

INCREASING FRENCH ENROLLMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Two years ago Glenview District 34 opened a brand new middle school, Attea, in addition to my existing middle school, Springman. For any other teacher, this would be great news. For a French teacher with dwindling enrollments, it was a reaffirmation of having to get out there and really rally for saving the French program! It was up to my colleague and me to invigorate the French curriculum and to get the word out to the fifth graders that French was indeed the place to be.

The first place to start was the "Fifth Grade Parents' Information Nights," held in the spring. We came armed with pamphlets about "Why Learn French," "Where French is Spoken in the World," and a list of all of the Illinois companies that hire French speakers. We fielded the most difficult questions given the current political environment and the erroneous belief that "Spanish is easier to learn." We explained to parents that one of the basic premises of middle school philosophy is that students should be given choices. When students select their own language, they feel ownership and will try to be successful in it. This explanation that their child should have input in the decision-making process netted us each two large sixth grade classes. Being also a Spanish speaker, I appealed to the Spanish-speaking parents in the audience that their child belonged in the French classroom where he/she would be challenged and engaged in learning "a cousin language" to Spanish.

The French Department has made extracurricular activities and field trips a vital part of our curriculum. From sixth grade continuing through eighth grade, we integrate the students into the French-speaking community. Field trips this year included French cooking demonstrations. After the demonstration I sent students on a scavenger hunt. The shopkeepers in the area were very willing to place French items in their windows to help with the hunt. Many of my students returned home with fresh *baguettes* under their arms to share with their families.

Other field trips have included a visit to the Museum of Contemporary Art where we engaged a French-speaking docent to guide the eighth graders through the current exposition at the museum. Afterwards, we sampled *crêpes* and shopped for chocolates.

Every spring, as part of their food unit, the eighth graders dine at a French restau-



rant. Chef Charlie Socher makes a special *plat* for the group, and there is always a theme for the event. One time a Moroccan spoke about Morocco and Chef Charlie served a wonderful *tagine et couscous*.

This year, the sixth grade classes will visit the Field Museum and partake in a program on French West Africa. The seventh graders visit the Art Institute yearly to view and study Impressionist Art. At every opportunity, we invite French-speaking guests to class to talk about their country or their personal experiences living in another country. We have welcomed guest speakers from Belgium, France, and Quebec.

One of the most important things we have done is to establish a thriving French Club. At both middle schools we have combined the French and Spanish clubs into one large social club, the Global Language Club. It meets monthly and includes guest speakers, *Mardi Gras* celebrations, mini film festivals, and arts and crafts sessions. We also use the club to plan two major events: *La Semaine du Français* and National Foreign Language Week. This year the students decided to kick off *la Semaine du Français* by designing their own t-shirts for the opening day's events. Our art teacher volunteered to be the photographer and took many photos which we proudly displayed in our trophy case for all to see. Both middle schools had the front halls decorated with blue, white, and red balloons and special planned events throughout the entire week. We had students make the morning announcements in French and held trivia contests. We created a special French menu prepared by the cafeteria staff at all the elementary schools in the district. During *la Semaine du Français* and National Foreign Language Week we decorate the halls of the elementary schools with promotional and informational French posters to better inform the fifth graders about learning and

selecting French as their future language choice!

The publicity continues in the spring when we either visit the elementary schools with a short program or have the elementary students visit us. We let our own French students be in charge of the promotion. They talk with the fifth grade students about why they have selected French, about school activities and field trips, and, most of all, the fun they have participating in

Le Grand Concours. The best publicity often turns out to be our own students. By giving students choices and ownership in learning French, we can continue to successfully increase our enrollments!

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