

Le Grand Concours – Should I give it this year?

Laura Faga is a French teacher at Lewis S. Mills High School in Region 10 (Burlington/Harwinton).

Bonjour! My name is Laura Faga and I am the new Directrice du Grand Concours for Connecticut. Last year was my first year in this position and I was busy planning our awards ceremony when the world stopped.

Today is March 29th and I administered the contest to 43 of my students today! Nothing like waiting until the very last minute. Last year, I administered the contest to all of our students on March 12. I had randomly selected that date, on the earlier side of the administration window, so I would be better prepared to answer questions as they arose. Little did I know at the time how lucky I was to have selected that date! I was so fortunate that I did not have to figure out, like many of other French teachers did, how to administer le Grand Concours once schools closed. As schools shut around the country, the AATF was working hard to figure out how to handle this. Their solutions allowed teachers to administer remotely and also allowed for an extended testing period which allowed others to continue to test “hors concours” (meaning they would not be eligible for any national awards), but they could still participate.

This year AATF did a great job of figuring this all out ahead of time. They allowed teachers to proctor the contest to students over Zoom, Google Meets, and other similar platforms. By filling out a simple google form, teachers could apply to administer remotely. Approval was immediate and instructions for proctoring and an attestation that you had followed the rules followed soon after. Today this worked out for me as I had one student quarantined last week and two students who were quarantined today right before our scheduled test!

A colleague today asked me why we give the Grand Concours and I had to pause for a second because we do have so much to do and such a short time to do it. During a normal year, our job is hard! If you are like me, you are constantly asking yourself questions like: *Did I speak enough French today? Did I balance class out with enough writing, speaking, listening, and reading? How can I incorporate more culture? Did I assess the right way? Did I differentiate my instruction to meet the needs of each kid? Did I post my learning target and could a student explain it to an administrator who might come in?* This year we are asking even more questions. *Do I feel safe? Are my students safe? Do I need to double mask? Do I need to quarantine? Are my kids appropriately spaced? How can they work together when they cannot be near each other? Am I doing enough to help their social emotional learning?*

So why do we add in yet another thing? We do it because it is such a great opportunity for our students to show what they have learned! One of my students pointed out to me how important this contest was to him last year. “In this past year, when SATs were rendered virtually unavailable, we were able to prove our value on a standardized test that wasn’t even in our own language.” So, while this contest is always a good idea, it could mean even more to students this year and last.

This is a tough year to give a test, to add something else to our plates. Bénédicte Kaufman, a teacher at Xavier High School, who just returned to teaching this year after a 10-year hiatus, shared with me her concerns about giving this test. When she left French teaching 10 years ago, she left a paper test and returned to teaching during this crazy year to find an entirely online contest that she did not feel well prepared to deal with on her own. However, she found support and a caring community of French teachers here in CT. “It was amazing. It made me proud to be a French teacher, to have found my way again to a community of professionals and really interesting material to learn from.” Her students enjoyed the change of pace. “They especially enjoyed the listening activities. It seemed to be just what our classes needed at the end of a long winter: a change of pace and activities, a time to synthesize and evaluate what we had learned.” And she appreciated the flexibility of the testing. “The majority of my students are studying in person, but a few are still remote and log on everyday via Teams to stream in our class. I was able to administer the exams to all at the same time and seamlessly.”

I am so glad that the AATF kept this test available and made it easier for us to administer - no matter how we are teaching this year. They have been willing to work with every unique situation that comes up. Teachers from our state agree. Ariane Barrillon, a teacher at Westminster School, shared that her students who have been taking the Grand Concours for 4 years await this opportunity to show their skills and earn rewards. “Despite the challenging situation generated by the pandemic this year, the Grand Concours was extremely well organized. As usual, the support and help of the organizers was wonderful. Any questions or concerns I had were answered very quickly. The Grand Concours is a wonderful experience for both students and teachers.”

I hope you will consider giving the opportunity to your students next year. Please know that the AATF will be there to support you as you try it for your first, 5th, 10th time!