

French Gains Foothold on New York City's Dual-Language Map



Oscar Hidalgo for The New York Times

Anne-Laure Fayard, with her children Jyoti and Melchior in Brooklyn, is heartened that more children will learn French.

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Published: August 22, 2007

Nearly all the 65 dual-language programs in the New York City public schools are conducted in Spanish and Chinese, languages that are considered practical tools for future success.

So far, French has not fit into that equation.

But next month, the first French-English dual-language programs will begin at three schools in the city: Public School 125 on the Upper West Side, P.S. 58 in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, and Intermediate School 22 in Harlem. They are the result of two years of lobbying from the French Embassy and a group of parents determined to promote the language in the public schools.

Dual-language programs have operated for more than 15 years, officials at the city's Department of Education said. The inclusion of French brings the total number of languages in the program to five, including Spanish, Chinese, and last year's addition of Haitian-Creole and Russian.

"There is a growing recognition that in our globalized society, speaking two or more languages is quite advantageous," Lindsey Harr, a department spokeswoman, wrote in an e-mail message. She added, "We open new dual-language programs partially in response to community interest and demand."

The department's efforts to open an Arabic-English school, the Khalil Gibran International Academy, in the Boerum Hill section of Brooklyn this year met with problems from its inception; just weeks away from the opening, its founding principal resigned under pressure.

Although the idea of a French language program never caused any uproar, selling it to the department, with all its bureaucracy, was no easy task, some supporters of the program said. And,

they added, it was often even harder to persuade other parents that French was useful for more than watching art films or reading a wine list.

“Parents didn’t really understand,” said Polly Desjarlais, a museum interpreter whose 5-year-old son, George, will enter a French-English kindergarten at P.S. 58. “Why French? I kept hearing that over and over again, from people at the playground. Why not Spanish, why not Italian, since this is a historically Italian neighborhood? Why not something practical that could be used?”

The French Embassy offered about \$20,000 in annual financing to each school that is beginning a program this fall, and raised more money from private donors.

“It was very hard to get anything started, probably because people have the wrong perceptions,” said Fabrice Jaumont, the education attaché for the French Embassy in New York. “I think it’s strange that people just focus on Chinese or Spanish when French is spoken in 50 countries.”

Anne-Laure Fayard, a professor at Polytechnic University in Brooklyn, said she was not surprised by the lack of French programs when she moved to New York. She even detected some anti-French bias in that.

“I know the stories about ‘freedom fries’ and everything, so I didn’t expect that everyone wants to learn French,” she said.

But some parents said that after asking around, they discovered a huge demand. According to data from *Éducation Française à New York*, a group founded in 2005 to promote the French language in the city’s schools, more than 31,000 children in New York City speak French at home.

Until now, their options were limited to private schools, like the Lycée Français on the Upper East Side, which is not only exclusive, but also charges tuition of more than \$18,000 a year for elementary school students.

Florence Nash, who helped found the education group, said there was an underserved population of French speakers in the city who could not afford private school and whose children had no way of continuing their language education in the public schools. There were the families from European countries, including Belgium, Switzerland and France, as well as the more recent waves of immigrants from Morocco, Syria and Lebanon, many of whom had backgrounds in French.

But Ms. Nash, who is from France, said French people were not predisposed to create their own programs, especially within the usually intractable public school system.

“It’s a scandal that there hasn’t been anything in French before, because the population is there,” said Ms. Nash, who lives in Stuyvesant Town with her husband, daughter and son. “But the French, they are too embarrassed to do anything. They don’t have the American mentality of ‘do it yourself.’”

At P.S. 125 and P.S. 58, the programs will begin as a single kindergarten class, then expand by one grade every year. At I.S. 22, the classes will begin as Grades 5 and 6.

French dual-language programs have taken hold in public schools in Chicago, Miami, Boston and Washington, said Mr. Jaumont, who spends much of his time lobbying school administrators across the country to push French programs. “We’re launching this new campaign called the World Speaks French, showing that French is spoken everywhere, internationally,” he said. “Maybe that would be seducing for American principals.”