

Foreign Language Associates Northwest (FLAN):
An Overview of Elementary School World Language Offering -2008

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1. Program Summary

a. Introduction:

FLAN is a non-profit, grassroots organization formed in Bellingham, Washington over 20 years ago, to provide our elementary and middle school students with an opportunity for exposure to other languages and cultures.

b. Mission Statement:

'We open the doors for children to different cultures through introduction to their languages and customs. We provide high-value, extracurricular instruction of foreign languages at Bellingham public and private schools for the elementary-and middle-school age groups.'

Note that the mission statement explicitly does not claim to teach fluency in language, that is,

there is no expectation that a student who participates in a FLAN program will be even moderately proficient in the language taught. As there is some middle school language instruction through the school district now, FLAN hasn't had a presence in middle schools for some time.

c. Organizational Structure:

The FLAN organization is governed entirely by a volunteer board of directors consisting of the parent representatives from the participating schools (more on parent reps elsewhere). The elected offices of President, Secretary and Treasurer are filled from the board of directors. The day-to-day operation of FLAN is handled primarily by the program's Regional Coordinator, one of two positions that is not entirely pro-bono. The second is a part-time bookkeeper who handles financial matters.

d. Language Lessons:

FLAN contracts with individual PTAs (or other parent associations) to provide extra-curricular language instruction in the language or languages desired by that school's parent and student population. FLAN provides the teacher, the curriculum and the materials. The PTAs manage student recruitment, scheduling, lesson location, and the collection of course fees from students to pay the contracted session fee to FLAN. Languages are taught in sessions of six to twelve weeks, with two lessons per week, either before or after regular school hours. PTAs typically offer two or three sessions per year.

e. Teachers:

Teachers are recruited primarily from the community of local 'heritage speakers'. Some teachers are also sourced from the pool of world language students at Western Washington University. Teachers are paid hourly for their services.

2. Program Strengths

a. Heritage Speakers as Teachers:

FLAN's target audience is children in elementary schools, i.e., ten years old and younger. This is known to be the age at which the sound of a language (its unique phonemes) can be most easily assimilated. While older children and adults can certainly learn a new language, they have passed the age at which they are able to completely adopt correct pronunciation. For this reason, FLAN has a strong preference for native speakers ('heritage speakers') as teachers. However, FLAN does occasionally recruit teachers from the pool of Western Washington University language students preparing for a teaching career (some of whom are heritage speakers themselves). Teachers are required to model correct pronunciation at all times. FLAN lessons are taught almost exclusively in the target language, providing an immersion-type environment for the duration of the students' exposure to the teacher. Most teachers are very committed to passing along their language and aspects of their heritage culture to their students.

Teaching methodology borrows heavily from the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, developed

by Dr. James J. Asher. Because the focus is so much on listening comprehension and pronunciation, FLAN hardly ever uses any written materials with the students. Interaction in the classroom is first and foremost verbal and physical (games, songs, rhymes, etc.). FLAN teachers are trained in this method through periodic workshops taught by the Regional Coordinator. For more information on TPR, see <http://www.tpr-world.com/>.

b. Small Class Size:

Because of the active nature of a typical FLAN lesson plan (which often includes physical games for counting and repetition of target words, such as “Simon Says”, etc.), class sizes are limited. Ideally, no more than ten children are enrolled per class. Occasionally it becomes difficult to accommodate the number of applicants for a session – too many for one class, not enough for two – and depending on the experience of the teacher, larger classes are allowed. However, the absolute limit is 15 students. This allows every child to receive personalized attention and gives the teacher the opportunity to engage every student in every lesson.

c. Flexibility:

The FLAN program, because it is not associated with any larger organization, is very flexible in its offerings, to maximally accommodate the student and parent body at any given school. Sessions start and end depending on the individual desires at a school. There is no blanket schedule that has to fit in every case. Some schools have a very active FLAN program in place, with several languages being taught in every quarter, while others offer only one language perhaps once or twice a year, depending on demand. In theory, any language that parents desire and that FLAN can recruit teachers for can be offered. In reality, Spanish, French and Japanese are the languages most often requested and therefore taught. There is a small but persistent interest in ASL and German, as well.

d. Cost:

Because FLAN is run almost entirely by volunteers, the organization’s overhead costs are low and are made up primarily of teacher salaries. Teachers are paid a competitive hourly rate, to compensate for the periodic nature of the job, and to increase teacher retention. The low overall program costs are passed on to the parents of students. A typical fee for twice weekly instruction for eight weeks in a small group is \$80 per student. This compares favorably with other extracurricular programs such as music or academic tutoring.

