

# RESULTS SUMMARY: WORLD LANGUAGE FOCUS GROUPS

Prepared for Palo Alto Unified School District

June 2015



In the following report, Hanover Research presents the results of six onsite stakeholder focus groups that were conducted on May 6 and 7, 2015. These focus groups were conducted to further assess the feasibility of expanding world language programming across Palo Alto Unified School District. Findings from these focus groups will inform and qualify the district's broader world language strategic initiative.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

## INTRODUCTION

Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD) requested that Hanover Research (Hanover) design and conduct internal and external focus groups to gather feedback on the potential expansion of world language (WL) offerings in elementary grades. These focus groups were designed and conducted to inform and complement findings gleaned from the WL literature review and best practices report completed by Hanover as well as the forthcoming district stakeholder survey and student data analysis. Focus group discussions aimed to address the following questions:

- How are world language immersion programs perceived and demanded in comparison to more traditional world language instruction?
- What is the most appropriate and effective way to facilitate world language programming?
- How should PAUSD expand its world language offerings, if at all?

## METHODOLOGY

Hanover collaborated with PAUSD to organize six onsite focus group meetings, each comprising 6 to 12 participants, which took place from May 6 to May 7, 2015. Each of the focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes. Two focus groups comprised high school world language teachers, two groups comprised elementary school immersion and English-language teachers, and two groups comprised parents and community members. The composition and details of these groups are presented below in Figure ES. 1.

**Figure ES. 1: Palo Alto Unified School District Onsite Focus Group Composition**

FOCUS GROUP NUMBER	DATE	STAKEHOLDER GROUP	SCHOOL	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
1	May 6, 2015	High school world language teachers	Gunn High School	12
2	May 6, 2015	Elementary school immersion and English-language teachers	Ohlone Elementary School	6 (3 Mandarin immersion teachers; 3 English-language teachers)
3	May 6, 2015	Parents and community members	-	9
4	May 7, 2015	High school world language teachers	Palo Alto High School	6
5	May 7, 2015	Parents and community members	-	10*
6	May 7, 2015	Elementary school immersion and English-language teachers	Escondido Elementary School	8 (4 Spanish immersion teachers; 4 English-language teachers)

\*One participant in this group missed the first 20 minutes of the session

Because of the sensitive nature of the focus group questions and research objectives, Hanover maintains participants’ anonymity throughout the presentation of results. This report provides a topline analysis of issues and ideas raised during the six focus groups, and primarily focuses on areas of participant consensus.

Figure ES.2 provides a summary of the questions and follow-up questions that Hanover asked each of the six focus groups. Some questions were modified based on stakeholder group expertise and priorities.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure ES.2: Palo Alto Unified School District Onsite Focus Group Questions and Follow-Up Questions**

QUESTION		FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS
1	What is the best way to provide world language instruction across the district?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ At what grade level should world language instruction begin? Why?</li> <li>▪ Should a world language be required? If so, when should it be required? Why?</li> <li>▪ What benefits, if any, are afforded by immersion programming?</li> <li>▪ Should non-immersion programming be available at the elementary school level? Why?</li> </ul>
2	What are the strengths of PAUSD’s world language programming?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How do PAUSD’s programs help build listening/speaking skills? Reading and writing skills? Cultural appreciation?</li> <li>▪ What else do you value about these programs?</li> </ul>
3	What are the development areas of PAUSD’s world language programming?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What could be better about PAUSD’s current foreign language programs?</li> </ul>
4	What changes would you like to see in PAUSD’s world language programming?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What languages, if any, should PAUSD add? Why? At what grade level?</li> <li>▪ How should immersion programming be modified, if at all?</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> For a full list of the specific questions asked of each stakeholder group, see: “Methodology Outline: World Language Focus Groups,” prepared for Palo Alto Unified School District by Hanover Research, May, 2015.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **PAUSD elementary school teachers, high school teachers, and community members strongly suggest that the district’s world language programs lack vertical alignment and meaningful articulation.** Participants argue that current programming is disjointed and fails to provide a clear, central mission with well-connected K-12 pathways for students studying a world language. Stakeholders attribute this disjointedness to a lack of district-level world language leadership and limited opportunities for cross-grade teacher communication and collaboration. They also agree that these issues must be resolved before any new languages/programs are established.
- **Focus group participants cite the current gap in middle school world language as the most pressing articulation issue, especially for immersion students.** They believe that immersion students experience a significant loss of language skills after Grade 5. According to the participants, students often take a world language in middle school either as an elective or through a “wheel” program, but these courses must also cater to new language-learners and are taken in lieu of other electives.
  - Teacher participants suggest that the district should offer content-based courses (e.g. Science, Math, etc.) delivered in a world language at the middle and high school levels to better support immersion and bilingual students.
- **High school world language teachers report numerous situations in which they must teach classes that comprise students with an exceptionally wide range of language skills.** Limited articulation leads to classes containing a mix of immersion students, new language-learners, and special education students, making individualized instruction very difficult. In addition to adding more content-based world language courses in high school, teachers propose other solutions which include strengthening the co-teaching model and ensuring that teacher aides speak the world language of instruction in their classes.
- **Almost all participants agree that starting a language early is more likely to lead to bilingualism, and the majority of participants agree that language instruction (immersion or non-immersion) should begin as early as possible.** Early world language instruction of any type is praised for its non-academic benefits as well, including stress relief and cultural identity safety.
- **While teachers and community members agree that FLES and other non-immersion programs do *not* promote bilingualism to the same extent that immersion models do, those in favor of offering world language early in a student’s academic years view FLES programs as “the next best thing” to expanded immersion programming** (and in some cases as the most appropriate option). Parents and teachers are interested in these programs as a way to expose students to different cultures and build their excitement around world languages. However, some parents and teachers fear that FLES-like programming could interfere with other core subject schedules.

