



## Analysis of ELL Plan Information Sessions

### Key Findings

1. Around 160 people participated in informational sessions this spring to gather input to guide the development of the English Language Learner Plan.
2. Participants called for the district to expand existing ELL programming, pay extra attention to staffing needs, involve families early and often in ELL programming decisions, and prioritize language development.

### Background

The Office of Multilingual and Global Education (OMGE) is developing an English Language Learner (ELL) Plan designed to accomplish three goals:

1. Provide effective instruction to meet our ELL students' needs
2. Distribute ELL services more equitably across the district
3. Prepare our workforce to teach the growing number of ELL and bilingual students in our schools

As part of this plan's development, OMGE has asked for input from various stakeholders, including staff, parents, and community leaders. During May and June 2015, OMGE staff conducted six information sessions designed to gather this input. OMGE leadership asked the Research & Program Evaluation Office (RPEO) to analyze notes taken by OMGE staff during these meetings to identify themes in the feedback. This report outlines those themes.

### Data Collection and Analysis Methods

OMGE collected data through six information sessions between May and June of 2015. These sessions were open to the public and offered in both English and Spanish. Specific demographic information was not available on participants, as it was not consistently tracked. In total, approximately 160 people provided input via the information sessions. The table outlines the session details, as recorded by the notetakers.

**Table: Description of ELL Plan Information Sessions**

Date	Location	Number of Participants	Attendee Characteristics (if available)
5/26/15	Goodman Community Center	12	Not available
5/27/15	Meadowood Community Center	18	Not available
5/28/15	Lussier Community Center	15	MMSD staff and ELL parents
6/2/15	Vera Court Community Center	25	Primarily Spanish-speaking ELL parents from variety of East attendance area elementary schools; some Hmong speaking parents
6/3/15	Urban League	65	Primarily parents from Midvale/Lincoln, mostly in the English side of DLI programming at those locations; parents not in DLI; MMSD staff; and several Hmong parents
6/4/15	Bridge Lakepoint Community Center	25	Primarily Spanish-speaking ELL parents from La Follette attendance area elementary schools

The notes gathered during the information sessions focused on three questions of interest:

1. What do you see as the future implications for MMSD, based on growing ELL enrollment?
2. What does ESL or bilingual education look like at your school?
3. How can we increase access to bilingual education across the district?

To determine the themes among these meetings, we conducted a qualitative analysis on the responses. For all data collected, we analyzed word frequencies and searched for emergent themes and trends. We then used descriptive coding (i.e., summarizing in a word the basic topic of a passage of data) to categorize the topic(s) of each comment and used structural coding to indicate which question prompted the response. Due to the significant thematic overlap between the answers provided for each question, we used the same set of codes across all questions.

There are two main limitations to the findings of this report. First, the viewpoints represented in this report may not be reflective of the MMSD community at large. Since attendance at sessions was voluntary, it is likely that those who chose to attend already had a vested interest in ELL programming. Other key groups could hold potentially different viewpoints on the current state of programming and how to move forward. Second, the notetaking varied in its completeness, including how comprehensive the notes were (e.g., verbatim versus summary statements) and the indication of who was speaking (e.g., facilitator versus participant). Due to this variation and the fact that RPEO staff who analyzed the notes were not in the room for the conversations, the nuances of these conversations may not have been readily apparent from the notes.

### Findings

As mentioned above, although the information sessions focused on three questions of interest, attendees’ responses to these questions were often indirect and overlapping, making it difficult to conduct an analysis focused around each question. Although the questions of interest were specific and distinct, responses generally focused on ideas for change and improvement. Therefore, we considered the responses to all three questions as a whole and sought themes that could inform ELL programming in general.

The graph below shows the percent of comments coded under each theme. The “Other” and “School-Specific Comments” themes represent a wide variety of topics and opinions that do not lend themselves to cohesive analysis.



■ Programming ■ Staffing ■ Family Engagement ■ Language Development ■ Transportation ■ Funding ■ Other ■ School-Specific Comments

Across the six sessions and questions of interest, four themes emerged: expand ELL programming, pay extra attention to staffing needs, involve families early and often, and prioritize language acquisition and retention.

#### Expand ELL Programming

In general, participants expressed support for increased programming for ELL students, citing it as a “priority.” Participants pointed to the need for more access to programs at all levels (4K-12), increased access by school, and more language offerings. They seemed particularly concerned about the lack of support for students at the secondary level, with several participants commenting that little to no services and supports seem to be in place currently for students in middle and high school. They also called for the district to invest in ELL programming adequately, providing transportation, funding, and resources. They want the district to be future-oriented and to “think about developing programs based on future needs and not only for actual needs.”



Of all types of ELL programming, Dual Language Immersion (DLI) received the most attention from participants. Participants expressed support for the current DLI programs and, if anything, wanted more DLI sites to open throughout the district to allow access for all students, stating that limits based on geography or transportation are “unfair.” They also called for immersion programming for other languages, and expansion of the current Spanish-English DLI program into 4K. Participants discussed the various models for DLI, including 90/10 versus 50/50 or strand versus whole school, but no consensus emerged from the comments on a preferred option. Overall, participants wanted the district to “adequately support [DLI] programs” because “expecting positive results already is not reasonable especially when some schools don’t do what they are supposed to do.”

