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Measuring What Matters: How Denver, Iowa, Community Schools Strengthened Language Learning with the AAPPL

Case Study

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Introduction

Denver Community Schools in Denver, Iowa, sought a way to ensure their Spanish language program aligned with ACTFL® *Proficiency Guidelines* while providing students with access to the Iowa State Seal of Biliteracy. By implementing the ACTFL

Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL), the district gained data-driven insights to refine instruction, recognize student achievement, and validate program effectiveness.

Challenges:

- Ensuring instruction aligned with *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*
- Identifying a recognized, affordable way for students to qualify for the Iowa State Seal of Biliteracy

Solution and Implementation:

- Adopted the AAPPL in 2019
- Tests all four language modes each spring with seniors in Spanish 4

Results:

- Improved student motivation
- Data-informed instruction
- Strengthened curriculum
- Community recognition for student achievement

Summary

Denver Community Schools, located in Denver, Iowa, serves approximately 940 students districtwide, with around 250 enrolled in high school world language courses. The Spanish program, taught by two dedicated teachers, emphasizes proficiency-based learning across four levels of instruction.

When the State of Iowa adopted the Seal of Biliteracy, Denver's world language department saw an opportunity and a challenge. As Emily Huff, a Spanish teacher, explained, ***"We weren't sure we were adequately preparing students in line with the ACTFL standards and were only using our professional judgment when assessing their proficiency."***

To meet this challenge, the department turned to the AAPPL, a recognized, standards-aligned measure of performance toward proficiency designed and developed by ACTFL and administered through Language Testing International® (LTI).





Identifying the Challenges

Before 2019, Denver’s Spanish teachers relied primarily on classroom assessments to gauge proficiency. While these assessments provided valuable insights, the district wanted a more objective, data-driven measure that could:

- align instruction with *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*,
- offer students a pathway to the State Seal of Biliteracy, and
- provide affordable testing options.

This focus on both quality and accessibility guided Denver’s decision to adopt the AAPPL.

“We wanted it [language assessment] to be a recognized test by our State Seal of Biliteracy and cost effective for the students opting to take it. We liked that the AAPPL was four separate tests assessing each of the different modes.”

*—Emily Huff,
Spanish Instructor at Denver High School*



Solution and Implementation

Denver Community Schools implemented the AAPPL in Spring 2019, beginning with 30 students and has continued annually ever since. Testing is conducted at school under supervision, with each of the four components: Interpretive Reading (IR), Interpretive Listening (IL), Presentational Writing (PW), and Interpersonal Listening and Speaking (ILS), administered over several weeks in the spring semester.

“I liked that each mode is a separate test giving only a snapshot and data of that particular skill,” Emily Huff noted. *“We could order the tests and give them at various points throughout the year... it was flexible to split up the four tests.”*

Testing with the AAPPL is currently open to seniors enrolled in Spanish 4 who opt in. Results are used both for the State of Iowa Seal of Biliteracy qualification and instructional improvements.

Results

Since adopting the AAPPL, Denver's world language program has seen measurable instructional growth and student engagement.

Instructional Insights:

