

Community Views Of A Foreign Language Program In Conejo Valley Unified School
District Public Elementary Schools

AP Research

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Abstract

Currently, there is not one public elementary school (PES) in Conejo Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) that offers a foreign language program (FLP) with the goal of attaining fluency. The attitudes of people in CVUSD towards the implementation of an optional FLP in a PES are discovered and analyzed in this study. The five perspectives within the CVUSD community that are taken into account are PES parents, teachers, and principals, district board members, and high school students. Six PESes were studied, each of which included a principal interview and surveys of the teachers and parents. In addition, students from one CVUSD high school were surveyed, and two district board members were interviewed to gather the board's perspective. In total, 8 interviews were conducted and 465 surveys were collected, divided among 212 parents, 26 teachers, and 227 students. The data analysis reveals that all five perspectives analyzed have interest in establishing a FLP in PES, meaning that the community would support a FLP to make it successful. Thus, CVUSD should consider adopting a dual language immersion (DLI) program, a type of FLP, in at least one PES to benefit students and further their foreign language education.

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Introduction

The percent of PESs that offered foreign language instruction in 2008 in the United States was 15%, according to The Center for Applied Linguistics (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2011). Thus, the majority of students in U.S. public education aren't given the option to learn a foreign language when they are young. There are several different, common types of FLPs, each with certain goals and molds for an individual community. In deciding if a FLP can fit within a school, support from the school community is one of the necessary factors, including support from parents, district staff, principals, students, and teachers. Currently, CVUSD is lacking a FLP in PES which strives for fluency, and the purpose of this paper is to discover if there is community interest in adopting a FLP in one or more PES. As background, the value of knowing a foreign language, the effect of Proposition 58 on FLPs, and the foreign language policy of CVUSD will be discussed. Also, several types of common FLPs will be mentioned to compare the goals and structures of each in hopes that one will be best suited for CVUSD.

Literature Review

Values of Foreign Languages

To begin, there are numerous benefits for students to learn and know a foreign language. On the website of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, a United States academic organization, there are 63 studies listed that indicate cognitive gains due to second language acquisition (2011). Among those gains, bilinguals are shown to surpass monolinguals in “hypothesizing in science; reading and spelling skills; word recognition and grammatical judgement; connection between print and spoken word; concept

formation; and attentional control” (Ivers, Ivers, & Duffey, 2013). Additionally, on the same website, it was shown that students who are learning a foreign language, as compared with those not learning one, have improved general math ability, problem solving skills, and native language understanding and acquisition; higher standardized test scores; more flexible thinking; and in children, greater evaluative skills and overall cognitive development (Ivers, Ivers, & Duffey, 2013). Significantly, the process of learning a foreign language gives students numerous cognitive benefits, some of which can only be given when the learner is a child, meaning that they need to be younger to get full benefits.

Further, foreign languages are also valuable to students in the future. As stated by the National Clearinghouse of Bilingual Education, “demand for bilingual employees throughout the world is increasing,” thus “the ability to speak, read, and write two or more languages is a great advantage in the job market” (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000). Notably, students who learn and retain a second language have multiple benefits in the future, including a broader selection of jobs since they fit the bilingual requirement (Vogel, 2001). Further, knowing another language allows for communication with others of a different culture, resulting in a spread of ideas from multicultural perspectives and an expanded cultural appreciation. As stated by Thomas Vogel, who was successful in starting two international marketing communication agencies, “a consensus exists among politicians, industry, universities, and students that a global economy depends on the internationally minded, interculturally trained, multilingual graduate” (2001). To clarify, knowing multiple languages enhances the overall global economy. Therefore, the United States could benefit from teaching foreign languages to students early on, because in return, those students could heighten the United States’ economy through using the languages they learned in global trading, if they decided to acquire that type of job.

Law and Policy Background

In California, before Senate bill (SB) 1174, also known as Proposition 58, English language learners were obligated by Proposition 227 to be taught “overwhelmingly in English” so that they could fluently learn English. However, this also made English language learners, 83.5% of whom only speak Spanish, unable to learn their native language in school (California Language Census, 2015). So, SB 1174 passed in 2016 to help reestablish bilingual and multicultural programs in public schools. Part of its initiative is that if at least 20 parents at any grade level or 30 parents at one school “request” a FLP, the school “shall be required to offer [one]...to the extent possible” (SB 1174, 2014). Importantly, SB 1174 allows parents’ voices to be heard and taken into account in regard to their children’s foreign language education.

