

French and Spanish are  
**Elementary**

Je vois des  
champignons au  
bord de la rue.  
I see some mush-  
rooms at the side of  
the road.

“Yo soy un chico. Ella es una mujer.” I am a boy. She is a woman.

“Agricola, agricolae, agricolae, agricolam, agricola.” Farmer, of the farmer, to the farmer, from the farmer.

Chances are, you remember the very first phrases you learned in foreign language class, listening, parroting and repeating in lilting cadence. Chances are, you were immersed in the sounds, words and culture of the language you studied. But chances are, you were not six years old.

How are today's Whitefish Bay students learning foreign language?

When are they learning it? Why are they learning it? And, most important, how well are they learning it?

First, they are not learning “foreign” language; they are learning “world” language. This semantic change was made a few years ago, recognizing that America is a land of many languages, and that the word “foreign” carries a negative tone.

The “why” of world language instruction needs little argument. Today's students will live and work in a global economy and culture. Their need to understand and appreciate the languages, customs and beliefs of other cultures will grow every year.

Because America is so much more diverse, and because scientific and educational evidence concludes that the brain is ripe for language acquisi-

tion at a very young age, the Whitefish Bay School District enhanced its world language curriculum starting in the fall of 2000. At the time, world language instruction began in middle school. The first significant academic component was level I, offered as an elective in eighth grade.

Whitefish Bay now offers world language starting in first grade; our current fourth-graders were the first to take it. French is taught at Richards, and Spanish is taught at Cumberland. The goal of the elementary program is to develop students' comfort in hearing and speaking another language and to become familiar with basic



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*Whitefish Bay parent*

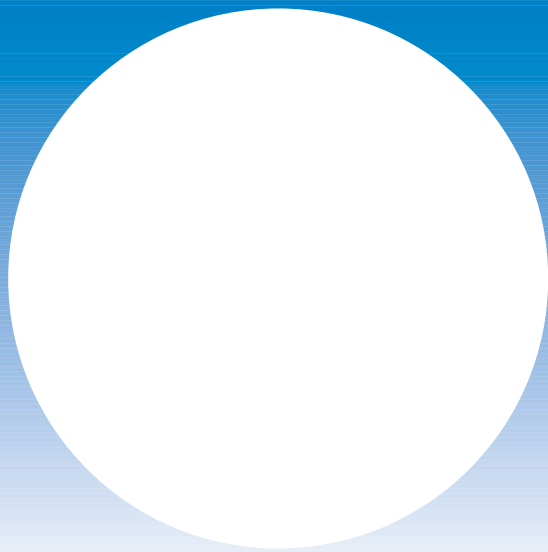
vocabulary, cultural traditions and songs. First through fifth graders take language class for one hour each week, in two half-hour blocks.

One mother of a Richards second-grader says, “It's fun for the kids and fun for us to watch Matt, as French kind of begins to click for him. The other day we were doing our English spelling words, and out of the blue, Matt said, ‘I know that word in French. It's la pomme.’ It is great to see when they relate French to something outside of French class. I think it is really good exposure.”

### *Spanish or French?*

Some parents are concerned about which language their students take, holding the opinion that Spanish is the most popular second language in our country, and French is less desirable. Director of Instruction Tony Frontier says, “The purpose of the program at the elementary level is to get those brain cells receptive to learning another language. It is like teaching piano to young learners. Some of them will stick with piano and some of them will switch later to another instrument. But all of them will benefit from the exposure to piano.”

Says Matt's mom, “When the time comes, Matt will choose whatever language he wants. Our family has strong German roots, and he may



well take German. I don't feel disadvantaged because he isn't taking German now. I feel grateful that he has the exposure to French. It's all good for kids, no matter what the language is."

In grade six, German joins the menu along with French and Spanish, and all students have two seven-week cycles of language instruction. One cycle is in their chosen language, and the other cycle is split between the other two languages offered at the middle school. The goal of sixth grade language instruction is to explore the academic aspects of language.

This year's sixth-grade class is the first group that has had world language since third grade. French teacher Julie Peterson says, "All the language instructors have noticed how much more comfortable our students are with world language. We are seeing them pick things up more easily, and there is just a different feel to it. It is way less of a struggle for everyone and the students just seem to like it more."

Formal academic language instruction begins in grade seven. Seventh graders choose from French, German and Spanish. They take the class every day for the full year, in both seventh and eighth grades, resulting in completion of one level (level I) of language (the equivalent of one year of high school language). Approximately 75 percent of students currently choose this elective. Eighth grade is not an entry point for world

language. Because of the way schedules are blocked in the middle school, students must either start their elective world language in seventh grade or wait until high school.

Some have asked why it takes two years of middle school to complete the equivalent of one year of high school language. A big factor is the number of minutes of instruction per class period. High school class periods are longer than class periods in middle school. As a result, the two years of instruction in middle school equals about 75% more classroom minutes than one year of instruction at the high school. Therefore, students who start their world language in seventh grade learn level I on a gentler curve than those who start in high school. Interestingly, some parents feel that the strongest students should consider foregoing language in middle school, but others believe the gentler curve may be just what such a student needs to get established in the language. Most agree that world language instruction at the high school moves at a fast pace. The grading scale is demanding; a score of 95% is required for an A.

World language offerings in high school are relatively unchanged, with Spanish, French and German taught through level V and Latin offered through level IV (the addition of level V is a possibility next year). The fifth level of world language is considered Advanced Placement ("AP").

What does all this mean for our students? Because Whitefish Bay is

only in its third year of the revised curriculum, it is too early to fully measure the effectiveness of the changes. The current fourth graders will be the first class to enter middle school having taken world language since the first grade.

The school district is watching carefully to see whether early preparation will allow some students to move further and faster through the five levels of world language currently offered in the high school. If so, it's likely the district would consider higher levels of instruction.

### *New Offerings*

Whitefish Bay also could consider adding a new language. Japanese, Chinese, Russian and American Sign Language are the most common extra offerings in districts around the country. However, new language instruction is expensive. State spending caps virtually require that any new courses come at the expense of established budget items.

For now, the Whitefish Bay world language program seems to be accomplishing its goals. Many students are comfortable with world language, and are continuing their studies through upper level courses. Parents are encouraged to share their thoughts about the program with teachers and administrators, and to continue advocating for a strong language program for all Whitefish Bay students.

