Showcasing Exemplary Programs and Providing a Blueprint for Improvement: The Pennsylvania PEP Awards

By Thekla Fall

One of the elements most vital to the success of a K–12 language program is an administrator's understanding of quality in world language programs. To be credible, this definition cannot come only from the in-house department chair or supervisor. The message needs to come from the language profession and be reinforced regularly. Program effectiveness should also be demonstrated in ways that administrators understand (i.e., quantifiable, district-wide assessment data). Without such data, undesirable program changes can be made without full realization of short- and long-term consequences.

Administrators and teachers must work together to create exemplary language programs. World language professionals need to demonstrate that scheduling decisions and program cuts matter, providing planning time is important, and staff development opportunities are vital. Furthermore, teachers play a major role in maintaining and improving their own skills and in motivating students to continue to higher levels of instruction. All of these are critical for the benefit of student language proficiency and the overall success of a program.

There have been many top-down, national calls for reform in foreign language programs. This article introduces a "bottom-up" initiative which allows schools to self-select to promote and/or improve their programs: the Pennsylvania State Modern Language Association (PSMLA) Exemplary Program (PEP) Awards.

The PEP Awards Program has two important goals. One is to provide outside validation and showcase high quality Pennsylvania high school language programs that opt to participate. The second is to enable schools to use PEP materials as a blueprint to spur improvements that will have a meaningful and measurable effect on the learning outcomes of students. The ultimate aim is to promote and propagate best practices in language programs.

Program Origins

The PEP Awards program emerged from a specific need for guidelines in the Pittsburgh Public School District (PPS). As an example, in the mid-1990s, one of the district's middle school principals was very excited about her great new program. "Every student in my building is learning Spanish!" she proudly declared. That seemed like great news; unfortunately it was not the whole story. It turned out that although the school had 550 students, there was only one Spanish teacher. This meant students received instruction in one class per week (or less) resulting in a program where students end up saying, "I studied Spanish for years, but didn't learn a thing."

> How do principals determine what constitutes a good foreign language program?
>
> How can we help them make effective programming decisions?

The principal's intent to provide all students with language instruction was laudable, but the resources were insufficient. What was even more worrisome was that the principal was convinced she was doing the right thing. How could changes be suggested to her in a tactful way? The parents were happy to have a Spanish program. How could they be informed as to what constitutes a good program? And, most importantly, how can the language profession provide information to administrators to help them make effective programming decisions from the onset?

To remedy this and other similar situations, PPS designed elementary, middle school, and high school program profiles in the form of three rubrics to allow individual program advantages and shortcomings to be graphically highlighted. These rubrics were given out to principals at meetings along with their district-wide, student oral proficiency test results—a potent combination. Principals could graphically see how their programming decisions affected test scores. They could compare their school to other schools. We got their attention by using concrete data.

Over several years, major benefits of this type of data were observed. The middle school principal with the 550+ students added a second teacher the following year (still not ideal but an improvement). It quickly became clear that district-wide test results and the program rubric were powerful documents. It was this tangible, positive impact at PPS that inspired PSMLA to create the state-wide PEP Award program, revising the PPS high school rubric into the PEP rubric (see sidebar on p. 55).

The PSMLA PEP Awards Program

Every fall, the PSMLA PEP committee sends a letter to all 500 Pennsylvania superintendents—the top school decision-makers. The mailing includes: an explanation of PEP and an invitation to participate; the PSMLA PEP rubric—a yearly graphic reminder of what good language programs look like; a list of current PEP Award schools—so they see PEP is doable; and a few carefully chosen research items on the benefits of language learning. In addition, e-mails are sent to all PSMLA members and PEP application materials are posted on the PSMLA website (*www.psmla.org*).

To participate in PEP, high schools must submit evidence that they meet 11 indicators of exemplary performance that are listed on the PEP rubric. Participation is free; the only requirement is that one faculty member must be a PSMLA member. Four levels of excellence are awarded (Globe, Bronze Globe, Silver Globe, and Golden Globe) for a two-year time period which then must be renewed. Applications are judged by two regional panels to ensure an unbiased review. (Committee East members rate applications from the west and vice versa for Committee West.) Both committees use the same rating rubric.