Similarly, the CVUSD Board Policy document describes that “the Superintendent or designee shall recommend world languages to be taught in the district's educational program based on student interest, community needs, and available resources” (2009). Significantly, the needs and interests of the community are two of the three factors that a FLP is dependent upon. Thus, with student interest and expressed necessity by the community, it is probable that a FLP would be well-received at public schools where interest is shown. The third factor of resources makes up the remaining necessity for a FLP, including funding, bilingual teachers, and materials. Another CVUSD document, the English Learner Master Plan, a plan to make English language learner students efficiently learn English, describes a FLP as “such a program [dual language immersion or bilingual program] would generally require a minimum of four to six years of bilingual instruction for participants to reach academic proficiency in both languages” (2014). Consequently, the program would have to start in the early years of elementary school, around kindergarten to second grade, in order to only be in elementary school. Otherwise, for students to reach academic proficiency, the program would have to continue into middle school which would make the program more complex, yet also

give students more exposure to the language, meaning they would be more likely to retain it (Moinzadeh, Talebinezhad & Behazin, 2008; Duncan & Paradis, 2016).

Types of FLPs

In choosing a FLP model, some important factors are the amount of time dedicated to foreign language instruction and the goals of the program. Table 1 (below) provides a summary of the three basic, common types of FLPs implemented into elementary schools (Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000). It should also be noted that within the DLI type, there is a 50/50 model and 90/10 model. The 50/50 model means half of the students speak English and half speak the second language; class instruction is equally divided in English and the second language. The 90/10 model starts with class instruction at 90% in the second language, 10% in English; the second year is 80% second language, 20% English; and so on until it reaches 50% in both languages.

Table 1: Types of Foreign Language (FL) Programs

	Time of FL instruction	Subject Material	Goals
Immersion or Dual-Language	50-100%	Some or all subjects are taught in the FL. FL lessons are incorporated as necessary in the curriculum.	To become fully proficient in both languages, master subject content, and gain appreciation for other cultures.
FLES (foreign language in elementary schools)	10-50%	Time is spent learning the FL and other subject matter.	To acquire FL skills in oral and written components. To use subject content to develop FL skills. To gain appreciation of other cultures.
FLEX (foreign language experience/exploratory)	10-20%	Time is spent learning the FL and culture, some taught in English.	To acquire general exposure to the FL and/or interest in the FL for the future. To gain appreciation for other cultures.

By asking questions through interviews and surveys to the CVUSD community pertaining to time spent learning the foreign language and the goals of the program, their opinions will be found, and a general idea of the best fit FLP for CVUSD should be apparent.

Features of Success in a FLP

To be successful, all FLPs are reliant upon the support of their community which includes parents, district staff, teachers, and students. At Monteverde Elementary School, a “two-way bilingual immersion model [school] at the national and international level” in Northern California, “the emphasis that teachers place on weaving multiculturalism into every academic area of the curriculum” is a key factor in the success of their FLP, according to Quintanar--Sarellana, a former elementary teacher and current professor at San José University (2004). As revealed, to completely teach a foreign language consists of more than just the language; it also consists of lessons about the culture of places where the language is natively spoken. By teaching the foreign language along with its culture, students can acquire a better understanding of and appreciation for different cultures. This FLP is successful because of teachers’ support in building the program with the incorporation of culture which interests the students, in turn creating parent support due to their kids’ positivity towards the program.

Methods

Participants

In gathering data to try to discover the attitudes of people in CVUSD towards an optional FLP in PES, surveys and interviews were conducted. A total of six out of eighteen PESes in CVUSD were surveyed, including the parents and teachers at each school. Additionally, each principal at the six schools surveyed were interviewed to further understand their perspective on foreign language education, importance, and the possibility of adding a FLP in their school. Each school and principal is given a letter abbreviation so that their identity remains confidential. Two CVUSD board members who are relevant to this field of research were also interviewed; their job titles are not specified due to the fact that they would prefer to remain anonymous. The interview data is analyzed through a tape

recording of and written notes from each interview. Only one principal requested not to be recorded in the interview, in which case, more thorough notes were taken. The second set of survey participants were students at a high school in CVUSD. The Institutional Review Board approved the surveys before being distributed. Due to district policy, before the students could take the survey, they were asked to return a signed and approved parental consent form which explained the nature of the survey. In total, 210 elementary school parents, 226 high school students, and 25 elementary school teachers were surveyed. Each group had surveys of slight difference, but the same core questions. To account for multiple perspectives, a Spanish version of the parent and student surveys were made with the cooperation of bilingual Spanish teachers so that Spanish-only speakers could participate in the survey.

