

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I am so excited to be joined today by Jorge Avalos, current Verona High School Associate Principal, and formerly one of my Spanish teachers in Sun Prairie. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Jorge Avalos

Yeah, of course.

Claire Darmstadter

So first would be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position here at Verona.

Jorge Avalos

That's a loaded question. I'm originally from Chicago, inner city of Chicago. So I grew up in a predominantly Mexican American neighborhood. And we spoke Spanish at home, we only spoke Spanish, even to this day. Every time I go home in Chicago, we don't speak English. I have two kids now. And the rule in the house is we don't speak English at home. So we only speak Spanish. So I did my undergrad in education, K-12, at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. So I'm a certified Spanish teacher. I did three years in Champaign Urbana, at a local high school after college. And then I came to UW-Madison to get a master's in Spanish literature. So Spanish is immersed in everything that I do. After my master's at UW Madison in Spanish literature, and culture, I taught seven years in the Sun Prairie Area School District, and middle school high school. So I did eighth to ninth grade combined. And then I went back to school one more time to grab my administration degree from Viterbo University. So this is my fourth year in my current field. And I also have taught at Concordia University, methods for teaching our languages, mostly the theory behind it, how do people acquire languages? And in my current role, I oversee the entire world language department. And I also oversee the ELL department as well.

Claire Darmstadter

Wow, see, got a lot on your plate. Yeah, so I remember when I was a student, you're kind of beginning to make that transition into admin. And I think for a lot of us, it was pretty strange, or at least kind of puzzling to see a language teacher going into admin. So did you feel like at a certain point, you were kind of expected to shoot for those potentially higher status or higher paying jobs? Do you think you could have had a larger impact on the school by going into those positions? Or what kind of motivated you to make that switch?

Jorge Avalos

That's a really good question. I love the classroom. I'm a teacher at heart, I still continue to create professional development for our staff here. I actually did a pilot course last summer, and I taught summer school for four weeks as administrator because I have a lifetime license in Spanish and in administration right now. But I just wanted to pilot ways that I can continue to help our students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. So for me, I felt like I had to leave the classroom in order to make a greater impact for all of our students. When I was a classroom

teacher, I loved it, I had about 100 to 150 students every year, and you're in a classroom, perfecting your skills, you know, you're trying to balance all the skills you need in order to acquire language from the speaking to the listening to the writing, and that takes a lot of time to have a good pace of it. But after a while, I wanted to see ways that I can impact programming for our entire school. So that's why I decided to leave the classroom to make a greater impact. And in my current role, I have about 1,700 students at the high school. And I'm able to do more leadership activities where I can actually find young talent in our students and immerse them into interview committees. We did a muralism project where we bring local artists and try to see ways that they see themselves reflected not only in the curriculum, but also in the spaces like physical walls, or even in the food service department. We've done great things for our students of color. For example, we did our Soul Food Fridays, in the month of February, where they decided our Black Student Union decided what kind of menu they wanted to have to celebrate Black History Month. So I love the classroom. I'm a teacher at heart, but I felt like in order to make a greater impact, I had to make the sacrifice of leaving the classroom in order to be at the table when those decisions are being made that impact our students.

Claire Darmstadter

And do you feel like your linguistic abilities are always viewed as something positive or additive to your position as an administrator, do you feel like sometimes you're kind of the default person to translate materials even if it wasn't like your job description? Do you think it's really important to have linguistically diverse individuals in those higher level or decision making positions?

Jorge Avalos

I think so because as you can see, across the nation, public institutions are diversifying. And with that diversity, you have to adjust to different cultures and how do they see the education system, so for me speaking Spanish in my role has been huge because I have families calling me or if I call them, I only not only have a common language, but I also have a common culture and they feel more comfortable. There's more of a trusting relationship because they know that I've experienced that immigrant story as well. I'm a first generation American, my parents are immigrants. So I have that connection with them. And I think it has been very beneficial because they want to see people like me in these positions, not only for the parents, but also for the students, because that's how I see myself as a role model as someone that, hey, I can see myself in that role, Mr. Avalos, first generation American, and he's a principal and, and he has all this fancy title. I think it's a two way street where families connect with me. And also our students see ourselves as the unlimited potential that they have when they're in the classroom.

Claire Darmstadter

And I know you currently work pretty closely with the language programming of the school. So can you talk a little bit about your work in that space and how much you're able to kind of influence what actually happens? Do you have a stake in the curriculum and specific philosophies they ascribe to? Or is it more just kind of like making sure things stay running smoothly on a day to day basis?

Jorge Avalos

My role as an administrator is to support the program, how do I grow the world language department? And how do we have a strong team that can function interdependently with each other and help each other out. And I think that's what I'm happy that we're having here in Verona is, we haven't had a lot of turnover in the last couple of years since I've been here. So you got to be mindful of the interviewing process to make sure you hire the best possible candidate, but also the person that can get along with the rest of the administration team. I've also had a little bit of an influence. I mentioned, I piloted an AP Spanish literature and culture course last summer, so I created everything from scratch during COVID. It was a four-week program, and it pretty much was focused on Latin American short stories and poetry. So I was able to focus on the Latin American boom in the 60s, in order for our students to see themselves connected with writers from Latin America. We don't see that in our education system in the traditional world language department. So that's something that I really wanted to change. And we just put in the course perspectives an AP Spanish literature and culture course for next year. And our numbers are looking pretty strong, we have about 17 or 20 kids that already sign up for that. So I'm happy to see that they're gonna see amazing writers from Latin America, like Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Rulfo for Pedro Páramo. So you have all these amazing writers, and I'm happy that they're gonna be able to see a little bit of that culture, and not wait until college to see these great writers like was my lived experience when I was younger, in high school.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, it's so exciting. And so, you know, going into the fall, obviously, with language courses, there's a sequence. It's not like courses like maybe science where you can kind of take one in isolation, and then different one the next year. So what students do the previous year impacts what they're going to do the next year. So keeping in mind how COVID has changed everything, are teachers having to kind of reset expectations for the fall, are they going to change what they're doing? What's kind of the approach taking COVID into consideration?

