

Introduction

Due to the fact that Newport News is home to a large percentage of Hampton Road's immigrant population, Newport News Public Schools serve a significant number of English Language Learners (ELs) as students. ESL students (or ELs) have always been a vulnerable population, but with the pandemic these students have suffered even more than their peers. Not only are English Language Learners disproportionately represented in the low socioeconomic status population, but they are also heavily dependent upon the school system not just for an education, but often for basic communication skills as well. Whereas the pandemic has been harmful to the general student populations' academic progress, it has been exceedingly detrimental to ELs' progress towards English communication and proficiency in addition. As a result, the already at-risk students are struggling even more to reach the mandated standards, while teachers and administrators themselves struggle to support everyone (Virginia Department of Education, 2021). My own experiences volunteering in classrooms both before and during the pandemic made abundantly clear the fact that students are frustrated by lack of progress and teachers are overwhelmed with working to meet the needs of every student. However, even in the face of these obstacles, NNPS as a whole has maintained a tightknit community which views all members as family.

Many studies have demonstrated that one area which can drastically improve the performance of ELs is socialization between student groups of different cultures. Unfortunately, many public schools exist in a system of separation between groups; not due to the fault of administration or any individual, but because students interact with other students who share their classes. Many of the same students take all AP classes together, just as the ELs are all consolidated due to their class schedules being built around ESL classes. Turney (2013) investigated the impact of a mentorship program for ELs with peers specifically serving as the mentors. The results of this study indicated that building connections through mentorship increased English Language Learners' general confidence, as well as comfort in practicing English. Additionally, the mentors experienced an increase in multicultural awareness, which is also critical to EL acceptance and success. Similar studies have been replicated frequently at the elementary school level, but there is less research regarding secondary education.

This project was developed as a method of addressing both the needs for academic support (tutoring) and exploring the benefits of mentorship in the Newport News public high school setting.

Project Goals

This project was designed with the intention of fulfilling two ultimate goals:

1. Strengthening community ties between ESL students and others, who otherwise may not interact substantially throughout the day.
2. Provide academic support both to English Language Learners and their teachers.

Although these needs were especially prevalent following the virtual learning associated with the pandemic, both have always been opportunities for improvement, and remain so. Despite substantial ongoing growth, it is important to maintain focus and energy on these goals going forward in order to make further progress in the education of ELs.



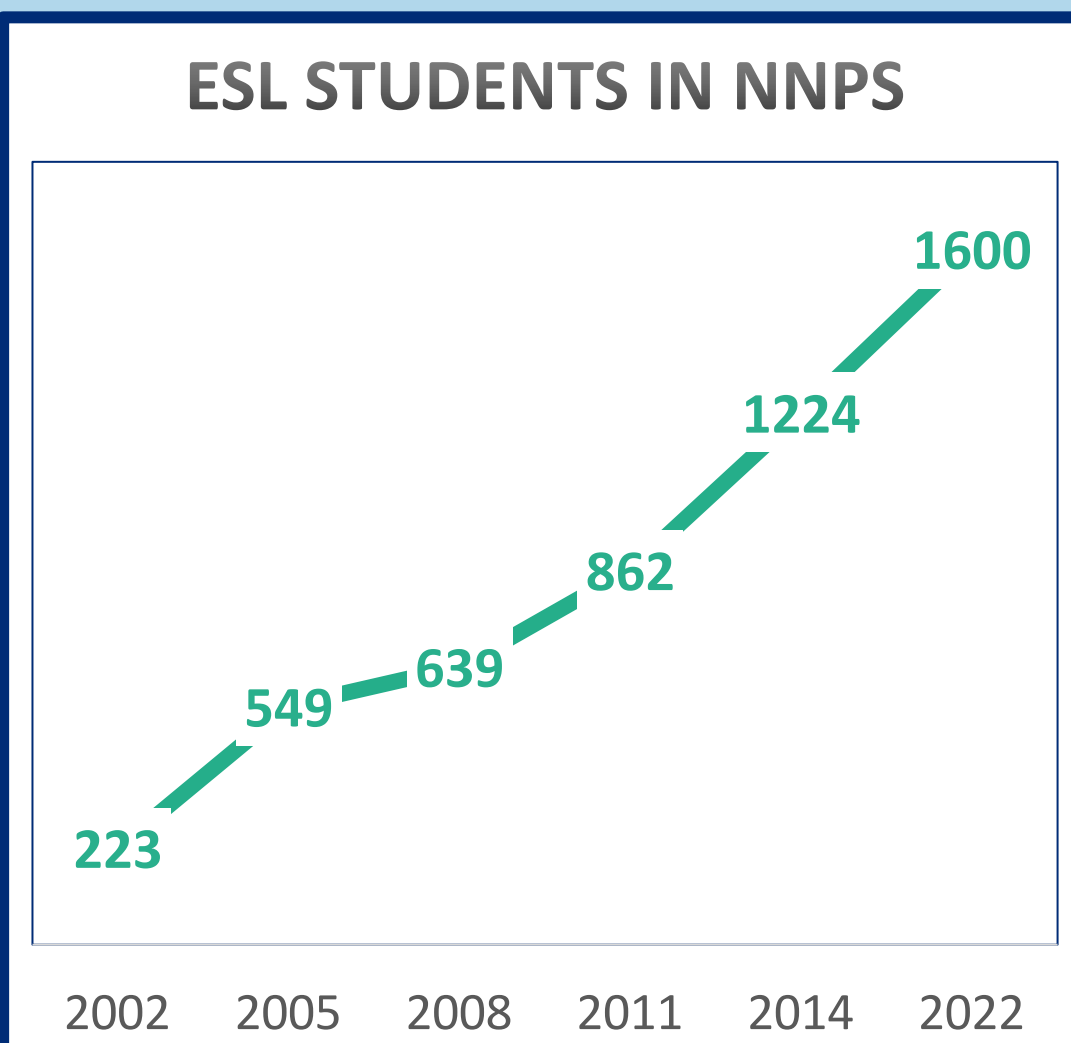
High school tutor helping a student with English homework.