To contact parents of elementary school students, principals of each elementary school sent out emails with a brief description of the survey and the links to the Google form. If parents could not access the online survey, they had the option to take a hard copy of the survey from their student's school front office.

Measures

General questions asked in the parent, teacher, and student surveys served as background for the participant's gender, which languages they could understand, their school (and grade if students), and language capability. Two questions were to find out their values of foreign languages. Six questions asked were to see which language and type of FLP they would prefer (e.g. which grade to begin, the importance of culture, etc.).

Questions that were specific to the parent survey were to know their child's grade, school, and language capability; and to see possible enrollment and for what reasons, including two open responses.

Language Fluency

One issue addressed was trying to get a diverse participant population apropos of language fluency. With language fluency diversity, people's perspectives of which language they find most valuable can be altered. To get a diverse population, a Spanish version of both the parent and student surveys were created so that the biggest local language minority could participate in the survey.

Results

Table 2: Survey Participant Language Fluency Chart

	Parents	Students	Teachers
Total number of participants	212	227	26
% fluent in English	94.3%	96%	100%
Number of participants fluent in English	200	218	26
% fluent in Spanish	12.7%	23.3%	11.5%
Number of participants fluent in Spanish	27	53	3
% fluent in a different foreign language	13.7%	12.7%	0%
Number of participants fluent in a different foreign language	29	29	0

Table 3: Participant Division by Individual PESs

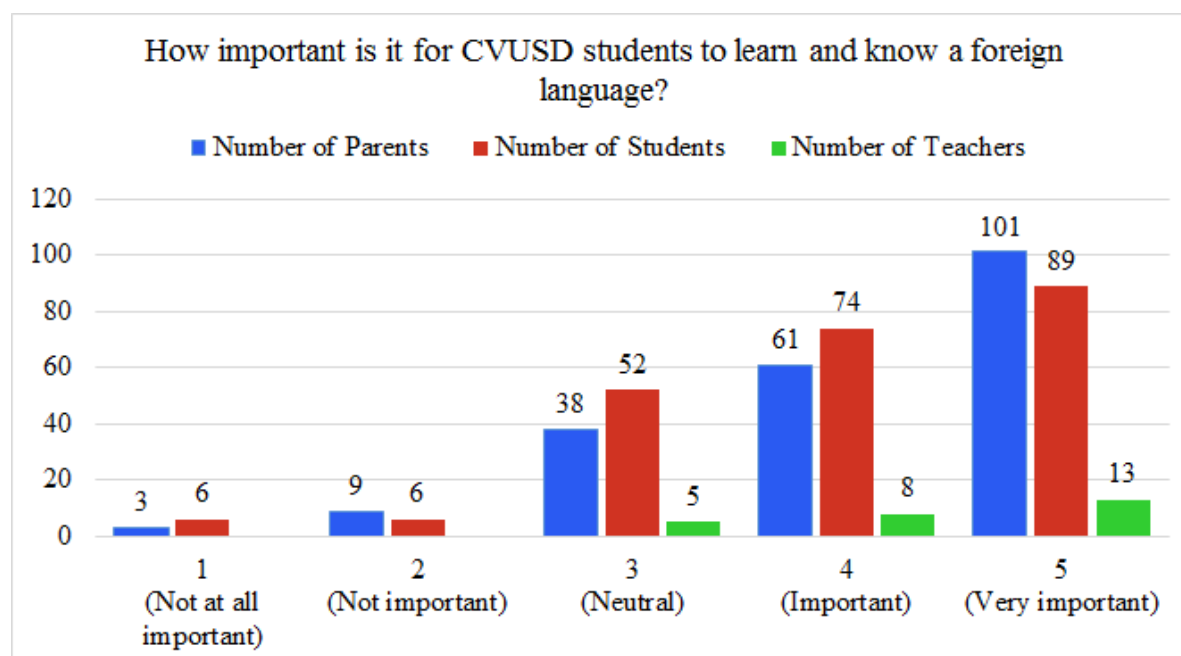
	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Number of Parents Surveyed	36	44	5	41	8	81
Number of Teachers Surveyed	8	8	3	4	1	2

Survey Analysis

The Spanish versions of the parent and student surveys had by three parent and seven student responses, meaning that almost all the participants could understand written English. 25.5% of parents surveyed were fluent in at least one foreign language. Likewise, when parents were asked if their children knew a foreign language, 25.5% responded affirmatively.

Of the three teacher respondents who could speak Spanish, two had a bilingual teaching credential for Spanish. Students had the highest foreign language fluency rate at 31.2%.