Jorge Avalos

Well, the first thing they had to do this year is they had to adjust their teaching, to all virtual, we started virtual for the entire first semester. And we just recently moved to concurrent teaching where they had to pivot again, and adjust to having students in the classroom physically and also students at home. So they've done a lot of pivoting. That's the magic word that we use here. And I'm really proud of them because despite the pandemic, they've been able to support each other and adjust. Virtual teaching pacing is completely different than pacing in the classroom. So I have not pushed them too hard, because I know they're doing the best they can. And then we are actually — one of my job's is to support them and provide resources for them to do their jobs and improve their pedagogy. So we actually have right now on the 29th, I teamed up with an outside consultant, and they're going to be coming in for three hours in the month of March, three hours in the month of April, and three hours in a month of May to work on curriculum development, and adjust accordingly. So like you mentioned, from one level to another, I want to make sure that there is a good flow, and there is good vertical and horizontal alignment with the middle schools as well. So yeah, this is something that you try to make the

program stronger, and you also put the supports that they need in order for them to do their job to the best of their abilities.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, it seems like there's a lot of intentional work going on. So you also talked about how you're a father and at home, it's a Spanish only household, but I would imagine in the community, you can't exactly guarantee you that every single thing is going to be in Spanish. So how do you kind of approach that with your kids? Do they go to a school that has Spanish language instruction? Do you kind of make sure to go into certain places in the community that speaks Spanish? How do you make sure that you're supporting Spanish when the wider community might not always be?

Jorge Avalos

Yeah, many things that we do, my son is in second grade and my daughter is in 4k. So they're both in a two way immersion program here because I want to make sure that they have a really strong language that's part of my identity and my culture, and I want to make sure I transmit that to future generations. We're also very intentional in going to places that feel like home, right. So I've always been told, like *cultura cura*, which translates to the culture will heal you. So whenever you're having a hard time or a stressful day, I run towards my culture, right? Whether it's an item or something that is pre-Hispanic or a short story, or any symbol like Frida Khalo socks, or a pen or something. So I always have my mugs, and anything that represents my culture. And we are also very intentional in teaching them. Oh, your parents are from Mexico, your grandparents are from Mexico. So we always put that identity in there, we try to go to grocery stores that have Mexican products. So we are very intentional on going to ice cream shops that have Mexican flavors. And we try to have Spanish books at home that teach about our culture. My wife does a really good job of reading to them at night and we always read in Spanish as well. And also when we watch TV, we try to put our shows, even if it's American shows, we try to put them in Spanish, so they learn the language as well. And of course, Netflix, we try to find cultural cartoons that they can learn from as well, so whenever we go make their first trip to Mexico, they understand a little bit of their culture and our identity.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, hopefully that can come sometime soon. I know right now it seems very far away. So kind of comparing and contrasting the different places you've lived, whether it's in Chicago or Sun Prairie, or Verona, how do you think language is viewed or the community's hospitable to language? Does it depend what language you speak? What's the difference there?

Jorge Avalos

I know the language importance because a lot of people see the economic benefits of Spanish, you know, like, people that I talked to, when I go to the bank where I go to see a doctor or a nurse, a lot of people tell me, I wish I would have taken Spanish, right or I regret not taking Spanish. And sometimes they feel like if they would have known Spanish, then they would have been being able to compete better in the market. And that's one thing that a lot of people pay attention to. But I would just push a little bit more and make us think a little bit about the benefits

of speaking another language that is not just the economic factor. There's the health benefits. There's research that shows that students that learn another language, their brain develops differently. So they're able to multitask better, right? People who work multiple languages, their brain is working at a different pace that they can actually delay Alzheimers, or any of these diseases. So I think there are the economic benefits, but I think I'm also trying to make sure that people understand that there's also health benefits for students and children and adults at any level to learn a language.

Claire Darmstadter

So the health benefit obviously, it's probably easier to sell to adults, but to kids that might not make as much sense to them. So we tell kids all the time that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason, you can answer in English, in Spanish, in a mix of both, what would you tell a little kid about why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

Jorge Avalos

Si es importante hablar porque te puedes comunicar con un mundo completamente diferente. Toda latinoamérica habla español, el Caribe, Centroamérica. Y es un poder que tener porque puedes disfrutar más de la comunicación con personas de todo el mundo o dibujos animados, caricaturas. Yo sé que hay caricaturas en Argentina que son muy populares. En México, hay programas muy populares como El chavo del ocho. So, como digo yo, la cultura cura. Y es una manera de empoderarte tú como persona y tener una identidad positiva. Y te da una autoestima fuerte en las cosas que vayas a pasar en tu vida.

It is important to speak more than one language because you can communicate with an entirely different world. All of Latin America, the Caribbean, Central America speaks Spanish. And it is a power to have because you can enjoy greater communication with people all over the world or cartoons. I know that Argentina has some really popular cartoons. In Mexico, they have programs like El Chavo del Ocho. So, as I say, culture cures. And it is a way to empower you as a person and create a positive identity. And it gives you a strong self esteem for the things that will happen in your life.

Claire Darmstadter

Thank you so much. I appreciate all you had to share with us in taking a couple of minutes out of your very busy day I can imagine, so thank you so much and I hope you have a great rest of your school year.

Jorge Avalos

Thank you so much!