

PROGRAM REVIEW

ADVANCED LEARNING/SPECTRUM
PHASE I REPORT: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

JUNE 2017



RESEARCH & EVALUATION DEPARTMENT

Jessica K. Beaver, PhD
Senior Research Scientist

Anna S. Cruz
Lead Statistical Analyst

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by the SPS Research & Evaluation Department in collaboration with the Division of Student Supports and the Advanced Learning Office. In particular, Stephen Martin, Supervisor for Highly Capable Services and Advanced Learning Programs, drafted portions of the background information for this report and the staff of the Advanced Learning office provided feedback on research design. Kari Hanson, Director of Student Support Services, provided guidance throughout the research design, data collection, and analysis process. The authors are grateful for contributors' content expertise and general guidance throughout the research process.

Introduction

Program Review Purpose and Scope

In accordance with Superintendent SMART Goal 3 and Policy 2090, the Board of Directors has asked that Seattle Public Schools undertake a systematic review of district programs and services. The goal of program evaluation is to improve decision-making by deepening understanding of program design, implementation, results/outcomes, and cost/benefits. International Education/Dual-Language Immersion and Spectrum/Advanced Learning were both selected for review for the 2016-17 school year.

The program review for Advanced Learning is also part of the Division of Student Supports' "Advanced Learning Priority Program Review and Communication Plan," a multi-year effort to constructively address concerns raised about the Advanced Learning Department and districtwide services for advanced learners.

The program review for Advanced Learning includes two phases of work:

- Phase 1: Descriptive analysis of "current state" Advanced Learning programming
- Phase 2: Design study of high-growth practices for students above or well above standard

This report details results from Phase 1 and includes the following components:

Report Roadmap

- I. Overview of Spectrum and Advanced Learning
- II. Descriptive Data for Advanced Learning
- III. Current Issues and concerns within Advanced Learning
- IV. Overview of Phase 2 (Design Study) Reporting

The Phase 2 report will be delivered in fall 2017.

I. Overview of Spectrum and Advanced Learning

To understand the context of Advanced Learning services in Seattle Public Schools, it is necessary to distinguish between services for Highly Capable students, which are provided for in state law, and Spectrum programs, which are specific to Seattle.

Background: Highly Capable Cohort (HCC)

Prior to 2011, services for Highly Capable Students (the Washington term for “gifted” students) were delivered statewide on a voluntary basis¹, wherein districts applied for state grants to support their identification and programmatic efforts and then filed a year-end report on program status.

When SB 5919 took effect in September 2011, Washington became the first, and only, state in the country to fund appropriate services for gifted students within basic education rather than as a supplement. The bill did this by making "Programs for highly capable students" part of "the instructional program of basic education provided by each school district." Highly Capable Services are now mandatory statewide.² Over the years, the names for the program have changed: first called the Individual Progress Program (IPP), the program then became the Accelerated Progress Program (APP), and is now called the Highly Capable program in order to reflect the state’s language. The Highly Capable Cohort (HCC) is a self-contained service option available to HC students in grades 1-8.

Background: Spectrum

The Spectrum program was launched by SPS as a second tier program for advanced students who did not meet the eligibility criteria for Highly Capable.³ Originally called the Horizon Program, it was designed to mimic the format of the services for Highly Capable students. Highly Capable students were (and are) offered the opportunity to attend self-contained classes, which are classes limited to HC students in grades 1-8. Spectrum students were offered a similar opportunity to receive services in a self-contained environment at several regional Spectrum sites and at all middle schools.

Since the 2016-17 school year, the regional Spectrum elementary and K-8 sites have no longer offered full time self-contained classrooms for identified students. At some sites there were too few identified students to populate full classes, while at other sites there were too many eligible students, resulting in waiting lists. Spectrum programs for middle school students, have continued at most sites, but are often designated as honors classes, and are not necessarily restricted to district-identified advanced learner students. While Highly Capable students may require access to specialized classrooms, the district stated goal is to meet the needs of Spectrum-eligible students in general education classes.

For more information on Advanced Learning services and programs, visit the [SPS Advanced Learning webpage](#).

¹ State administrative code requirements (WAC 392-170).

² [Link to information about the Washington State HCP program](#)

³ Eligibility criteria are set by each District. Seattle requires for HC cognitive scores at or above the 98th percentile and achievement scores in math and reading at or above the 95th percentile. For Spectrum/Advanced Learners, the criteria are 87th percentile in both cognitive abilities and achievement.

How are Spectrum students grouped in schools?

Data collected from our April 2017 survey of school principals confirmed that currently no elementary or K-8 schools offer self-contained classrooms for Spectrum-identified advanced learners. Six out of ten (60%) of middle schools reported offering self-contained courses for Spectrum-identified advanced learners, in most cases in math or English Language Arts.

Most principals reported implementing some form of grouping based on current student achievement to support differentiation of instruction. Grouping occurs most commonly for math and English language arts, but in comes cases for science and social studies as well.

In middle schools, principals reported that grouping typically occurs through course assignments, for example by offering honors level courses for higher achieving students. At the elementary level, principals said their schools implement either a flexible clustering approach (e.g., small group instruction), or a “walk-to” model in which students regroup across classrooms. Some elementary schools use a combination of flexible clustering and a walk-to approach. The walk-to approach, which is used mostly for math instruction only, is implemented by all elementary Spectrum schools in at least some grade levels and by 17 out of 35 (49%) of non-Spectrum elementary schools. In cases where a flexible clustering approach is used, principals reported that students receive small group instruction according to their current level, for example, based on reading benchmarks. In such cases, Spectrum-identified students are clustered across classrooms within their grade level. In math, for example, these students might receive enrichment opportunities during small group instruction. The chart below shows the primary grouping approaches used in elementary schools.