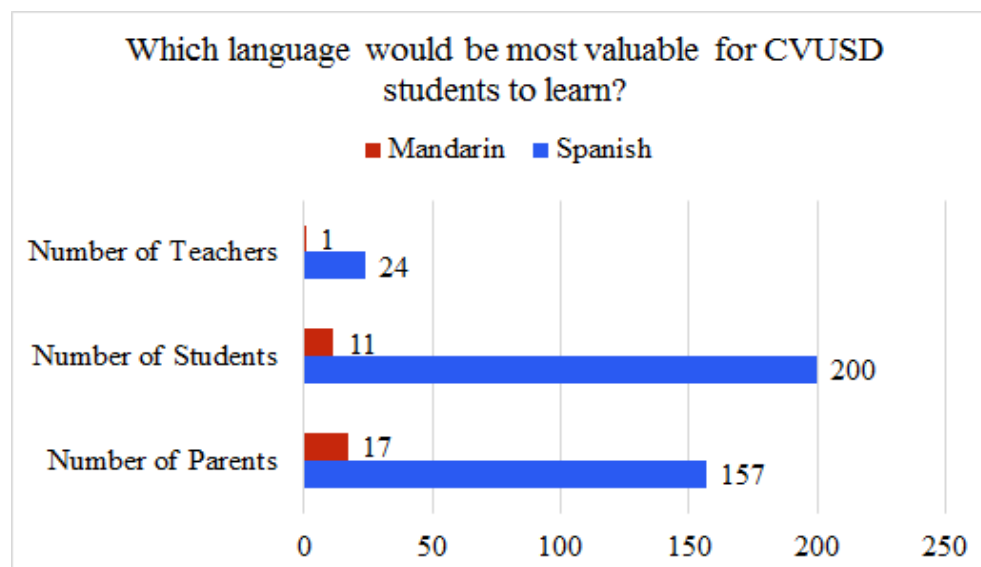
One question asked parents, teachers, and students to rate the importance of learning and knowing a foreign language on a Likert scale of one (not at all important) to five (very important). The question targeted CVUSD students by asking parents to rate the importance for their children, students for themselves; teachers rated it for CVUSD students. 76.6% of the parents chose five or four. 5.4% of parent respondents rated the importance as a one or two combined. For teachers, 80.8% chose a four or five. When students were asked, the majority also chose a five (39.2%) or a four (32.6%).



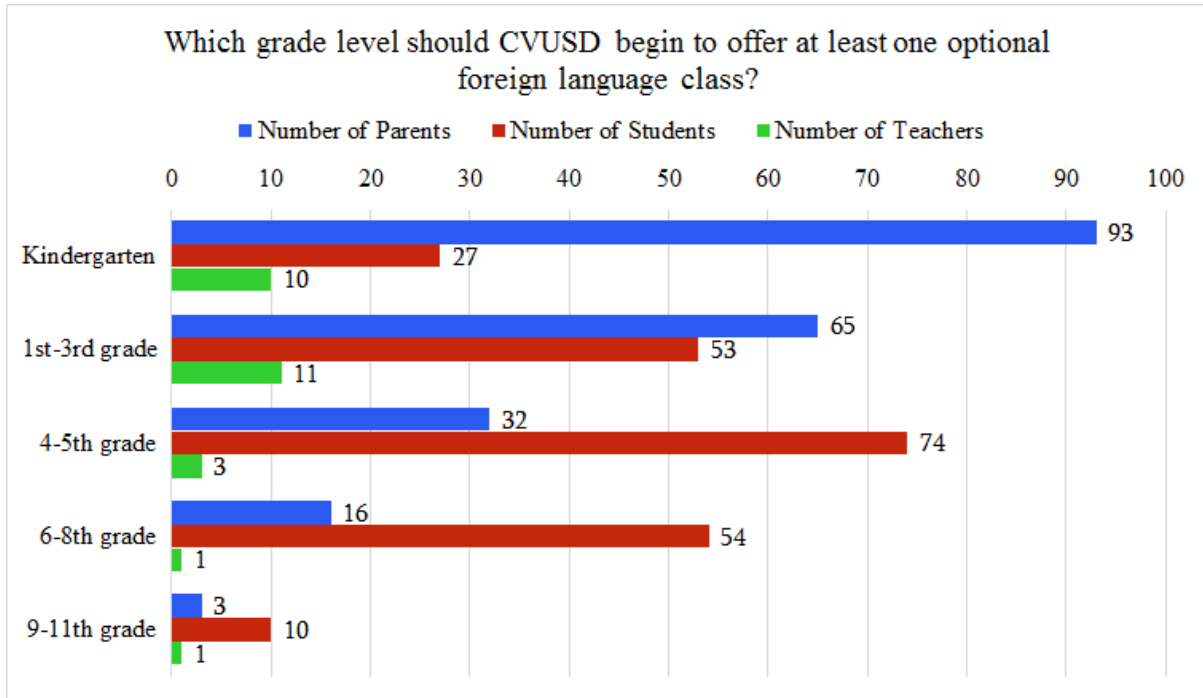
Another question asked participants to select multiple listed reasons why they did or did not value foreign languages; 2.4% of parents, 8% of students, and 7.7% of teachers selected “knowing a foreign language is neither important nor valuable.” Among all participant groups, the most commonly chosen statement was that foreign languages are valuable because they “open up career and job opportunities” (79.7% parents, 92.3% teachers, 87.2% students). For parents and teachers, “it helps expand one’s view of the world” was the second most common selection (72.2% parents, 76.9% teachers). For