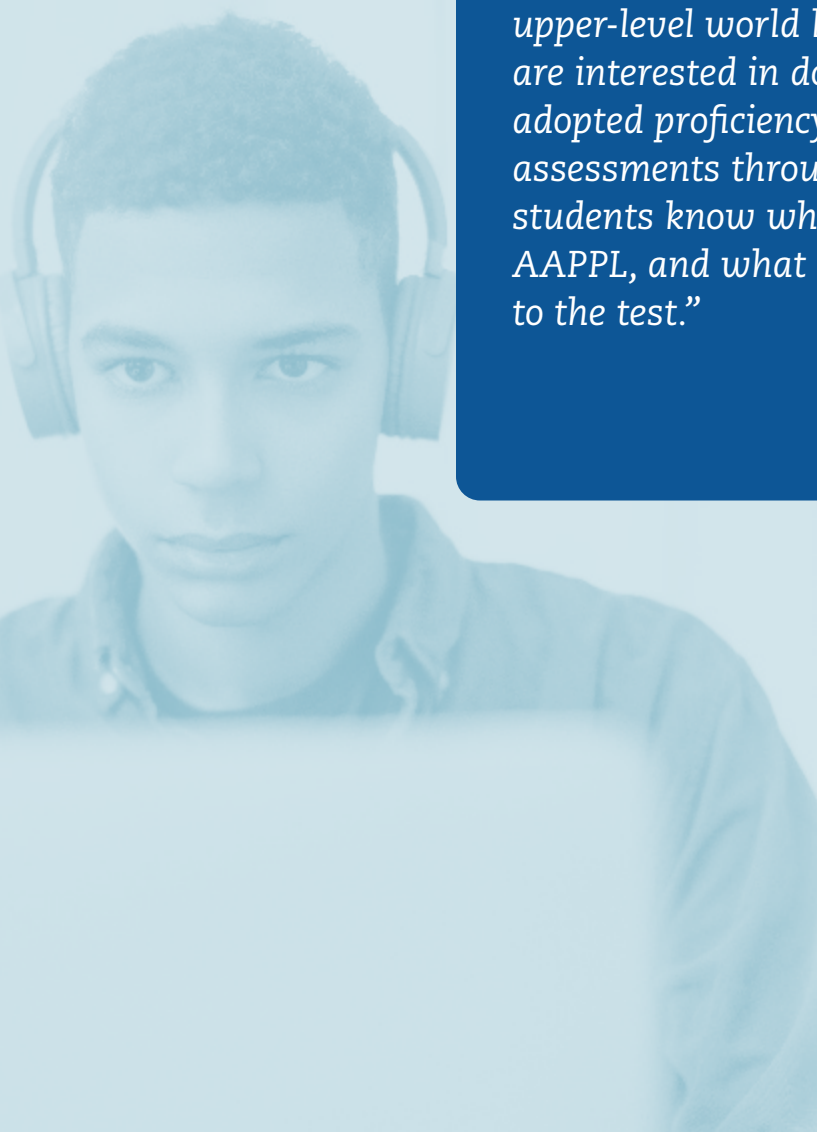
The data revealed strengths and gaps that guided curriculum adjustments.

“After 2023, I knew that Interpersonal Speaking and Listening was a weak area, so I focused my attention on trying to build that skill specifically,” Huff noted.

Similarly, writing performance improved after teachers identified specific gaps in second-person writing and adapted classroom tasks accordingly.

Student Motivation and Achievement:

The assessment provided a clear incentive for students to pursue higher proficiency, and they are motivated to continue improving their skills and take upper-level classes.



“There is an incentive to continue to learn and grow and take upper-level world language classes because they [students] are interested in doing well on the AAPPL. We also have adopted proficiency standards and common language in our assessments throughout the year so that even as Juniors, our students know what a Novice High is, what an I3 means in the AAPPL, and what the expectations are in our courses aligned to the test.”

*—Emily Huff,
Spanish Instructor at Denver High School*

Professional Growth and Program Validation:

Teachers now use data to validate and refine their curriculum.

“It gives our program data to validate the job we do in preparing the curriculum and assessing the students. It's an unbiased assessment of our students' language skills,” Huff commented.

Community Recognition:

Students who score 12 or higher on all four components are honored publicly.

Huff said, *“At the conclusion of each school year, we recognize students at a community assembly and awards ceremony, and we publicize the accomplishments on our school’s social media.”*

The combination of data-driven instruction, clear student goals, and public recognition has reinforced a culture of proficiency, pride, and progress.

Conclusion

For Denver Community Schools, adopting the AAPPL transformed language learning from subjective assessment to evidence-based language growth. The program now not only prepares students for the Seal of Biliteracy but also cultivates lifelong language learners.

Through AAPPL, Denver has found a reliable, empowering way to measure what truly matters: real-world language proficiency and meaningful learning outcomes.

“The AAPPL is an unbiased assessment of our student’s language skills and being able to look at the data has helped me grow professionally. The same is true for our students. The AAPPL is a celebration of their language journey as well. I always tell them that I can give them an A and a sticker and tell them they are so smart, but there is something more meaningful when a standardized test used nationally (or globally) says the same thing.”

*—Emily Huff,
Spanish instructor, Denver High School*

