

U.S. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR REFLECTS ON EXPERIENCES IN FRANCE

(Editor's note:: Tom Leonard, IL, is one of ten American school administrators who traveled with AATF Executive Director, Jayne Abrate, to France in November 2005 as part of the French Embassy/*Washington Post*/AATF Fellowship Program.)

Ah, Paris.

This past fall, I was afforded a great opportunity by the AATF. An opportunity not only to visit France, but to get an insider's view of the French educational system, visit schools, converse with French officials, and share thoughts with new friends/colleagues from the U.S.

Over the years, I have had an affinity for France. I was fortunate to have hosted an exchange student from Paris for several visits and subsequently traveled much of France with her as our guide. But this experience, sponsored by the AATF in conjunction with the *Washington Post* and the French Embassy, was truly unique. Like all travel, it was an education ... but, in this case, it turned out to be so much more.

Like many large suburban high schools, the one I work at offers French, Spanish, German, and Latin. Until a few years ago, we also offered Russian, but declining numbers forced us to use our staffing allotment in other domains. Being a former math teacher, I never needed to be concerned with enticing students to enroll in my math courses. They came whether they had an interest or not, primarily due to the college entrance requirements. In addition, there was rarely competition among various math courses. Everyone basically progressed along the same path.

My own experience with foreign language was much more limited than most of our group. Although I took French for three years in high school and two years in college, my knowledge had drifted away to the point where I could read a little, understand some conversation, but did not have the confidence to utter more than basic greetings.

In recent years, besides being the principal of a high school of 2900 students, I have also been given responsibilities to oversee our district's secondary (6-12) program. This has broadened my scope and pushed me to look for opportunities to better understand the different subject areas that I am asked to support. Hence, when I was told of this unique opportunity to visit

France and engage in conversations with experts on the teaching of foreign languages, I leaped at the chance.

As a high school principal, leaving your school in early November while classes are in session and your football team is progressing through the playoffs is a scary thing. Those who have been in this type of a role know that the community expects the principal to be "on call" every second that the students are engaged in academic or co-curricular activities. Fortunately, my district's school board and superintendent recognized the value of this opportunity and,



The group of administrators in Saint-Valéry. Tom Leonard is on the left.

along with my own knowledge that I would be supported by a talented group of building administrators; I was thrilled to leave school in session to expand my horizons.

In the January edition of the *AATF National Bulletin*, Jayne Abrate gave a beautiful day-by-day account of our trip. For my part, I will not try to replicate her article, but instead will share some of my personal highlights and how this experience has changed the way I think about the importance of foreign language instruction in our schools.

First some highlights. Ah Paris ... even in November and even in the rain ... it is such a beautiful city. We were treated like dignitaries by all the officials that we met. In particular, I would like to thank Chantal Manès, *Inspectrice d'anglais* in the *Académie d'Amiens*, and Michel Girardin, Assistant Director of the *FIAP Jean Monnet*. One could not ask for more gracious hosts.

Our time in Paris was magical. A reception at the U.S. Embassy, a dinner cruise on the Seine, a guided tour of the *Centre Pompidou*, a concert at *St. Julien le Pauvre* ... the cultural experiences could not have been better planned. In Amiens, being able to tour *Notre-Dame d'Amiens* and to visit small towns in the *Baie de Somme* allowed us to get a taste of the beautiful French coun-

tryside.

Beyond the general benefits of visiting a truly beautiful and unique country and experiencing some of the wealth of its culture, we were blessed by a simultaneous life changing experience due to the educational discussions and observations in French schools. This truly deepened our experience and made it one that none of the administrators who participated will soon forget.

In addition to the cultural activities and sights, we were able to sit in on several classes. For me, the highlights included observing an English class of fifteen year olds at *Lycée de Sèvres*, playing with eight year olds at an elementary school in Amiens, and having lunch prepared and served by the teenage students of *Lycée d'application Édouard Gand*.

Beyond the visits to schools, we were also able to meet with teachers, school administrators, and government officials in a truly sharing dialogue. Many of our conversations centered on foreign language education in France, the emergence of the European Union with its guidelines the study of foreign languages, the growth

of English instruction in France, and the struggle to address increased opportunities for all segments of society within our schools. One needs to remember that our visit coincided with the Fall riots in France. And while we never experienced the turmoil first hand, it was a topic of discussion throughout France. Often the public discussions focused on changes that needed to be made in the schools.

The conversations were "eye opening." In general, I think most of us found it surprising as to how the French schools were staffed. The training of teachers, the uniformity of a national curriculum, the importance of testing, and the role of the building administrators deepened our understanding of the French educational system and caused us to reflect upon our own.

While most of our group had foreign language backgrounds, there were a few of us whose teaching areas were not in the languages. Without a doubt, the non-language experts gained a much deeper understanding of the need for quality foreign language instruction in our schools. The added cultural benefit to learning a second (or third) language also became extremely clear as we had a first-hand experience of the wonders of French culture.

I know I can speak for many of the par-

ticipants who journeyed to France in November, in the rain ... it was a life-changing, educational experience for which we will always be grateful. The AATF directly sponsored four of us: Cara Churchich-Riggs (NE), Joyce Morgan (AL), John Wollersheim (MN), and me (IL). For the four of us, I will say ... *Merci beaucoup!* ... your generosity and vision will not soon be forgotten.

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