students, the second most common response was “it helps one when traveling to foreign countries” (85.8%). All survey participant groups had a 69% selection rate for the statement “it makes one more culturally diverse” which was also the third most common response in all groups. 42.9% of parents, 50% of teachers, and 54.9% of students selected that “it improves one’s memory, focus, and attention skills.”

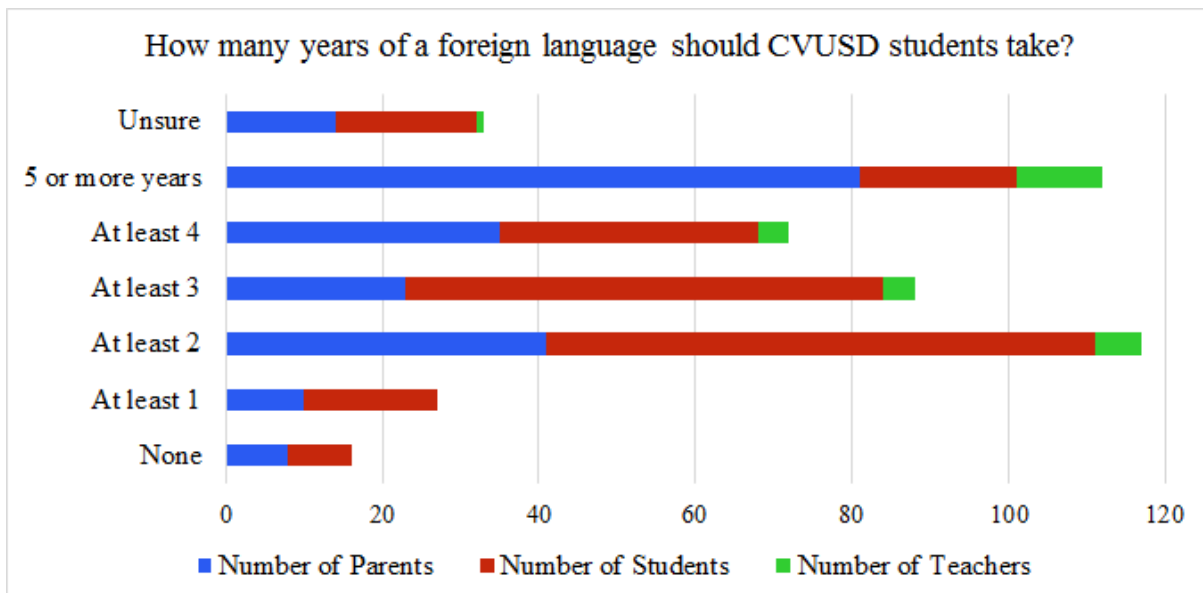
The next set of questions inquired to find which type of FLP would best fit CVUSD students, the school, or the specific parent’s child. In regards to which language would be most valuable for CVUSD students, 74.1% of parents, 88.1% of students, and 92.3% of teachers chose Spanish as the optimal language. Mandarin was the second most chosen language with 8.0% of parents, 4.8% of students, and 3.8% of teachers.



The majority of parents wanted their children to begin learning a foreign language in kindergarten (43.9%); the next closest option was first through third grade (30.7%), then fourth through fifth grade (15.1%). Teachers thought a FLP should begin in first to third grade (42.3%) or kindergarten (38.8%). Students thought one should begin in fourth through fifth grade (33%), and had a smaller amount choose first through third (23.7%) or kindergarten (12.1%).

