

Foreign Language Program Review
Report of the Visiting Team
October 29-30, 2013

The Foreign Language Visiting Team was invited to Belmont to conduct their Outside Evaluation of the Foreign Language Department of the Belmont Public Schools on October 29 and 30, 2013. Members of that team are:

- ❑ Debbie Watters, Director of World Languages, Needham Public Schools
- ❑ Kristen McAuliffe, Curriculum Coordinator for Foreign Language/Related Arts, Whitman-Hanson Public Schools
- ❑ Sophie Kulas, French teacher, Weston Public Schools

This Outside Evaluation is an integral part of the Foreign Language Program Review which the Belmont Public Schools (BPS) is conducting. On October 29 the team visited both Chenery Middle School and Belmont High School, observing classes in each language and at many levels. We also met with foreign language teachers, a special education teacher, principals and assistant principals at each school, the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and finally, members of the Foreign Language Steering Committee. Several aspects of the BPS World Language Program became apparent:

The acquisition by students of proficiency in a classical or modern language is highly valued by BPS educators. Foreign language teachers are committed to that goal and work creatively to help all students to achieve. School administrators work within budgetary and scheduling constraints to support the foreign language department and the students working within that department.

The Foreign Language Program Review is conducting a thoughtful, thorough and professional examination of the Program. The preparation for our visit was extensive: we received documentation of the previous Program Review (2002), Curriculum Guides (both old and new and the schedule for creation of new guides); Reports of Professional Learning Teams; the Executive Report of the Internal Evaluation of the Foreign Language Program of the Belmont Public Schools and the Program of Studies for the middle and high schools. On October 29 we visited 22 classes (see attached schedule) and met with administrative teams for each school and the district.

Essential to a strong and vibrant foreign language program is an effective Department Head. In Belmont that leader is Colleen Foley. Throughout our visit we heard from various stakeholders their professional regard for and appreciation of all that Ms. Foley

does for the department. It is clear that Ms. Foley is committed to high standards for BPS students and teachers and works to provide the supports and structure that they need in order to accomplish that goal. Her detailed preparation for our team visit made our visit a success and her willingness to consult with us and answer our questions has greatly enhanced our understanding of the BPS Foreign Language Program.

Guiding Questions

The Foreign Language Steering Committee charged the Visiting Team with addressing the following Guiding Questions. Below are our findings.

Is the foreign language curriculum appropriately challenging?

Middle School

Based on classroom observations and review of the 2009 student STAMP assessment data the middle school program appears to be appropriately challenging. Most class activities observed were communication-based. The middle school Administration believes that the middle school students are appropriately prepared for high school. In classroom observations middle school students were engaged in the lesson's activities and there was individual accountability (individual white boards, assigned partners, guided notes based on Smart Board). The middle school teachers had daily objectives posted that were language tasks. In 8th grade students have an 'immersion' day once a week in term 1, increasing to four days a week in term 4.

High School

In discussions with Colleen Foley about the use of the target language in classes, she stated that she has consistently observed the exclusive use of the target language in the honors level courses. We also observed that in the Advanced Placement Chinese and Spanish courses. However, on the day that we visited we saw insufficient use of the target language in French and Spanish classes. Also, the activities that we observed did not seem to be about authentic communication, but rather appeared to be isolated tasks. In all of the Spanish and French classes we observed at the honors and CP levels there was no immersion experience for the students -- teachers were translating what they said and activities seemed to be isolated tasks. We were told that the program's goal is complete immersion at the 3H level but we did not observe that. Students coming into the high school from more than two years of everyday instruction at middle school with immersion experiences should be able to continue that use of the target language in high school. Students should be discouraged from translating. The goal is for them to use what they know in the target language.

The curriculum maps are in the process of being revised. Exemplary maps include for each unit essential questions that are language tasks rather than grammar tasks. For example, the essential question should be “How do I describe something in the past?” rather than “Use the preterite tense”. Each unit should be designed beginning with what students will have to do at the end of the unit. That goal should include all four language skills and those skills should be assessed. A curriculum guide is much more than a list of chapters in the text. The curriculum guides should also include how much of the target language will be used by the teacher and the students.

