

A BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

Aligning Our Targets: Proficiency, Learning, Assessment

THE MEMPHIS CITY SCHOOLS' STORY

by Alyssa Villarreal

In celebration of NNELL's 25th anniversary, it is important to note how far we have come! Twenty-five years ago, early language programs were fighting for their place in the K-16 continuum. Just getting a program started and sustained was the focus. Over time, the viability of the types of programs came under examination and we refined our practice.

Today, we continue to refine our practice and improve our worth with data. Our programs are now focused on being learner-centered, proficiency-focused, and intertwined with 21st Century Skills and the Common Core. We have made so many strides in early language learning; in fact, it is no secret: any program can grow. Through the lens of one district's journey of program refinement, we will identify a blueprint for success by aligning our targets.

REFLECTION ON CURRENT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Is your program where you want it to be? Is it produc-

ing the results that you desire? Are students yielding the greatest results possible or are they even outscoring the norms? Consider asking yourself the following questions:

- Are the goals of the program realistic? Have the goals been communicated to all the stakeholders: parents, teachers, administrators, the school board, and the community?
- Does the program have enough time for sufficient language exposure to meet the targeted proficiency levels?
- Is the curriculum focused on meaningful, engaging activities that do not focus on language alone but also focus on integrating language and content from the regular curriculum so that the students are cognitively engaged the entire time?
- Is the curriculum standards-based and thematically organized?
- Does the curriculum make connections to the target culture?

- Is there horizontal articulation so that students experience similar instruction and have similar outcomes when they are studying at the same level but are placed with different teachers?
- Does horizontal articulation lead to appropriate vertical articulation so that students continue to grow as they move from level to level?
- Is there a balance of languages being offered or is only one language being offered?
- Is local funding available so that the program does not have to depend on the vagaries of grant funding?
- Are the instructional activities intrinsically interesting, cognitively engaging and culturally connected?
- Is professional development for the teachers an ongoing part of the program?

In 2004, I asked myself these very questions as I assumed the role of World Language Coordinator of Memphis City Schools (MCS). In my reflection, I found we fell short in many areas. In 2004, 77 of our 125 elementary schools offered a Foreign Language Exploratory (FLEX) language program. Of those 77 programs, the implementation ranged from some grades getting instruction to all grades receiving instruction. The program was started with a bottom-up strategy, adding a grade-level each year in each program. Meanwhile, only two middle schools offered any language instruction in their programs. Ultimately, I arrived at the understanding that the bottom-up strategy, while viable, was not yielding the results we wanted in our programs.

In 2005, we began to restructure our program using a top-down approach and by 2006 all of our middle schools offered some sort of language offering and the 12 remaining elementary programs offered FLEX instruction. Our programs were now organized in feeder patterns creating the opportunity for 12 years of continuous study. While this had been a major project, it quickly became apparent that while the structure of the programs made sense, the results were not coming within the current course design. Through an ambitious FLAP project, we went back to the drawing board to look for further refinements to the program that would yield the proficiency we desired for our students.

Today, we have strong feeder patterns across our programs. We have K-12 feeder patterns in Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish as well as AP feeder patterns that serve pre-AP middle school students. We continue to work on articulating curriculum and materials. What we have learned, to-date, is that managing a language program is a journey. You do not wake up one day and find that you have arrived at program perfection! In fact, in education today, you have to wake up every morning ready to reinvent yourself based on the latest research. If, at some point, you can embrace change as a means to providing world-class language instruction to a group of students, then change becomes easier.

It only takes a few focused steps to create or reinvent a successful program. Schools and districts that are moving forward are setting targets, designing instructional pathways to meet those targets and testing internally and externally to ensure they are meeting those

targets (Duncan 2012). I would add a fourth step: reflect and connect to ensure the necessary reflection and following connections are explicit. Let's walk through each step examining them more closely.

STEP 1: SET PROFICIENCY TARGETS

In setting targets, you must consider two main things questions:

1. *What are the exit targets for the entire program?*

Then, beginning with the end target in mind, back map the targets to your program.