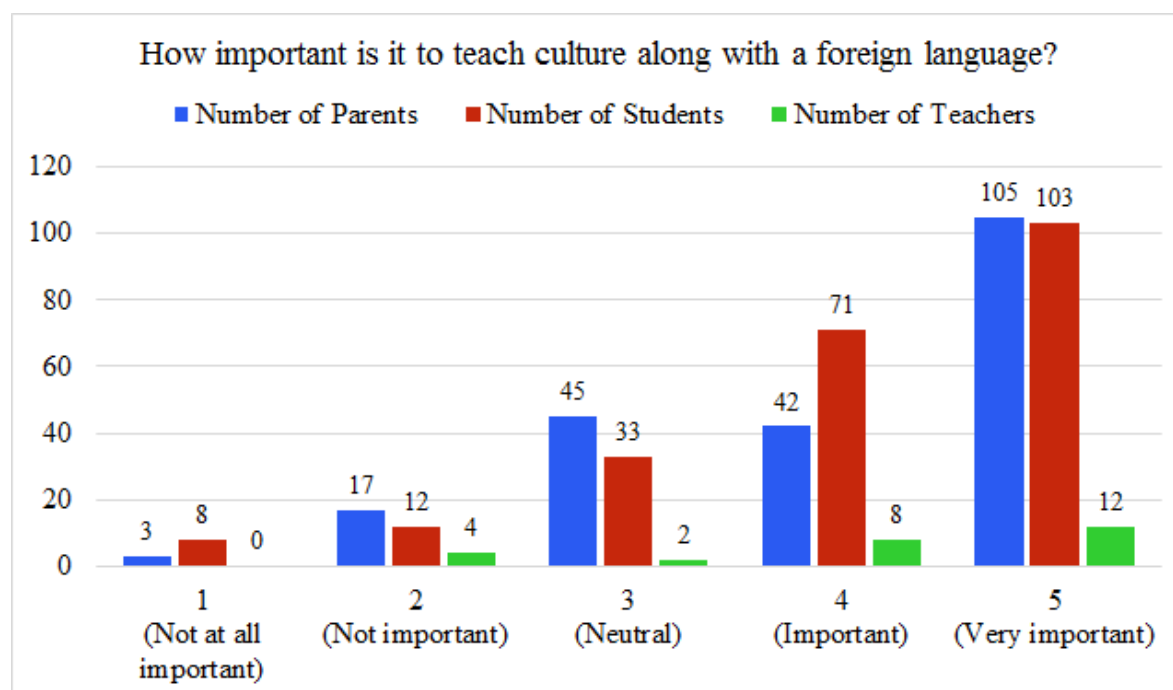


For the amount of years learning a foreign language, 54.7% of parents thought that CVUSD should require four or more years of foreign language instruction and 19.3% thought at least two years. 42.3% of teachers thought that students should take five or more years of a foreign language and 23.1% thought at least two years was sufficient. 23.3% of students chose four or more years and 30.8% chose at least two years.



Regarding time, 63.7% of parents, 50% of teachers, and 59.5% of students selected that students should have ten to forty percent of their education in or about a foreign language if a FLP was implemented. 20.3% of parents, 19.2% of teachers, and 26.4% of students selected that it should be fifty percent (equal time in English and the foreign language).

Lastly, on a Likert scale from one (not at all important) to five (very important), 49.5% of parents, 46.2% of teachers, and 45.4% of students marked the importance of culture as a five, whereas 9.4% of total participants marked a one or two combined.



When asked if “CVUSD should offer an optional foreign language program in at least one public elementary school,” 92.5% of parents, 88.5% of teachers, and 91.2% of students--a total of 426 participants--responded yes.

Consequently, 73.6% of parents said that they would “most likely” enroll their child in a FLP if there was an option in PES, 21.7% said “possibly,” and 4.7% said “no.” 44.3% of parents affirmed that a FLP would be a deciding factor in choosing an elementary school, though because their children are currently in PES, it should be noted that 39.6% would consider switching their child to a different school if it had a FLP. Two concerns of switching

schools that parents frequently mentioned were their child's interest (n=12) in the FLP and the location of the other school (n=17).

Interview Analysis

Because principal support is essential to establish a successful FLP, each principal from the six surveyed PESs were interviewed for an average of twenty minutes each. Some of the questions pertained to if they felt that a FLP could fit within their school, if they would be supportive of a FLP, and their opinion on which type of FLP would best fit their school/CVUSD. Notably, not all principals have researched FLPs, so some did not know which would work best or how they would work within their school.

One statement that all (6) principals agreed upon was that foreign languages are valuable and important. Five principals mentioned that knowing a foreign language helps people on an "international" or "global" scale. Principal A said that "we live in a global society...in a growing time of where you need to be able to connect with people in other languages." Principal B said "internationally they [students] would be more prepared for the future...and they would be able to participate better in the business world if they were bilingual." Principal D said "We live in an international community; we're all much more connected now via digital resources." Principal F said that foreign language education "would be a great addition for our students to expand their global education; that's a component that's missing."

