

Elementary Exploratory Spanish Program

Grades K-6

Overview

Young children, because of their natural curiosity, physiological adeptness at imitating sounds, and openness to new situations and ideas, find the study of another language an enjoyable experience. Beginning the study of a world language at the earliest age possible provides distinct advantages for the language learner, including:

- A positive attitude toward the language itself (Donato, Tucker, Wudthayagorn, & Igarashi, 2000)
- A positive attitude toward the culture
- Positive self-image
- Improved cognitive skills (Cacavale, 2007)
- Improved test scores (Cooper, Yanosky, Wisenbaker, Jahner, Webb, & Wilbur, 2008) (Taylor, Feyton, Meros, & Nutta, 2008)
- A global perspective
- Improved problem-solving skills (Bialystok, 2005 and 1999)
- Greater success in other academic areas (Curtain and Dahlberg 2010)

Early language acquisition is the foundation upon which a sequential learning experience is built. It leads young learners to a lifelong pursuit of linguistic and cultural learning experiences. Studies have shown that the above-mentioned benefits increase with a length of sequential study. In addition, a length of sequential study provides learners the opportunity to attain a higher level of proficiency in the language (Dominguez & Pessoa 2005). Therefore, school systems are encouraged to begin language instruction as early as possible. Local schools are encouraged to design a well-articulated Grades K-6 world languages program that expands the minimum required content standards.

Elementary school world language programs vary greatly across the state in terms of frequency and intensity of instruction. Frequency refers to how often students receive instruction (one, three, or five days per week) while intensity refers to both the length of time and the quality of instruction. FLEX (Foreign Language Exploratory) programs meet one or two times per week with a total of less than 60 minutes of instruction, while FLES (Foreign Language in Elementary Schools) programs meet four or five days per week with a total of at least 160 minutes of instruction. This document recognizes that students in FLEX programs will have less opportunity to acquire the target language and, therefore, will not reach the same proficiency level as those students in FLES programs. In Mountain Brook City Schools, we follow the FLEX model with students being exposed to an average of 30 minutes a week of Spanish instruction.

From kindergarten to third grade, students learn useful and frequently used phrases. Students are exposed to basic vocabulary throughout these first years, such as colors, numbers, calendar, weather, shapes, community, transportation, body, clothes, family, house, and school. Not only are the students exposed to the Spanish language, but also to the culture. The students will learn about the culture and geography of many Spanish-speaking countries. Instruction is done using authentic objects, traditional crafts, music,

games, technology, and literature. From fourth grade to sixth grade, the basic vocabulary is reviewed and practiced through verbal and written communicative activities. The students will be exposed to many of the Spanish-speaking countries. The curriculum covers geography, landmarks, important people, important events, and interesting facts.

The goal at the elementary level is to provide a strong foundation of cultural and language awareness, in order to facilitate foreign language education at a higher level for each student. The purpose of the program is not for the students to be fluent in Spanish by the time they complete the sixth grade, but to learn basic vocabulary and useful phrases, and to develop an understanding of the Spanish-speaking culture. This will help prepare them to be better citizens in our global society. A significant degree of language proficiency is not an outcome. Although language proficiency is directly proportional to the amount of time spent with the student, students will have sufficient vocabulary to have fun with the language and communicate on a basic level in a structured setting. Students will ultimately develop foundational listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in the target language.