Figure 1. Percent of schools implementing grouping based on achievement

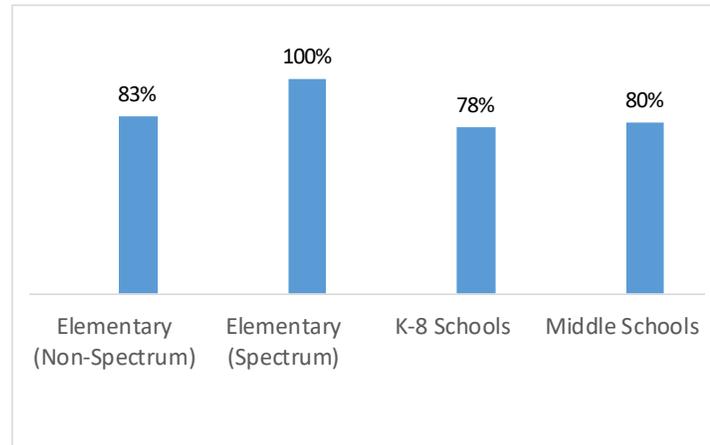
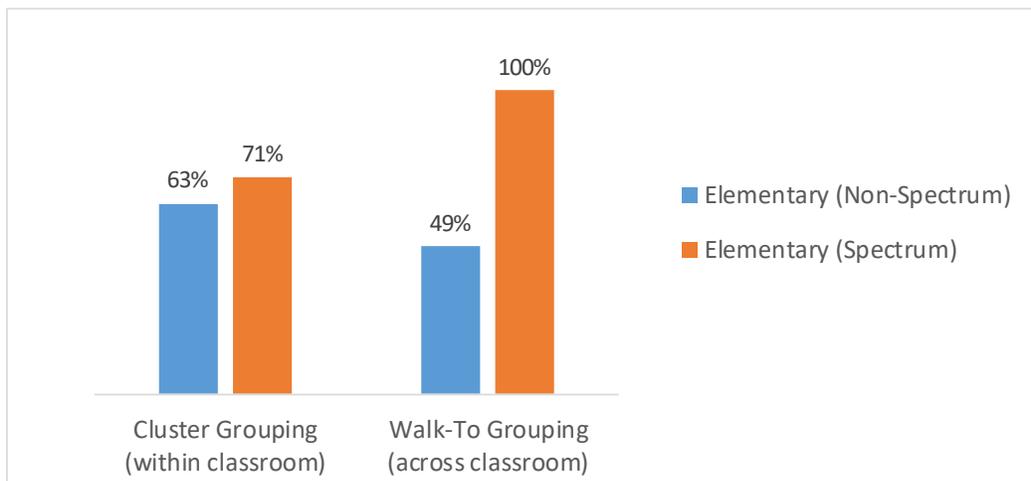


Figure 2. Grouping approaches used by elementary schools



II. Descriptive Student Data

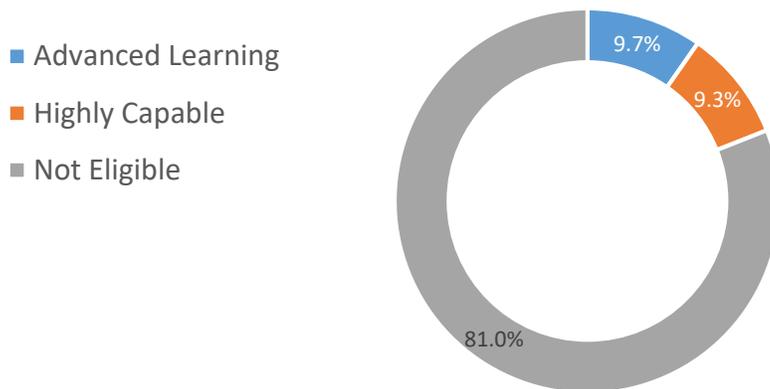
This section provides descriptive data of Advanced Learning/Spectrum enrollment and student performance. Unless otherwise noted, student enrollment data are from 2016-17. Additional tables will be provided in an appendix (forthcoming). Student proficiency and growth data are from 2015-16.

Note: Descriptive statistics provide useful summaries of data and are valuable tools in the inquiry process; however, these data should not be used to infer causal relationships, for example between Advanced Learning/Spectrum eligibility and student performance.

Student Enrollment

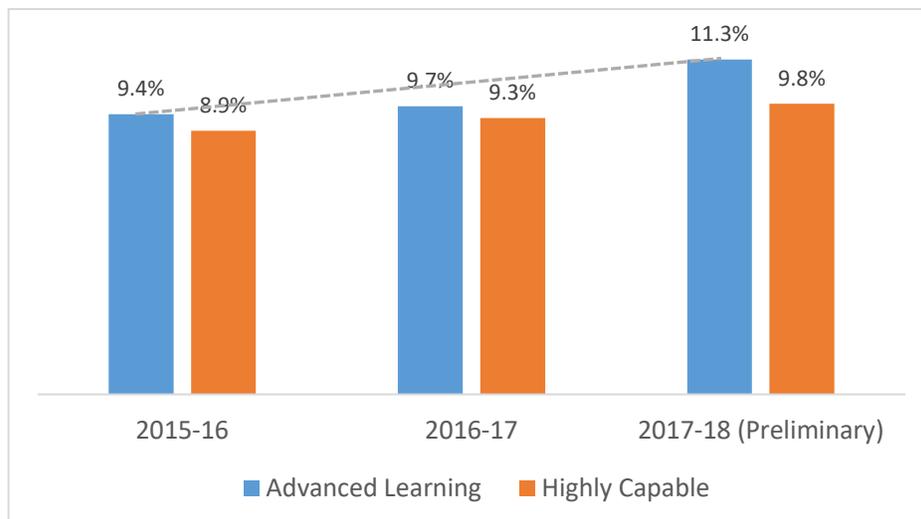
Districtwide, 9.7% of students in 2016-17 were eligible for Advanced Learning and 9.3% for Highly Capable. 81% of students were Not Eligible, meaning they were either not tested or were tested and did not meet the required benchmarks for identification.

Figure 3. 2016-17 Advanced Learning Eligibility, Grades 1-12



There has been an increase in the districtwide percentage of students eligible for Advanced Learning over a three-year period, from 9.4% in 2015-16 to a projected 11.3% for 2017-18.

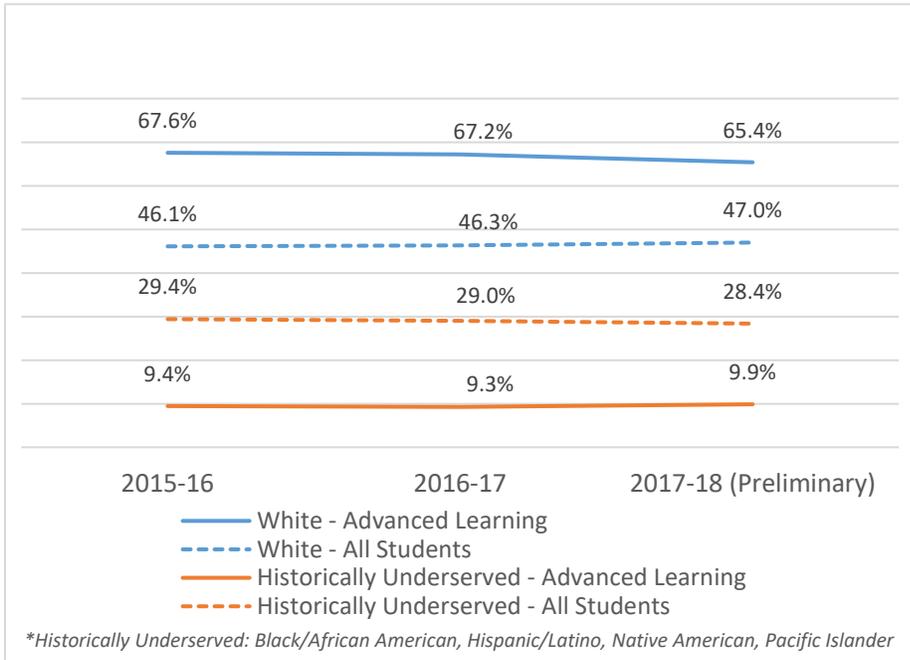
Figure 4. Percent of Advanced Learning and Highly Capable Eligible Students



Note: 2017-18 data are projected from referral data and demographics for incoming students in grades 1-12. Data are preliminary.

