

ESOL Multilingual Focus Group
Albemarle County Public Schools Strategic Planning
March 11th, 2013



“If you can speak another language, it means you open a window to a beautiful world. Each culture has so many precious things that you don’t think about until you know that language. Language is important to improve ourselves, to learn about other nations, and to realize ourselves better by comparing ourselves with others. It reduces conflict, war. If you learn a language, you understand why another culture is different.”

PURPOSE

More than 10% of Albemarle County Public Schools’ families speak a language other than English at home. While around 60% of these families speak Spanish, the rest speak a wide variety of 50 other languages. This focus group sought to collect the perspectives of these parents to contribute to the strategic planning process for the school division.

PARTICIPANTS

Two participants arrived for the focus group. Xuejun Du, a parent from Jouett and recent immigrant from China, represented the Mandarin speaking community that makes up 7% of all ESOL students in the county, and Greer parent Zakiya Toirova represented the

Russian and Turkish speaking community that make up about 4% of all ESOL students in the county.

QUESTION 1: What was your most powerful learning experience?

Both participants described learning English as their most powerful learning experience. They said that learning English was the most challenging learning experience they had, but that it had also been the most rewarding and opened up a new world for them. Both felt this experience was powerful because it was connected to a clear goal: immigration and adaptation to life in the United States. They both felt supported by teachers who continually challenged them and expected more from them than they thought themselves capable.

QUESTION 2: What will life look like in 20 years?

Each child will have a computer that will have text-to-speech capability. Technology will progress in ways that is difficult to imagine. Knowledge will become less important – it will be more important to understand how to retrieve knowledge using technology. There will be a challenge to maintain a focus on a healthy body with more technology.

QUESTION 3: What skills will students need to participate in this world?

Students will need to learn to be good citizens – they need to know what is good and what is bad. They will need to learn the ethics involved with technology and have a good attitude about learning. They will need to learn to identify their own goals and think carefully about their career plans. They will need to learn how to regulate themselves in using technology for entertainment purposes, e.g. video games. They will need to be better at collaborating with others.

QUESTION 4: What should schools be doing now to prepare children to acquire these skills?

Middle schools should become like high schools and be focused on identifying career options and high schools should be like college and prepare students to apply their knowledge in specific fields. Schools need to teach students how to use computers, but they should also teach students to work with their hands and understand the value of manual labor, e.g. repair their own toys, fix furniture. Schools need to continue to emphasize sports and educate children about how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. They need to emphasize teamwork. Schools should emphasize student choice – give students many pathways to graduation so that they can choose their own life based on their interest. They should provide flexibility to pursue more time on what interests them because we need all kinds of professions. Schools must continue to work with families to build partnerships, they must listen to parents, reach out to them, and get parents to help them understand what children's interests and life goals are.

Schools should teach children as many languages as they can to prepare them to collaborate with others. "If you speak a language, you open a window." Each culture has many precious things and language allows us to understand other

cultures and learn more about ourselves by comparing ourselves to others. This also helps to reduce cultural conflict so that we can build a more peaceful world.

The parents suggested that OAs could begin using google translate on IPADs in school offices to help them communicate with parents who do not speak English. They both said that when they first came to the schools, communication was difficult because they had not yet learned English. One of the mothers is a medical technician and says that they use google translate to communicate with clients and this is helpful. Medical technicians also receive cultural training and she says this has helped her in interacting with other immigrants in the community.

Both parents suggested that schools have nights for international parents to connect with native parents so they can build relationships because it is hard to make friends when they first move to the community, and this would also facilitate their children having friendships with native speakers outside of school, which would help them learn English. The native and international families could work together on a volunteer project for the school.

THEMES

Cross-cultural/multilingual communication; Good use of technology; Student choice; Challenge/High expectations; Research skills; Parent partnerships