PEP is not perfect—criteria and indicators have been tweaked numerous times over the years to take into account the diversity of high school program features. PEP is also not a competition, since all high schools that provide evidence of meeting PEP indicators receive an award.

Awardees are presented with an official PEP Award certificate and are given recognition at the annual PSMLA conference, in the annual *Pennsylvania Language Forum* publication, and in the *PEP Award Showcase* on the PSMLA website. Small, incremental, monetary tokens are given to Bronze, Silver, and Golden Globe PEP schools.

Eleven Performance Indicators of the PEP Rubric

The title of "PSMLA Exemplary Program" is awarded to high school programs that attain at least 8 of the 11 Indicators at or above the four levels: Globe, Bronze Globe, Silver Globe, or Golden Globe. Each level is increasingly more rigorous. A school may only have one indicator

"off the rubric." In that case, however, they cannot receive higher than a Globe Award.

The 11 indicators were written to elicit concrete evidence of desirable program features that would not require on-site visitations. While written at an earlier date, most PEP indicators are in line with ACTFL Position Statements (*www.actfl.org/news/position-statements*). Some indicators are more in the

PSMLA PEP Award Rubric

High schools must meet or exceed 8 of 11 program indicators in a column. Only a Globe Award may have one indicator "off the PEP rubric."	Golden Globe Award	Silver Globe Award	Bronze Globe Award	Globe Award
1. Maintain high percentage of total world language enrollment	90% to 100% of total school enrollment is enrolled in a foreign language class	77% to 89% of total school enrollment is enrolled in a foreign language class	56% to 76% of total school enrollment is enrolled in a foreign language class	35% to 55% of total school enrollment is enrolled in a foreign language class
2. Provide a variety of languages in a four-year high school sequence	One language for schools with fewer than 350 students; two languages for 351–700; three languages for 701–1,000; and one additional language for each additional 1,000 students (all in four-year sequence)	One language for schools with fewer than 350 students; two languages for 350–700; three languages for 701–1,500; and one additional language for each additional 1,000 students in at least a three-year sequence	One language for schools with fewer than 350 students; two languages for 350–700; three languages for 701–1,500; and one additional language for each additional 1,000 students in at least a two-year sequence	One language for schools with fewer than 350 students; two languages for 350–700; three languages for 701 and above
3. Retain students at higher levels	50% or more of students in a language in 9th grade continue to level 4 and above	40% to 49% of students in a language in 9th grade continue to level 4 and above	30% to 39% of students in a language in 9th grade continue to level 4 and above	15% to 29% of students in a language in 9th grade continue to level 4 and above
4. Participate in AP, IB, level 5, and/or CIS program	At least one AP, IB, or CIS program for every traditional language offered	At least one such class for every traditional language offered	At least two such classes	At least one such class
5. Schedule classes that are one level per period	No multi-level (split) world language classes per school in commonly taught languages	No more than one multi-level (split) world language class per school in commonly taught languages	No more than two multi-level (split) world language classes per school in commonly taught languages	No more than three multi-level (split) world language classes per school in commonly taught languages
6. Provide an extended sequence of instruction in a commonly taught language	12 years or more (sequential program begins in grade 1 or kindergarten) in at least one language	6 years (sequential program begins in grade 7) in at least one language	5 years (sequential program begins in grade 8) in at least one language	4 years (sequential program in at least one language through 11th or 12th grade
7. Implement Key Instructional Practices	90% to 100% of world language teachers follow key instructional practices as described	80% to 89% of world language teachers follow key instructional practices as described	70% to 79% of world language teachers follow key instructional practices as described	60% to 69% of world language teachers follow key instructional practices as described
8. Administer standards-based, performance assessment(s)	District-wide, standards-based assessment in all traditional languages taught at two benchmark levels, non-traditional at one level	District-wide, standards-based assessment in all languages taught	District-wide, standards-based assessment in all languages taught	District-wide, standards-based assessment across all languages taught
9. Engage in yearly staff development on world language topics	80% to 100% of world language teachers participate in at least one full-day local, state, or national world language conference per year in addition to at least one in-house world language specific workshop (equivalent to a five-hour day)	60% to 79% of world language teachers participate in at least one full-day local, state, or national world language conference per year in addition to at least one in-house world language specific workshop (equivalent to a five-hour day)	50% to 59% of world language teachers participate in at least one full day local, state, or national world language conference per year in addition to at least one in-house world language specific workshop (equivalent to 2.5-hour half-day)	40% to 49% of world language teachers participate in at least one full-day local, state, or national world language conference per year or one in-house world language specific workshop (equivalent to 2.5-hour half-day)
10. Maintain membership in professional organizations	90% to 100% of world language teachers belong to a professional world language organization	80% to 89% of world language teachers belong to a professional world language organization	70% to 79% of world language teachers belong to a professional world language organization	40% to 69% of world language teachers belong to a professional world language organization
11. Provide special program features	Three program features per school that connect world language students to outside resources & provide language practice outside of the classroom	Two program features per school that connect world language students to outside resources & provide language practice outside of the classroom	One program feature per school that connects world language students to outside resources & provides language practice outside of the classroom	One program feature per school that connects world language students to outside resources or provides language practice outside of the classroom