- **Immersion programs are praised by parents and teachers for their ability to mold culturally competent, bilingual students.** However, select parents and teachers stress that immersion programming is not ideal for *all* students. These stakeholders argue that immersion students run the risk of inhibiting their English language skill development or “burning out” on a particular world language. Furthermore, some parents expressed the need for multiple world language programming options. Rather than offering only immersion programming, some parents and teachers would value a FLES-like offering as well.
- **Most parents and teachers argue that the district should not instate an early childhood world language requirement, pointing to feasibility issues such as scheduling and faculty recruitment as well as political concerns.** Ultimately, parents and teachers would most value an increase in world language *options* for elementary students.

# SECTION I: STRENGTHENING WORLD LANGUAGE PROGRAM ARTICULATION

This section presents focus group participants’ ideas regarding vertical and horizontal world language program articulation across PAUSD. Hanover summarizes specific strengths and areas for improvement of the district’s world language program alignment and presents possible solutions for bolstering its mission consistency. These identified strengths, development areas, and potential solutions reflect the responses of all stakeholder groups consulted by Hanover. Hanover identifies areas of consensus and, when applicable, disagreement between these groups. In the following subsections, Hanover provides a summary as well as specific examples of the responses to questions related to program articulation.

## VERTICAL ALIGNMENT AND ARTICULATION

District elementary school teachers, high school teachers, and community members strongly agree that Palo Alto Unified School District’s world language programs lack vertical alignment and meaningful articulation. That is, they argue that world language programming lacks a clear, central mission and well-connected K-12 pathways for students studying a language. When describing PAUSD’s world language programs, high school and elementary teacher stakeholders used positive adjectives such as “innovative” and “unique” alongside adjectives suggesting inconsistencies (Figure 1.1). Overall, this implies that teachers view the district’s world language program *content* as exemplary; however, this high performance may be undermined by a lack of cross-grade coordination. High school and elementary school teachers cite the absence of opportunities for cross-grade communication as a contributing factor to this limited program articulation. Perhaps more importantly, teachers also call for district-level world language leadership and the need for program alignment. All district stakeholder groups, including parents, stress that a large gap exists in world language curriculum at the middle school level, which is particularly problematic for elementary immersion students. Below, Hanover expands on the issues raised related to program articulation.

**FIGURE 1.1: “DESCRIBE PAUSD WORLD LANGUAGE IN ONE WORD” – DISTRICT TEACHERS**

Strong	Innovative
<b>Disjointed</b>	Authentic
Unique	Creative
<b>Not supported</b>	<b>Gaps</b>

elementary teacher stakeholders used positive adjectives such as “innovative” and “unique” alongside adjectives suggesting inconsistencies (Figure 1.1). Overall, this implies that teachers view the district’s world language program *content* as exemplary; however, this high performance may be undermined by a lack of cross-grade coordination. High school and elementary school teachers cite the absence of opportunities for cross-grade communication as a contributing factor to this limited program articulation. Perhaps more importantly, teachers also call for district-level world language leadership and the need for program alignment. All district stakeholder groups, including parents, stress that a large gap exists in world language curriculum at the middle school level, which is particularly problematic for elementary immersion students. Below, Hanover expands on the issues raised related to program articulation.

## DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

Elementary and high school teacher participants agree that PAUSD needs a district-level administrator with world language expertise to oversee K-12 program articulation. “We need an administrator to set a clear vision for world language programs and establish long-term goals,” noted one high school WL teacher. Teachers emphasize the importance of this administrator having world language teaching experience, arguing that this background would help ensure there is a district-level understanding of world language instruction’s intricacies and necessary supports (Figure 1.2). Teachers also argue that district WL articulation warrants a *full-time* administrative position filled by someone with strong institutional knowledge of the district.

**FIGURE 1.2: DESIRED  
DISTRICT-LEVEL WORLD  
LANGUAGE ADMINISTRATOR  
CHECKLIST**

- 1 FTE allocation
- Recent world language teaching experience
- Institutional knowledge of district

## LIMITED MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAMMING

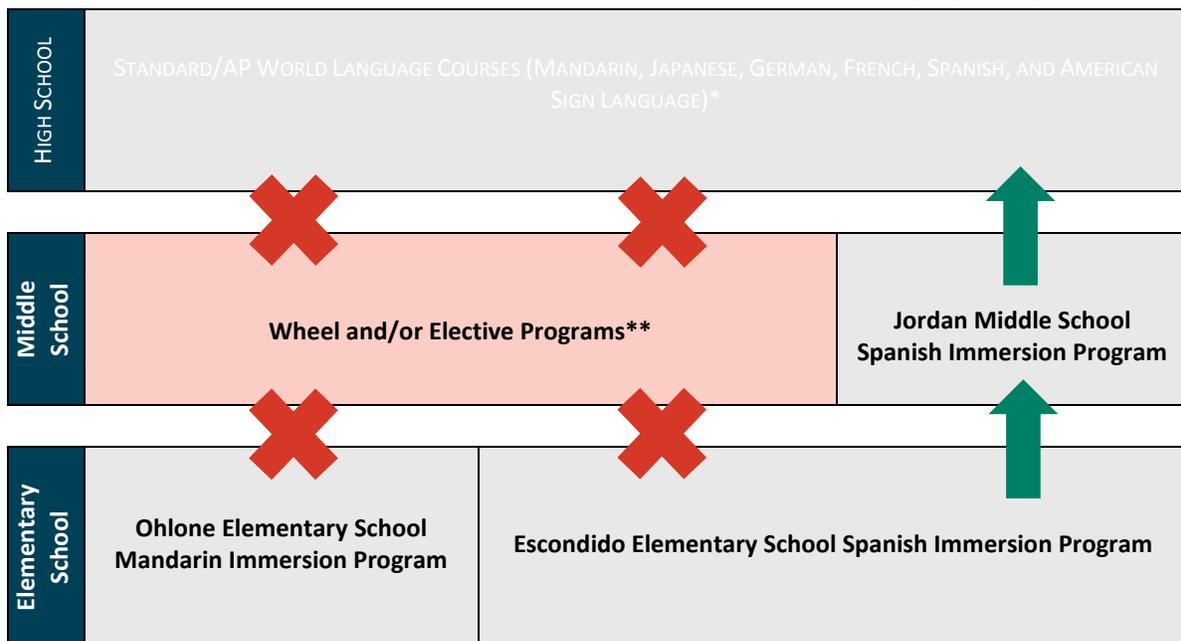
District community members and teachers are frustrated by the perceived gap in world language programming at middle schools. This problem especially affects students who have completed K-5 immersion programs at Escondido and Ohlone Elementary Schools, have developed language proficiency, and continue on to middle schools that lack world language programming that aligns with what the students previously learned (Figure 1.3). As one high school world language teacher noted, “Immersion programs were designed without making any provision for where students would go *afterward*.” According to district stakeholders, students in Grade 6 can access limited world language programming through the “Grade 6 Wheel” and can later take world language elective classes in Grades 7 and 8. Unlike immersion programming, middle school world languages are offered as a *discipline* rather than a content-based course, and students cannot always access their immersion language at their respective middle school. Moreover, these courses must also cater to non-immersion students who are beginning a new language, which in turn, create large disparities in student ability within classes. Finally, students also must sacrifice enrolling in other electives, such as band, in order to take a world language in middle school. While Jordan Middle School’s Spanish immersion program does offer the opportunity for some students to continue immersion education in middle school, teachers and parents question the current *quality* of this program and its capacity to serve all immersion students. One Ohlone teacher noted, “Jordan’s immersion program was cobbled together, last minute, as an accelerated Spanish course for select students...it could be better.”

