MEMORANDUM

To: Arlington School Board
From: Advisory Committee on English Learners (ACEL)
Date: June 5, 2024
Subject: Report and Recommendations

Chair: Amy Graham
Members: Jared Peet, Anne Zebra, Luisa Concepcion (APS teacher)
Staff Liaison: Sam Klein, EL Supervisor, Office of English Learners.

Background: During the 2023-24 school year, members of the Advisory Committee on English Learners (ACEL) focused on ways to improve instruction for secondary students learning English. After identifying key characteristics of highly successful programs and meeting with English learner teachers and parents, we have two recommendations, shown below. A more detailed report on the development of these recommendations follows.

Recommendation 1 A Path for SLIFE Students: First, ACEL recommends having the Office of English Learners (OEL) identify a specific path for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE students) beginning with an enhanced SLIFE identification process. Other necessary SLIFE supports include appropriate class sizes, co-planning time for teachers, an explicit curriculum and related materials designed specifically for these students, professional learning and assessment that includes competency testing.

Budgetary Implications: Estimates of the additional cost of this support must wait until more work is done to identify the right course sequence(s), appropriate class sizes, number of SLIFE students and need for extended learning time. Implementation may reduce the need for remediation and/or retaking classes which will offset any new costs.

Strategic Plan Alignment: Ensure that every student is challenged and engaged while providing multiple pathways for student success.

Committee Vote: Oppose – 0; Approve - 3

Recommendation 2: Prioritize and Track Coteaching: ACEL also recommends that OEL develop a priority list for coteaching of secondary courses taken by EL students and begin to explicitly track how often coteaching is taking place within those classes. Tracking coteaching will enable APS to set specific goals and compare outcomes of classes with and without a co-teacher.

Budgetary Implications: Developing a priority list can be done with existing OEL staff. It's possible that tracking co-teaching will require some changes to information systems. However, ACEL has no way to determine what those costs might be.

Committee Vote: Oppose – 0; Approve - 3

Report to the School Board

1. Gathering Information

How did we gather information about ways to improve instruction of secondary English learners (ELs)? We used three ways to learn more about the experiences of students, teachers and parents:

- We read about the common characteristics of a small group of high schools shown to be especially effective in educating ELs.[1]
- We conducted interviews with four EL teachers from Washington Liberty; one student from Washington Liberty and one student and four parents from Gunston Middle School. Many of the ideas surfaced by the teachers at Washington Liberty were also raised by current and recently retired EL teachers at HB Woodlawn, Wakefield and Washington Liberty in a second meeting.
- We reviewed input on literacy instruction from ELs at Wakefield High School, collected by the Chair, Advisory Committee on Teaching and Learning.

We then identified key statements that were related to ideas that were repeated and amplified during the meetings with parents and teachers. Each member then selected a few statements to highlight and discuss. This discussion identified some important themes. However, interested readers can find all of the quotes from the meetings in the Appendix.

2. Key Themes

A number of statements from our informants resonated most strongly with members of the committee:

- There's no consistency within or between schools in how English is taught even at the very beginning levels.
- APS has ELs with very different levels of prior education. There needs to be more than one path.
- Teachers have to do more than just show students pictures. They need to help them understand relationships between words, concepts and subjects.
- We promote students to a new level before they demonstrate competency.
- Teachers aren't teaching the basics, even at level 1. Rigor is the goal but ELs still need the basics.
- Effective teaching of ELs requires a deep understanding of their needs.
- True coteaching can be a powerful model but requires mutual respect and co-planning time.
- Some students don't feel safe asking questions in class. They also feel that teachers need more compassion for students learning English.

[1] *Preparing ELs for College and Career: Lessons from Successful High Schools* by Santos, M., Palacios, M., Cheuk, T., Greene, R. Mercado-Garcia, D., Zerkel, L. Hakuta, K., and Skarin,R. Teachers College Press 2018.

After discussing the statements above, a number of key themes emerged to focus our recommendations.

- APS need to improve its methods of identifying and supporting SLIFE students (those with limited or interrupted formal education). The necessary supports include appropriate class sizes, co-planning time for teachers, an explicit curriculum and related materials *designed specifically for these students* and professional learning.
- While rigorous instruction is essential for ELs, the foundations for that instruction must be carefully constructed. Currently, some curricular materials assume knowledge that many students at the beginning levels lack. In addition, students who are afraid of revealing the gaps in their knowledge are reluctant to ask questions.
- Good co-teaching can help address problems with materials, encourage rigor and conversation and help create a classroom culture in which students are not afraid of asking questions. However, too often EL specialists simply "push in." Without the benefit of co-planning time, appropriate professional development and a relationship of trust and mutual respect, co-teaching is much less powerful.