Particular attention should be paid to the courses at the CP level. The 2009 STAMP assessment data showed no growth in student achievement from the testing in 8th grade to that in level 3CP for Spanish students and only modest growth for French students. In contrast, students in Spanish 3H and French 3H had advanced at least one level on the ACTFL Proficiency Benchmarks.

Recommendation: The revision of curriculum maps should continue, with time and professional development provided to teachers so they can complete this critically important work in a timely fashion.

What additional strategies can we incorporate to help students achieve cultural and communicative proficiency? In particular, how can we help students develop increased fluency when speaking in the target language?

The most important strategy we suggest is expecting students to stay in the target language in high school language classes above the first year course. In order to do that, teachers have to stay in the target language themselves, sheltering their language and not translating for the students. They also have to teach the students the phrases they will need in order to function in an immersion classroom setting. Ninth grade teachers will be building on the work done in middle school. The focus of the curriculum should be communicative proficiency (that is seen increasingly in the new curriculum maps) so that students are motivated to have authentic conversations around useful and interesting topics. Teachers should provide non-scripted authentic opportunities for communication by students -- ex: debate, travel/event planning; talking about a past experience; interviewing someone -- as well as content-based feedback rather than grammatical correction. Students can also provide feedback to each other -- summarize what the student said; what’s another question you could ask. The language lab experience can help students evaluate their pronunciation. They can practice speaking and record how they sound. They can also practice conversations that don’t involve seeing the other person (like talking on the phone). Teachers can also intentionally practice pronunciation with students so the students feel their speech is more authentic. Students should be assessed regularly using the department’s speaking rubric.

Additionally, there is an opportunity here for teachers to share their best practices around student-centered learning as well for professional development to further increase teachers' knowledge of these strategies. When students are directing the lesson they are more invested and with more opportunities to use the target language to communicate authentically they will feel more empowered to do so.

Recommendation: High school courses above the introductory level should be taught completely in the target language and teachers and students should be provided the training and supports in order to be successful in that immersion environment.

Culture should be included in every unit of instruction. That cultural knowledge should build through the levels. The AP French and Spanish curricula require students to know significant amounts about the cultures and history of countries where the language is spoken -- more than students can learn in one year of instruction. Foreign language teachers should work together with the AP curricula to see what cultural components can be included in the high school courses that lead up to AP. These cultural components should also be assessed on a regular basis. It is also possible to run the senior year non-AP course as a content-based course -- for example, French film; Hispanic artists; Latin American history; French literature.

Recommendation: The curriculum guides should be reviewed to be sure there is a cultural component in each unit. Specific attention should be paid at the high school honors level course to build a sequence of cultural knowledge and themes that can prepare students for the AP level.

What additional strategies can we utilize to help all students access a challenging foreign language curriculum? How can we better access the expertise of special education resources in the schools?

One course that seems problematic for both teachers and students is the Spanish 1B course. There is a mix of students in the course -- many are coming from the middle school and some from Spanish 1 at the high school. Students coming from the middle school have had over 300 hours of Spanish instruction while students coming from Spanish 1 at the high school have had fewer than 150 hours. That is a large discrepancy in terms of preparation to move ahead (Spanish 2 courses face the same challenge). For all students placement in Spanish 1B is by teacher recommendation. While Spanish 1B is recognized by Belmont High School as a second year of world language and thus its students meet their graduation requirement (two years of study of the same world language) it is not so recognized by most colleges and universities.

