Advisory Committee for English Learners
December 2025

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Amy Graham, Chair 2024-25
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Pattrice Park
Anne Zebra

Staff Liaison: Sam Klein, Supervisor, Office of English Learners

Recommendation 1. Sustained professional development and coaching for all teachers on creating opportunities for speaking and interaction in high school classes.

Alignment to Strategic Plan
Priority: Student Academic Growth and Success
Performance Objective: Growth in Reading & Math
Strategies: (1) Deliver curriculum through rigorous, evidence-based and culturally responsive instruction (2) Provide professional learning ..to include sheltered instructional strategies to support the four domains of language development.

SUMMARY
Because of the recent changes to the secondary EL program, including enrolling newcomers in English 9 and encouraging students at all EL levels to take advanced courses, our committee was interested in learning how high school English learners feel about their progress. To that end, we met with high school ELs at multiple sites for feedback on how they assess their education thus far. We discovered that students expressed a strong interest in challenging coursework to support their high academic aspirations but they want and need support to succeed. The students specifically detailed situations in which they were not able to comprehend the teacher or the classwork, and identified a need for more opportunities to practice speaking and interacting with each other and English-proficient peers. Because interaction and the production of language is the foundation for reading and writing growth and essential for building academic content and language proficiency, teachers must intentionally build in time for students to produce and interact with the academic content and vocabulary, and not just remain passive listeners. This is especially crucial given that APS English learners are encouraged to enroll in challenging high school courses and to seek an advanced diploma. Indeed, there are currently about 320 high school English Learners levels 1-4 enrolled in an AP, IB, or dual-enrollment course.To assist in the students' academic and language growth and success, we recommend sustained professional development and coaching for all teachers on creating opportunities for speaking and interaction in high school classes, in addition to the scaffolding strategies already in place.

Budgetary Implications
Budget neutral

Committee vote: 5 in favor, 0 opposed **Date:** 11/19/25

DETAIL

Introduction: During spring 2025, committee members met with small groups of English learners at two high schools (Washington Liberty and Wakefield) and one program (Arlington Career Center) in order to obtain qualitative student feedback on their academic progress. Students came from diverse backgrounds and first languages. Beginners (levels 1 and 2 of English proficiency) met separately from intermediate students (levels 3 and 4). Summaries of each session are linked in the Appendix.

The committee explored three topics and questions with the students:

Topic 1: Support for learning English
1a. Do you feel like you are making progress in learning English? Why or why not?
1b. Is there anything that has been especially helpful to you in learning English?
1c. What additional support(s) do you need to successfully learn English?

Topic 2: Support in content classes
2a. What kind of support do you receive as an English learner in your content classes such as math and science?
2b. Can you tell us about an especially positive experience in a content class? or an especially negative experience?
2c. What additional support(s) do you need to be successful in your content classes?

Topic 3: Academic goals and graduation
3a. Do you know what classes you need for graduation?
3b. What are your academic goals? Have you spoken to a teacher, a counselor or other person at school about those goals?
3c. Is there anything that is making it challenging to reach your goals?
3d. What additional support would help you reach your academic goals?

The focus of this recommendation is on the first two topics, as all students reported frequent communication with counselors on graduation requirements. The students uniformly reported high academic aspirations and a desire to continue their education at the post-secondary level, and are aware of requirements they need to meet for graduation. They welcomed opportunities to take advanced classes that forced them to improve their English skills and work with English-fluent peers. (Note: the students in our focus groups were selected by the schools. All seemed to be on an academic track to graduate. We would have also liked to have spoken with students identified as SLIFE–students with limited or interrupted formal education–and those struggling with attendance or other challenges. Perhaps these interviews can happen in the future.)

Regarding the Topic 1 and 2 questions, while students all reported feeling like they are making progress in learning English, they clearly stated they need support that they don't always get, often due to large classes, feeling afraid to ask questions, teachers talking too fast or pacing too

quickly, or teachers assuming students understand more than they actually do. They were, however, able to identify helpful instructional strategies (all consistent with research) that helped them learn both English and other academic content.These included co-teaching, vocabulary preview, bilingual dictionaries, consistent routines across the four language domains (speaking, listening, reading, writing), peer support, instructional assistants, and explanations/videos in Spanish. (While *translanguaging* is possible in other languages, only Spanish was mentioned for first language support.) Students who had been given well-designed opportunities to speak and interact with English-fluent individuals remembered those experiences and strongly endorsed them. For example, several students recalled that one English Language Development (ELD) teacher routinely asked students to preview new vocabulary and then to work with a partner to discuss questions using the key words before presenting to the class.

Other students (particularly those at level 3 and 4) said that their intensive or advanced classes helped them learn English because the language demands were higher, but many times they felt lost in class. Teachers generally talked too fast or paced the course too quickly, believing that the students understood more than they did. Students hesitated to ask questions about grades or content, not feeling comfortable speaking the language. They then felt isolated in their classes rather than part of a learning community. They generally reported they just want more time to speak and interact in class. It was most helpful when the teacher created structured time for interaction with English-proficient peers to review content and assist the English learners in building speaking skills. This combination of speaking and interaction supports language skills, content knowledge, and simply confidence.