3. **Lessons from Exemplary Schools**

In February, ACEL presented findings from six public high schools performing exceptionally well in terms of giving secondary ELs access to credit-bearing courses and graduating. How does the experience of these exemplary schools help us understand the issues identified in APS? In fact, these schools have experienced and taken steps to address all of these issues.

SLIFE Students: Like APS, each school has students entering with very different levels of prior education. SLIFE students receive special programming through a newcomers' program, extended learning time and/or mentoring to ensure that while their path may be somewhat different, they receive rigorous instruction and graduate. All schools try to leverage the language strengths of their students either through bilingual education or *translanguaging* – use of first language to understand concepts while learning the related English vocabulary and grammar.

Extra services to one group of SLIFE students included small-group skill classes, book clubs using engaging texts, lunch groups with counselors and teachers, and access to a SLIFE library. **Preparing ELs for College and Career** page 59

Consistent, Rigorous Instruction: Each school had a unified language development framework, which helps to create consistency in instruction within the school. Interestingly, the six schools do not share an identical framework. What's important is not whether the framework is "correct" or "best". What matters is that it guides instruction throughout the school.

To achieve the difficult feat of providing rigorous instruction to students who may have significant education gaps, several of the schools have very different classroom structures

in years one and two than in years three and four. In years 1 and 2, schools focus on the creating the language foundations needed for future instruction. This may mean that EL students are in classes only with other EL students at the same level. These classes are frequently cotaught by content and EL specialist. In years 3 and 4, students are more highly integrated with grade-level peers after they have the foundational language needed for success in these classes.

The exemplary schools all use intentional and ongoing assessment practices to push student "to higher levels of rigor as soon as it becomes possible to do so." (page 33) Multiple forms of assessment including classroom observations, writing samples, grades, and formative and summative assessments are all considered when moving students to a different English proficiency level.

> You can provide professional development forever, but teachers have to see each other in action. This is where the real PD happens."
> **Preparing ELs for College and Career, page 18.**

Co-teaching and Classroom Culture: The exemplary schools use strategic staffing to ensure that their teachers have "a depth of knowledge of the history, background, needs and strengths of the ELs in their school community." (Santos et. al. page 72) They recruit teachers who are former ELs, understand the immigrant experience, and speak the home languages of the students – similar to many ELs teachers in APS. While many teachers are dual certified in ESL and content areas, the schools also use coteaching and create opportunities for teachers to learn from one another through collaboration, common planning time and observations.

Each of the exemplary schools provides intensive social-emotional support to its students through structured advisory program or mentoring. They also help families connect to resources needed to create a strong stable home environment that supports learning. Through this support, the schools hope to build trust and engagement so that students do feel safe asking questions, requesting help and speaking and participating in the classroom.

Limitations. The challenge of emulating the methods of these exemplary schools is that each is small institution with a highly dedicated staff who are driven by a passion for teaching ELs. They understand on a deep level the needs of ELs and are willing and able to take the extra steps needed to meet those needs. While APS certainly has teachers who fit this description, especially those who chose to specialize as EL teachers, we don't know to what extent content teachers share this zeal.

4. Recommendations

What recommendations is ACEL making to the school board? This year, ACEL is making two ways to strengthen support to secondary ELs.

Recommendation 1: A Path for SLIFE Students: First, ACEL recommends having the Office of ELs identify a specific path for SLIFE students beginning with an enhanced SLIFE identification process. Other necessary SLIFE supports include appropriate class sizes, co-planning time for teachers, an explicit curriculum and related materials designed specifically for these students, professional learning and assessment that includes competency testing.

> (Some) SLIFE students (even at the secondary level) can neither read nor write in their home language, making the effort to teach these students English exponentially harder. --**EL Teacher.**

Estimates of the additional cost of this support can be determined as a clear path is identified and APS obtains a realistic count of these students. Two factors: class sizes and extended learning time will have the most impact on costs. The path for SLIFE students will necessarily require extended learning time if students are to graduate within four (or five) years. Some of the exemplary schools have obtained grants to help with the extra costs of extended learning time and other resources.

The EL teachers with whom we met made a clear and compelling case for this change. The teachers see first-hand that the differences between a level 1 (beginning) EL student with academic and cultural background knowledge and a SLIFE student who lacks this foundation can be *extreme*. Improving instruction for SLIFE students will benefit all ELs by ensuring that students are adequately prepared for more rigorous courses.

Recommendation 2: Prioritize and Track Coteaching: The second recommendation is to have the Office of ELs develop a priority list for coteaching of courses taken by EL students and begin to explicitly track how often coteaching is taking place within those classes. The need for coteaching will likely vary both by subject and level of English development. For example, social studies courses may require coteaching even with a higher level of English because many EL students are unfamiliar with US government and history. Tracking coteaching will enable APS to set specific goals and compare outcomes of classes with and without a co-teacher. For example, are pass rates for biology higher for ELs when the course is cotaught?

