

SAVING A FRENCH PROGRAM

In Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools (NC), we had a little “skirmish” several years ago. We are a school system fortunate enough to have a flourishing elementary school foreign language program (FLES). In the early 1990s when the program was developed, there were six elementary schools in our district. It was decided at that time to have three “French” elementary schools and three “Spanish” schools. Since then, three new elementary schools have been built, and, not surprisingly when one considers the recent trends, they have all become Spanish-teaching schools. Nevertheless, the three French programs continued to thrive, and I must say that the reason that we have a strong French program at the high school level is because of the jumpstart the students get at the elementary level as well as our very solid middle school program. Next year at East Chapel Hill High School, a school of about 1500 students, we will have five French 3 classes, about 75 students in three French 4 classes, around 50 in two AP Language classes, and the last time I checked there were 27 signed up for AP French literature. I attribute all of this to our strong elementary school French program!

At the beginning of the 2002–2003 school year, our superintendent decided that all elementary schools should teach Spanish (horizontal alignment), conducted a “study,” and worked out a “plan” to implement switching the three French elementary schools to Spanish. A World Language teachers’ meeting was called to gather “input” about this move, and despite much negative feedback from all language teachers, it certainly seemed as though the proposed change was a *fait accompli*, as one of our Latin teachers remarked at the meeting. All that needed to be done was get it approved by the Board of Education and *voilà*, no more elementary school French, which would obviously have a devastating effect on the middle and high school programs.

We French teachers began a major counterattack. First, the superintendent received a barrage of telephone calls, letters, and e-mails from parents, students, teachers (including elementary school Spanish teachers), university professors, everyone who was passionate about keeping French and there were many, explaining why this move would have very unfortunate consequences and didn’t make sense in the first place. Our basic argument was “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” along with much emphasis on the importance of French in the world today). When it began to look as though the

superintendent would remain firm in this ill-conceived idea, we concentrated on convincing the School Board, and the letters, telephone calls, face-to-face conversations, editorials, and e-mails were numerous and frequent. In early 2003, the meeting during which the Board was to vote on the proposal took place. We were there in great number, and many had signed up to speak, including those same teachers, students, parents, university professors mentioned earlier. One parent had done an excellent video about the elementary program, many people spoke passionately, and the East Chapel Hill High French students presented a large, colorful banner which read *Vive le français!* signed by the high school students. The most effective speakers were the students themselves. There were students with family connections in Africa, a girl from Canada, an East Chapel Hill graduate attending Duke University who had begun French in kindergarten and continued through both AP courses, a ninth-grader who made an outstanding Power Point presentation plus many others. At the end of that evening, the Board decided to put off the vote in order to gather more information.

We made certain there was a lot more information forthcoming—all pro-French. After a month of continued communication with the Board, they met again. I was feeling discouraged because the superintendent’s proposals always seemed to be approved. Also, I had a student whose uncle was on the Board. I had told her, “Great! Tell him about how wonderful French is.” She assured me she had already done this, but that he had said his mind was made up and he was voting to change to Spanish. “Spanish is more important today.” So I went to that Board meeting feeling not too hopeful but determined to see it through. Once again, many pro-French speakers addressed the Board and, once again, the students who spoke carried the day. When it came down to Board discussion and voting time, the first Board member to speak was the uncle of my student. Through the fog of my worn-out brain, I heard him say something like, “I was convinced that Spanish was the way to go, but after hearing all this, especially the students, and considering all the evidence, I’VE CHANGED MY MIND.” Then one by one, each Board member said approximately the same thing. They didn’t even have to vote. The outcome was obvious. The French elementary school program would continue.

Even writing about this now, four years later, it pumps me up, but I totally under-

stand that we won only the battle and the war continues. We must be constantly vigilant and stay on our toes in protecting our French programs. Our experience in Chapel Hill certainly shows that there is strength in numbers. If your program is ever in danger, enlist all the help you can get, mobilize your students—that’s key, and keep fighting the fight! *Vive le français!*

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STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING SCALING DOWN FRENCH PROGRAMS

Be Visible to be Viable

- Participate in everything your district or school does.
- Organize a French Festival.
- Have a French dinner and invite the community.
- Organize fund-raisers for a worthy cause.
- Take advantage of National French Week to tout all the reasons French is so important.
- Participate in the National French Contest.

Make French Relevant

- Organize conversation groups.
- Take trips to France and Canada or any French-speaking country or area.
- Have a very active French Club that organizes many French-related activities.
- See French movies and go to French restaurants.
- Make “French outside the classroom” assignments.
- Go to your local art museum and get a docent who speaks French.
- Stress the importance of French for SAT preparation.
- Do super-fun activities in class that your students will tell others about.
- Arrange for your students to have Francophone pen pals.
- Invite outside speakers to come to your class and tell about their French-related interests.

Recruit

- Send high school students to the middle schools to tell about the French program.
- Send high school and middle school students to the elementary schools.
- Have middle or high school students present mini-French lessons at elementary schools.
- Speak to and educate counselors and

administrators about the importance of French.

- Do everything you can to pump up the numbers.
- Recruit diversity!

Publicize

- Let everyone know about the cool French-related things you are doing.
- Call the newspaper and get the photographers and reporters out.
- Get articles published in the school newspaper and the school newsletter.
- Put signs around the school announcing the next French Club meeting or activity.
- Get parents' e-mail addresses and keep them posted on events and activities.
- Create a Web site and post French-related activities there.
- Make a French activities bulletin board outside your classroom for all to see.

Work Together

- Keep in contact with other French teachers. There is strength in numbers!
- If, Heaven forbid, you find your program is on the chopping block:
- Get everyone you know and everyone you don't know involved. Do not go it alone!
- Enlist the help of other French teachers in your school, your system, other districts, your state, at the university level, the AATF, parents, your students, anyone who can help.

DO NOT GIVE UP!