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Taking a Closer Look at High School German Programs

"We have a dynamic teacher. Students want to be in his classes."

Background

In 2007 the Mapping and Enhancing Language Learning (MELL) project surveyed schools online and by phone on whether or not they offered world languages and if so, which languages they offered. In this survey, 27 percent said they offered German, which was significantly less than the 40 percent that said they offered German in our original 2004 World Languages Survey. This was the most obvious drop in percentage in any particular world language program when 2007 and 2004 survey results were compared. We decided to investigate this drop in language offerings further.

During the spring of 2008, the MELL project contacted by email or phone 91 high schools that reported offering German on the MELL Survey or that were listed by the Washington Association for Teachers of German. We heard from counselors, teachers, administrators, and other office staff, and received a total of 75 responses.

To see if there was a noticeable trend in offerings of German classes, we asked the following questions:

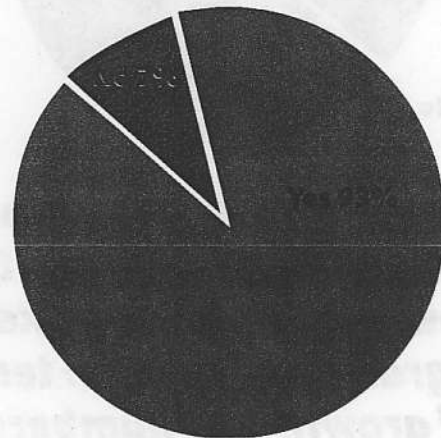
1. Did the school plan to offer German in the following year?
2. Was student interest in German-language classes high or low?
3. Did the school plan to replace the teacher, if their current teacher left or retired?
4. What made a program successful or unsuccessful?

We also tried to ascertain, based on anecdotal reports we had heard of schools dropping German for other new languages, such as Chinese, if the decreased interest in German saw a parallel increase of any kind in Chinese-language programs in the school. Well over 90% of schools indicated no or did not specify, so we did not see a clear trend in that direction, although some of them did indicate an increase in interest in Japanese.

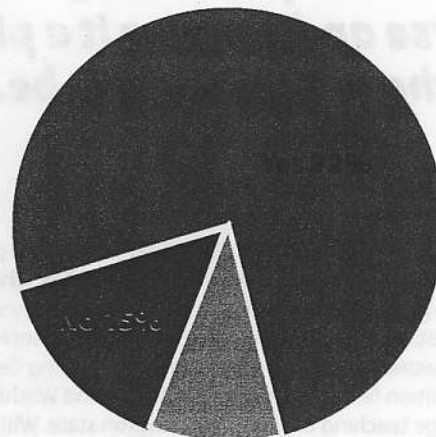
It is important to note that often the person who responded to our questions was not part of the school administration and

therefore could not definitively tell us the school's plans for the future. So the data in this report are most reflective of the current state of German language programs in the schools, not of future plans.

1. Will your school offer German next year?



2. Are the classes full?

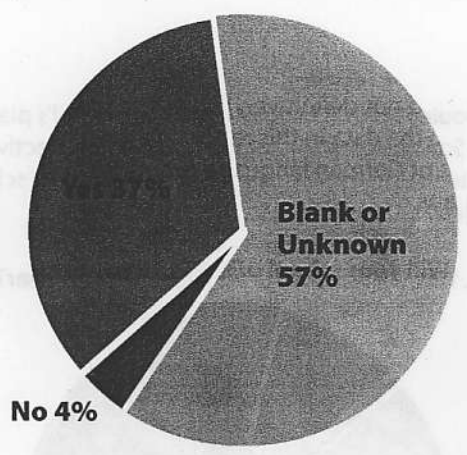


Blank or Unknown 13%

Of the schools interviewed, 93 percent said they would continue to offer German, 7 percent said they would not, while 72 percent said classes were full and 15 percent said they were not. Of those that indicated they would not be offering German next year, one school indicated that the program was dropped when the teacher retired. Another indicated that the school had a fairly small enrollment (about 600 students in grades 9-12) and they already offered Japanese, French, Spanish, and American Sign Language; the enrollment in German was not high enough to justify keeping the program.

Regarding teacher retirement, when asked if the school would hire a new teacher for German when the current teacher retired or left, 37 percent said yes, 4 percent said no, and the majority, 57 percent, said they did not know or it was uncertain.

3. If the current teacher retires or leaves, will your school hire a new teacher for German?



“After 20 years teaching German, I really don’t know exactly what makes a program successful in terms of growth and numbers. It may have to do with the teacher promoting the course and making it a place where kids want to be.”

“The teachers make it successful.”

The Heart of a Successful Program

Almost 60 percent of those that responded explicitly cited that a good teacher and the quality of instruction were at the heart of what made their program successful.

Comments included:

“The passion and commitment of the instructor.”

“The present program is well-organized, rigorous, and engaging. The class is taught in such a manner as to allow for differentiated instruction and different learning styles of the students. [The instructor] is a well-trained and experienced teacher.”

“The determination of the teacher.”

Other factors that respondents felt played a role in making a program successful included: exchanges with Germany such as GAPP (German American Partnership Program), engagement with outside German-related activities and groups, and technology that enhanced learning. Reasons for struggling German programs included schools unable to find qualified teachers, pressure on students to take other classes, too many languages offered in a small school, and budget cuts.

Implications for Future Study

Clearly our survey results just begin to explore the landscape of world languages being offered in our high schools. From our data, we might conclude that German language offerings are still on a decline in our state, but because we did not talk directly to school administrators we can’t be sure of the actual decline we might expect in the future. With the decline that we do see, we need to begin asking further questions: What is the reason for this decline? Is German seen as less important than other languages to students and administrators? Are administrators the ones making the decisions and are the decisions being made strategically? Are there enough German teachers available to teach? Are students learning German in other settings, such as Online Learning or Running Start (where high school students attend classes at the local community college)?

The Mapping and Enhancing Language Learning (MELL) project was initiated in 2006 by four National Resource Centers at the University of Washington’s Jackson School of International Studies, which received funding through the U.S. Department of Education’s Title VI program to launch a four-year project to collect data on world language learning and teaching in Washington K-12 schools. The Center for Global Studies, Center for West European Studies (CWES), East Asia Center (EAC), and the Ellison Center for Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies (REECAS) are working with the UW Language Learning Center, Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Washington State Coalition for International Education, and Washington Association for Language Teaching (WAFLT) to establish an understanding of world language teaching trends in Washington state. With funding from the Title VI program grants and a State Innovations grant from Longview Foundation, the MELL project is creating a series of policy briefs based on the data collected through the MELL surveys of schools. For further information, call the Language Learning Center at 206.543.0563 or email mellwa@u.washington.edu. Web: depts.washington.edu/mellwa