

Voilà le Ray School French Club

By Karen Kaliski

“Simon dit marchez!” Leah, Laurel, Sina, Hazel and Matthew — first graders at the Ray School in Hanover — march around the classroom awaiting the next command. “Touchez la chaise!” One or two of the kids stop marching and touch a chair. “Oops! Je n’ai pas dit ‘Simon dit!’”

Bill Mlacak smiles. Maybe he’s happy that he caught a few kids in a game of “Simon Says.” Maybe he’s happy that the others knew that “chaise” means “chair” in French. Maybe it’s just that French Club at the Ray School is a lot of fun for everyone — even the parent/leaders like Mlacak.

Two years ago, a group of Ray School parents started the French Club for kids of all grades — kindergarten through fifth. Last year (2003-2004), more than 60 kids participated in each of the fall and winter/spring sessions. During 2004-2005, the numbers settled down a bit to 52 in the fall and 43 in the winter/spring. Those are still whopping numbers for an elementary school extracurricular club, especially one run completely by volunteers.

The club founders were inspired by personal concerns rather than ambitions to form a large after school activity. “I was con-



Dartmouth '07, Natalya Shulga, leads an enthusiastic group of 2nd graders.



Children learn to make baguettes from Susan Miller at King Arthur Flour Bakery.

cerned that my kids would lose the French skills they’d acquired in their previous school,” says Melina Hill Walker.

She approached the Ray School Principal Bruce Williams and asked if there were options for starting French before fourth grade. Williams told her that Bill Mlacak and Joanna Whitcomb were similarly concerned that their kids weren’t getting enough reinforcement for the French they were speaking at home. The families met and decided to recruit other parents to form a club for any kids that were interested.

It was a surprise when 69 kids signed up for the fall 2003 session of French Club. “We expected 12,” says Whitcomb. But maybe it shouldn’t have been. In 2001, a Dresden Task Force on Early Foreign Language Education looked into offering Spanish at the middle or elementary schools. A survey of 830

households in Hanover and Norwich showed that 69 percent agreed that foreign language instruction is as important as math and reading, and 88 percent agreed that the earlier foreign language instruction begins the better.

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Educators agree that acquiring a second language early in life is extremely valuable. As reported in 1992 by the College Entrance Examination Board, students who averaged four years or more in foreign language study scored higher on the verbal section of the SAT than their counterparts who studied

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four or more years in any other subject area. Meanwhile, the average math score for students with four or more years of foreign language study was the same as it was for students with the same amount of math study.

ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) advocates second language instruction pointing to studies that show it sparks creativity and problem solving abilities. ERIC also suggests that foreign language speakers have greater access to certain types of jobs and deeper understanding of their own and other cultures. And, as the Internet, outsourcing, multinational corporations and trade pacts are making the world smaller everyday, fluency in other languages enhances an individual's, and the country's, competitive position in the world economy.

You'd be hard pressed to find a Ray School French Club member (especially the first graders) who is worried about the world



*Field trips to
Cafe Semolina
are both fun
and tasty when
hosted by
bilingual owner,
Andy Lory.*



economy. Most of the 43 kids who show up every Tuesday are looking for fun after a long day of school. And they're hungry.

Anyone who has ever put themselves into a room with elementary school-age kids at 2:45 p.m. knows that you need a plan and you need food. Fun and learning are both byproducts of careful preparation and hard work by club administrators and those who act as leaders, or teachers. A handful of committees — Steering, Activities, Language Advocacy and, maybe most importantly, Snacks — are staffed by 40 parents who keep things running.

French Clubbers are busy; not with drills

and recitations but with games, arts and crafts and field trips. Simon Dit, boules (traditional French lawn bowling), roche/papier/ciseaux (rock/paper/scissors), bingo, scavenger hunts and other games teach basic words and a bit of French culture. Songs and art projects help celebrate holidays and seasons. Field trips offer a chance to leave school property and use French around town.


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The Montshire Museum is a great place for scavenger hunts and opportunities to teach words like fish, turtle, butterfly and moose in French abound. At the Hanover fire station, the club learned about fire equipment in two languages.

Nearby Storrs Pond is a great place for walks. Club members learn how to marcher doucement (walk lightly), voix tranquilles et actions douces (use quiet voices and gentle actions), soyez prudent (be safe) and laissez la nature telle qu'elle est (leave nature as we found it). Good hiking rules in any language. A very popular spot for the French Club is Semolina on Route 10 where the kids go for a café experience. After all, what's French Club without the occasional baguette et fromage?

"The aim of the club is to provide exposure and fun," says Whitcomb.

In January 2005, the Ray School French Club presented the Hanover School Board with a proposal to begin French instruction in first-grade. (Why French? There is already French faculty in the school, kids will begin French in the fourth-grade and New Hampshire shares a border with Canada where there are many French speakers.) The proposal reminds the board that starting a second language early is academically important, and indicates a number of schools in N.H. do offer second language study to students beginning in kindergarten.

Like any new program, second language study costs money that strapped school districts are hard pressed to find. There seems no doubt that Dresden district parents are supportive of language programs for the youngest students. When those programs will be available is anyone's guess. But for the kids at the Ray School, a band of hardworking Mamans et Papas is helping their kids get a good start with le français. 

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