Enrollment trends have stayed relatively flat over a three-year period. White students comprise approximately two-thirds of all AL eligible students, but less than half of enrolled students in the district. However, 2017-18 preliminary data suggest a slight narrowing of the gap for overrepresentation in AL for white students.

Figure 5. Proportion of White and Historically Underserved* Students (3-Year Trend)



Note: The Advanced Learning office has undertaken numerous efforts in 2016-17 to increase access to Advanced Learning for Historically Underserved students. Specific efforts are detailed in Table 3 (page x).

English Language Learner students and students receiving special education services comprise a smaller proportion of Advanced Learning/Spectrum eligible students compared to students overall. There are fewer than 10 current ELL students who are AL eligible.

Figure 6. 2016-17 Composition of Students by ELL

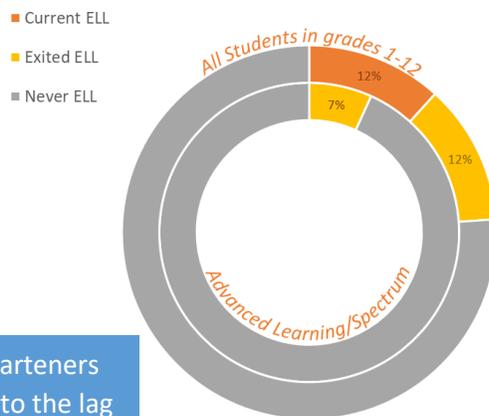
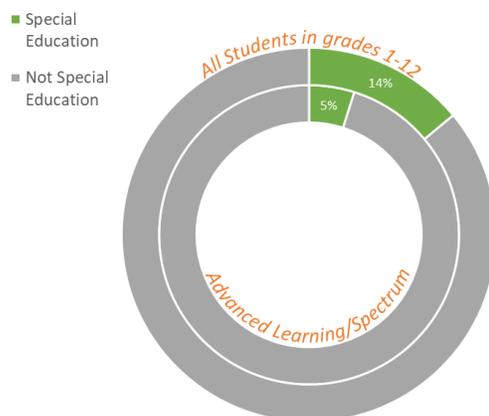


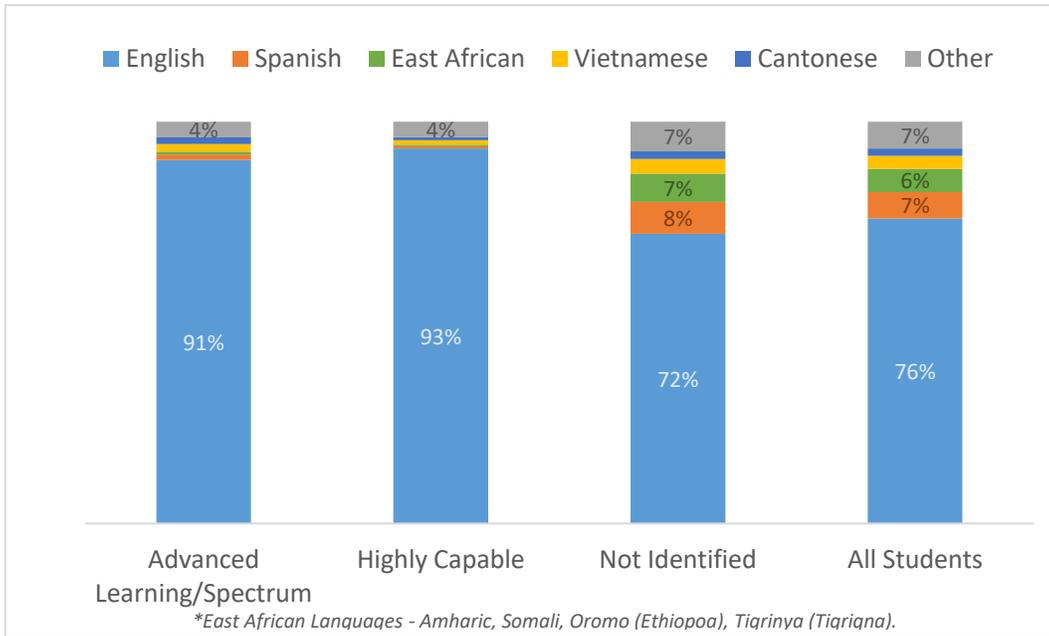
Figure 7. 2016-17 Composition of Students by Special Education



Note: Kindergarteners excluded due to the lag in the eligibility referral process.

