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Lafayette School District Considers Foreign Language Options

By Jean Follmer

The benefits of learning a foreign language at an early age are well documented. Not only does acquisition of a second language make a child more worldly and aware of other cultures, learning a second language can also lead to increased academic performance and test scores. Being fluent in a second language can also be a factor in future job searches since our increasingly global economy often demands bilingual workers. Further, many studies have shown that it's increasingly more difficult to learn another language as a person ages.

The Lafayette School Board held a Study Session on Elementary Foreign Language last week. During the meeting, the Board discussed a number of ways that foreign language might be introduced to the curriculum at the elementary level. Among the choices discussed were: extending the school day to allow for an immersion program so students can gain proficiency in a second language, fitting foreign language instruction into the current school day, outsourcing through a before or after school enrichment program and establishing Magnet immersion schools or classes. Although the District is not in a financial or practical position to implement a foreign language program at this time, Lafayette Superintendent Fred Brill said the District definitely sees the value for

the long run. "This would be a really good and important thing for our kids," he added.

The Lafayette School District administered a Strategic Planning Survey last spring. Respondents included elementary and middle school parents, students, District staff and past parents. Among other curriculum priorities, the importance of a foreign language curriculum in grades K-3, 4-5, 6 and 7-8 were polled. The results by number of staff and current parent respondents were reported in the Lafayette School District Survey 2009 District Foreign Language and Globalization Report as seen below.

The district currently offers French, German, Mandarin and Spanish at the middle school level for grades 6-8. Although foreign language isn't offered at the elementary level in Lafayette, many parents who consider it a high priority have secured learning opportunities elsewhere for their children. Such programs include French for Fun in Lafayette, which offers an immersion-style French program for pre-walkers through middle school; Kids into Speaking Spanish in nearby Walnut Creek, offering a Spanish-immersion preschool curriculum; and Viva el Espa ol in Lafayette holding Spanish-immersion classes for pre-walkers through adults.

Viva el Espa ol, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, also offers before and after school enrichment classes at each of the Lafayette school sites and the enrollment trend has increased annually. For a monthly fee, families can enroll their student in a daily Spanish immersion program. The convenience of having the program at the school site sits well with many families. The cost, however, can be a factor in keeping some interested families from pursuing a foreign language curriculum for their younger children.

Viva el Espa ol owner Margaret Grover-Roos says she started her school due to her passionate desire for young children to reap the benefits of learning a second language. "They're a vital partner filling an important gap that we have right now," said Brill. Although Grover-Roos has willingly filled that gap, she would like to see foreign language in the schools for all students K-12. Grover-Roos is not in the business to make money; she is a permanent volunteer who has never drawn a salary from the organization.

The Board plans to move forward with its study and Brill has been charged with forming a committee that will ultimately recommend a course of action to the Board. Brill said the committee will be in place by next month and the members will be announced at the Board meeting on December 9 at 7:00 pm in the District Office.

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	HIGH PRIORITY		MODERATE PRIORITY		LOW PRIORITY	
	Staff	Parents	Staff	Parents	Staff	Parents
K-3	5 (5%)	176 (41%)	19 (20%)	98 (23%)	72 (75%)	153 (36%)
4-5	9 (9%)	211 (49%)	23 (24%)	117 (27%)	64 (67%)	104 (24%)
6	26 (27%)	262 (61%)	36 (38%)	110 (25%)	33 (34%)	60 (14%)
7-8	49 (51%)	304 (69%)	38 (40%)	105 (24%)	9 (9%)	30 (7%)