Additionally, all principals agreed that culture should be taught alongside a foreign language. Three principals valued culture as "very important," two valued it as "really important," and one as "critical." As principal F stated, "it's important to give students more global awareness and appreciation of how people live in different areas of the world. It helps create more tolerance and understanding of people."

In regards to which language would be ideal for CVUSD students, all principals chose Spanish. Their reasoning was relative to the district on a local perspective, including the “big population of Spanish speakers” and the “geography” (Principal C & Principal B). However, three principals mentioned Chinese as a second option with the reasoning of the smaller population of Asian families and benefit of Chinese in the “international job market” (Principal E).

The optimal grade level to begin a FLP among principals varied. Four principals said “the younger, the better” in regards to teaching a foreign language, though only two affirmed kindergarten as the optimal time to begin a FLP. Principal F chose second grade because of the high amounts of “curriculum and needs in first grade” which “might be really challenging for the students to do so much language-based activities in English and also add another one.” Principal B said that “to acquire a second language, students have to have success in their first language,” so to have that “firm foundation,” fourth or fifth grade would be optimal to begin a FLP.

Four out of six principals expressed interest and possibility in fostering a FLP at their particular PES. The two principals who stated that their PES could not adopt a FLP reasoned that their PES already has a demanding “specialty program” which a FLP would not be able to overlap. Though two other PESs have “specialty programs,” those principals felt that a FLP could fit. Importantly, as defined by principals, a FLP can range from short, after school classes to a DLI program.

Issues which concerned all principals in the process of establishing a FLP were time, staff, and funding. Principal B summarized the time issue by saying that students’ schedules are “packed with required core essentials.” Staff for a FLP concerned principals because there were two teachers who had a bilingual teaching certification from the six schools, meaning that the school would “need to hire other staff” and “potentially displace current staff”

(Principal A). Though no principal gave a detailed description of the funding issue, all principals noted cost as a problem in establishing a FLP.

Other problems associated with a FLP noted by principals were maintaining enrollment and the school's community feeling. Principal E explained how if students in the later years of the FLP left, they could not be replaced because of the program's structure, resulting in smaller class sizes. Principal D said that "once a school specializes in one area, it starts drawing from outside of its attendance area and starts losing the neighborhood aspect... proximity to the school increases involvement."

To gather the perspective of the CVUSD board, two board members relative to this research were interviewed, though their credibility shall not be further revealed due to their request to remain anonymous. When asked if PES should have an optional FLP, Interviewee A responded, "it's a great option to have if there are resources to support it, but what's better is to have a plan that's systematic, building from one grade to the next." Interviewee B responded that "the question would be if it were a program that continued into middle school and high school, but if it's just in elementary, that wouldn't be as optimum." When asked if there's a FLP that would best fit, Interviewee A said "no... the research does state very clearly that the 90/10 models have a higher success rate than the 50/50 in order to build biliteracy and biculturalism." Interviewee B said she "would choose the 50/50 model."

A different issue that both board members mentioned in implementing a FLP into PES is that "the parents have to buy into the program and believe in the research" (Interviewee A).

Discussion

By finding the perspectives of people in CVUSD towards an optional FLP in PES, there can be shown reason to implement one, and a general understanding of which type would fit best according to the perspectives of parents, district staff, and students.

Community Interest

As shown by the participants' ratings of the importance for CVUSD students to learn a foreign language, the community majority values foreign languages and finds it important for CVUSD students to learn and know a foreign language. The reasons as to why people in CVUSD value foreign languages are mainly in the cultural and long term benefits of a foreign language rather than the cognitive benefits. To elaborate, though research such as of Ivers, Ivers, & Duffey has proven the numerous cognitive benefits to learning a foreign language, all survey groups have no more than a fifty percent selection ratio of choosing cognitive benefits (with the exception of students at 54.9%), a greater understanding of a person's first language, and improved performance in other classes as values of learning a foreign language (2013). On the other side, where over fifty percent of survey participants selected the values, including more job opportunities, cultural diversity, and an expanded world view; there is also research proving these benefits of foreign languages (Zelasko & Antunez, 2000; Vogel, 2001). Hence, participants are aware of the cultural and global benefits of foreign languages and thus would support teaching culture along with a foreign language. Multicultural lessons are also part of the success of a bilingual immersion program (Quintanar-Sarellana, 2004). However, the majority of participants did not select an increased global economy as a foreign language value, which is a world benefit (Vogel, 2001). Significantly, by knowing the reasons as to why people in CVUSD value foreign languages, a FLP can shape its goals relative to the community's reasoning. For instance, because cultural diversity is a significant value among participants, the FLP should include cultural lessons about different cultures where the foreign language is spoken.