As part of this initiative to prioritize coteaching, principals may want to consider flexible coteaching structures where one teacher supports multiple teachers of the same course – so that EL teachers are in fact teaching when in the classroom. OEL and content offices may want to examine other ways to increase collaboration between content teachers and English language specialists including common planning times, ways to share materials for ELs, and observations.

A Final Note It is hard to imagine a more daunting academic task than learning rigorous secondary content in an unfamiliar language. We have identified two important steps that could make a significant difference to our secondary ELs. However, we know there is much more to learn from successful schools – and not just the six we studied this year. We hope that APS will continue to search out other exemplary practices to make teaching and learning more rewarding for our students and teachers.

Appendix: This appendix includes the entire list of key quotes shared at the April ACEL meeting. The * indicate a statement selected by one or more members to highlight and discuss.

Students

If I raise my hand the teacher doesn't see me, then I give up. ***

Kids are afraid of looking like they don't know anything so they won't ask questions.

Do presentations and practice pronouncing words.*

Teachers in regular math classes are focused on teaching math. But if it's only explained in English, they speak in a way that students can't understand.

Read daily and discuss the reading daily in class so we understand.*

More choice on the books we read.

More small group work.

In elementary school it was very helpful to read books together in small groups, discussing the books in small groups.

We want people to have more patience with us. We are still learning English.

Have more compassion and patience with the students.

In Elementary school, we learned new words but didn't use them … we forgot them and needed to relearn them later.

When they teach us new language, we need to hear it more than once.

My tenth grade English teacher …explained thing step by step and gave details so I knew exactly what I was doing.

[One helpful literacy practice was] practice vocabulary words from the books then identify the words in the book and discuss what they mean.

[One helpful literacy practice was] word of the day – learn words, write sentences to build vocabulary.

[One helpful literacy practice was] read sample papers that other people have written that are very good so we can see examples of good writing.

Have clear instruction on how to write an essay with samples.

Parents

Students need to do presentations in front of a group. Let them choose a topic they really like. The presentation will require them to use reading writing and speaking skills.

Students need to be reading more books.

Read daily and discuss the reading daily in class so we understand.

A reading club would help a lot of kids .. all reading the same book and then talking about it. Then have students choose the next books.

How do illiterate parents support their children at home?

Parents face child resistance in trying to read at home. They [the children] say "That's what school is for."

My oldest child tested out in elementary school – she was highly motivated and had a strong EL teacher. Now that she's in middle school, she still could use help, especially in math. She can do the computations but she doesn't understand what the word problems are asking her to do.

A 5th grade teacher noticed my child was shy and needed active encouragement to speak and participate. Once that started, my child improved significantly.

Teachers

We need more than one path. *

We have students with very different levels of prior education. ***

One size fits all is holding back some but it's pushing out others.

We used to get more information to identify kids with these gaps.

There's no consistency in how we teach English. Everyone teaches something different, even at level 1. ****

We used to coordinate across schools by meeting monthly, talking about what we are teaching and sharing resources.

Effective teaching of ELs especially at levels 1 and 2 requires a deep understanding of their needs. ***

To make content comprehensible, we need more than pictures. We need to help students see relationships and build schema. **

Many of our students have little in the way of schema compared to students in U.S. schools.

We have to teach in multiple ways – pictures, experiments, guest speakers, videos…

We aren't teaching the basics. The vibe is we need more rigor but the L1's (WIDA level 1 students) still need the basics. **

I'm all for rigor but I don't want kids to fail.

The real drag on our rigor is having SLIFE kids in our classes. It's like trying to teach algebra to kids who can't add or subtract.*

Groups should be by language ability, not by age. *

Kids get promoted to a new level by grade without competency-based assessments. **

True coteaching is not the same as just pushing in and helping students.*

True coteaching means planning together and teaching so an outside observer would not know who the EL teacher was. This takes time and trust and a cultural change in APS.*

The content teacher doesn't want to hear my ideas for making the topic accessible to the EL students.

The rigorous materials are too high level. The language level is too high. It's very frustrating for the students. *

The texts [referring to new more rigorous materials] does not reflect the lived experience of the students.*

We need reading specialist in high school*
ASPIRE training is helping some teachers with the science of reading.*

Kids in their regular classes feel so unincluded they don't even want to be there.

A grade-level English class has to be cotaught. The level of scaffolding and individual attention is more than what one teacher can do. EL certification is not enough. (A similar statement was made about an environmental science class with level 2 /3 ELs.) *.