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Building Proficiency with Purpose: How West Jefferson Hills School District Uses the AAPPL to Drive a Multilingual Future

Case Study

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Introduction

West Jefferson Hills School District, just south of Pittsburgh, PA, has transformed its world language program from traditional grammar-based instruction to a dynamic, proficiency-based model. At the center of this transformation is the ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL), delivered by Language

Testing International® (LTI). With a focus on real-world communication and aligned with the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines - 2024*, the AAPPL has become a critical component of the district's mission to prepare students for lifelong success in a multilingual world.



Summary

Over the last 15 years, the world language program at West Jefferson Hills School District has undergone a profound paradigm shift from a grammar-heavy curriculum to one centered on authentic communication and real-world language proficiency. As the district's instructional approach evolved, so did the need for a reliable way to measure student outcomes and demonstrate their program's success. That's where the AAPPL came in.

In 2023–2024, the district began using the AAPPL in French and Spanish to evaluate students' performance toward proficiency, inform instructional decisions, and award the Pennsylvania State Seal of Biliteracy. The assessment provided a comprehensive and credible measure of all four modes of communication: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. With insights from the AAPPL, the district has introduced a new speaking-focused language lab and has seen continued growth in students' outcomes, especially in higher-level courses.

The district now views the AAPPL not just as a test, but as a key component of its language program's continuous improvement cycle.

Needs:

- An independent, third-party assessment aligned with the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*
- A tool to support the district's shift toward a proficiency-based curriculum
- A way to credential students for the Pennsylvania State Seal of Biliteracy

Solutions:

- Adoption of the AAPPL to assess all modes of communication: Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational
- Integration of proficiency-aligned instructional resources (e.g., Voces Digital's *Nuestra Historia* and *Notre Histoire*)

- Creation of a new "Language Lab" course to strengthen speaking skills

Results:

- Improved proficiency across all communication modes
- Actionable data that informs instruction and supports program improvement
- Increased student engagement and qualification for the PA State Seal of Biliteracy
- Expanded program offerings and stakeholder support

Needs: Evolving from Grammar-based to Proficiency-based Instruction

West Jefferson Hills School District serves over 1,000 students at Thomas Jefferson High School, with 473 currently enrolled in French and Spanish. Over the past 15 years, the district has moved steadily away from direct grammar instruction toward a proficiency-based approach.

With no state-specific standards in Pennsylvania, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines became the foundation for evaluating student growth. The district set proficiency goals for each course level, with benchmarks ranging from Novice Low in Level I to Intermediate Mid and higher in AP-level classes.

We needed an independent, third-party way to assess our students' proficiency in the language to culminate our shift to proficiency-based pedagogy. Offering a credential like the PA Seal of Biliteracy and utilizing the AAPPL were natural additions in our evolutionary timeline.

Zack Bonatesta,
World Language Department Coordinator

Proficiency Goals for Each Course Level at Thomas Jefferson High School

- AP/CHS Level • Novice High to Intermediate Mid (or higher)
- Level IV CHS • Novice High to Intermediate Mid (or higher)
- Level III CHS • Novice High to Intermediate Mid (or higher)
- Level III • Novice High to Intermediate Low
- Level II • Novice Mid to Novice High
- Level I • Novice Low to Novice Mid

The decision to adopt the AAPPL was straightforward: **“It met the holistic requirements for what we had been looking for AND it enabled us to immediately tell if a student qualifies for the PA Seal of Bilingualism,”** shared Zachary Bonatesta, the World Language Department Coordinator at Thomas Jefferson High School.

Testing takes place in class over several days, proctored by world language teachers. The district administers all four components: Interpretive Listening (IL), Interpretive Reading (IR), Interpersonal Listening and Speaking (ILS), and Presentational Writing (PW).

Results are reviewed at the department level to evaluate instruction and student needs. One major finding: Interpersonal speaking remains the most challenging skill area, especially in French.

In response, the district introduced a new “Language Lab” course in 2024–2025, designed to provide an immersive environment that prioritizes oral communication. “The Language Lab will focus primarily and heavily on spoken communication,” Bonatesta shared. “It can be taken alongside upper-level courses like CHS III, CHS IV, and AP.”

Instructional strategies have also evolved to match the assessment approach. “The results have been the impetus for our department to utilize a still-in-development version of Comprehensible Input,” Bonatesta added. The department uses story-based literacy resources from Voces Digital, which align with the proficiency model and promote meaningful communication.

Results: More Proficient Students, Stronger Programs

Since adopting the AAPPL, the program has seen consistent growth in student language abilities across all skill areas and levels:

“The ability levels in every area of communication have improved across the board from the lower levels all the way to AP. Students are becoming much more well-rounded in their language proficiency.”

*Zachary Bonatesta,
World Language Department Coordinator*

Here’s a snapshot of key results from 2023–2024. The green highlighting in the “Averages” table indicates that the average rating “meets or exceeds our current required proficiency level of that course.”



Conclusion

By adopting the AAPPL, West Jefferson Hills School District has successfully bridged the gap between instruction and assessment. The district not only supports its multilingual learners with meaningful credentials like the PA Seal of Biliteracy but also uses AAPPL results to strengthen teaching practices and inform program growth.

Without proper PA State Standards, most entities use the ACTFL standards for evaluation of language ability and use their benchmarks to create language programs. The AAPPL is a tool that directly measures ability against the ACTFL paradigm. The assessment results can be used as a real-world career credential by students.

Zachary Bonatesta,
World Language
Department Coordinator

For districts looking to create a future-ready, proficiency-based world language program, West Jefferson Hills offers a compelling model, one built on gold-standard assessments and a commitment to meaningful communication.

TOTAL TAKERS	ILS	PW	IL	IR
Regular French III	2	2	2	3
CHS III French	33	34	33	34
CHS IV French	7	7	6	6
AP/CHS French	5	5	5	5

TOTAL TAKERS	ILS	PW	IL	IR
Regular Spanish III	2	2	2	2
CHS III Spanish	20	19	20	20
CHS IV Spanish	22	21	22	22
AP/CHS Spanish	8	9	6	6

TOTAL TAKERS	ILS	PW	IL	IR
Heritage Spanish Learners	8	7	7	7

AVERAGES	ILS	PW	IL	IR
Regular French III	NH	NH	NH	I3
CHS III French	NH	NH	NH	I2
CHS IV French	NH	I1	I4	I4
AP/CHS French	NH	I1	I4	I4

	ILS	PW	IL	IR
Regular Spanish III	I2	I2	I4	I4
CHS III Spanish	I1	I2	I3	I4
CHS IV Spanish	I2	I3	I4	I4
AP/CHS Spanish	I3	I3	I5	I5

Heritage Spanish Learners	I3	I3	I5	I5
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With clear proficiency targets for each course, teachers use AAPPL data to identify gaps, tailor instruction, and guide students toward higher levels of language performance.