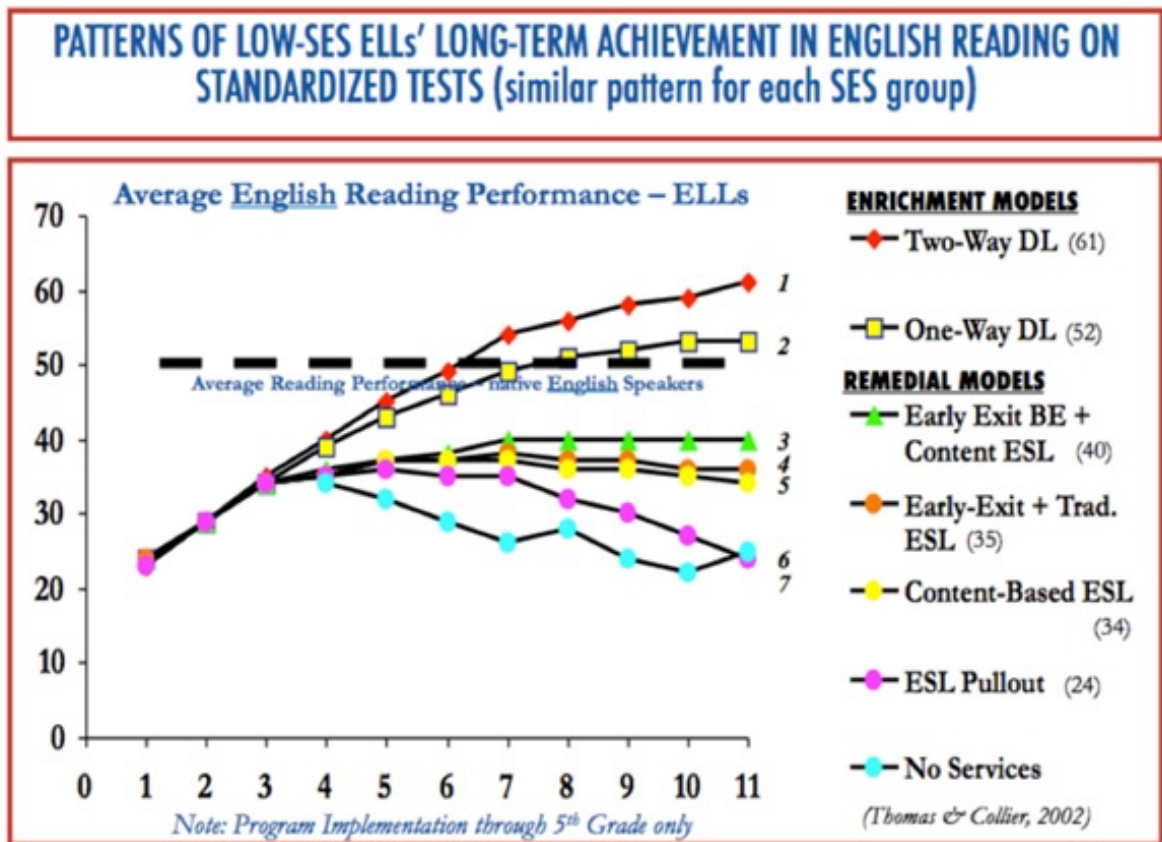
Thank you so very much for giving me your time today. The experiences and thoughts you shared will be such a big help to the World Languages Program.

APPENDIX B Benefits of Immersion Slide

Thomas and Collier

<https://www.teachingforbilitery.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ThomasandCollier.png>

The study included over 700,000 minority language students in five large school districts across the country.



Study included over 700,000 minority language students in 5 large districts across the country. Findings were validated by comparing to school systems in 26 states during the following 2 years.