

French Teacher Rallies Families to Save French V Course

I teach French at a small rural high school to which half of our 900 students are bused. The community has a small university, a state park, lots of farms, and numerous lakes. Most of the factories located here have closed in the last couple of years, and our unemployment rate is the third highest in the state. My relationship with the community is enhanced by my visibility outside of the classroom. Because of a week-end job, I am accessible to hundreds of parents, and we easily share observations about their children.

In my school, Spanish students outnumber French two to one. To sustain my program, I was able to persuade the middle school to offer French as an elective for high school credit, and that program has been ongoing now for over twenty years. As a result, many freshmen enter high school as French II students. We are on a 4/4 block schedule, which permits interested students to take two levels of French in the same school year, and that has really helped my enrollment in upper level courses. In addition to serving as department chair, I am a 'singleton' teacher, responsible for French I, II, III, IV, V and AP. So far, I've only offered AP as independent study due to low enrollments.

As department chair, I get a copy of the enrollment numbers of students and sections each spring. We can then assess which classes will be offered and provide guidance with a suggested list of who would like to teach which levels. Two years ago, when I saw the enrollments and noticed that there was no French V listed on the schedule, I was perplexed and asked my French IV students how many were continuing their French studies. Enough hands were raised that I knew there should have been a section of French V offered. When I told the students that French V was not on the schedule, I promised them I'd find out why.

I went to the guidance department and was told that enrollments for Level I were bigger than those for Level V. Since guidance felt it was logical to serve MORE students by canceling Level 5; that's what was done. When I conveyed this message to the Level IV students, we ALL decided to try to do something about it before it was too late. The students gave me their home phone numbers and indicated a good time to call, and I began to contact parents. The students wrote a petition and all signed their names. I sent a letter home to parents (this was not done on school time or on school equipment) and asked them to contact my administrators ASAP. [This letter follows the story.]

I asked the head of guidance and the principal to meet with me the following evening. I gave them a list of the benefits of language study and of the requirements of local colleges. I also showed them the college placement test results for the last five years. I countered that Level I students were mostly

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freshmen who would have an opportunity during the next three years to take a language class and offered to take one really large section of that level in exchange for the continuation of the upper level class.

I told them that gifted kids deserve to have advanced classes and showed them how many of my students went on to major or minor in French. I also reminded them about my French Honor Society and its requirements for membership. The Société Honoraire de Français (French Honor Society) really helps both my enrollment and makes administrators more willing to continue scheduling the upper level classes. And finally, I presented the administration with the petition signed by French III and IV students.

The principal acknowledged that he had already had calls from parents. We had a courteous and calm conversation, and the administrators were good listeners. They agreed to cancel one section of Level I so that French V could continue. If that had not worked, I would have gone to speak with the school system's curriculum director, and the parents and students and I would have gone to a school board meeting. I'm glad none of that was necessary.

I think what saved my program was the fact that I had kept records over the years, as well as messages and notes I had received from former students. Each year, I find out where each of my advanced students is going to college and offer my help when the students take French. I tell them that I would love to have feedback when they are in a French class, even offering to proofread compositions for them, and many do contact me! Some students even stop by my classroom when they are home. The large universities in the state all send my school the results of our students' scores on placement tests, which guidance shares with me. I keep notes students send me. When a student visits, I write the information down in a special file I keep on my computer: name, date, what the student said.

This year, I've taken another step: Since I have my master's degree in French, a large state university approved me to teach Levels IV and V for concurrent high school and college credit! The students and parents are very enthusiastic about this, and so am I. I feel this will be good for the students and for enrollment—a win-win situation!

The French teacher sent this letter to parents of her French IV students.

DATE

Dear Parent of _____,

Your child, in selecting his/her classes for next year, indicated a desire to pursue French, Level I. This shows a sincere desire to continue in language studies, which has been shown to help in SAT/ACT test scores, as well as in increasing cultural literacy and making him/her more marketable in the working world!

Staying in French for another year could also help him/her place out of college classes, receiving up to 12 credit hours in French that you would not even have to pay for! However, taking a year off would lessen recall of French and could affect his/her performance on the placement test.

I would like you to know that there is a distinct possibility that French V will not be offered next year, unless you are willing to take action as quickly as possible. Due to a large enrollment in Level I classes, I was told that more Level I would be offered and French V would be cut.

Since the enrollment in Level I is mostly freshmen, who have another three years to take French, and who could have taken Level I at the middle school last year, I feel this decision does not consider the needs of your child, an upper-level French student, for the reasons stated above.

However, there is still a possibility of changing the situation, if you can help. I have already volunteered to teach a very large Level I class in order to keep French V alive. What you can do is phone an administrator or your child's guidance counselor at (XXX) XXX-XXXX), or send an e-mail, or stop by the office in order to voice your support for continuation of the French program at the advanced Level V.

What parents have to say matters very much to the school, and your support would be very much appreciated. Please feel free to call me at (XXX) XXX-YYYY) if you'd like to discuss this or have any further questions.

Sincerely,

French Teacher

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