Another important implication from this research from the sample of how many parents in CVUSD are interested in a PES FLP. As mentioned previously, SB 1174 requires at least 20 parents from the same grade or 30 parents from the same school to request a FLP

in order for the district to need to offer one as possible. Revealed by the parent survey, out of the 212 responses from six PESs, 196 parents claim that CVUSD should offer a FLP in PES, and 202 parents say they would possibly or most likely enroll their child in “an option for their child to begin learning a foreign language” in PES if it is available. Though parents have not requested a FLP, it is evident that they would prefer to have an option to enroll their child in a FLP in PES, and that there is a sufficient number of parents to take action to make a FLP in PES possible.

Markedly, 84 parents answered that they would consider switching schools if that other school had a FLP. Thus, if a certain elementary school has qualities making it a more suitable school for a FLP, there would be parents willing to consider switching their child’s school to enroll in the program, increasing enrollment. If they would switch schools, two common concerns among those parents are the distance to the school and their child’s interest. To address their concerns, the FLP would need to be in an area of local proximity to the largest amount of parents interested in the FLP.

The parent perspective is significant in implementing a FLP because they decide if their children enroll and remain in the program. Thus, their support in, belief of, and desire to become a part of the program is important for the FLP to become successful. In sum, parents thought a FLP should begin in kindergarten, last a minimum of four years (as they thought should be required of CVUSD students), have less than half of the school day taught in the foreign language, and teach culture. Significantly, these findings uncover which type of FLP parents would prefer to enroll their child in.

Type of FLP

As shown from the data, CVUSD values foreign languages as an important subject to learn. Despite this, CVUSD students are not given the option to become fluent in a foreign language solely through public education. Henceforth, the foreign language options should be

improved upon. Knowing that immersion programs have the goal of fluency (Table 1), a type of DLI program should be investigated as the possible type of FLP for a CVUSD PES (Gilzow & Rhodes, 2000).

There is no one right amount of time spent in each language in a DLI. Though board members favored programs of fifty percent or higher in second language instruction to begin with since those have been shown to be more effective in achieving fluency, parents opted for the less than fifty percent option. A possible reason for this is that parents value English over the second language, and have the current notion that a DLI program with more instruction in the second language will setback their child in English. Both board members highlighted parents' beliefs as a possible challenge: parents have to understand the initial setbacks their child will face as a result of learning two languages instead of one. To sustain a successful immersion program, parents must trust the process, keep their child enrolled, and believe that by the end of the program, students will have mastered both languages. If parents lose faith in the program's validity, they could remove their child from the program part way through, likely permanently shrinking that class level's size.

Though this study focuses on elementary school, future studies could expand onto secondary public education's attitudes towards a continual FLP through primary and secondary school.

Limitations

In surveying students, the majority of surveys were distributed to them through their foreign language classes in order to have a higher likelihood of a greater amount of participants. For the reason that the survey topic (foreign languages) related to their subject, some foreign language teachers advocated more than other teachers would for their students to take the survey. The limitation in getting more results from foreign language classes is the majority of students who took the survey were currently enrolled a foreign language class

which could create bias in the survey results. However, though 97% of students who took the survey either had previously taken or were currently taking a foreign language class, that high school required students to have at least one year of a foreign language.

This study provides a general answer as to which type of FLP, a DLI, should be implemented. More specific data that could narrow down the FLP options are the available resources. The cost of a FLP incorporates staffing, materials, and classroom space; cost is a factor that is essential to address when considering plausibility. Cost is considered a limitation to this paper because is not accounted for, yet is pivotal in deciding to implement a FLP. Future research could be conducted on the funding for a FLP and on finding adequate staff to support the program.

Conclusion

The absence of a FLP with the goal of fluency in CVUSD PES is addressed by finding the community's attitudes towards foreign languages and implementing a FLP into PES. Through the data analysis, CVUSD board members, students, and PES parents, teachers, and principals are shown to have interest and support for a FLP in PES. Deduced by the community's attitudes, a dual language immersion program focusing on Spanish language and culture, beginning in the early years of elementary school, and lasting for a minimum of four years would be adequate. Foreign languages are a subject missing from CVUSD primary school education, and by implementing a FLP into PES, the opportunities for students would be enriched in a way that benefits both them and the world.

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