When the above information is combined with the 2009 STAMP student achievement data for Spanish 3CP students, it is clear that there is an opportunity to revise the way Belmont High School teaches Spanish to its lower level students. In general these are students who have challenges in one or more of the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and need many repetitions of new vocabulary and language structures in order to acquire them. Thus, the curricula for the Spanish 1 and 2CP courses have to be different than that of the 2 honors level. The pedagogy has to focus on student engagement in meaningful communicative tasks with clear expectations and student accountability. Close consultation with the special education staff around classroom accommodations such as guided note-taking, visual reinforcement of all auditory input, help with organizational support, will also be critical. With these changes in curriculum, pedagogy and student support it should be possible to eliminate the 1B course and support all students in the Spanish 2 CP level. The department should also consult with the English and History departments to learn more about in-school tutoring that is provided to struggling students. Perhaps that would be appropriate for Spanish 2CP students as well. Could there be a foreign language tutor in the Tutor Center?

Recommendation: The curriculum and pedagogy of the Spanish 1 and Spanish 2CP courses should be examined and revised to eliminate the need for students to be placed in the Spanish 1B course and to raise the level of achievement of Spanish 2CP students.

In our one day of classroom observation we noted at the high school that there was variation in representation in classes of particular groups of students. We encourage the foreign language department to study the placement of students to determine whether the entire student population is being appropriately challenged, held to high standards and supported in that endeavor.

Recommendation: The Foreign Language department at the high school should assess the placement of the school's minority student populations (students of color as well as its students in other marginalized groups) to ensure that they are performing at achievement levels comparable to their majority peers.

In the 2009 Program Review Survey of Foreign Language Teachers both middle school and high school teachers expressed concern that there was not enough support for struggling students (MS 71%, HS 67%). 71% of middle school teachers and 36% of high school teachers would like more support from special education staff. It appears that at the middle school students who have an aide in other subject classes do not in foreign language. At the high school it appears that foreign language teachers get

some support from special education teachers with non-foreign language dependent tasks such as executive functioning tasks and behavior management.

Recommendation: The Foreign Language Department at both schools should continue to work closely with their colleagues in Special Education and look for opportunities to share best practices.

What can we do to meet the needs of all students (those who are highly motivated, those who struggle, and those in the middle) in heterogeneously grouped classes at the middle school?

Student motivation is certainly a strong factor in student achievement. In studying a foreign language another important factor is how many repetitions a student needs in order to acquire new vocabulary and language structures. Both of these factors interact with the curricula. A basic requirement for student success is a curriculum that is based on authentic communication so that student quickly develop a sense that they can communicate in another language. Communication rather than complete accuracy is the focus. Students move towards accuracy as they use the language more. When the curriculum is useful and engaging it can be accessed by all students.

As students move through the curriculum, teachers can use common formative assessments to gauge student proficiency. Teachers may then work with students in flexible groupings around a particular task. Teachers can also provide online practice of a particular task and assign it to students based on their proficiency. With projects or assessments teachers can establish what is required in order to demonstrate proficiency and also provide students with choices for additional opportunities to show what they know.

Recommendation: The middle school curricula should be examined for relevance, authenticity and accessibility to all students. Teachers should work together to assess student proficiency, share best practices, and develop opportunities for students to work on areas of their interest or need.

Do the texts that we use for the Latin program adequately support the curriculum?

The Latin curriculum should be clear in terms of expectations of what students should know and be able to do at the end of each course. Whatever text is used should support the curricular goals. That said, some texts are more accessible to a wide range of students than are other texts. The middle school program uses the *Ecce Romani* texts while the high school uses *Jenney*. At Needham High School we found that while

our top students were successful with *Jenney*, our lower level students struggled. Since we switched to the *Ecce Romani* series three years ago our Latin enrollment has almost doubled. Students who do not have a quick and accurate grasp of grammar and sentence structure are more successful with *Ecce* than they were with *Jenney*.

Recommendation: The Latin teachers in the middle and high school should examine the curricula for all Latin courses and compare the experiences, and those of their students, that they are having with the texts they are currently using. They could also survey high school students (those currently enrolled in Latin classes as well as those who have dropped) about their experiences with both texts. This may lead to a recommendation to change textbooks to increase accessibility to Latin for all students.