A 2024 American Instructional Resources Survey published by Rand revealed that half of US teachers serving multilingual students do not feel adequately prepared to meet their needs, and that leaders should prioritize professional learning opportunities to support educators. APS has certainly provided years of professional development on working with English learners, including strategies for building student interaction, both as part of the DOJ Settlement Agreement and earlier through APS's long-time commitment to SIOP Implementation. In addition, Goal 1 of the Office of English Learners 5-Year Strategic Action Plan mandates high quality instruction that integrates the four language domains of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Yet despite the years of professional offerings, conversations with students indicate that there is still too much "teacher talk", to the detriment of English language development. Moreover, while APS has adopted an ELD curriculum that focuses on speaking and listening, our student interviews suggest that not all teachers are implementing the ELD curriculum as designed. This means some students may not be getting adequate speaking practice in their specific class designed for this purpose. As a result, we recommend **continued professional development and coaching focused specifically on speaking and interaction,** incorporating interactive strategies within the adopted curriculum and motivating teachers to make these part of their instructional routines.

Recommendation 2. Ensure staff with co-taught sections have the common planning time needed for the effective implementation of this instructional strategy. As a practical matter, EL teachers should work with no more than two content teachers to allow for sufficient and effective teacher collaboration

Alignment to Strategic Plan
Priority: Student Academic Growth and Success

Performance Objective: Growth in Reading & Math
Strategies: (1) Deliver curriculum through rigorous, evidence-based and culturally responsive instruction (2) Increase co-taught sections… to support the inclusion of English learners.

SUMMARY

Discussions with high school English learners and teachers at multiple sites identified co-teaching as a successful strategy for developing English language skills while mastering challenging content. Careful planning between teachers, however, is required to identify the vocabulary, grammar, opportunities for speaking, listening, reading, writing, and peer interaction within the content that English learners need to progress. This is especially important as APS implements initiatives to maximize EL participation in intensive and advanced classes. Conversations with EL teachers indicate that they, too, welcome the opportunities to co-teach and help students succeed, but are frustrated when there is no time to effectively plan instruction with their content partners. We therefore recommend that **EL teachers should work with no more than two content teachers to allow for sufficient and effective teacher collaboration.**

Budgetary Implications

Budget neutral

Committee vote: 5 in favor, 0 opposed **Date:** 11/19/25

DETAIL

In our discussions with students, co-teaching emerged as a successful instructional strategy. Students felt that co-taught classes were helpful largely because they made it much easier to get questions answered and content explained. Some students described a situation in which the co-teacher was responsible for the English learners who felt ignored by the content teacher. Students in one school enrolled in mainstream English 11 especially appreciated an EL co-teacher who took them in a small group to the library to reteach the material, as their general education class was too large and noisy for them to follow the instruction and they were afraid to talk.

Co-teaching is mentioned throughout the OEL 5-Year Strategic Action Plan:

- Goal 3 states “Increase ELs’ access to rigorous content and provide instructional support for their participation and achievement in coursework.”
- Strategy 3.4 recommends implementing co-teaching **including shared planning time**.
- Goal 7.2 recommends co-taught classes to increase EL participation in a variety of programs.
- Strategy 9.2 prioritizes EL teacher staffing in the master schedule, **with access to common planning time**.

We know that co-teaching in high school has increased in APS. Currently, about 70% of secondary EL teachers participate in this format, and when successful, students report benefitting from the extra support. However, conversations with EL teachers indicate frustration and inefficiency, due to:

- Being assigned to more than two co-taught classes, which limit time for collaboration.
- Being assigned to wildly varying content areas, limiting time to build content expertise or even awareness

- Having schedules changed with little notice, sometimes to a completely different content area.

We understand the scheduling challenges in trying to meet the mandate to increase co-teaching. However, without thoughtfully considering how to manage EL/content teacher partnerships, the benefits of co-teaching are difficult to realize. These benefits include:

- Creating strong language and content objectives
- Content teachers learning strategies from EL teachers for effective differentiation, such as developing vocabulary, employing imagery, and using sentence frames and other scaffolding
- Developing joint classroom activities to build interaction (per our Recommendation 1)
- Having time to discuss individual student needs

It is true that curriculum is available online and that teachers can communicate electronically. However, if an EL teacher is spread out among various teachers and content areas with little time to coordinate with content partners, as we have learned is happening in the scramble to implement co-teaching at all English learner levels, it is difficult to implement co-teaching effectively, certainly not until partners have experience working together. Research reports and teachers confirm that the least effective co-teaching model is for EL teachers to stand around in the classroom like "well-paid aides", as one teacher remarked. The most effective co-taught classrooms are those in which it is difficult to distinguish between the content and EL teacher, a goal which requires time to plan. In fact, the ideal situation is a multi-year co-teaching partnership to fully allow the EL teacher to learn the content and the content teacher to internalize effective language scaffolding strategies.

APS has acted upon its commitment to hire more English learner teachers despite the challenging budget environment. This commitment is greatly appreciated. But common planning time is also essential to creating the kind of lessons that promote deep understanding of both content and language for English learners. In fact, the lessons developed through common, thoughtful planning time will benefit all students, not just English learners. *Any* student who needs some extra attention paid to developing vocabulary, building background, or summarizing content orally and in writing will benefit from carefully prepared lessons that effective co-teaching promotes. **Although we recognize the scheduling challenges, we recommend and urge secondary schools to promote effective co-teaching by pairing EL teachers with no more than two content partners to allow time for sufficient and effective common planning.**

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Staff Response

Appendix

ACEL Student Feedback, Spring 2025