2. *What is the exit target for my program?* Keep in mind that setting realistically rigorous targets depends on:

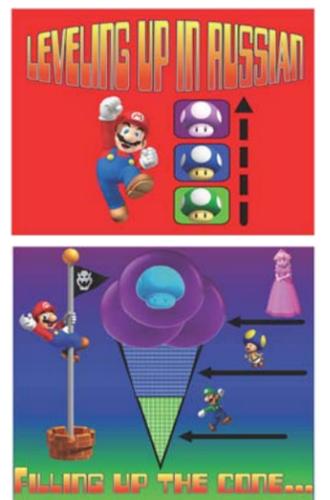
- the amount of time the students receive instruction weekly and
- the frequency with which they receive instruction.

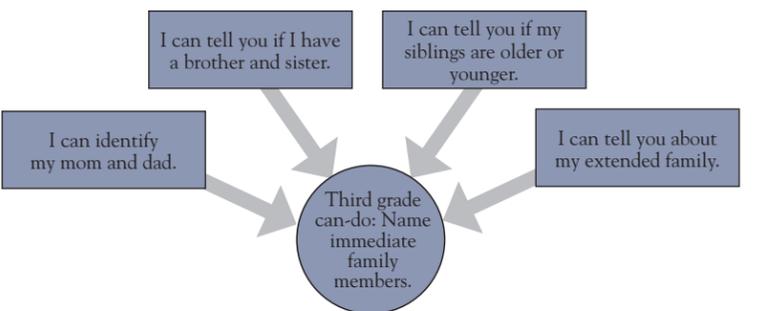
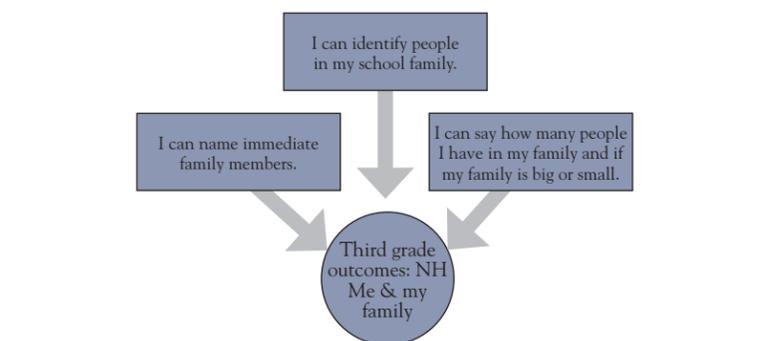
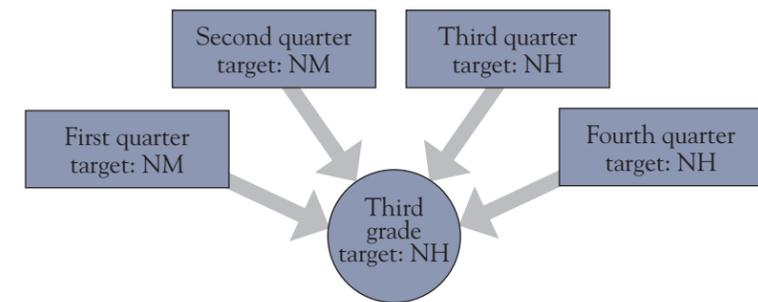
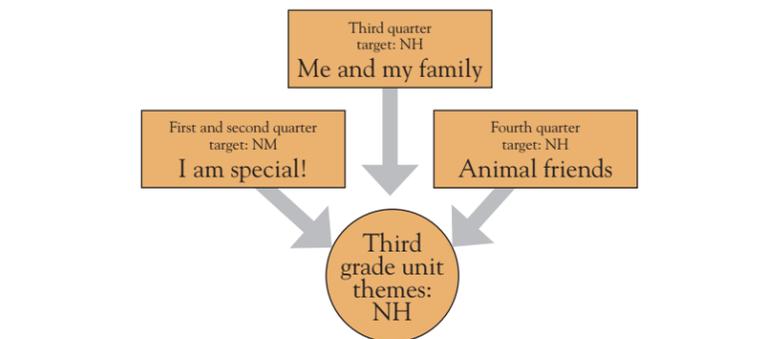
Once you have set the exit target, decide on annual targets by grade level.

