

Advocating for French: The Role of the Local AATF Chapter President

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What can you do if one of your members contacts you to tell you that cuts to the French program are being made in his/her district?

Of course, each case is vastly different since so many variables come into play. Therefore, it is quite difficult to give stock advice. Even helpful tips can become so full of “if...then” clauses that it becomes too tedious to write, let alone read. So let me offer just **six short suggestions**, based on personal experience:

First, put out a call for help. When one of our members contacted me to say she had just learned from her principal that her district would not offer 7th grade French in the fall (heralding the potential beginning of a slow but inevitable march towards the complete elimination of French in her district), I e-mailed anyone and everyone I could think of in AATF who might be able to give me advice and insights—my Regional Representative, and the Representatives of several other nearby regions, the AATF President, and Executive Director, and Advocacy Commission Chair. All of them had wonderful advice to share with both of us and also served in an important “support-group” role since advocating can sometimes feel like a very lonely business.

Second: Find a way to let students and parents know of the district’s plans. If, the decision is not yet a matter of public record, this can be quite tricky. A non-tenured teacher may not feel free to speak to students and parents about the issue, and even a tenured one may be told to refrain from sharing the knowledge. A few carefully placed phone calls may be necessary, encouraging parents to go to the next Board of Education meeting to ask about the future of French in the district.

Third: Never underestimate the passion that students have for French. In this case, within a week of hearing of the district’s decision, one very dedicated and passionate and technologically savvy student had set up a website to let her schoolmates know what was going on behind closed doors and to solicit support to save the district’s French program.

Fourth: Contact the media. I went to the website of our widest-circulation local paper (*Newsday*) and to the website for the Long Island section of the *New York Times* to find the names and e-mail addresses of journalists who typically cover stories on education. Then I sent an initial e-mail (see Appendix A), and a follow-up (Appendix B) to the one journalist who wrote back to me. The result was a story that appeared on the first page of the Long Island section of the *New York*

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Times (April 5, 2009), portraying the middle school French teacher and the district's French program in a very positive light.

Fifth: Once the plan is a matter of public knowledge, contact the members of the Board of Education, the Superintendent, the Principal(s), and local Business leaders (such as members of the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, the Masons, etc.) to remind them of the importance of French in your community. Copies of the letters I sent are attached in Appendix C.

Sixth: Finally, be patient yet persistent. Follow up on developments in the school district as the story unfolds to adjust tactics.

Rappelons-nous que même si le jour de gloire n'arrive pas tout de suite, nous garderons l'espoir qu'il arrivera bientôt !

Appendix A

Initial e-mail to journalists:

Dear Journalists,

It has come to my attention that several school boards on Long Island have recently voted to eliminate French programs in their districts.

Some of these votes seem to have occurred behind closed doors, such that the parents, students and community members have not been made aware of (nor were they consulted on) these curricular changes.

The middle school students in Kings Park (Suffolk County), having gotten wind of the decision to begin phasing out French in the fall, have put together a website to try to save their program. I hope you will find a couple of minutes in your busy schedules to visit their website. (NB: Link to website was provided here)

If you click on the "Petition" tab, you will find the many student comments in support of their program. It's well worth a look at their heartfelt defense of their program and maybe even worth a broader story about listening to student voices in these difficult financial times.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can provide additional information.

Sincerely,
Sarah Jourdain

Appendix B

Follow-up message:

I have just a few of additional pieces of information that have come to me more recently.

- The website created by the students in Kings Park to save their French program has been visited over 9,000 times in the past week, and their petition page has registered 91 comments. Their teacher says they are very excited to be receiving so much support. Hopefully their efforts will not be in vain.
- To address the frequent misconception that Spanish is somehow easier to learn than French, Linguistics Professor Barbara Bullock of the University of Texas has written an article comparing the ease and challenges for Americans learning various languages (focusing specifically on Spanish and French). Professor Bullock's article is published in this document: *The Ease and Challenges for an English Speaker Learning French*
- To address the continuing relevance of French, Prof. Richard Shyrock at Virginia Polytechnic U. has created an informative web site "Why study French": (URL was given here; that site no longer exists, but see the site at the University of Virginia: <https://french.as.virginia.edu/why-study-french>)
- (Here, reference was made to Tennessee Bob's webpage on advocacy which has been rolled into the <https://advocacy.frenchteachers.org> site)
- Some of the most compelling stories about the value of French, however, are the ones posted on the "Petition" page that the Kings Park students created.

Appendix C

Sample letter to a Board of Education member:

Dear (Insert Board Member name here),

I would like to urge the Kings Park School District to reconsider its decision not to offer French to 7th graders beginning in the fall of 2009.