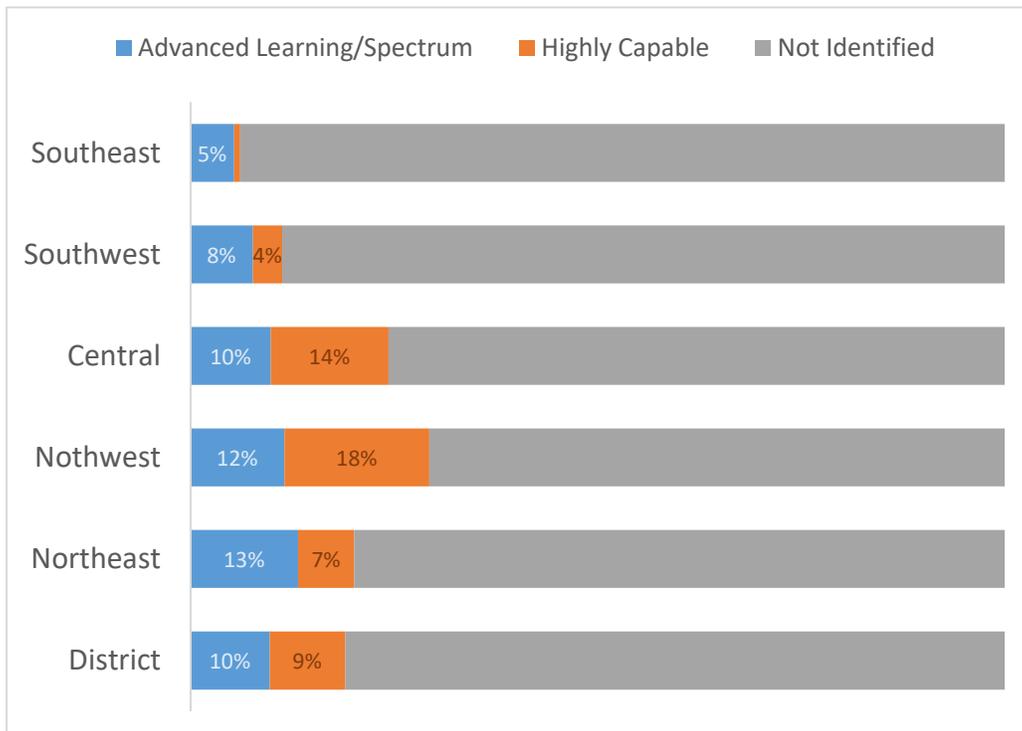
Most all (91%) of Advanced Learning eligible students speak English at home, compared to 76% of students overall in the district.

Figure 8. Home languages by Advanced Learning Eligibility



For 2016-17, the Northwest region has the highest concentration of the district's Advanced Learning/Highly Capable students (30%), while the Southeast region has the lowest concentration (6%).

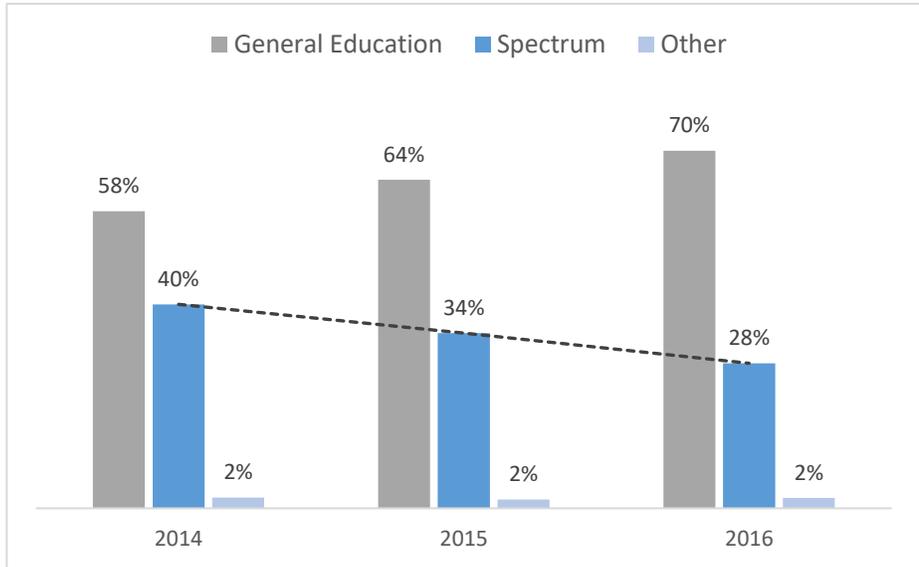
Figure 9. Advanced Learning Eligibility by Region, 2016-17



There has been a steady decline in the percentage of AL eligible students enrolled at a Spectrum designated school. The decline is most noticeable among elementary grades, where the proportion of students dropped by 12% from 40% in 2014 to 28% in 2016.

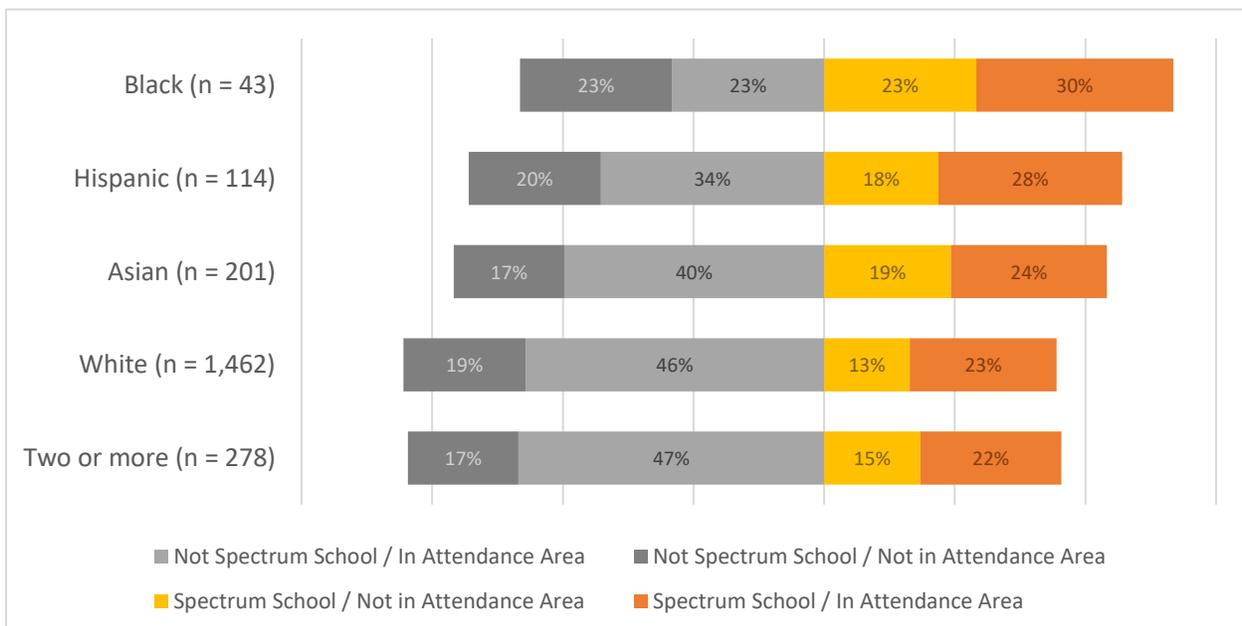
Figure 10. Advanced Learning/Spectrum Eligible Students by Program (Grades 1-5)

Note: As of 2016-17, there were no self-contained Spectrum classrooms in elementary or K-8 schools. However, the Spectrum enrollment designation persists. Parents of AL/Spectrum-eligible students can opt to send their child to a Spectrum designated school if spaces in that school are open.



