

A Phoenix Success Story

Yes, a French program can come back! And I'm so happy that it was mine—and that other people were responsible for bringing it back to life!

For a number of years I taught French in a high school of about 1,000 students, in a small community of 12,000 people located about 70 miles from a major metropolitan center. The population is primarily Caucasian, with a small but growing Hispanic community. The sources of the economy include farming and industry as well as retail and restaurant establishments. Although the number of college graduates living in the community is below the state average, about 60% of our high school students go on to post-secondary schools after graduation.

My French program was relatively small but successful. Since no world language classes are offered at the grade school level in the district, we offered French at levels 1 through 4, with the fourth year being counted as an honors-level class. In-class activities were heavily supplemented by extracurricular events. I took several trips to France with student groups and even one with adults from the community who wanted that experience themselves. My students and I participated in French immersion weekends through the *Aventure Française* program and made numerous excursions to Chicago to see musicals and go to French restaurants. We hosted French students for home-stays that included local tours as well as trips to the Art Institute of Chicago. We celebrated National French Week with various activities aimed at participation by both French Club members and the school at large. We even offered French classes to grade school students, with the student members of the French Club providing the activities.

Of course, I publicized all of these activities—as well as my own professional activity, such as participation in AATF conferences—by frequently putting articles and pictures in the local newspaper. You have to let people know what you are doing! I kept in touch with former students who had gone on in French and would ask them to speak to my classes whenever they had an opportunity to do so. I made it a point to write 'Thank you' notes to all who facilitated the French student home-stays: the principal, the host families, those who provided local tours to the French students, other teachers who welcomed students to their classes whenever they were not having tests (and then, naturally I made them more than welcome them to my classroom), and so on.

So many activities, and so many students. But the time came for me to retire. And then the unthinkable happened. Because I was retiring, the administration decided that French no longer needed to be offered at our high school. The only language that would be available to the students henceforth would be Spanish. Various students and parents expressed their dismay to me, to the Spanish

teachers, and to members of the administration. To no avail. The decision had been made, and French was dropped.

During the months following my retirement, however, things started to happen. One former colleague, a math teacher, took it upon himself to research the world language offerings in our particular school conference. It was discovered that all of the other schools offered at least two languages and at least four levels. I think this teacher, a former student who was overtly proud of the school, respected the work I had done over the years and felt that it was an embarrassment to *his* high school to have limited offerings in an important academic area. He raised the issue at a faculty meeting, and other teachers offered their support for an effort to reinstate French.

Under this kind of pressure from the faculty, the administration reversed its decision and put French again on the list of course offerings for the following year. Although one year of the French program had been lost and no French teacher was present to advocate for French, enough students signed up for it to create two sections of French 1 and two sections of French 2. Obviously, whatever the personal views of the administration, these students and their parents—not to mention the faculty—could not be ignored. A part-time position was created and was offered . . . to me! I had retired, but I couldn't say 'No' to my former colleagues and these eager students.

As I consider what happened, I believe that parents and teachers do recognize a language program that provides academic challenges as well as social and cultural opportunities. Nevertheless, it is important for language teachers to publicize how students meet those challenges and what those opportunities are—to spotlight what the students are able to do, and to put their names and pictures in the newspaper. It is important to thank people who help out, and to let them know how much they are appreciated. The community will reciprocate. I was in the local grocery store this past fall, when one of the checkout people wanted to know what I was doing there in the middle of the day. I explained that I had retired and the person (whom I did not know personally) made a point of coming over to me to shake my hand and thank me for all that I had done for the students in the community. What a gratifying experience! The person knew who I was and what I had done.

Publicity and information are important. I always gave the school counselors the AATF flyers on the importance of French to use with parents who were trying to help their child make a world language decision. But it is important also to be non-partisan. I taught both French and Spanish, and when a negative remark would be made about either language, my response was always, "The more languages, the better!"