

PANGEA

Parents for a Global Education Association

Responses from David Weinstein, School Committee Candidate

Thank you for your efforts to strengthen and support language immersion programs in Cambridge, and to keep world languages at the forefront of our planning.

With regard to world language instruction Cambridge is a leader in some respects (immersion programs) and making less progress in other areas (world languages at the elementary level, for example). I have heard concerns from parents about a lack of progress on the elementary world language instruction, including during my time as a parent representative to the Citywide School Advisory Committee, when I helped share with the Graham and Parks School community the efforts of the Baldwin School parents to request a pilot program at their school. And I have heard from other parents concerned about ensuring adequate resources (including space and SES balance) in immersion programs.

These concerns should be addressed by the district in consultation with the full community. All families should know what our short and long term plans are for these programs, and how we arrived at those decisions. And those plans should result from a process that prioritizes educational research into the benefits of such programs and a comprehensive assessment of the demand in Cambridge for these programs, now and into the future.

1.) How would you balance Cambridge families' desire for world languages in elementary school within the constraints of the available time, assuming no changes to the length of the school day?

The time constraint is probably the biggest issue. We need to start by engaging families in a true conversation (even a survey would be a good start) about what they are seeking with regard to world languages, and look at what data shows is good for kids.

We know that early years are best for language acquisition and for brain benefits. Do we need to develop fluency for those benefits? Let's see what our goals are and tailor offerings to those goals. After school options can supplement school-day offerings, but not every child will have access to those options, especially if there is additional cost, so we must ensure that what is offered during school is developmentally appropriate, and is substantial enough to provide benefits in terms of child development and later language acquisition.

At the elementary level we may only be laying the groundwork for more intensive study at upper school or high school – but we shouldn't miss that opportunity.

There is also the possibility that families with children who are already multilingual might opt for something else to enrich their child's educational experience instead of acquisition of another language. We should consider this as we project what programs we might want and the size they should be. Perhaps another curricular option could complement world languages for those children, e.g. expanded music opportunities, or a technology or arts offering. (Of course all children should have art, music and technology in the curriculum – these would be enhancements to the standard experiences.)

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2) What steps do you feel the school committee can take to support recruitment of low-income families to the Cambridge immersion programs, to ensure families of all background can benefit from these programs?

We need to ensure that there is not a misperception about who is in language immersion programs and who belongs there. All children of all SES status belong there. We also need to be careful not to counsel families into SEI who might prefer language immersion. The goals and benefits of the programs need to be clear, as do the distinctions between their approaches.

Also: We should be looking comprehensively at our projected enrollment over several years and our projected demand for various programs, including language immersion. If we can project a sustained demand greater than what we can currently meet, we should allocate resources to meet that demand. If swelling ranks of children enrolling in the Cambridge Public Schools means we need a larger budget to increase the size of those programs, then we as a school committee need to gather that data and make that case.

3) What level of resources should the District provide to support the Ola Portuguese and Chinese immersion programs in middle school?

The Chinese immersion program currently does not continue past 5th grade, but if there is sufficient demand from families to do so we should support that. If there is not demand for immersion through 8th grade we should provide courses that enable the Chinese immersion students to maintain and build their skills, even in a non-immersion setting.

The Ola program should continue to be supported through 8th grade, with the same level of support that all students in the four upper schools have. These programs – Ola and the Chinese immersion program if we add 6-8th grade – should be maintained at a high level throughout middle school.

We should seek opportunities to leverage the benefits provided by the larger student cohort of the upper schools, for example additional electives, clubs or theater programs to ensure these opportunities benefit the students in the immersion programs as well.

And we can find opportunities for the non-immersion students to benefit from the presence of an immersion program. This could range from cultural events to actual language learning opportunities, depending upon the shape we determine the world languages program will take in the coming years.

There may also be students in the upper schools who have a connection to Chinese or Portuguese language or related cultures but have not been part of the immersion program. There would be some natural connections to make for them. This could be an excellent way to support middle schoolers who speak Chinese or Portuguese, but whose families have not chosen an immersion program.

We also should look for opportunities for Amigos School 6-8th graders to benefit from some of the resources of the upper schools, such as participation the aforementioned clubs and electives – possible intramural sports. Not being located in the same building as a larger upper school presents a logistical challenge, but if there is enough demand for these opportunities we can find a way to facilitate some opportunities.

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4) How could the Sheltered English immersion programs work together with Amigos, Ola and Chinese immersion?

Some children who begin in the Cambridge Public Schools in SEI might then transition to Amigos, Ola or Chinese immersion as their needs change. Facilitating that change would be worth considering. Additionally, there can be mentorship and partnership opportunities between the programs, especially, but not exclusively, in the case of SEI students who speak Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese or Spanish.

5) What languages do you consider to be the most important for students to learn in the 21st century?

This is unpredictable. Chinese would be an obvious answer thinking globally. In the United States Spanish would seem to be most important. But in our diverse community there will be many people who for reasons of heritage or future plans wish to study a different language. And global realities can change quickly. When I was in school Russian was still a popular option for some. That changed quickly with the fall of the Soviet Union. Fifteen years from now when our current preschoolers are leaving the system, there may be another geopolitical shift we can't now anticipate.

But knowing another language – and having the insight into another culture or many cultures that such a skill enables – will always be beneficial.

Thank you again for these questions.

David Weinstein

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