Project Significance

This project is significant in several ways. First, and most importantly, it provides significant support resources for the ESL students being served by Newport News Public Schools. This population of students is growing so rapidly that new resources are constantly in demand, and this project has worked to address that need. ESL teachers also benefit from the program in that it allows them to direct students to a specific group for tutoring and support, since they themselves cannot tutor every single student in need of such services. Additionally, this project has perpetuated the goal in NNPS of creating a family environment and has built bridges between different groups of students. Hopefully, the continuation of this project will further connect all populations of students and draw ELs into other school groups and activities.

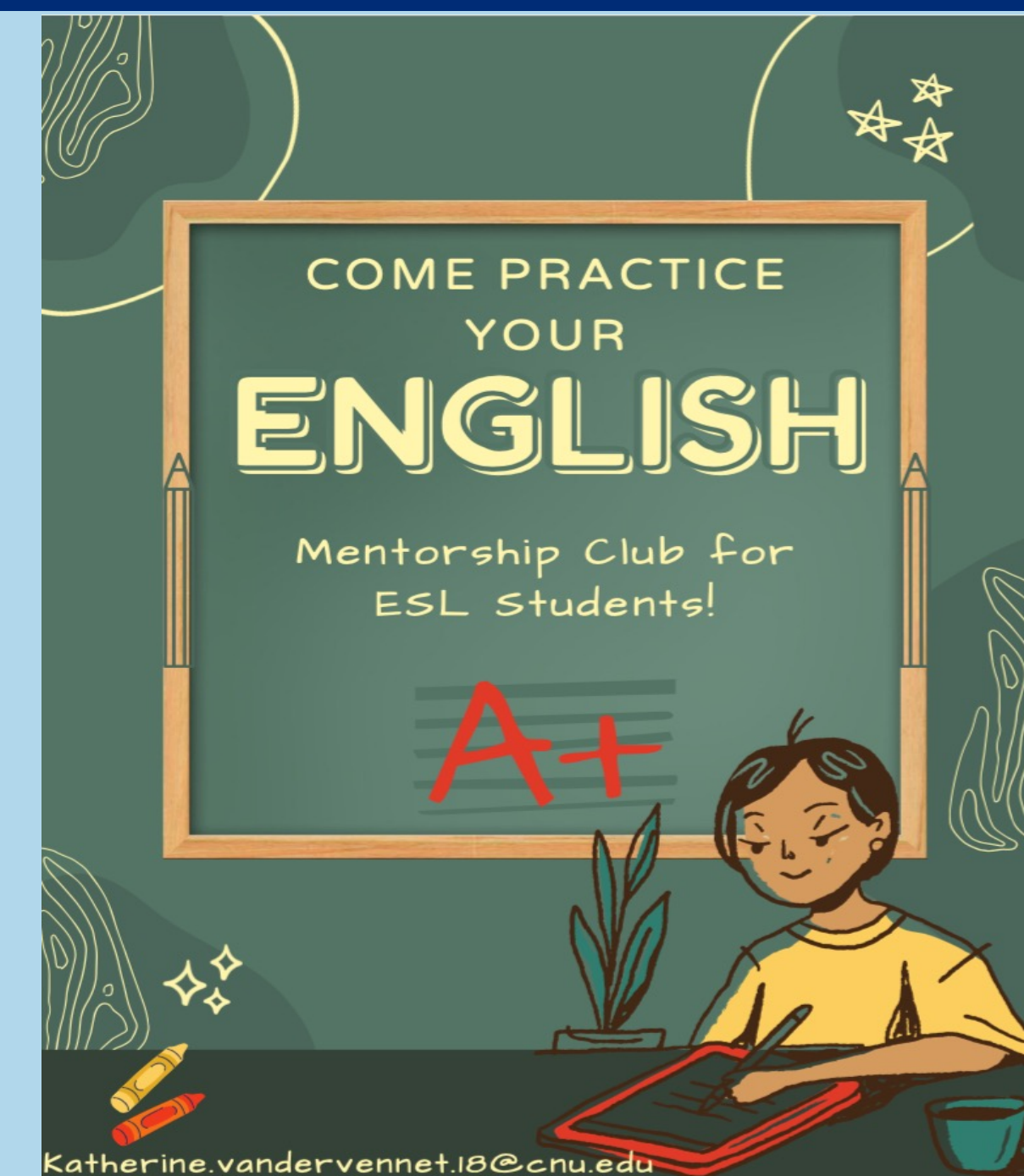
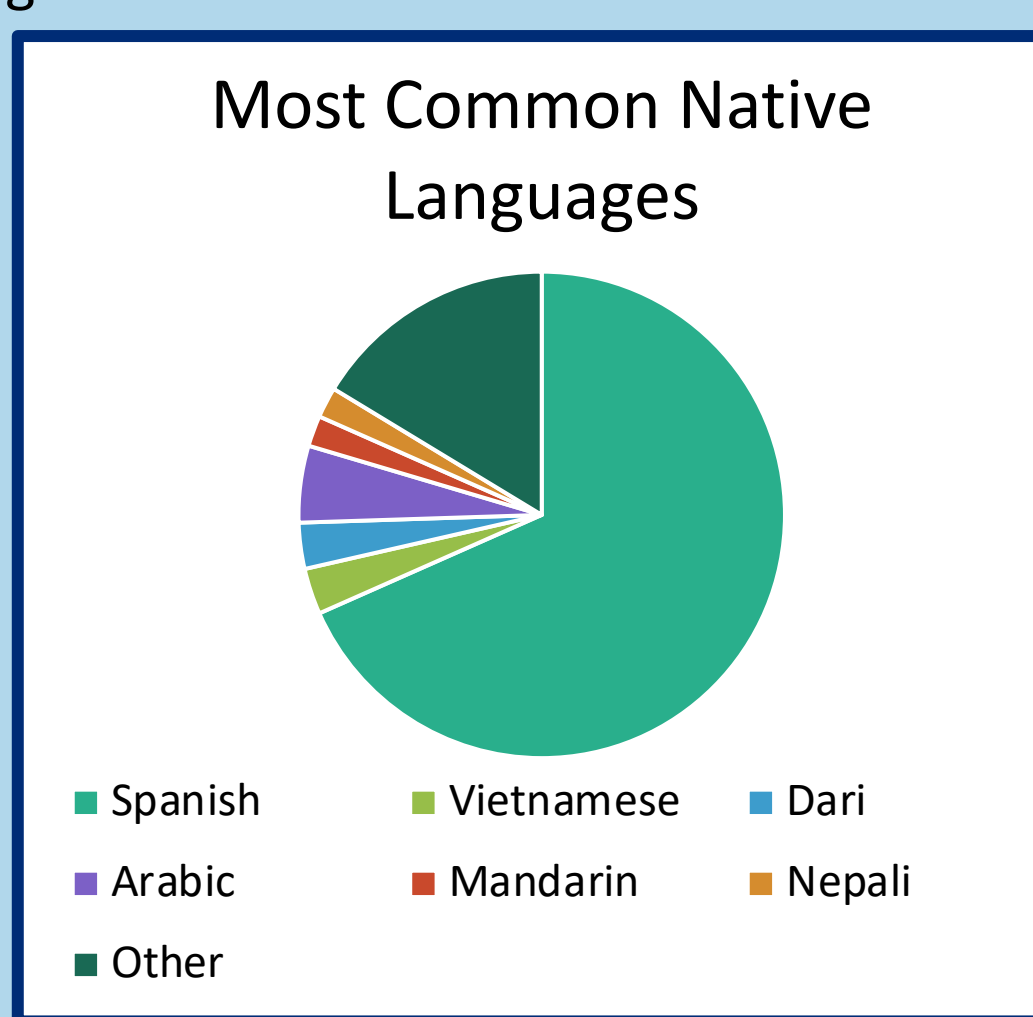
However, this project is significant to the greater community as well. Although always a topic of heated debate, the discussion over immigration has grown increasingly divisive in recent years. A critical factor in creating this division is a lack of cultural awareness on the part of many Americans. Many programs and organizations have set out to spread awareness of other cultures and global events, but have faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Some individuals have firmly rooted perspectives, while many others simply cannot connect the idea of other cultures to daily life: it is too distant. Building opportunities for young native English speakers to work directly with ELs creates more opportunities for cross-cultural understanding, as well as a personal connection to ideas which many find totally abstract. In the long run, projects such as these can increase future acceptance by Americans of other cultures and generally create a more welcoming culture.