It would be unfortunate if Kings Park students could no longer choose to study one of the most widely-spoken international languages on the globe. As I am sure you know French is the only other language, besides English, to be spoken on 5 of the world's continents. With French, students can be understood in 55 countries across these 5 continents by over 200 million people. French is also the third most common language on the Internet (after English and Chinese), and it is the official working language of the UN, NATO, UNESCO, the International Olympic Committee, the European Union, Doctors without

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Borders, and the International Red Cross, just to name a few. Clearly, French remains vital for international commerce as well as politics, medicine and sports. Students in Kings Park would benefit from continued access to learning this valuable language.

Additionally, since French provides the base for more than 30% of modern English vocabulary, students who have studied French earn the highest scores on standardized tests (SAT/ACT/GRE/LSAT), a clear advantage for college admission. This advantage should not be denied to Kings Park students.

Focusing solely on New York State, one can see that French is also of great importance as far as trade is concerned. Our largest trading partner is Canada, and more specifically the French-speaking province of Quebec. If Kings Park graduates are no longer able to develop basic proficiency in French, they will be at a competitive disadvantage when applying for jobs with the majority of our trading partners.

For all of these reasons, it makes sense to continue the excellent French program which your District currently offers. Kings Park students have a 100% pass rate on the NY State Proficiency and Regents exams, and the Kings Park French students have won numerous local, regional, and national awards, including recent awards in our poetry competition and the National French Exam. While I understand that difficult financial times may require budgetary cuts, any savings you might gain by eliminating French would be offset by the academic and economic harm this would cause to your students.

I hope that you will be able to reconsider reinstating French for your 7th graders this fall.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any help.

Sincerely,

Dr. Sarah Jourdain

Sample letter to a Rotary Club member:

Dear Rotary Club Leaders,

I would like to bring to your attention a recent decision by the Kings Park School District, which is not in the best interests of the Kings Park community (its residents, its businesses or, most importantly, its students): The Kings Park School District has removed French as a language choice for 7th grade students for the fall of 2009. This will most likely result in the elimination of the entire French program in the secondary schools over the course of the next few years.

As sponsors of highly successful Rotary Youth Exchange Programs, as well as numerous well-respected international service projects, you are certainly aware of the vital role the French language plays in communications around the globe. French is the only other language, besides English, to be spoken on 5 of the world's continents. With French, students can be understood in 55 countries across these 5 continents by over 200 million people. French is also the third most common language on the Internet (after English and Chinese), and it is the official working language of the UN, NATO, UNESCO, the International Olympic Committee, the European Union, Doctors without Borders, and the

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International Red Cross, to name just a few. Students in Kings Park should not be denied access to learning this valuable language.

Additionally, since French provides the base for more than 30% of modern English vocabulary, students who have studied French earn the highest scores on standardized tests (SAT/ACT/GRE/LSAT), a definite advantage for college admission. This advantage should not be denied to Kings Park students.

Recent trade figures may also be of interest:

- The number one trading partner of the United States is Canada.
- The number one trading partner of many states, including New York, is the French-speaking province of Quebec.
- Here are some 2008 trade figures for New York:

Canada:	\$14,504,000,000
Switzerland:	\$7,932,000,000
France:	\$2,555,000,000
Belgium:	\$3,124,000,000
<u>Total:</u>	<u>\$28,115,000,000</u>

Compare this to the figure for New York's trade with China in 2008: \$2,350,000,000. Clearly, French is a vitally important language for New York State.

For all of these reasons, it makes sense to offer children the choice of learning French in the Kings Park School District.

Currently in the Kings Park District, there is an excellent French program, staffed by tenured teachers. The Kings Park students have a 100% pass rate on the NY State Proficiency and Regents exams (as posted on the KPCSD website). The Kings Park French students have won numerous local, regional, and national awards. And the students themselves wish to retain their French program. They have created a website to advocate for their program. I hope you will find a few of minutes in your busy schedules to visit their site: (website URL was given here)

If you click on the "Petition/Guestbook" tab, you will find many student comments in support of their program.

The Kings Park School District will not see any major budgetary savings by eliminating 7th grade French in the fall. The economic harm that this decision will create, however, may be felt over the next several years once graduates of Kings Park high school are no longer able to participate in businesses, organizations, or service opportunities which require French.

I urge you to contact the Board of Education as well as the Superintendent of Schools, (Insert name here), to support the French program and to request that 7th grade French be reinstated for the fall.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you need additional information.

Sincerely,
Dr. Sarah Jourdain

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