Teachers and parents report that, because of these middle school gaps, immersion students’ language skills suffer tremendously upon immersion program completion. This lack of programming also prevents non-immersion students from beginning an effective course of language study in middle school. One high school teacher shared, “Just one year

“Immersion programs were designed without making any provision for where students would go *afterward*.”

without a language, such as during Grade 6, can set an immersion student far back in his/her language acquisition.” Parent participants report that they feel pressure to enroll their middle school students in private after-school and weekend language programs because they feel the need to compensate for this middle school gap. As one parent shared, “After immersion, the best way for our daughter to learn Chinese is to send her to a separate, private program.” Ultimately, focus group participants strongly recommend that PAUSD consider adding more world language programming in middle schools, especially to support immersion students before expanding world language programming at the elementary level.

**Figure 1.3: Palo Alto Unified School District Middle School World Language Program Gap**



✘ Indicates lack of cross-grade program articulation

\*American Sign Language only offered at Palo Alto High School; German only offered at Gunn High School

\*\*Not all students can access their immersion language through wheel and/or elective programs across all middle schools

### ADDITIONAL PROGRAMMING GAP SOLUTIONS

Gunn and Palo Alto High School WL teachers, who are more exposed to the direct effects of PAUSD’s middle school programming limitations on immersion and non-immersion students, propose the following solutions for bridging the middle school WL gap:

- Provide more opportunities for cross-grade communication:** High school world language teachers report that they rarely communicate with elementary and middle school teachers and vice versa. This exacerbates the lack of articulation across grades. High school teachers feel that they could better tailor their curricula to student needs if they were more in touch with earlier grade instructors.

- **Offer content-based language instruction for immersion/bilingual students in middle schools:** Rather than relying on world language electives and wheel programming to support immersion students’ continued language instruction, the district could offer content-based language instruction in middle schools for immersion and bilingual students. As a specific example, one teacher proposes offering biology in Spanish to interested/capable students. This type of program would allow immersion students to maintain language skills without sacrificing participation in other electives. It could also minimize the number of middle school language classes that comprise both immersion and non-immersion students.
- **Offer content-based language instruction for immersion/bilingual students in high schools:** If PAUSD introduces content-based language instruction in middle schools, high school teachers argue that this type of programming should be extended into the high schools to provide clearly-articulated and challenging paths for high-achieving language students.

## HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT LANGUAGE ABILITY GAPS

High school world language teachers report numerous situations in which they must teach classes that are made up of students with an exceptionally wide range of language skills. This issue is particularly pronounced in lower level high school language classes (e.g. Spanish 1, Mandarin 2, etc.). The current K-12 world language model allows for situations in which a single high school language class may contain students who have completed an immersion program but did not test into upper level or AP language classes and students who have just started to learn a language. Consequently, teachers can struggle to provide the individualized instruction necessary to effectively teach a language. One high school world language teacher noted, “The difference between teaching to an immersion student and other non-native speakers is tremendous.” As stated above, providing different options for immersion program graduates such as content-based language instruction would help alleviate this burden on teachers. In addition, high school teachers propose the following solutions for limiting wide-ranging ability gaps in language classes:

*“The difference between teaching to an immersion student and other non-native speakers is tremendous”*

- **Strengthen co-teaching model:** High school teachers are in favor of bolstering the existing co-teaching model to provide more opportunities for individualized world language curricula.
- **Ensure teacher aides speak the world language:** High school teachers argue that teacher aides are most effective in a world language classroom when they have an understanding of the language of instruction.

- **Reduce class sizes:** While high school teachers recognize that it may not be logistically feasible, they argue that reducing class sizes allows for more individualized language instruction.

Despite these recommendations, both high school and elementary school teachers are hesitant to recommend full tracking for immersion program students. Many argue that it is still important that immersion students are offered ample opportunities to socially interact with students outside of their immersion cohort.

## HORIZONTAL ALIGNMENT

Focus group participants, and teacher stakeholders in particular, argue that minimal *horizontal* alignment exists across different language programs and schools. They feel that this issue further warrants a district-level push for world language program articulation and the hiring of a full-time, district-level administrator. By one account, school-based world language departments “exist in isolation from one another.” Consequently, world language and immersion programs appear to have limited opportunities to share best practices and align course standards. These program inconsistencies can ultimately be frustrating for both students and their parents.

