

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

In an article entitled "French Gains Foothold on New York City's Dual-Language Map," (*New York Times*, 22 August 2007), Julie Bosman reported on what are now the first French-English dual language programs in the New York City public schools. The programs are taking place in three schools (one in Brooklyn, one in Harlem, and one on the Upper West Side). They have been introduced because of the efforts of a group of parents dedicated to the promotion of French. Each program will also receive nearly \$20,000 annually from the French Embassy, and still more money was raised from private donors. Over the past fifteen years Spanish, Chinese, Haitian-Creole, and Russian have all had programs, but not French. In fact, almost all the 65 dual-language programs in New York City's public schools are conducted in Spanish and Chinese. These languages have prospered because people consider that knowing Spanish and Chinese will help children succeed in the future.

Since one could make the same arguments for French as a practical language—one that is spoken in over 50 countries and is one of the working languages of the United Nations—why was it so difficult to get a program in French started? There are many possible reasons, and I would suggest that in recent years one of the main ones has been French opposition to the war in Iraq. At the same time we also know that old stereotypes—and new ones for that matter—die hard, a point I have made more than once in this column. French has never been described as a "practical" language in this country despite its high-tech successes such as the TGV, aeronautic advances, high-tech visibility, and its standing as the sixth largest world economy.

In spite of these obstacles and prejudices a group called Education Française à New York was founded in 2005 to promote the French language. It discovered that 31,000 children in New York City speak French at home, and this provided impetus for convincing the New York Public schools to start French dual-language programs. One of the exciting things about the new French programs in New York City is that they will help to modify the image of French as a language only spoken by the wine-drinking elite in the United States. Indeed, before the new initiatives began, the Lycée Français on the Upper East Side was the only option for parents seeking French immersion for their children. With tuition at more than \$18,000 a year for elementary school students many children were obviously excluded. Florence Nash, one of the founders of the education group, pointed out that there are not only French-speaking families from Belgium, Switzerland, and France in New York; but new immigrants are also arriving from Morocco, Syria, and Lebanon. Many of them are French speakers.

At two of the schools the programs will begin as a single kindergarten class and then expand one grade every year. At the Harlem school the classes will begin as grades 5 and 6.

Fabrice Jaumont, the education attaché for the French Embassy in New York City has been working tirelessly for several years lobbying administrators all across the United States to back French programs in the schools. His effort is part of the joint program of the French Embassy in Washington and the AATF called "The World Speaks French and So Should You." This exciting and promising and exciting initiative was featured in the September *National Bulletin*. Its Web site is www.theworldspeaksfrench.org. It contains samples of all the visuals created for the campaign to date and links to "Top Ten Reasons to

Learn French," as well as the AATF and French Embassy Web sites. Readers should also consult Richard Shryock's "French: The Most Practical Language (www.fl.vt.edu/french/whyfrench.html). Jaumont says that dual-language programs have already taken hold in public schools in Chicago, Miami, Boston, and Washington.

In the wake of the recent initiatives and success described above, several things seem clear to me. One is that those of you in urban areas should follow the lead of the group of parents in New York, who organized themselves and brought pressure to bear on school administrators to give French a deserved place in the curriculum. In the face of increased competition from Chinese and Spanish, the best approach is to organize in order to defend and further the French language. It is also important to stay in touch with both the AATF and French and Quebec consulates in your areas. Other consulates from the Francophone world may also be able to offer resources and personnel who are willing to meet with interest groups. Of course, we cannot expect the kinds of monetary support that were provided in New York City, but this should not deter us from rallying the troops and developing the needed *esprit de corps*.

When teachers, students, and parents all work together, good things can happen! As the result of the new promotional campaign of the AATF and the French Embassy in Washington, not to mention the new initiatives in major U.S. urban centers, we are beginning to build some much-needed momentum. To keep this momentum we need to build new alliances and support groups. In an age of e-mail, text messages, the cell phone, and the I-pod, we must not forget that the most effective communication still takes place face to face. Individual teachers, who may not know about the AATF, must be a priority for all of us. With so many baby boomers now reaching retirement age, it is crucial that we help the new teachers find their place in our profession and encourage them to take on the duties that we have carried out in the past. Showing and convincing them to become part of the solution to the problems that face all of us, will be a crucial part of our legacy.

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