It is important to remember to keep expectations high, but not unreachable. We often lower our expectations for younger children unnecessarily. While they may be limited in what they can do in the grand scheme of proficiency, we must create age-appropriate ways for students to demonstrate what they know and can do. Last spring we tested a group of fifth grade students in Chinese who had studied Chinese for only two years. Using the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), in a bold move, two second grade students volunteered to participate in some openings. There was no difference in the performance of the second grade students. In fact, they left excited about what they had done while the fifth grade students were focused on what they could have done better. The second grade students were fearless and excited by the opportunity. We learned from this that we must provide examples of performance that are realistic and still push students to grow linguistically. Just because they are young learners does not mean they cannot build proficiency.

Teach your students about proficiency!

One of my elementary Russian teachers, Keenan Sloan, developed a presentation for his classes (K-5) on proficiency using the language of video gaming. Now, all of our elementary students are focused on "leveling-up" in their modern language classes. Using cartoon characters to bring the idea of moving up the proficiency scale, students now level up through the novice performance levels in order to fill their ice cream cone. To fill up your cone, you expand chunks of language to sentences and then add connecting words to connect sentences. Introducing proficiency to students is critical for success because it makes students partners in the learning process. It gives them some control and rationale for buying in. It also provides the teachers a cue to push





students for better output. For example, if a teacher asks a student what they wear to school and why they wear it and the student answers with a list, the teacher then is able to ask the student if it was a blue or purple item? Or he can encourage the student to level up to blue or purple based on the current performance target. These quick clues empower students to reflect on their performance with immediate feedback and demonstrate improvement, even when working with our youngest students, because the feedback is immediate and age-appropriate.

STEP 2: DESIGN STANDARDS-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL PATHWAYS TO MEET THOSE TARGETS

The biggest “ah-ha” moment for my teachers occurred after OPI testing fifth grade students. When reflecting on what we had learned from the experience (not even the results) the teachers identified focusing on the function of language, focusing on what can students do with the language. With your targets in place and the functions of language identified, identify your unit themes. Be cautious not to use topics, as they are too narrow in scope to get the robust theme you need to build linguistic proficiency. The degree to which you can support content-based instruction is helpful in determining themes. We began by mining possible themes from core curriculum and state standards. Stories also help refine the theme of a unit. Stories are a part of every unit, implementing authentic literature, such as Russian Folk tales, into every unit possible.

Once you have selected the unit themes its time to identify the desired unit outcomes. In MCS, we use *can do statements*. This allows us to write unit outcomes once and use them with a variety of audiences from students to administrators. The *can do statements* are used as the basis for creating daily lessons and allow students to monitor their own language growth and integrate metacognitive skill building in the language classroom. The unit *can do statements* then can be unpacked to create daily performance indicators that students use to focus their learning and teachers use to guide their planning of the instructional pathways for a given lesson. Posting the learning target daily is critical to getting student buy-in and sparking their motivation to participate fully in daily instruction. If you share the learning targets daily and have an agenda of learning experiences, even your most reluctant learners can begin to partner with you in the learning process. Learning targets announced and posted for the duration of the lesson, will create the comfort of knowing what to expect. Following the posted agenda promotes students’ success and the learning environment becomes a partnership for all students.

For world language teachers, learning targets improve instruction and groom realistic expectations for language

learning while breaking the notion that fluency is a destination. We are able to show students how they grow toward proficiency – they further their journey of proficiency. When we set our daily targets, prepare students to meet those targets, and allow them to demonstrate the target’s proficiency, we find success in our classrooms. This is one of the most impactful and critical type of advocacy for language learning, especially early language learning.

