

Remarks to the Board of Education

High school French teacher urges retention of the elementary school French program

Good evening. I am Kathleen Rhodes and I teach French at East Chapel Hill High School. I've also taught French and Spanish at Phillips and Chapel Hill High School and served as Lead Teacher of World Languages for six years. This is my 19th year in Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools. I'm here tonight to speak in support of keeping our elementary school French program.

I speak from a perspective slightly different from some of those you've hears so far, in that I teach at the other end of the K-12 program –French 4 and AP Language and Literature. In this role, I have the opportunity and pleasure on a daily basis to see the results of the great elementary school French program in the sophomores, juniors, and seniors I teach, well over 80% of whom began their study of French in elementary school. I would like you to be aware that we have approximately 50 students in our AP French program, and 75 in French 4. I find it hard to imagine any school in the nation having comparable numbers, but I am fully aware that the reason for this is the wonderful elementary school French program as well as the great middle school French program in this district. Please do not consider knocking out the foundation of such a flourishing program as the one we have here. To assume that eliminating our foundation will not have a major effect on the entire program is very naïve.

We call ourselves a K-12 program, but I can attest to the fact that it does not stop at grade 12. I've lost count, after all these years, of how many students come back after graduation to tell me how they're doing in college, and of course, what's going on in their French course always comes up. I hear such things as: I'm doing so well in my advanced-level French class and it's easy, I'm the only one who knows how to speak French in my class, I'm spending the summer/semester/year in France or another French-speaking country, I'm going to live in the French house, I'm minoring or majoring in French. These are students who began their study of French in elementary school here in Chapel Hill. Here are a couple recent examples: In December I spoke with a freshman at Duke who was in AP Language last year. He told me he is going to minor in French and that he passed out of so much French that he doesn't have that many courses to go. Also, I recently ran into Lilian Lee at line at the post office. She told me her granddaughter, Jamie, was a French major at Emory University (Jamie began French in kindergarten with Carol Orringer and continued through the AP level at East). Lilian was very excited about leaving for Africa two days later to visit Jamie, who is studying there this semester.

At the last board meeting, Morgan Edwards, a French 3 student, made a presentation in which she showed on a transparency the numbers of French and Spanish students in each level at East. As you remember, in French there were

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fewer students at every level except AP, but the numbers held steady across the board. I remember hearing a comment about the French numbers being a flat line. It certainly sounded like a negative thing to me—kind of like French is dead. However, I must tell you that I am proud of our flat line in French. What it really means is that once a student chooses to study French, it's very likely that he or she will stay with it for the duration. The students do that because they were turned on to French from elementary school days, they've always enjoyed it and learned, they've made progress and experienced success. They wouldn't still be there if this were not so.

I plead with you tonight to let us keep and work to improve a program that has brought pride and recognition to our system. I know it's in your hands at this point—we've done much of what we can do to make our program excellent and a source of pride, although I acknowledge there's more we can do. I think it's really sad that our district is considering cutting a great elementary school French program that serves all students, in large part because we at the middle and high school level have done a less-than-effective job attracting minority students to our courses. This is the gap that we need to eliminate, and I know I can speak for all middle and high school French teachers in saying that we WILL concentrate on spreading the word about the many reasons that French is an excellent choice for minority students. All we ask for is a little time to accomplish this, and I know we're ready, willing, and able. Please give us the opportunity to make what's really good even better by allowing our K through 12 plus program to continue. Thank you very much.