

Advocacy from a Board Member's Perspective

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As a former French teacher and International Languages department supervisor and as a current member of the Board of Education in the district in which I taught, I have some particular insight about the importance of advocacy perhaps not afforded to others.

I have been on the board in my district for about six years. We are a high school district. There have been two occasions when the existence of the French program at one of our feeder schools came into question. At the first call to eliminate the program, there was an uprising of parents and the proposal was tabled. The second time the proposal came up, it went through, and the French program was dissolved. What was the difference and is there anything we can learn from this?

Parental Involvement

I believe there are three keys. First is parent involvement. When parents are invested in a program and are willing to speak up when unwanted changes are proposed, boards will often back down. There are many ways to get parents invested. They should be kept informed as much as possible about what is happening in and out of class, asked to become involved in events such as French week, or to chaperone field trips, for example. Pressure from parents is probably the most important available deterrent to the elimination of programs. Good public relations and the visibility of a program are invaluable. Our high school district learned that the feeder school was going to eliminate its French program and informed the parents of our students. Once parents were informed, they lobbied the feeder school board of education, and the decision was rescinded.

Your position as an individual French teacher is delicate. You do not want to start an insurgency by going directly to parents and enlisting their support. This would not be looked upon positively by the powers that be. However, it is to your benefit that parents be aware of any upcoming decision regarding the French program, so that should they so choose, they can fight it. I would therefore not make any public announcements in class but it might not hurt to mention this discreetly to a key student.

In addition, if you are a resident of the district in which you teach, you have every right to attend a board meeting and address the board. Boards allow public comment at different times during a meeting and for varying lengths of time. You can also address the board as a non-resident, but I think that your input carries more weight if you are a resident. Board agendas are normally posted at every

school, and often they are included on the district web site. There are plenty of materials out there including materials provided from the AATF to help you or parents with arguments in favor of your French program.

Feeder School Instruction

The second key is good, continuous instruction at the feeder school. We are held to a higher standard in the French classroom. We must have good instructors who engage students, hold them accountable, involve parents, and know how to promote good PR. And these teachers must stay. What happened at our feeder school was that they hired a good instructor, but when she left, the administration had an opportunity to phase out the program by not offering French in the 7th grade and by hiring a part-time teacher to finish out the program in the 8th grade. Perhaps because the teacher was leaving the district, she did not galvanize parents to resist the change. For whatever reason, the parental support wasn't great enough the second time around.

Local Elections

The third key—and one that requires more research—is to get involved in your local elections. In our district, half our school board is up for election or reelection every two years. Call your school board candidates. Ask them what their position is on foreign language in the classroom and which languages should be taught. Make them aware that someone out there is interested. You can certainly talk to other members of your staff who may also have contacts they can influence.

It is in a high school's benefit to have articulation meetings with feeder schools and to build a solid working relationship among teachers and administrators. Why not invite the building principal to an articulation meeting? Although feeder schools and high schools may be in separate administrative districts, if the two operate like a well-oiled machine, then the feeder schools may not be so hasty to make decisions independent of the high school.

There are no easy answers and every school district is different. Good teachers, good programs, good communication, parent involvement—these are some of the keys in advocating for your French program.