

Elementary World Language
Program Development
February 5, 2013

Rationale for Elementary School World Languages

Why should schools teach world languages in elementary schools? This is the first question that must be answered if a school division is committed to investing the time, personnel and other fiscal resources in developing and implementing a program. Research suggests that learning a world language at an early age has positive effects on cognitive skills and academic performance. Recent studies also note benefits such as increased creativity and problem-solving skills, improved performance on basic skills tests and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and enhanced skills in English.

From a cultural awareness viewpoint, learning a world language provides opportunities for students to broaden their global perspective. They can learn about the history, traditions, customs and geography of the people who speak the language.

Planning Process

The first step in the planning process is to create a steering team. The team should include all stakeholders: parents, world language teachers, classroom teachers, elementary and secondary administrators, division administrators, and business and community leaders. The committee must achieve the following goals:

- Research and understand the rationale for teaching elementary world languages
- Explore different program models (total immersion, dual language, Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES), for delivery of instruction.
- Identify the advantages and disadvantages of different program models
- Evaluate the division's current world language program and identify areas of strength.

The elementary program must provide a sequence that is consistent and supported across all levels, elementary, middle, and high.

- Identify desired outcomes and build a program model that will support these goals and outcomes.

Designing the Program

This part of the process must be thoughtful, researched in detail and discussed in depth.

Program design includes:

- Scheduling – One study recommends 75 minutes per week and classes meeting every other day. Other research recommends instruction daily for no less than 30 minutes per day.
- Curriculum design – Curriculum should be based on national standards. The American Council on the Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) provides proficiency guidelines for reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
- Instructional materials – Meaningful language learning must take place in different contexts, including socially, cultural experiences, and in other content areas
- Staffing – Elementary world language teachers should be near native proficiency and be certified as an elementary teacher. Building a relationship with institutions for ongoing professional development and student teachers is a method for building and sustaining a strong program. It is important teachers understand first and second language acquisition in elementary students. When hiring the number of teachers for each school, consideration must be given to the size of the school, the schedule and number of student contacts per day and week.
- Multiple entry points – There must be a plan developed to accommodate new students to the program. Students new to the school and world language program must be given a chance to learn some of the core material that has been covered by their peers (Example – A new student moving in as a 4th grade student would need to learn some of the content that had been exposed to other students in the 3rd grade).
- Student accessibility – Elementary world language programs must be available to all students. The broader world view that a program like this can create along with improved cognitive skills are extremely beneficial to average and low income families.
- Language choice – This can be the most controversial issue of program design. Factors that must be considered when choosing a language are teacher availability, program

organization and scheduling, upper level programs and language diversity. The decision on which language(s) to offer can help build a feeling of ownership and commitment from parents, teachers, and community members.

- Program coordination and evaluation – The program should evaluate student achievement and progress in addition to information gathered from parents, students, and teachers.

Program Feasibility

Along with program model, decisions need to be made that consider budget, scheduling, space decisions and personnel decisions. The committee must determine the level of support before making a recommendation. Once a program has been developed and implemented, it is difficult to change the design. In school districts where elementary world languages programs are designated as one of the core subjects, as opposed to being viewed as an extracurricular activity, the curriculum and program tends to be more rigorous.

School communities will take pride in the benefits provided to students by a high-quality world language program. Establishing a program of this type requires adequate planning and a commitment of expertise, time, funding, and personnel.