Indicator #1
Maintain High Student Enrollment in World Language Classes

Rationale
Foreign languages are for all students, not just the academic/economic elite.

Definitions/Exceptions
Total school enrollment will be defined as all students enrolled in the school. Special education students whose 504 Individual Education Plan (IEP) precludes participation in a world language program may be subtracted from the total. Please note: Not all IEP students are excluded from world language study, thus not all IEP students should be subtracted.

Evidence
Attach computer-generated printouts from the school database (current school year) that clearly show the
- total student enrollment of the high school
- total number of high school students enrolled in world language classes
- number/percentage of students with IEPs who are excluded from language study (optional)

Use the above to calculate the percentage of all students in the high school enrolled in world languages.
Highlight the two totals and resulting percentage and show the math.

Important notes:
- The total school student enrollment printout may be applicable for Indicators 1–3.
- A chart or table created by the applicant is not considered evidence—it must be a school-generated computer printout from the school database.
- Send only the last summary page of the student enrollment lists, showing students numbered.
- All student names must be blackened out.

Indicator #7
Implement Four Key Instructional Practices

Rationale
Time on task is critical for attainment of standards; teachers must maximize their use of the target language and facilitate students' comprehension by using "negotiation of meaning" techniques. Without pair and small group activities in the target language, students have insufficient speaking practice. Students will not attain proficiency if the main emphasis of instruction is grammar. Cultural knowledge is essential to effective communication.

Definition of Key Instructional Practices (See National Standards, ACTFL.org)
Modern language teachers:
1. use the target language 90% of most class periods (or more) in a comprehensible way
2. engage students in pair and small group communicative activities in the target language 3-5 periods per week
3. encourage students to express their own meanings in the target language daily
4. integrate culture into daily language instruction

Evidence
Make an appointment with your principal/headmaster or equivalent. This is an opportunity to educate and win some points for your department. Explain the Four Key Instructional Practices and discuss how well your department is carrying them out. Ask for a % and the principal's signature. Fill in the date.

Evidence: The completed Verification of Key Instructional Practices Form
The principal/headmaster verifies that based on her/his classroom observations and to the best of his/her judgment, ____% of modern world language instruction is in line with the Four Key Instructional Practices as defined below. Classical languages should be included where appropriate.
- The % may indicate the average degree to which high school teachers implement key practices or the % of high school teachers who implement them.
- Explain how % was obtained.

hands of teachers and others more in the hands of administrators; all require joint efforts.

Indicators 1 and 7 are presented on this page in terms of rationale, definitions, and evidence (see the PSMLA website for more detail on all 11 indicators). While administrators must sign off on the entire application, Indicator 7 provides an opportunity to educate principals/headmasters since it requires their personal assessment. Indicator 8 is most often the one to be rated "off the rubric."

Goal One: Public Recognition and Validation of Programs

In the fall of 2011, PSMLA sent out a survey to 38 schools that participated in PEP between 2005 and 2011. The survey response rate was 42% (16 respondents); 92.3% of those agreed that PEP gives their program outside validation and 61.5% agreed that they used PEP to promote their language program among students/parents.