Students' attendance at their neighborhood school slightly varies by race. 23% of AL eligible black students attend a Spectrum that is not in their attendance area, followed by Asian students (19%) and Hispanic students (18%).

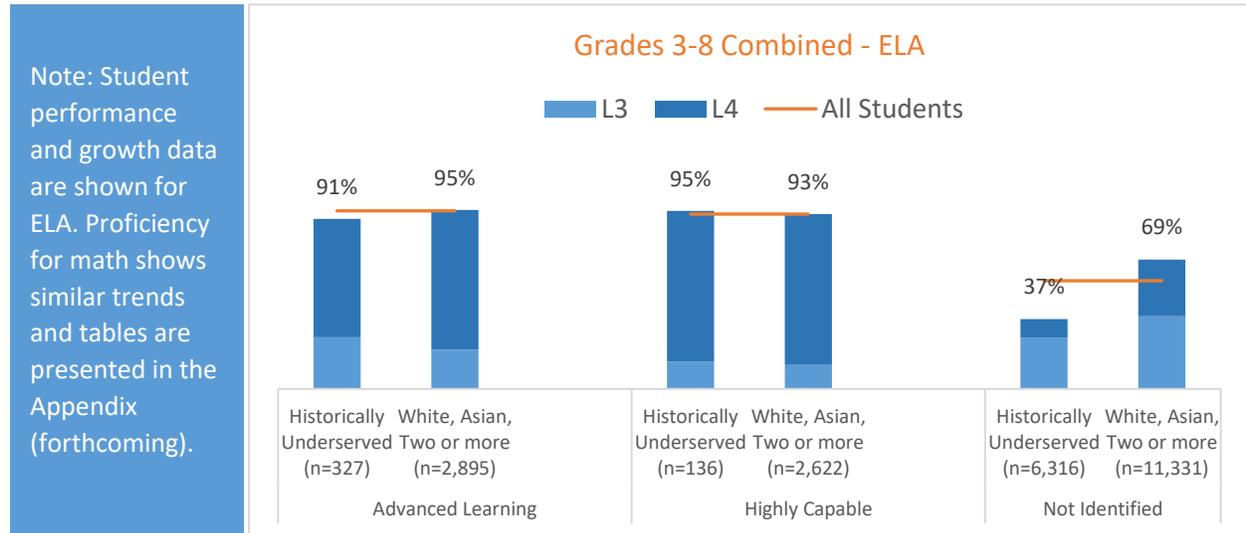
Figure 11. 2015-16 Advanced Learning Eligible by School Type and Attendance Area (Grades 1-5)



Student Performance

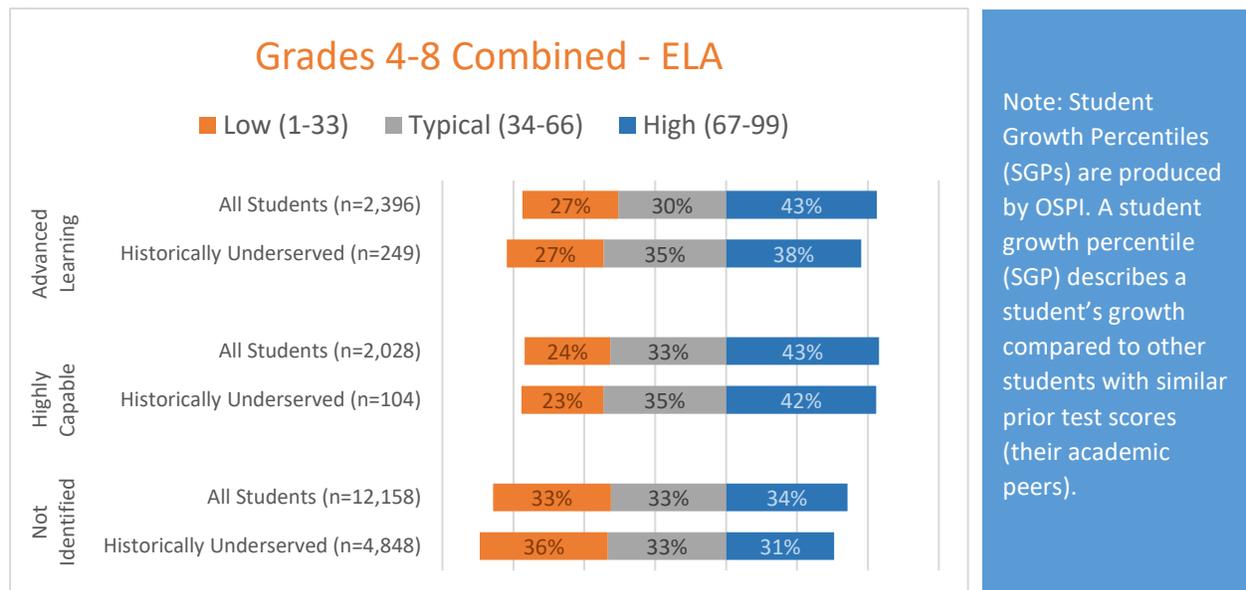
Proficiency rates for students identified for Advanced Learning/Spectrum and HC students are over 90%, and Historically Underserved students perform equally as well as their white, Asian, and multiracial peers. The opportunity gap persists, however, for Historically Underserved students not identified for Advanced Learning.

Figure 12. 2015-16 Smarter Balanced Results by Advanced Learning Eligibility



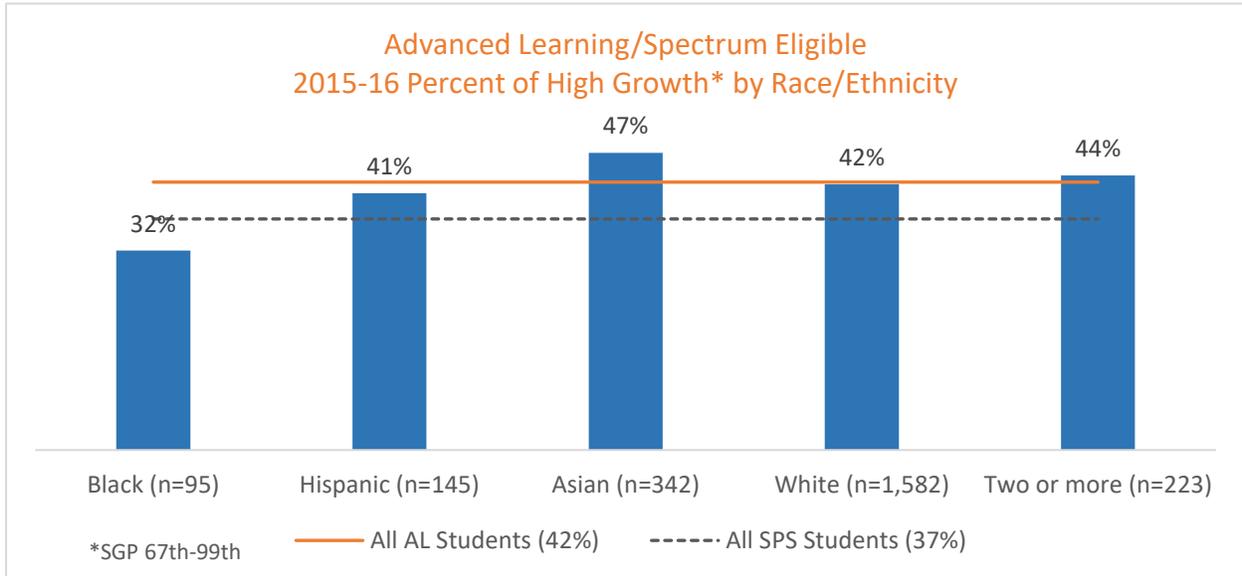
Student growth is another way to examine student performance. Although differences by race are not evident for HC students, there are some differences for AL eligible students. 43% of all Advanced Learning eligible students with a growth score demonstrate high levels of student growth compared to 38% of Historically Underserved students who are AL eligible.