ESL Students in NNPS



The city of Newport News serves as one of only seven hubs for immigrants across the state of Virginia, and is home to the greatest number of immigrants and refugees in the Hampton Roads community. Moreover, these numbers have increased exponentially in the last twenty years ago as the world has faced much unrest and living conditions elsewhere have remained unpredictable. Naturally, the number of English Learners in NNPS has reflected these general patterns, and today's ESL student population is well over 1600. This rapid growth has incited the development of many programs across the city of Newport News, ranging from welcome centers to newcomer programs, as well as additional non-profits and resources for supporting these students.

As is the case with many other areas in the United States, Spanish-speakers make up the predominant number of immigrants and ESL students. However, there are many other nationalities and home languages; prevalent among these are Arabic, Dari, and Vietnamese. In recent years, the multiculturalism of the group has only expanded, as increasingly high numbers of immigrants come from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa. The combined facts that ESL student populations are so diverse, and that the structure of these groups is fluid, create a need for multicultural awareness in all aspects of planning programs, both curricular and co-curricular. This also means that educating native English-speaking students on multiculturalism is essential to creating a more cohesive group.



Poster for advertising program to ESL students



Poster for advertising program to potential mentors

Project Plan

1. After formally being awarded the Ferguson Fellowship, I reached out to April Vazquez and Bruno Morales (again) to determine details and form a concrete plan with which to move forward.
2. At the first meeting, we concluded that Denbigh High School would be the most fitting school at which to launch the program and reached out to Assistant Principal of Instruction Jason Hollar.
3. Professor Grau and I worked with Mr. Hollar to construct a viable program which was tailored to the needs and scheduling logistics of Denbigh High School. We determined that after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays, as well as the Friday morning "flex" period, would be the best times to conduct tutoring and mentorship.
4. I worked to develop a brief training/list of tips for potential mentors.
5. I created a brief application to distribute to student populations identified as potential mentors or tutors. National Honors Society students were identified as the primary target group of students to serve as mentors.
6. Teachers identified ESL students who may benefit either from additional tutoring or from the social support provided by mentors.
7. Designated tutors began meeting with ESL students and providing English assistance/tutoring, primarily on homework assignments.

Supporting Materials

Below are several of the materials which were developed and used throughout this project. The left box describes some of the basic tips developed for a "crash course" in tutoring ELs. Each of these is a common practice in the ESL classroom and is derived from research-based strategies. The box on the right describes the questions asked on the mentor application form which was distributed. The last three bullet points are the three short answer questions which were included for the purpose of determining potential quality of the student both as a tutor and a mentor.

Tips for Teaching Beginner ELs

- Use visuals
- Use gestures
- Repeat yourself
- Speak clearly (do not mumble or whisper)
- Do not use unnecessary advanced vocabulary
 - Use props often
- If you know their native language, you can use it to help with confusion/obstacles

Mentor Application

- GPA
- School year
- Favorite Subject
- What class is your best grade?
- Please list and describe any previous tutoring experience you have.
- Why do you want to be a peer mentor?
- Why would you be a good peer mentor?



Community Partnership

NNPS ESL Instructional Specialists April Vazquez and Bruno Morales served as the community partner contacts on this project. The Newport News Public School mission statement is to ensure "every student graduates college, career, and citizen-ready." As part of achieving this goal, administrators and teachers in NNPS work tirelessly to provide advanced options for students, as well as additional support for any student who may benefit from these resources.

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