

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody I am joined today by Leah Ebener, K-5 Spanish teacher at Roosevelt Elementary in Kenosha. Thanks for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me!

So it'd be great if you could first give us an overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position.

Leah Ebener

Sure, so I attended Carthage College, which is in Kenosha, Wisconsin. I was an elementary ed and Spanish double major, and then I minored in music. And part of the requirement of majoring in the language at Carthage is that you study abroad. So in my junior year at Carthage, I studied abroad in Spain. And with being both an elementary ed. and Spanish double major, I wasn't quite sure which route I wanted to take. And in my time in Spain, I just realized that this is 100%, what I need to be doing with my career and so from that path, I directed my focus more towards Spanish education versus elementary education of being first grade or second grade teacher and was hopeful that I would be able to find an elementary language position. After coming back from studying abroad, I was in a fourth grade placement for student teaching, and then a high school placement for Spanish for student teaching. And I loved both of those experiences, and still felt that I maybe wanted to pursue a fourth grade position or an elementary. And so this position opened up at Roosevelt and came here to be the elementary language teacher here. And here's where I am.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So I'd really love to dive into that elementary, non immersion language education. I feel like people don't know what that entails as well. So can you just kind of talk us through like a format, how often you're interacting with the kids and kind of what the normal day looks like for you?

Leah Ebener

Sure. So I see all students once a week, so each class has finished once a week, and I see them for 30 minutes. There's a couple of different models that you might see, Wisconsin uses the standards that were just revised and updated in 2019. And they're proficiency based. So it's looking at through the proficiency levels, what are students able to do and the language. So the range starting from novice low, all the way up through advanced. So what I have done is, there is a committee called FLES committee, Foreign Language Early Sequence, that works in our state. And so I've gotten connected with them that have other elementary language programs all throughout the state. And so from that we've worked with Helena Curtain to use her unit proficiency template for writing units for grade levels. And so through that, we're able to identify what is the proficiency target for the unit, what we want the students to be able to do based on the modes of communication, so through the interpretive mode, which is listening and reading skills, the interpersonal mode, speaking, and then the presentational mode of using their speaking and writing skills. And so through that our state standards have standards that go along under those. And so I use those as kind of the success criteria for the units. And we are also an International Baccalaureate school. So I look at in each grade level, what are some of

their units of inquiry that they have, and what is kind of the best fit for certain units to teach at that grade level at that time. So I have two units per year. So they have one unit that they do quarters one and quarter two, and then a second unit that they do in quarter three and quarter four. And so kind of balancing what are they working on in IB units that I can connect with and support, but also balancing that with high-frequency language that a language learner who is acquiring new language would be benefited from learning. And so that was kind of the process that I use for writing the units for K through five.

Claire Darmstadter

And so when you're in your classes, is it totally in Spanish, is it kind of a mix of both? And how do you scaffold or support the language so that your kids can kind of understand what you're saying if they're not picking a button, every single word?

Leah Ebener

Yeah, so the goal is definitely to make it accessible for all students. And we have a really wide range of students and ability level here, which is one of the reasons I love our school so much. So the goal when you read the standards is always getting towards that 90% in the target language, so it's always you know, striving for that and I feel like there are some days that I am feeling like I'm successful in reaching, you know, close to that, and then there's other days that I feel like okay, I need to take step back and see, you know, where could I have pushed myself more to then be able to get the students to keep it that that goal. So I think it's kind of a balance, and it's knowing, first building that relationship with those students, and trying to maximize those opportunities. So that way, when you get into that instructional time, you're able to really strive towards that.

Claire Darmstadter

And so I know the IB program more in the high school level, and how to kind of relate to those courses. But I'm not so privy to how it operates at the elementary level. So can you talk about kind of the structure and then post elementary school when these kids have a little bit of Spanish background, but maybe not like the total immersion, how they kind of go into Spanish classes at a higher level?

Leah Ebener

So at the elementary level, it's called the Primary Years programme. So each grade level has six units of inquiry that are under one of each of the six transdisciplinary themes. And so they're roughly anywhere from four to six weeks that they last. And so we have our master program of inquiry board where we can see what are the six units per grade level, and then the order for when they're being taught throughout the year. And so that's part of that transdisciplinary framework that IB aims to have in all schools. And so as specialists or support staff, whether it's art, music, gym, library, we kind of look at those units to see where can we support that to enhance the learning experience, since IB equally values the arts as, as equal with reading, math, science, social studies. So that's kind of the order for the units of inquiry. For moving beyond Roosevelt, all students, if they take a language in sixth grade would go to that level one course. So there's not really right now an opportunity for advancement or moving on. They

would all start in that sixth grade, like Spanish one class and then from that point, and if they decide to move forward with that, then they would advance in seventh and eighth grade. And then in high school, we have the AP tracks of the students, if they are interested in pursuing that can keep progressing from Spanish 1, 2, 3, AP. There's also a Spanish for native speakers course that they have. And there might be an opportunity if a student comes in and thinks that they might be better fit to start in Spanish two versus Spanish one, sometimes those like a case by case basis that might occur but in middle school, all students would start at that level one.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you talked a little bit about your involvement with FLES, can you talk a little bit about how you're kind of what the work you do with that group, FLESFest, what that kind of is about and then if there's other professional organizations or informal groups that you're part of in the state to kind of build community within language educators?

Leah Ebener

Sure. So I went to my first FLESFest, three or four years ago, and I loved what I learned there. And I loved the experience of it. And I just felt like from that day, and from being connected with those like minded educators, I just became a better teacher. And that's something that professional connectedness and just, you know, continuing to stay at the forefront of what's happening in the field is really important to me. And so from that first one, I had just had some conversations with people who were on the committee and asked about getting more involved. And so from that point, I joined the committee. And so now we work together throughout the year to plan the annual FLESFest, they kind of just work incrementally throughout the year to work towards planning that professional development day.

Claire Darmstadter

And finally, we tell all our kids, whether they're little ones or they're older ones that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason if you can boil it down to one why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

Leah Ebener

Why it's a superpower to speak more than one language? I think it's just part of being a human and working in this, you know, living in this global society that we have. I think it's part of a way that we can come together.

Claire Darmstadter

Well, thank you so much. I appreciate all your time, and I hope you have a great rest of your school year.

Leah Ebener

Thank you.