Figure 13. 2015-16 Percent of Students by SGP Growth Level



Differences in demonstrated student growth are particularly evident for black students who are Advanced Learning eligible. Although there are far fewer students in this group overall (n=95), only 32% were “high growth” (SGPs of 67 or more), which is far lower than the district average for all AL students (43% high growth). SGPs for Hispanic/Latino students, however, are on pace with their white peers, though still slightly below the district average for all AL students.

Figure 14. Advanced Learning/Spectrum Eligible 2015-16 Percent of High Growth by Race/Ethnicity



III. Current Issues, Concerns, and Recommendations related to Spectrum/Advanced Learning

This section presents thematic data from two sources:

- 1) **Community and External Feedback.** The first source is notes and information compiled from various meetings of community members, the Board of Directors, district leaders, and other stakeholders regarding their critical feedback and suggestions to improve on Advanced Learning services.

Table 1. Sources of Community and District Feedback on Advanced Learning

Sources of Feedback on Advanced Learning	Stakeholder Viewpoints Represented
Board of Directors Work Session Minutes (October 2016, February 2017)	Board of Directors, district leaders
Districtwide 2015-16 Family Survey	Families
Racial Equity in HCC Team Recommendations (2016)	Families, teachers, students, community members
HCC Pathway in West Seattle Focus Group (2016)	Families, teachers, school leaders, AL staff
Evaluation Report: Accelerated Progress Program (2007 UVA study)	Board of Directors, students, families, teachers, school leaders, district staff

- 2) **Principal Survey.** The second source is the April 2017 Principal Survey, which was administered to all elementary, middle, and K-8 principals. Response rates on the survey were high (86%) and included responses from all 22 Spectrum designation schools.

Together, these sources provide a comprehensive picture of stakeholder issues and concerns within the Advanced Learning system, with a particular focus on Spectrum. In analyzing the above sources, three key issues emerged.

Key Issues Raised by District Stakeholders

Stakeholders want...

1. High quality, rigorous instruction for students who are not in self-contained environments
2. Solutions to ensure racial equity within Advanced Learning
3. A cohesive plan to guide the future of Advanced Learning programs and supports

Issue 1: Stakeholders want high quality, rigorous instruction for students who are not in self-contained environments.

“Teachers need more support for differentiation in the classroom and especially how to challenge spectrum and [Advanced Learning] students that chose to remain in their neighborhood school.” - Open-ended response from 2015-16 Family Survey

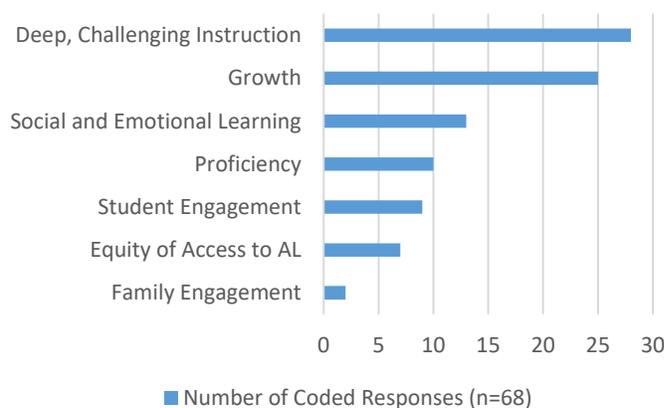
“I do not understand what will happen to my Spectrum tested kid for middle school. How do I know there will be challenging classes available for his level? It's a big concern for our family.”

Open-ended response from 2015-16 Family Survey

Stakeholders, particularly parents and family members, expressed concerns about the availability of challenging instruction and content for students who were Advanced Learning eligible but not in a self-contained HCC program. They cited teachers who did not have adequate supports for differentiation, and schools that were not well prepared to meet their needs of their advanced learners. The previous evaluation report on Advanced Learning (2007) highlighted the difficulty in providing high quality differentiation for Spectrum students. Said the report: *“It is not clear how Spectrum or the [Advanced Learning Opportunities] differentiate instruction for the highly able student who elects not to attend APP [now HCC].”* Family members who responded to the 2015-16 Family Survey expressed similar concerns.

A key goal of the Design Study for Advanced Learning (forthcoming) will be to determine the ways in which schools create differentiated environments that encourage high achieving students to stay challenged and motivated in class. In this descriptive report, however, we asked principals to define success for their Advanced Learning eligible student population (see Figure x). As shown below, the most commonly identified marker of success was students’ **access to deeper, more challenging learning opportunities**. Examples included differentiation of instruction, rigorous content materials, and the ability to engage in deeper learning opportunities.

Figure 5. Principals’ definitions of “success” for Advanced Learning eligible students



“Success means that every student is appropriately challenged with access to learning opportunities that meet the leaning needs of the individual student. AL is more about rigor than above grade level.”

Principal Survey Write-In Response

The second most common response was **student growth**. While most of these principals named student growth in an aspirational sense (e.g. “we want them to show growth from year to year”), others

provided guidance on how they measure growth in their school, for example naming interim assessments they use or clarifying that growth for them means making at least one year’s growth in one year’s time. In contrast, 10 principals mentioned that they define success by looking to **proficiency**, which they typically measured through proficiency on standardized, standards-aligned assessments.

