

## Advocacy Letter to Board of Education: Elementary French Program Cut Planned

Dear members of the \_\_\_\_\_ Board of Education:

As you are no doubt well aware, a proposal to eliminate French in the three elementary schools where it is now taught will soon be presented to you. At that time, you will be asked to make a very important decision that will have great implications for our district. Before you consider voting to approve this proposal, please understand fully what we would be losing.

We say we need to align our programs and offerings vertically and horizontally. You will be hard pressed to find a program better aligned than ours. We worked for six years (during which time I was Lead Teacher for World Languages) on alignment, and in our K-12 French program, we have an excellent model. This year's ninth-grade class at East can serve as an example. Many of them began French at Estes Hills or Ephesus, took French 1A in the sixth grade at Phillips, continued in French 1B in the seventh grade, took French 2 in the eighth grade, and are now continuing in French 3 in high school. Most of these students will take French 4 in tenth grade, AP Language as juniors, and PA Literature as seniors. We have a thriving French program here at East – approximately 200 students are in honors or PA French courses. There are approximately 50 students in AP French. There are seventeen seniors in my AP Literature class. I am fully aware, however, that the secret to our success and the basis for our program is the excellent elementary school and middle school programs that feed into our school. I find it interesting that the proposal for curriculum alignment (sixth grade on) for all world languages is the above plan. We've been doing it in French for years.

Secondly, we have a GREAT program. As they say, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it!" We have so many students in our upper-level courses because it's working. We must be doing something right. I was recently asked to speak at the spring AATF (American Association of Teachers of French) meeting, and one of the topics I was asked to address is what we do in our district to get so many state and national winners in the National French Contest. Programs look to us as a model as to how things are supposed to work. We have a nationally recognized French program right here in Chapel Hill. I must add that our program doesn't end at grade 12. As a high school teacher, I can't begin to tell you how many former students I have heard from (now in college or university) who plan to major or minor in French, how many students tell me they're the only freshman in their French class (because they're already so advanced) and how easy their French class is, how many of them tell me of their plans to spend a summer, a semester, or a year abroad. I very recently got a call from one of my students from last year who wanted me to write her a recommendation to live in the French House at the University of Wisconsin. I cannot for the life of me understand why we would be considering cutting out the roots of such a successful and well-established program.

I know one of the arguments to take French out and put Spanish in is that there are more cultural opportunities in Spanish closer to home. I understand this, although I'm sure a French student could participate in a Spanish-based cultural opportunity without taking Spanish in school. I feel that this would be even more mind-opening and

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culturally broadening – he/she could learn about two cultures instead of just one. I attend the Greek Festival every year, and I don't speak Greek, but I do appreciate their culture and enjoy participating in it when the opportunity arises.

Please be aware, though, that we offer MANY opportunities to French students (and all others who wish to participate) outside the classroom. At East we have an active French Club, French Honor Society, French Singers (we will be singing a Barnes and Noble soon, and plan a yearly spring "tour" of schools which offer French), we sponsor a little girl from Haiti, we offer student exchanges (we sent over twenty students to France for three weeks two years ago, and received an equal number of French students for three weeks), student trips (last February over 40 students traveled to Canada; this year over 40 will be traveling to France in April, and 12 of them will remain for a few extra days, staying with French families near Nice), after-school French conversation groups, we organize the elementary school French and Spanish poetry declamation (French Club does this), trips to the museum of art, French Club outings to French films, tutoring (French Honor Society sponsors this), our first annual "French Fest" took place last spring – the list is long. There is also an active Alliance Française in our community and they plan a number of cultural events as well. As you can see, French students are not without plenty of opportunities to use their French and participate in cultural experiences.

We have been asked how the elimination of the French elementary school program might affect our program. Here are some statistics to consider. Of the approximately 100 students that I myself have in French 4 and AP this year, 26 of them said they had studied French at Estes Hills, 35 at Ephesus, 12 at Glenwood, and 15 at an elementary school somewhere else. This comes to 88 per cent! And we are asked what effect this would have on our program? The answer is quite obvious. To contend that cutting the elementary French program would not have a devastating effect on the middle and high school programs seems ridiculously naïve to me. What a shame, and what a loss this would be.

Another argument for switching everyone to Spanish is to make the Hispanics in our community feel valued. Is this really the way to do that – to ditch a nationally recognized, first-class program of excellence? Are Hispanics in the Spanish elementary schools doing significantly better than those in the French schools? I haven't seen those statistics, but would be very interested in seeing them. It seems to me that "French class" would be one area in which Hispanics and all students would be on an equal footing, and I would think that would be very validating. (Actually, because of the similarity of Spanish and French, I would imagine that the Hispanic students would excel in French, and be learning something new in the process. I know that my Hispanic students are among my best.)

I am sure that you are aware of the value of learning French. You know, I'm sure, that it's truly a "world" language which is spoken on five continents, that there are approximately thirty countries in the world over which have French as an official language and there are many more where French is widely spoken, that it is one of the official languages of the UN, the European Economic Union, the Red Cross, and the Olympics. I think it is very significant that around 50 per cent of our English vocabulary

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is related to French (my students frequently tell me how easy it is to learn their English vocabulary words because of what they have learned in French class). You are of course aware of the importance of French in international business, and that many companies in North Carolina do business with French –speaking countries (or ARE French companies!). French is so significant in the study of world literature, philosophy and history. There are many fine works of literature written in French which come from Africa and the Caribbean. And I can't forget to mention the significance of French in areas of great student interest such as art, music, fashion, and cuisine! You can see I'm a Francophile, but there are many excellent reasons for this!

I realize that there are a number of good reasons to consider switching to Spanish in all elementary schools, but I feel very strongly that there are many excellent reasons to keep our outstanding French program in place. Please understand that I'm not writing because my job is at stake, since I'm certified to teach Spanish and was actually hired as a Spanish teacher at Phillips nineteen years ago when I came to this district, and have taught Spanish classes both at Chapel Hill High School and at East. What IS at stake here is an outstanding, thriving program which brings success to many of our students and pride to our system and to those of us who have worked so hard to build and maintain it. **PLEASE VOTE AGAINST THIS PROPOSAL!**

Sincerely,

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