Teachers point to a recent district-wide world language professional development day as an effective way to promote horizontal alignment. One Palo Alto High School teacher described this day as follows: “World language teachers came together for the first time recently and it was highly successful. Teachers were able to talk with their counterparts at other schools at different levels...they were able to share best practices.” Given the anticipated benefits, teacher participants want Palo Alto Unified School District to consider additional professional development opportunities that encourage horizontal collaboration and alignment.

## SECTION II: PROGRAM EXPANSION CONSIDERATIONS

The following section presents focus group findings related to the potential expansion of PAUSD world language programming. Hanover compares different stakeholder groups' opinions regarding the appropriate time to offer and/or require world language instruction, if at all. Hanover also presents stakeholders' hesitations surrounding the potential expansion of PAUSD's world language programs. Hanover identifies areas of consensus and disagreement between these groups when applicable. In the following subsections, Hanover provides a summary, as well as specific examples, of the responses given to questions related to program expansion.

### PROGRAM EXPANSION CONCERNS

While all district stakeholder groups recognize the potential value of PAUSD expanding its immersion and non-immersion world language programs, consensus suggests that *existing* programs should be strengthened before any expansion takes place. As one high school teacher noted, "It is more important to make existing programs stronger; by offering more and more classes, you start to see diminished quality. Let's build something strong first." Another high school teacher argues that, by focusing on better articulating current programs, the district can "ensure a strong infrastructure is in place for future programs." Both elementary and high school teachers agree that premature expansion will create more situations in which world language students lack clearly articulated K-12 pathways for language instruction.

Parents and community members indicate that they would certainly appreciate more language options for district students; however, they also acknowledge the limitations of expansion. Despite agreeing on the merits of world language programming, parents and community members repeatedly note that expansion imposes added costs and pressures on the district. Parents also recognize that program expansion can be highly political, especially when new languages and schools are being selected. One district parent stated, "Of course, world language should be a top priority at the district and everyone agrees it is a wonderful thing, but things like costs, funding, and politics must also be considered." Ultimately, focus group findings suggest that teacher and community member stakeholders are pragmatic and would value careful thought into the improvement of existing programs as the immediate priority relative to program expansion.

### BEGINNING WORLD LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

As with the world language surveys administered by Hanover Research, all focus group participants were asked about the appropriate age that PAUSD students should begin world language instruction (immersion or non-immersion). Almost all participants agree that starting language instruction at an early age more effectively promotes bilingualism, and that language instruction should begin "as early as possible" (i.e., Kindergarten).

Stakeholders across all focus groups repeatedly cited research studies and firsthand experience in defense of beginning WL instruction early. Parents in one focus group agree that this early instruction allows students to learn a language divorced from an “American accent.” Similarly, elementary school teachers from a different focus group stress that tonal languages, such as Mandarin, are best learned at an early age because it is easier for young children to develop the ability to hear these tonal differences. For example, one Ohlone teacher argued, “For language acquisition, we do not need to teach children to read and write in kindergarten; however, *sounds* are very important at this age. By Grade 3, the window has already closed for learning [different tones].”

These findings suggest that, regardless of logistical concerns and the limitations of immersion programming, most district stakeholders agree that early world language instruction more effectively facilitates bilingualism. However, this does not mean that all district stakeholders agree that world language instruction *should* be offered at early ages. Later in this report, Hanover discusses the small number of stakeholders that argue that world language instruction should *not* begin as early as possible.