Other categories of responses worthy of note include access to content that allows for **engagement** in both **academic and social emotional learning, equity of access to advanced learning opportunities** for typically underserved or overlooked students (e.g. ELL students, SPED students, students of color), and the **ability to successfully engage parents** in the advanced learning experience.

Issue 2: Stakeholders want solutions to ensure racial equity within Advanced Learning.

At the October 2016 Board Work Session on Advanced Learning, the Board of Directors asked district leaders to consider race and other disparities during their review of Advanced Learning and Spectrum services. This guidance stems from ongoing concerns from parents and community members regarding racial disproportionality in Advanced Learning services in general and HCC/Spectrum in particular.

“The tremendous racial disproportionality in HCC is a long-standing, well-known problem. There are steps the district can take now to reduce the disparity but to date it has refused to sufficiently prioritize this issue.”

“I want more equity across the board so we don't have these small isolated accelerated programs but a chance for all kids to be challenged.”

“Access [to HCC] is gated by a racist, classist, educationally flawed test, which is **REPREENSIBLE.**”

Racial Equity in HCC Team, January 2017
Responses on 2015-16 Family Survey



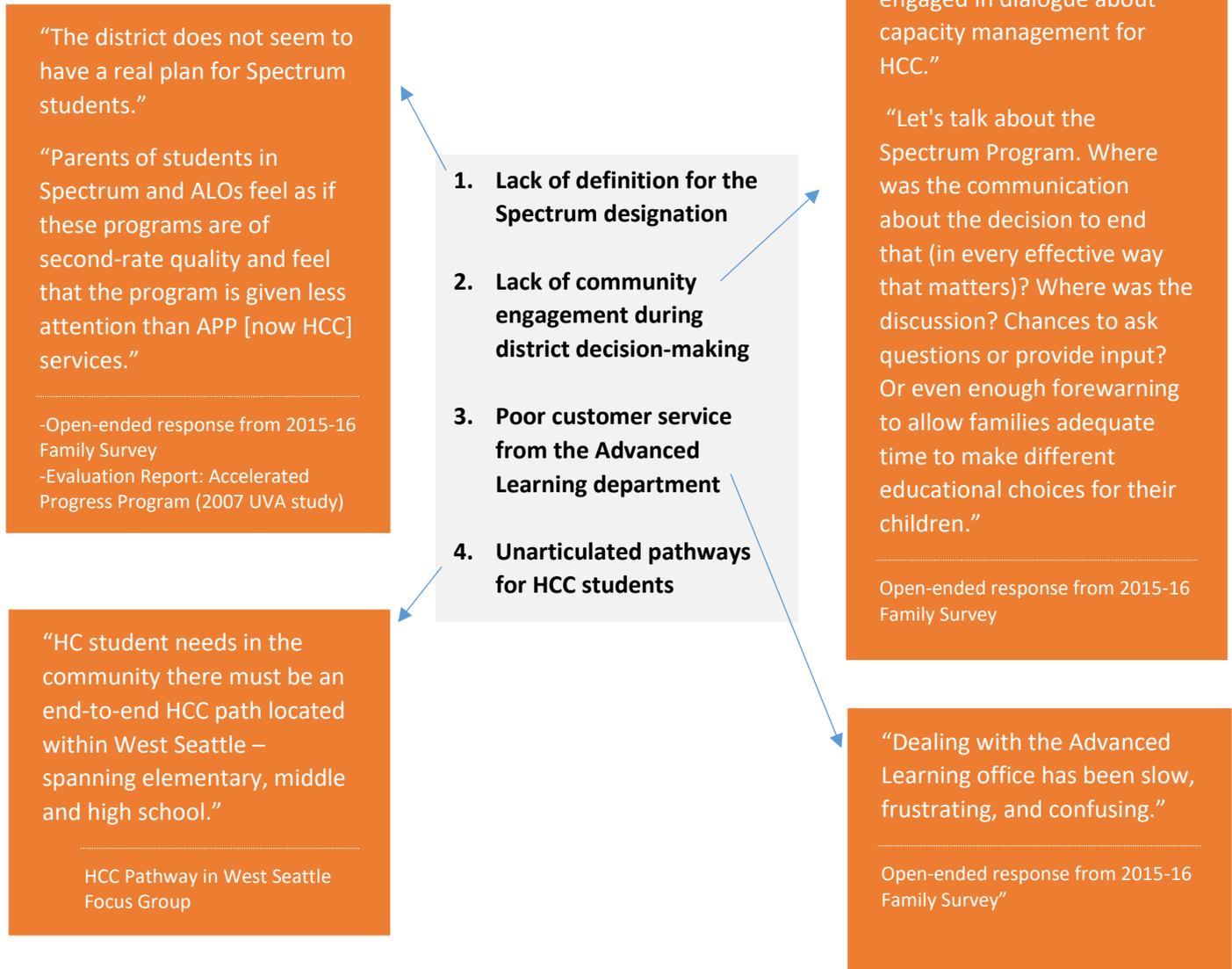
Recommendations: Community stakeholders – particularly the Racial Equity in HCC Team – and principals alike recommend the following changes to increase access to Advanced Learning programs for underrepresented students:

- 1. Make equity-focused changes to testing policies**
- 2. Provide better in-school access to Advanced Learning Opportunities**
- 3. Encourage more Advanced Learning referrals**

Table 2. Key Recommendations for Ensuring Equitable Access to Advanced Learning

Recommendations	Community	Principals	Principal Quotes
Key Recommendation 1: Make equity-focused changes to testing policies			
Universally screen all students	X	X	<i>"I would love to see that no students are tested until 3rd grade, which would level the playing field. Also that all students are administered the COGAT to help facilitate steps to Advanced Learning."</i>
Push testing back to later grades	X	X	
Provide free test preparation	X		
Modify allowances for outside testing		X	
Better outreach to families	X	X	
Key Recommendation 2: Provide better in-school access to Advanced Learning Opportunities			
Provide all students access to differentiated, rigorous, culturally responsive, engaging instruction		X	<i>"A more effective way to serve black, Latino and multi-race students would be to have effective, integrated ALO programs with support and training for staff in every neighborhood school."</i>
Key Recommendation 3: Encourage more Advanced Learning referrals			
Encourage teachers to recommend students in underrepresented groups for ALOs	X	X	<i>"Use teacher recommendation in lieu of testing for ELL students and families wanting to opt in. Test scores alone don't tell us who needs the acceleration and access to the program."</i>
Provide more opportunities for ELL students		X	
Redefine Advanced Learning to focus on more than math and reading		X	

Issue 3: Stakeholders want a cohesive plan to guide the future of Advanced Learning programs and supports. Sources within the community noted the need for a fully articulated long-term vision for Advanced Learning. Any plan for a comprehensive review of Advanced Learning, they said, must address the following:

