

MEMORANDUM

TO: Advisory Council on Teaching & Learning

FROM: Advisory Committee on English Learners

DATE: May 5, 2023

SUBJECT: Final Report for School Board Work Session

COMMITTEE CHAIR: Jared Peet

COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Luisa Concepcion (APS Teacher), Patty Gallardo, Anne Zebra, Amy Graham, Mike Steenhoek

STAFF LIAISON: Sam Klein, Terri Murphy

Background

The Advisory Committee on English Learners (ACEL) has continued our work to represent the English Learner (EL) community by expanding our outreach in the community to better assess the needs of Arlington's EL students and families. ACEL onboarded two new members to our committee, and met with teachers at Randolph Elementary and Kenmore Middle School in November, 2022. ACEL members interviewed APS staff members Dulce Carrillo, Darrell Sampson and Daryl Johnson. This memorandum presents two recommendations to center multilingual families in communications decisions.

Topic of Interest #1: Stagger District-Wide Events to Optimize Interpreter Allocation

- Rationale:** Parent-teacher partnerships are at the heart of APS' mission. It is vital that APS work to ensure that all parents can act on their rights to fully discuss their student's learning and development with their student's teachers. Teachers interviewed across APS elementary and middle schools clearly indicate a preference for having in-person interpretation to enhance communication with parents. However, because of the heavy demand for in-person interpretation, APS cannot always fully provide this service, especially for district-wide events that occur on the same day and time. For example, during spring Parent-Teacher conferences this year at one elementary school, an ACEL member reported that 12 interpreters were requested, but only 4 were on-site. Even with access to Language Line, a phone-in interpreter service, this presents obvious inequities for multilingual families who don't get the same parent-teacher experience as native English speakers. In some cases, instructional assistants are being asked to interpret, but this places staff members in difficult positions that may often require a skillset outside their areas of expertise.
- Potential research questions; methodology for getting more information from the community; what we know now about what APS is doing to address this problem; approach to identifying solutions:** In interviews with teachers at Randolph Elementary School and Kenmore Middle School, teachers clearly indicated a preference for in-person interpretation. Teachers reported challenges in scheduling meetings with interpreters due to shortages of interpreters, as well as not having access to enough interpreters during district-wide events like Back to School Night and Parent-Teacher conferences. In speaking with Dr. Darrell Sampson, ACEL is aware that no new interpreter positions are in the current budget though the FY24 budget includes more funds for interpreters. Dr. Sampson indicated that APS is posting positions for hourly interpreters to expand the interpreter pool. ACEL is supportive of this budgetary increase for interpreters. Dr. Sampson shared that the need for interpreters fluctuates by the day. There is a budget for interpreters in APS' pool and on APS' books and APS contracts with interpreters as needed. While not every parent meeting requires in person interpretation, there is a need for the right interpreters for the right scenario, and APS needs to educate staff about all options.

- **Strategic plan alignment:** Partnerships

Recommendation #1:

Rationale and Recommendation: Beginning with the SY 2024-2025 calendar, stagger district-wide events like back to school night and parent teacher conferences to optimize allocation of interpreters to fully staff in-person interpretation for district-wide events.

Budgetary Implications: N/A

Strategic Plan Alignment: Partnerships

Committee vote: 5-0

APS Staff Response:

The Office of English Learners (OEL) agrees that ‘parent-teacher partnerships are at the heart of APS’ mission.’ And, especially for parents who have a language in addition to or other than English, ‘it is vital that APS work to ensure that all parents can act on their rights to fully discuss their student’s learning and development with their student’s teacher.’ Therefore, we agree with this recommendation. The School Board voted to add additional interpretation and translation resources for the 2023-2024 school year. However, this recommendation states that in the 2024-25 school year, these subtle calendar changes take place. OEL sees these changes as beneficial to parents and their students, as well as to teachers who can be sure that their message is being received clearly and parents have an opportunity to discuss any topics of interest.

Topic of Interest #2: Diversify Communication Platforms to Support Immigrant Families

- **Rationale:** Clear, timely communication is vital to parent engagement. APS must continue to diversify communication platforms to target cell phones and other modes of communication most utilized by immigrant families. We applaud the School Board and APS for piloting the TalkingPoints apps this year and providing funding for ParentSquare’s one to one messaging platform. ACEL encourages APS to continue to develop and diversify their communication platforms to reach a broad range of constituencies, especially immigrant families, utilizing the platforms these families currently utilize most often, instead of asking families to adopt what APS uses most often.
- **Potential research questions; methodology for getting more information from the community; what we know now about what APS is doing to address this problem; approach to identifying solutions:** In November, ACEL met with representatives from Edu-Futuro to learn about effective communication with immigrant and multilingual families. Edu-Futuro emphasized the importance of WhatsApp and developing robust communications through WhatsApp, since Edu-Futuro indicated that the vast majority of immigrant families use this application. After speaking with teachers at Kenmore Middle School who work with multilingual families, they all applauded the TalkingPoints pilot. With ParentSquare having been adopted, ACEL encourages the School Board to monitor the training and utilization of ParentSquare across APS. In February 2023, over 480,000 text messages had been sent using the TalkingPoints pilot program in APS. There is a clear demand for direct one to one communication between parents and teachers that is cell phone based and allows easy access for multilingual families. ACEL also met with Mr. Daryl Johnson, who has demonstrated a strong commitment to diversifying the modes by which APS communicates with families. He emphasized the importance of providing more informal means of parent engagement and communication. In conversations with Ms. Dulce Carrillo, ACEL learned that while 99% of parents have logged in to ParentVUE at least once, it can be a challenge and requires a lot of resources to help multilingual parents access ParentVUE. The ParentVUE app is not very user friendly for phones, the Spanish translation feature is difficult to enable, and overall is very challenging to navigate for many families even though ParentVUE is the primary tool by which families can access information about their children. Looking into expanding options for increasing accessibility to ParentVUE, especially through its app, is an important area for APS to explore further.

- **Strategic plan alignment:** Partnerships

Recommendation #2:

Rationale and Recommendation: APS should continue to center multilingual families in their communications strategies, ensuring communications accessible through cell phones.

Budgetary Implications: N/A

Strategic Plan Alignment: Partnerships

Committee vote: 5-0

APS Staff Response:

The Office of English Learners (OEL) agrees that ‘clear, timely communication is vital to parent engagement.’ As APS has been piloting the use of a communication tool that provides two-way parent communication in the language of choice (Talking Points), it is critical that APS deploys technology and tools that allow parents and teachers to communicate easily. Next year, APS will be transitioning to Parent Square which provides that same two way communication in the language of choice. In addition, Parent Square works to translate one-way parent communication, thus providing parents with information in a language they can understand.