## EARLY EDUCATION: COMPARING THE IMMERSION AND FLES/EQUIVALENT MODELS

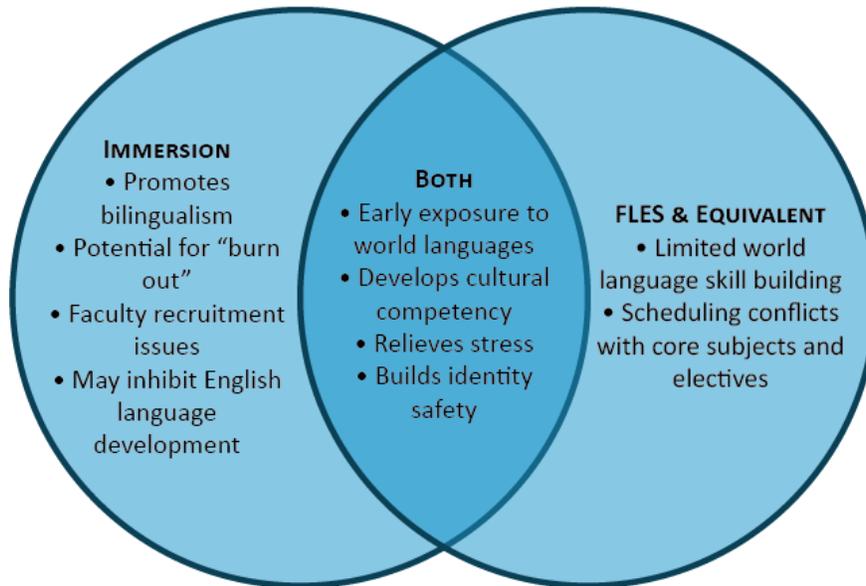
*Stakeholders feel that a district WL mission centered on bilingualism requires immersion programs; a district mission centered on “exposure,” warrants FLES programming.*

Focus group participants were also asked to compare the immersion model to alternative early language instruction models such as Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES). A FLES model aims to introduce elementary students to a world language through approximately 90 to 135 minutes of world language instruction time each week.<sup>2</sup>

Teachers and community members agree that the choice between FLES and immersion offerings is dictated by a district’s world language *mission*. That is, stakeholders feel that a district world language mission centered on bilingualism requires immersion programs; a district mission centered strictly on “*exposure*” requires FLES/equivalent programs. Figure 2.1 below presents an overview of the major differences and similarities between elementary immersion and FLES/equivalent programs described by focus group participants. Stakeholders generally agree that both types of early world language instruction provide for early exposure, cultural competency, stress relief, and identity safety. As stated above, the major difference between these programs lies with their ability to promote bilingualism. They also pose different scheduling and faculty recruitment issues. Ultimately, most parent focus group participants feel the district should offer both immersion and FLES.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see: “What is FLES? – FLES for All,” Arlington County School Board. [http://flesforall.org/what\\_is\\_fles/](http://flesforall.org/what_is_fles/)

**Figure 2.1: Comparing Perception of Immersion Programs and FLES Models/Equivalent**



### *IMMERSION PROGRAMS PROMOTE BILINGUALISM*

Community members, elementary school teachers, and high school teachers all agree that PAUSD’s current immersion programming effectively promotes bilingualism, excluding the current gap in middle school programming. High school world language teachers with experience teaching students who have completed immersion programs alongside non-immersion students spoke of the specific skills that immersion students possess. Some of the strengths that teacher participants noted include:

- Students are more articulate when participating in class.
- Rather than regurgitating information, students generate original thoughts in the language.
- Students are more confident and willing to take risks in class.
- Students demonstrate greater cultural competency.

Despite the collective enthusiasm for immersion programs and their ability to promote bilingualism, high school and elementary school teachers also agree that immersion programs are not suitable for all students despite parental enthusiasm and demand in some cases. One elementary school teacher notes that young children who struggle with language development should not be enrolled in immersion programs. She stated, “Students should be immersed or solid in at least one language to start...parents should know that immersion will *not* benefit their child if they cannot learn English first. We do not want bilingualism to be a negative experience for children.” Other teachers generally agree, adding that inappropriately enrolling a student in immersion programming early on in their education

can lead to negative experiences for parents, teachers, and students. Additionally, parents and teachers note that immersion programs can occasionally cause students to “burn out” on a language, preventing them from continuing that language later in their academic years. One teacher at Ohlone has observed frustrated students establish negative associations with Mandarin. She stated, “It can create a negative feedback loop. These students might start to say, ‘I don’t want to learn Chinese; I don’t like it.’” Thus, PAUSD may consider establishing different world language goals to address the diverse needs of its student population. In some cases, it may be better to “expose” students to a second language rather than “immerse” them in a second language.

### *IMMERSION’S PERCEIVED EFFECT ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION*

While most focus group participants agree that beginning world language early (i.e., Kindergarten), and immersion programming in particular, promotes bilingualism, some debate exists regarding whether students should actually begin immersion at this time. Select parents, and a small number of elementary and high school teachers, suggest that early immersion programs can delay students’ acquisition of English language skills. Focus group participants also note that this fear may explain any world language survey data that suggests unfavorable attitudes toward PAUSD’s current immersion programs. In addition to English skills, some fear that immersion programs hold students back in developing skillsets in other content areas. One parent argued that immersion students occasionally have to “play catch-up” in other subject areas when they enter middle and high school.