3. Program Weaknesses

a. Parent Expectations:

A fairly large proportion of the parents who enroll their children in the FLAN program are disappointed when their child doesn’t start to speak the target language at the end of a session. Many will re-enroll their children once or twice, but then lose interest. Unfortunately, there is a widely

held misconception that it should be effortless and fast for young children to learn a second language. To some extent, FLAN and the proponents of early language learning in general are to blame for this idea, because it has been said so often that younger children learn languages more easily. Of course, that does not mean that they can become fluent after sixteen, or fifty, or even a hundred hours of instruction. What it does mean is that exposure at an early age facilitates comprehension and is vital for correct pronunciation later on, and that repeated exposure is the key to success in the long run. That the long run implies many years of learning is something which is conveniently omitted from such reasoning. Consequently, parents are not willing to keep re-enrolling their children time after time, especially if the child expresses boredom with the program.

b. Continuity of Curriculum for Returning Students:

The curriculum used by FLAN teachers consists of general guidelines describing what might be covered in four sequential sessions over a period of two years. Examples are Polite Expressions and Phrases, School, Actions, Geography, Holidays (especially those that coincide with the time of year of the lesson), Numbers/Days/Months, Body Parts/Senses, Clothing, Family, Toys/Games/Sports, and Summer Vacation. All these topics might be presented twice in two years, once at a very basic vocabulary level, and then with increasing complexity of sentence structure and, hopefully, a broadening of understanding. Lesson plans are developed by teachers individually based on the guidelines.

Unfortunately, because there is little continuity in the students enrolled with FLAN from one session to the next, classes most often have a mix of complete novice learners side-by-side with students who have had some previous exposure. This makes the teacher's job very challenging. Teachers do not all have the same level of skill at integrating differing student abilities. Ideally, each student should be engaged at his or her own level. However, this is not always what occurs, and leads to boredom in students who are returning for the second, third or fourth time. Consequently, and not surprisingly, there is a steep drop in re-enrollment after the second or third session.

c. 'Parent Representative' Continuity:

The presence of FLAN at any given school is entirely dependent on the presence of a motivated parent at that school, who volunteers to become the FLAN representative and liaison between FLAN and the school's PTA (or other parent association). This individual needs a high level of commitment to making the program work at their school because the tasks of the parent rep are various and can be frustrating. The rep must advertise the program to the student and parent body, create and distribute registration forms, collect returned forms along with payment, organize the registered students into classes, phone parents to either confirm registration or suggest alternatives if classes are full or do not meet minimum enrollment, distribute class rosters to FLAN and the school office, handle all payment issues, liaise with the school office concerning class location, and coordinate with the FLAN teacher and Regional Coordinator at all times concerning issues as varied as the cancellation of lessons due to inclement weather, or difficulties with a disruptive student.

Parent reps tend to feel strongly about the value of language education at their school, and they

generally stay with the program until their child leaves that community. If the rep has not actively recruited and trained (or has been unable to find) a replacement before that happens, FLAN does not have a way of providing sessions at that school. If the PTA values language instruction, it then falls to their board to advertise the open position of language coordinator, and hope someone comes forward. Unfortunately this makes for poor continuity in the program.

d. Teacher Recruitment and Retention:

For the reasons discussed above, FLAN teachers often find themselves in a 'feast or famine' situation. During some quarters, several elementary schools throughout the district may be offering a variety of languages, while at other times, there are few if any sessions underway. Scheduling is also inconvenient – for example, an hour of work before 9 a.m. and two hours of work from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. on alternate days will most likely interfere with any other job the teacher may have. Unless a teacher is financially independent, this employment model is unsustainable.

Because of this, the typical FLAN teacher is either a homemaker, a mother who is home-schooling her own child or children and who integrates them into her language teaching, or a college student. Recruiting teachers for such uncertain employment is difficult and relies in large part on word-of-mouth recommendations. An unfortunate consequence of this situation is that teachers are sometimes less skilled at classroom handling techniques than might be desired, especially when they first join the organization. A large part of the Regional Coordinator's job is to workshop FLAN teachers in the TPR methodology, and to help them work through classroom management issues.

While community members (i.e., local mothers or homemakers) tend to stay with the organization once they have been recruited, students understandably move on after graduation, leading to high turnover in this category of teachers, and the continuous need to retrain new recruits.

e. Cost:

FLAN questionnaires in schools have shown repeatedly that there is a high level of interest in second language education among parents. However, this high level of interest has also repeatedly not translated into high levels of enrollment. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this is that parents expect the schools to provide language education within the scope of the regular school day at no extra cost to the family.

4. Conclusion

There is no doubt that FLAN provides a service that is desired by parents throughout the community. However, because of the issues discussed in this document, there are serious limitations to what FLAN, by itself, can accomplish. Parents and students alike would benefit from world language instruction being incorporated into the basic elementary school curriculum by a forward-thinking school administration, thus making a second language accessible to all children in our district, regardless of financial means.

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