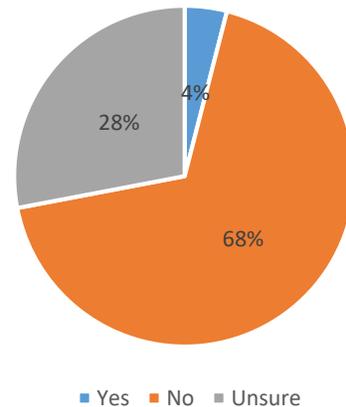


At the Board of Directors Special Meeting on February 8, 2017, Board members and district leadership discussed plans for the future of Advanced Learning services and programs. Recognizing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of the current services, district leaders presented the Action Plan for Advanced Learning (of which this program review is a component) and gathered Directors’ feedback on necessary improvements to data reporting and program/service delivery. Said Chief of Student Support Services Wyeth Jessee, *The questions now include, with regard to AL, what are we, what do we offer? We need to... address the definition and structure of the program... We need to plan out this year, next year, and for the years ahead.*”



Recommendations: In the principal survey, we asked principals to shed light on the future they see for the Spectrum program. When asked whether they thought the district should continue to designate certain schools as “Spectrum schools,” over two-thirds of respondents (68%, 46 principals in total) said “no.” Only 4% of respondents said “yes”, the rest (28%) were “unsure”. Principal responses generally did not vary by the level of school (elementary, middle, K-8) or whether the school was a Spectrum designated site. Results did vary by region, however. “No” responses from principals were the most concentrated in the Central region (85%) and the least concentrated in the Southeast (41%) region.

Figure 6. Do you believe that the district should continue to designate schools as Spectrum sites?



In open-ended responses, these principals cited two main concerns:

- 1. Maintaining a Spectrum designation perpetuates inequities in the district, benefiting families who are privileged in terms of both race and socioeconomic status.**

“I don't see any reason why students who qualify for Spectrum can't be successfully served in their home school. We work hard to retain our Spectrum students at our school by finding ways to provide instruction at their level.”

“Strong, aligned academic programs – ones that differentiate instruction and flexibly group students, are standards based and guided by data to inform instruction, use common formative assessments and intervention/extension models such as PLCs and MTSS – eliminate the need for Spectrum sites or Spectrum student designation for student success.”

“When the district designates Spectrum sites, it is effectively declaring that non-Spectrum sites are not expected to provide rigorous instruction. This has a deleterious effect on parent confidence in their neighborhood schools.”

Open-Ended Responses from Principal Survey

2. **All schools should be able to accommodate Advanced Learners – special designation for specific “Spectrum” schools is confusing for parents and is not aligned to the district’s efforts to establish Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS).**

“Spectrum serves no purpose. Its function segregates our students in the service of what? Our goal is to provide outstanding instruction to all students.”

“Our advanced learning system is already so inequitable. Spectrum is not required by state law and we should not continue to be a system that allows white people to access more privilege.”

Open-Ended Responses from Principal Survey

Another 28% of respondents (19 principals) who responded said they were unsure. In open-ended responses, ten principals said, for example, that it would be difficult to do away with a program that parents have come to expect for students, and that more resources and supports would be necessary if the designation were to be eliminated. Finally, 4% of respondents (three principals) said that the Spectrum program should be continued. These principals noted that, for some students and families, the program is working well and that these students might be less well served in a non-Spectrum setting.

Summary and District Responses

Community members, the Board of Directors, and school principals have all raised important issues and concerns regarding the current state of Advanced Learning programs and services, including but not limited to the Spectrum designations of schools. Importantly, these stakeholders have not only raised the concerns but have provided forward-looking solutions to identified problems.

Importantly, the district has already taken action on several of the recommendations mentioned by community stakeholders and principals. First, the Board approved Action Plan for Advanced Learning is, in and of itself, a response to the call in Issue 3 above for a “cohesive plan for Advanced Learning.” Additionally, the Advanced Learning Office is currently implementing an array of simultaneous approaches to increase access to Advanced Learning programs. The focus of these efforts is to enhance equitable access to underrepresented populations, most especially low income, ELL, and students of color.

Table 3. Strategies employed in 2016-17 to increase access to Advanced Learning programs

Identification Strategies	Professional Development and Outreach Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each and every student was able to test for eligibility; there are no pre-qualifications • Scrutinized referrals from ELL students for characteristics such as rapid language acquisition • Expanded referral window • 2nd grade targeted universal testing at 32 Title I elementary schools; invitations for continued screening extended to 67 parents • Follow up testing completed at Title I students' school sites during the school day • "Special consideration" in the eligibility process as noted in our Superintendent Procedures and practiced by the MSC (Multidisciplinary Selection Committee) • Current teachers may recommend students for testing, triggering an invitation to parents to refer. Email and phone follow-up if no response to invitation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiation workshops at the central office and satellite sites • Collaboration with the Rainier Scholars Program (contacted applicants to generate referrals for previously unidentified high potential students of color) • Site visits and presentations to Title I schools regarding identification and referral of students for AL services • Website information and videos and disseminated to local and social media outlets • Eligibility forms and first day packet announcement (translations in nine languages) • AL representation on the Equity and Race Advisory Committee (ERAC) • AL representation on the Southeast Seattle Education Consortium (SESEC)

IV. Overview of Phase 2 Reporting

The district is considering how best to meet the academic needs of Advanced Learners (those not in self-contained HCC classes) in all schools within an MTSS framework. The next phase of reporting will aim to shed light on the conditions, factors and educational strategies that will serve these students. Phase 2 Reporting will have two components: a Literature Review of best practices for students who are above or well above standard; and a Design Study based on in-depth site visits at seven schools.

Literature Review

Seattle Public Schools will partner with Dr. Nancy Hertzog and Dr. Sakhavat Mammadov at the University of Washington to conduct a literature review of research-based best practices for students who are above or well above standard. The review will include the topics of instructional differentiation, professional development for teachers and staff, and schoolwide structures to support and serve the needs of this group of students.

Design Study

A key task in the Advanced Learning Priority Program Review and Communication Plan is to research and determine the learning environments, instructional and curricular practices and settings in which the advanced learner is:

- Thriving socially and emotionally;
- Growing academically, and;

- Experiencing an engaging, positive and challenging learning experience within the general education setting.

The Design Study will detail findings from seven school visits detailing approaches to instruction for students who are above or well above standard, but who are not in a self-contained HCC program. School visits will include school leader interviews, teacher classroom walk-throughs, teacher interviews, and student focus groups. Both the Literature Review and the Design Study reports will be delivered to the Board in the fall 2017.