STEP 3: TEST INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY TO ENSURE STUDENTS ARE MEETING TARGETS

This has quickly become my favorite part of the process. While the creative process we must engage in to set targets and design learning experiences is enjoyable, assessment provides the feedback that makes it all worthwhile. I often ask my teachers if we don’t know where we are, how do we get better? Success is gratifying; therefore, we need honest feedback to continue our journey toward greater proficiency. In my opinion, language teachers are the models. Fluency is a lifelong learning process.

Internal assessment is a hallmark in our elementary program. Teachers assess daily using the daily targets as the benchmark for gauging interpersonal skills and using SMART. I have never seen students ask to be assessed, but using a clicker system allows students get the personal feedback immediately. From a programmatic standpoint we use common mid-unit assessments and end-of-unit assessments, as well as a common annual assessment. For end-of-unit and annual assessments, teachers switch classes to administer the assessments for a more objective approach to assessing. All teachers report student scores on a data collection form. The data is compiled at the district level and examined by elementary content leaders for feedback on everything from instruction to curriculum and assessment. Implications are vast and assist us in further refining skills. One question that internal assessment does not answer is how well are we really doing? How do we know we are asking the right questions?

Twenty-five years ago, I am not sure there were many options for assessment other than internal measures. Today, we have options for assessment to give us the feedback we need to hone our programs and skills. Due to the size of our district and limited funds, we test samples of students, using OPI, Standards Based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP), and this year ACTFL Assessment of Performance Toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL). We focus our external data collection on listening and speaking skills as this is only the third year of instruction for most of our programs and literacy is just now being explicitly taught. As our programs continue to articulate, reading and writing will be assessed in fifth grade as well. In the meantime, the external assessment has provided us with empowering feedback that has allowed us to focus our curriculum, assessment, and professional growth activities in a manner that deliberately grows our teachers and programs. Whatever option(s) you choose for your program—SOPA, ELLOPA, STAMP, AAPPL, OPI—it is important to get external feedback.

The question I am asked the most is about logistics. How do

we make it happen to interview every student, every unit? The answer was easy and right under our noses. We simply gave ourselves permission to build assessment time into every unit. Each unit ends with two weeks of assessment so we can ensure that instruction proceeds appropriately. Using centers, the teachers set up an interview as one of the centers to keep every student highly engaged in a learning experience. Our teachers also involve the students in the assessment process. Throughout each unit, students use *can-do folios* to track their progress so there are no surprises when the assessment comes. Students are then able to see what they should be working on in order to improve. This process helps the teacher have enough time to give feedback. Low levels of feedback, like what to work on and where students can improve, are easily gleaned from the student responses. Teacher feedback can then be more focused and specific in helping students progress linguistically. Additionally, using student self-assessment helps teachers keep their fingers on the pulse of the class progress toward attainment of the unit targets. Give yourself time to monitor and assess, it is one of the most important things we can do to improve student learning.

STEP 4: REFLECT AND CONNECT

Once you have targets, learning pathways, and data on how it is all working, the most important thing we can do is to reflect and connect. Reflect on the data. According to the data, what are we doing well? Where can we improve? Did anything surprise us?

Use the reflections to reconnect with the targets and learning pathways to refine your work based on the data. Reflect individually and as a team. This is the best team-building exercise you can do. While it was not designed to be team-building, the results are remarkable. When teachers work together to their strengths, the students always win.

We have learned a lot in the past 25 years. We have made unprecedented growth in elementary programs as evidenced by the immersion movements nationally. We will continue to grow and excel because our students need us to continue the journey with them. This is just one example of how programs across the country are engaged in effective instruction and the dedicated professionals who make it all worthwhile for our students.

Take small steps. Programs, like Rome, are not built in a day. Anyone can set targets. Anyone can reflect. Anyone can model best practices. The best part is you don’t have to do it alone or all at once. Take small steps each day, semester and year. Don’t forget to enjoy the journey. The best is yet to come!