Goal Two: Using the PEP Rubric as a Blueprint for Program Improvement

Seventeen schools have repeatedly applied for PEP since 2005. Of those schools:
- 9 schools maintained the same award level (5 at the Gold level)
- 4 schools improved by one level
- 3 schools improved by two levels
- 1 school improved by four levels (from a No Rating to Golden Globe)

Thus, while nine schools were able to maintain their award levels, eight schools were able to use PEP to spur improvement. Unfortunately, some schools also dropped out over the years due to school closings, personnel changes, and program changes.

It is unknown how many new applicants made prior improvements to be eligible for PEP initially. However, over the years, several schools that participated in PSMLA workshops or purchased Institutional Memberships reported that they were doing so to become eligible for PEP. The power of PEP can most clearly be shown, however, by the following anecdotes.

What Do Colleagues Say?

Thomasina White, retired World Language Content Specialist in the Philadelphia City School District, related how the PEP invitation letter to her superintendent was the catalyst for the Deputy of Teaching and Learning to call her in to ask why there were no PEP schools in the district. Armed with the PEP rubric, White was able to show the deputy where the schools were deficient. The most noticeable deficit was the limited number of the district's high schools offering more than one language. Two weeks later, the superintendent sent out a memo mandating that schools with student enrollment of more than 600 students offer at least two foreign languages. As a result, principals actively identified teachers with dual language certification and also sought support from central

administration for ways to successfully implement this initiative. (Although the economic factors of recent years slowed progress, one Philadelphia school is now an awardee.)

Department chairs and teachers play a critical role in using PEP as a transformative process as illustrated by the following testimonials. Jan Stewart, department chair of Hempfield School District's foreign language department stated:

"Getting ready for PEP is truly a process . . . but it is a reflective process that allows the department to think about what we are doing and what we should be doing. One of the ways that we get our application ready is to have members of the department sign up to take responsibility for the various indicators. That way, everyone has an understanding of what PEP means and each is truly invested in and can take ownership of it."

Gateway High School teacher Natalie Puhala stated: "I get it; PEP is a blueprint for schools. We started with a Globe award but my superintendent and the department have been working to attain a higher level—hopefully gold this year!" (Gateway High School made Golden Globe in 2012.)

Upon hearing of their 2013 PEP Silver Globe Award, Michelle Campbell, Wilson High School, wrote to express her thanks, saying, "We are moving all of our assessments to the IPA format with a common thematic curriculum in levels 1 and 2. We are linking the descriptors to the proficiency levels on the rubric. I'm hoping that is the direction that PSMLA is looking for us to move in. The PEP award has helped our school a lot. The data that it makes me collect is valuable when it comes to position cuts and the requirement not to run mixed-level classes has helped us keep them off of our schedule . . . PEP has really helped us to at least maintain our program. Our school even made a banner to hang up denoting our PEP status. This helps administrators to know what we have going on in 'world languages world'!"

The program even helps those who do not attain an award initially. One district that did not receive an award in 2013 wrote, "Thank you so much for letting me know how our school measured up. I'm taking this information and letting my department know what we need to do for next year so that we can reapply and, hopefully, receive an award!"

These comments point to the potential of PEP Awards to increase the number of high quality, exemplary high school foreign language programs. PSMLA also provides support to teachers to make improvements through regional workshops, conferences, journals, and guides as well as individual feedback to applicant schools.

There are currently 21 schools listed in the PSMLA PEP Showcase: 10 Gold, 3 Silver, 1 Bronze, and 7 Globe. They represent urban, suburban, rural, public, and private schools. For these schools, the PEP Awards program addresses a need that had not previously been met in the state—a bottom-up initiative that enables high schools to receive outside validation and public recognition for their high quality language programs. Many have used PEP as a means to encourage program improvement.

PEP requires a significant effort on the part of applicants to compile their documentation. It is also very labor intensive for the PEP committee members who volunteer their time and expertise each year. Obviously, both groups consider PEP to be a worthwhile endeavor. All believe that the PEP Award program is a step in the right direction to enable more Pennsylvania students to benefit from high-quality, standards-based language programs.

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