### *IMMERSION AND FLES: STRESS RELIEF AND CULTURAL IDENTITY SAFETY*

Stakeholder groups also celebrated the world language program’s non-academic benefits, including its ability to relieve students’ stress and build students’ sense of safety about their cultural identity. One teacher noted, “World language classes across all grade levels are often the least stressful for students; they give them an environment where they are not intimidated and are willing to take risks.” Other parents and teachers agree and appreciate the opportunity for students to explore skills and talents outside of more traditional school subject areas. In addition, teachers and parents praise how world language instruction supports students’ sense of cultural identity. For districts as diverse as PAUSD, world languages help to ensure that *all* students feel “validated in their own culture” and are able to appreciate other cultures. As PAUSD continues to evaluate its suite of world language programs, focus group responses suggest that PAUSD administrators should recognize these non-academic benefits as equal to the academic benefits.

*“World language classes across all grade levels are often the least stressful for students; they give them an environment where they are not intimidated and are willing to take risks.”*

### *FLES AND EQUIVALENT – CULTURAL AND LANGUAGE EXPOSURE*

While teachers and community members agree that FLES and other program types (e.g. elementary “wheel” programs) do *not*

promote bilingualism, those in favor of offering world language early on view these programs as “the next best thing” to immersion. They cite exposure and cultural competency as the main justifications for offering these programs in elementary schools when immersion is not feasible or appropriate.

Almost all of the focus group participants praised the benefits of early exposure to world languages, regardless of whether or not they feel these programs effectively teach students a language. One elementary school teacher noted, “I feel like language exposure creates excitement. It doesn’t give them skills, but it gives them enough excitement to continue a language later.” By this account, early exposure generates student interest in the study of languages, leading them to pursue WL programs in middle and high school. A different elementary school teacher added, “A child might have language skills, but it does not matter if they are not excited about it; it does not matter how hard their parent pushes them.” Various parents provided anecdotal evidence about the benefits of early exposure, including:

We have a bilingual household. My daughter was always embarrassed to speak Spanish to me. In the second grade, her school had an ‘international day.’ They celebrated her heritage and even asked her to sing a song in Spanish. This little exposure sparked her interest in Spanish.

Other parents and teachers agree, suggesting that early world language programs should be less focused on mechanics and grammar and more focused on communication and exposure to different cultures. One group of elementary teachers added that this minimal early exposure (i.e., once or twice per week in elementary school) allows students to exercise language development skills that may prove useful later in life. To this point, one elementary school teacher noted, “Once or twice a week is perfect; it does not *need* to be immersion. Regardless of how much it is, this instruction is very good for the brain at a young age.”

In addition to generating excitement around world languages and engaging language acquisition skills, focus group participants appreciate the cultural competency that FLES and equivalent programs instill in children. The same can be said about immersion programs. “Early exposure creates intercultural mindfulness, which is really important; that kind of skill building can begin when children are very young,” argued one high school teacher. Regardless of when they feel language *instruction* should begin, nearly all focus group participants appreciate the cultural exposure granted by current world language programs and would appreciate an extension of this into the elementary schools.

### **ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMMING**

Beyond immersion and FLES-like programming, district stakeholders propose alternative solutions for expanding world language at elementary schools and bolstering high school and middle school programs. These proposed alternative solutions include:

- **Offer afterschool world language programs:** Select parents from each focus group expressed interest in additional, optional afterschool world language programs for elementary school students. However, other parents argue that students should not be expected to spend additional time at school to learn a language. Teachers generally agree with these dissenters, noting that students participating in afterschool and weekend programs often experience “burn out” and lose the motivation to study a language.
- **Offer online world language programs:** Select parents proposed that PAUSD make online language courses (e.g. [Mango Languages](#)) available to students as a low-cost solution to world language expansion. One parent described a similar approach at a nearby private school in which students are able to communicate safely in a world language with students in other countries.

## REQUIRING EARLY WORLD LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

In addition to discussing the advantages and disadvantages to offering early world language instruction in a variety of formats, focus group participants were asked whether or not PAUSD should *require* students to take early world language programs. Most parents and teachers argue that the district should *not* instate this requirement, pointing to feasibility issues (i.e., scheduling and faculty recruitment), political concerns, and other potential adverse outcomes.