It is worth noting that while participants generally expressed support for increased programming, their comments and questions also pointed to the confusion surrounding the current programming available. Participants seemed unclear on what was currently offered, and often asked for programming to be expanded to sites where it already exists. They also explicitly stated that the current programming is confusing for parents, and that they are unclear on what exists and should be accessible to students now. That confusion must be considered as context for the call for increased programming, as clarity around what exists could address some of the requests for additions.

### ***Pay Extra Attention to Staffing Needs***

Staffing concerns came up repeatedly throughout the community conversations, suggesting that participants feel staffing is critical to the success of the ELL plan. They expressed concern that all school staff need a better understanding of the ELL programming and ways to support ELL students; as one participant stated, “cultural shifts in schools as ELL population shifts [means that] all staff will need to learn.” Participants called for more training for all teachers, rather than focusing exclusively on those who teach bilingually. As one participant stated, “a PD plan to support teachers in bilingual education should also include principals and other important school staff that need to understand bilingualism as well in order to provide high-quality support.” They also wanted leadership within building, and particularly principals, to have a deep understanding of ELL needs and to prioritize programming, which includes the hiring and retention of staff who are focused on ELL students and families. As one participant stated, “Principals knowing the program and understanding language acquisition will facilitate better placement, clustering of students, and master schedules in order to provide better services and programming.”

Participants called for more bilingual teachers and bilingual resource specialists. Many participants acknowledged that there seemed to be a shortage of bilingual teachers available to hire, but suggested several ways to recruit a new pool of bilingual teachers, such as working with university training programs, recruiting nationally and internationally, grooming new teachers from within MMSD, and hiring more available candidates from the Madison Spanish-speaking and Latino community. Participants also cited a lack of teachers who are completely proficient in two languages, stating a need for “truly bilingual teachers” who also understand that Spanish vocabulary may vary by region. As one participant stated, “schools need to have more selective processes to hire teachers to make sure they have high levels of linguistic and cultural proficiency.”

### ***Involve Families Early and Often***

Participants expressed a desire for families to be involved early and often in decisions around ELL programming, as the success of ELL programming depends on the families being an integral part of the process. They stated that families will determine the success of the program, both in their support of school-based activities and the reinforcement at home of the skills learned. However, many participants felt that parents now do not have the tools that equip them to adequately support their students, including a complete understanding of the programming available and constant communication with school-based staff. For example, one participant called for the district to “educate parents about programs offered and staff in schools.”

Communication emerged as a critical barrier to the kind of family involvement necessary for ELL programming success. Participants expressed concern that communication between school staff and parents was inconsistent, unclear, and not accommodating of family needs. For many participants, “communication can be teacher-dependent,” leading to inequities within and across schools. Unsurprisingly, participants mentioned language barriers explicitly, as many parents



felt shut out of the school community because of a lack of English skills and school staff who were unable to communicate in the parents' native languages. According to one participant, this creates an unwelcoming environment, as "Hispanic parents don't go to school because they do not speak Spanish and we feel afraid, ashamed, and we do not know what to do." Participants wanted schools and the district to reach out to parents via existing community venues, social media, and informal networks, giving multiple opportunities for learning and engagement.

### ***Prioritize Language Acquisition and Retention***

Participants believe that language acquisition and retention should be key priorities in the ELL plan moving forward, calling for the ELL plan to "maintain home language and [help students] reach full proficiency in English." They emphasized that English acquisition and proficiency matters greatly, both for native and non-native speakers, as it is necessary for academic success and, for many, college, career, and community readiness. As one participant stated, students need to "reach sufficient English skills so that they can go to university." Participants expressed concerns over whether program models currently are achieving this level of academic proficiency, and whether supports at the higher grades are pushing students to achieve English proficiency. Some participants even went so far as to suggest that the primary goal of the program should be English acquisition, believing that English proficiency would serve as a gateway to success. As one participant stated, "I'm concerned because while I want my child to speak more than one language, I want my child to be able to integrate into a community that speaks English."

Many participants believe that the ELL plan has an obligation to help students retain their native language, as native language proficiency is both a skill and a piece of a student's cultural identity. Some participants believed that "students lose their home language if they don't study it" in school and some expressed how they "value that the kids are speaking in Spanish." This loss of native language fluency would damage a student's sense of identity and connection to their culture. Further, by explicitly making it part of the curriculum, many participants believed the district would be teaching students to have pride in their heritage and their bilingual abilities, focusing on language being "asset-based for child, family, community."

While most discussions focused on the need for language acquisition for those students who are either non-native English speakers or English speakers enrolled in immersion programs, some participants also mentioned the need for all students to learn another language. They cited "lots of students interested in becoming bilingual." By making this a district priority, bilingual education would be seen as an asset for all.

## **Conclusion**

The input gathered from the six informational sessions on the ELL plan reveal four consistent themes: programming, staffing, family engagement, and language development. Participants called for the expansion of ELL programming, with varying ideas on how this expansion could look and specific thoughts on DLI. They believed the district should pay extra attention to staffing needs, both in training existing staff to support ELL students and in finding highly qualified bilingual staff to expand existing capacity in schools. Participants stated that families should be involved in decisions around ELL programming early and often and wanted communication, in particular, to be more consistent and clear. Finally, participants expressed that ELL programming must prioritize language acquisition and retention, both emphasizing English proficiency and, specifically for ELL students, maintaining their native language as part of their skillset and cultural identity.