What additional technology and digital resources could support the curriculum?

Belmont High School has a digital language lab in place and classes are regularly scheduled to use it. Some aspects of the lab work very well (we observed AP Chinese students working in pairs to describe for each other a house they had created). Other aspects of the lab don't work (recording student voices -- an important part of assessing the student). This issue with lab functionality needs to be addressed in a timely fashion. Teachers are not willing to spend class time trying to solve lab problems, so will quickly (and appropriately) get out of the habit of using the language lab.

Recommendation: The high school language lab should be fixed so that it is fully functional at all times.

All ninth graders at Belmont High School have iPads. iPads offer great opportunities for students to access authentic materials as well as receive and send teacher and student created materials and projects. In the world language department most classes have mixed grades of students, so there are not yet classes where all the students have an iPad. Also, many teachers in the department have not yet been trained on how to effectively incorporate the use of an iPad into their instructional practice. Thus, in our classroom observations we did not always see appropriate use of iPads. Some students who did have them to use were surfing the Internet or playing with the camera.

Recommendation: Belmont High School foreign language teachers should receive professional development of how best to incorporate iPads into their instructional practice and how to monitor students who are using iPads.

The middle school does not have a language lab and has no space for one in the future. A possibility to have some of the functionality of a language lab -- recording student voices, accessing online materials and authentic resources -- would be a cart of iPads

to be shared by the middle school foreign language teachers. If that were to happen, the teachers would need professional development similar to what the high school teachers need.

Recommendation: Consider the purchase of an iPad cart to be shared among the foreign language teachers at the middle school.

How has the lack of a solid team structure involving foreign language teachers at the middle school impacted instruction and learning?

This year at the middle school grade 6 foreign language teachers are not on grade level teams but grade 7 and 8 teachers are. (There is no longer a grade 5 foreign language program.) Middle school administrators report that the foreign language teachers consistently collaborate with each other. They have scheduled common planning time within their department once per cycle, with their team once per cycle, and with their grade level once per cycle. However, all but one of the middle school foreign language teachers teaches more than one grade level. That multiplies accordingly the number of teams and grade levels with which the teachers have to make connections. When a teacher teaches one grade level s/he has easier and more effective communication with the team as well as opportunities for interdisciplinary work with colleagues.

Recommendation: To the extent possible, foreign language teachers should be placed on teams and work closely with that team to ensure student success and maximize teacher collaboration.

Additional observations

Elementary program

Everyone we spoke with thinks the Belmont Public Schools should have an elementary foreign language program. Indeed BPS has examined this issue thoroughly and that information is available to all. The visiting team also strongly recommends an elementary foreign language program.

Lower class size

Everyone we spoke with is concerned about high class sizes in many middle and high school foreign language classes. The visiting team also strongly recommends class sizes no higher than 22. Interactions between students and the teacher are critical to students' acquiring a foreign language. High class sizes directly impact a student's ability to have those necessary interactions.

Opportunities outside the school day

There are extracurricular clubs for each language at Belmont High School. There are also school-sponsored trips abroad. We encourage the high school to take the next step and offer trips that include an immersion experience (student exchanges or home stays) so students use their foreign language skills in real life. These are powerful experiences from which students return eager to immerse themselves in the language here in school. Students could also look for community service or other opportunities in Belmont and surrounding cities and towns to use their foreign language skills in real life settings.

Conclusions

Belmont is in an excellent position to build on their strong foreign language program. The teachers are committed, expert in their field, and invested in student success. The administration at all levels offers strong and consistent support of the program. The commitment of the district and department to this Program Review process is commendable, as is its willingness to address significant issues. In closing we again commend all of you on your commitment to the students of the Belmont Public Schools and the important task they face in learning a foreign language.

It has been a privilege to get to know your school district for even this brief time. We wish you success as you conclude this Program Review and move forward. If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to be in touch.

Respectfully submitted,

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