### SCHEDULING AND FACULTY RECRUITMENT CONCERNS

Teachers almost unanimously agree that *requiring* world language instruction at the elementary level poses insurmountable scheduling challenges for the district, particularly for FLES/equivalent programs. One elementary school teacher described the crux of this issue, “When you require something else in a student’s instructional day, then that is

*“When you require something else in a student’s instructional day, then that is time taken out of the day; if you add something, then something inevitably must go.”*

time taken out of the day; if you add something, then something inevitably must go.” Teachers fear that an elementary-level world language requirement would prevent adequate instruction for existing standards. Parents are equally pragmatic when thinking about this issue. As one parent stated, “We need to think about the entire process. Something needs to be taken away whenever you require something new. We need to think about what that would mean for the child.” In addition to scheduling concerns, parents and teachers worry that the district would not be able to recruit enough quality faculty members to support an elementary-level world language requirement in any format. Ultimately, these collective opinions suggest that district stakeholders demand and appreciate world language *options* rather than requirements.

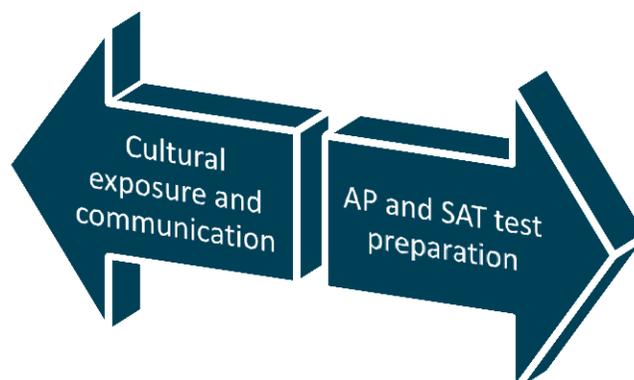
## POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Both parents and teachers feel that an elementary-level world language requirement would push the district to make highly-politicized and potentially divisive decisions. For example, based on the responses shared in the parent and teacher focus groups, it may be difficult to reach a consensus on the specific language to require. Within the focus groups themselves, parents used a wide variety of rationale to justify requiring specific languages over others (e.g. burgeoning world economies, local populations, and district demographics). These debates likely represent the district-wide debates that an elementary world language requirement would spark. Moreover, parents and teachers agree that a world language requirement may not be appropriate for *all* students. For example, students raised in bilingual households who are learning a world language at home could benefit from instructional time in other disciplines rather than world language. Furthermore, one parent shared that her husband is philosophically opposed to enrolling their child in an immersion program but would enroll their child in a FLES program. This range of commentary underlines the diverse educational goals and needs within the district.

High school world language teachers also fear that requiring a certain world language at the elementary school level threatens the existence of other world languages at the high school level. That is, a world language requirement may place students into rigid language tracks through to Grade 12. For example, if Spanish is required in elementary school, students may be more interested in studying Spanish in high school rather than German, Japanese, or American Sign Language. These debates further bolster arguments against requiring an elementary world language and demonstrate how many teachers would like to see alignment in language offerings across all grade levels. Most of the teachers suggest that the elementary and middle school levels should offer the same languages that are offered at the high school.

## PEDAGOGY AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

Elementary and high school teachers worry that world language instruction places too much of an emphasis on Advanced Placement (AP) examinations and SAT subject tests. One teacher noted, “Speaking and communication should always come first, then mechanics.” A different teacher added, “When instruction is too focused on AP exams, students may lose motivation.” As this comment suggests, world language teachers fear that the greatest benefits of world language instruction (i.e., cultural exposure, communication skills, the ability to break from other subject areas) are being overshadowed by a test-centric



mission. Although this approach may lead to higher test scores, teachers worry that students may consequently lose motivation to continue in a language and achieve fluency. Cultural exposure and communication can often be in competition with test preparation. Teachers argue that world language needs to be perceived as a tool for communication and cultural understanding *rather than* for test performance and elite college admission.

Parents did not have as strong of a reaction against test-centric world language programming. In fact, many parents celebrate the potential benefits of world language proficiency in the college admissions process. However, many do concede that world language should be an “enjoyable experience” for students. One parent emphasized, “There is beauty to learning a language; your brain is exposed to something different. Unfortunately, in high school, students aren’t learning in beautiful romantic way, they just want it for their college application.” As PAUSD works to better articulate its world language programs and corresponding strategic mission, the district would be well served to continue assessing how the overarching mission influences students’ motivations and goals for learning.

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