

Middle School French Teacher Foils Cutback

I'd like to share with you what was done in my school district to preserve the middle-school French program in which I taught for over 15 years. Students in my district take Spanish from kindergarten through fifth grade, and in fifth grade they can choose to continue with Spanish or begin French as they enter middle school. I'm proud to say that my program in French has built a fine reputation with the students and their parents as well as with teachers at the high-school level, and each year a significant number of students did (and do) choose to take French in sixth grade.

My district is in a suburb of a large metropolitan area, and in general parents are supportive of academic programs that will challenge their children and help them prepare for college. They are also quite competitive and want their children to be as well-prepared as they can possibly be so they have an edge in college admissions and in their careers.

I was a year away from retirement, and learned that the administration at my school planned to eliminate French in favor of having only Spanish available to middle-school students. I decided that I had nothing to lose and that I would advocate as effectively as I could to retain the program that I was so proud of and that had always had such positive results for my students.

The parents were a crucial support for the program—together with the students, they really rallied and fought for French. I gave one of the parents a list of students who were taking French, and a number of parents who wanted to save the French program formed a group in order to develop some strategies. Their first action was to hold a coffee for parents to discuss the situation and decide on how to proceed. (I did not attend this informal meeting.)

Here is what they did:

First, the parent leading the group contacted each and every School Board member. Her purpose was, first, to talk about the idea of choice for students—why should all students have to take one language?—and, second, to express her personal support for continuation of the French program in the middle school. (This parent was a person who had regularly attended School Board meetings as part of a volunteer position, so she was very well informed about Board procedures.)

Second, parents wrote letters—e-mails, mostly—to the School Board members to let them know that they, too, were in support of keeping French. They made sure that School Board members also heard from other parents—not just the ones whose children were taking French at that

time. That helped the Board to know that support for French was broad and deep.

Third, parents made sure that the French issue was brought up at each of the School Board's monthly meetings. They were able to do this during the "open discussion" part of the meeting, so it wasn't necessary to sign up for a time in advance. I don't know if this is how all School Boards operate, but this was a feature that worked well for us. At the meetings, parents would speak about how they felt the program was important for their children, and we had some high-school students who had been through our middle-school program who spoke about the program and the success that they were having at the next level. It was important for the Board to hear from both parents and students. By the way, I attended these meetings, but just to provide moral support—I did not speak.

In my classes, I spoke to the students about the situation and asked them to go home and tell their parents. My principal didn't want me to do this, and perhaps if I hadn't been retiring the next year I wouldn't have, but I wanted the children to know what was going on. Posters were made, but we weren't allowed to hang them—maybe in other schools this would be permitted.

Ultimately the Board chose not to eliminate the middle-school French program and the three classes of 6th-graders who wanted to take French the year after I retired, were able to do so.

What made the difference in our situation? Three things, as I see it:

- 1) Parents were involved and leading the effort from Day One. They are the people that the School Board will listen to.
- 2) The parent who was a leader was very well-informed about how the School Board works, and understood that the ultimate decision was made by the Board and not the school administration. So she knew that we had to inform the Board about the value of keeping the French program, and keep up the pressure.
- 3) The parents understood that they needed to get the word out about this proposal: we needed to communicate often and effectively with the community at large, with parents of all students (not just students already enrolled in French), and with School Board members. Keep that information coming!

So I'm happy to report that middle-school French is alive and well in my former school. As I look back on the experience, though, I realize that what is really important in keeping a French program alive is to make it so wonderful that the idea of eliminating it seems crazy.

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This was what helped motivate parents to fight on their children's behalf: they could see that their children were very well prepared for the next level and that they were enjoying their learning experience too.

In class, I did things above and beyond the textbook topics so that the students were really ready to move on in their language study. And we did things to grab the students' interest—participated in an immersion weekend, had parties with French food, rented banners of French art for the language hallway, learned about and celebrated French holidays throughout the year. We talked about culture in an organized way, too: One year we would learn about France, and the next year we would study Francophone countries.

And I got the community involved: I had groups come in to entertain the children, and had parents with expertise come in to speak during French Week or modern language week. This connection with parents and the community was crucial! Keeping them involved is so important.

I hope that my experience can give you hope that we can convince our school leaders that French programs have value for our students and that it's worth keeping them. *Bon courage!*