

LETTER TO THE MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

It was shocking and surprising to see the article “District 64 eliminates French classes.” In a world of global interconnectedness that includes over 50 countries where French is spoken and in a state where a total of 39.97% of our exports go to only three of those francophone countries, it is amazing that someone might conclude that knowing how to speak French would not be a “competitive advantage in the job market”. This rejection of the French language might also be a surprise to the managers of the over 100 Illinois companies that have established offices and factories in France such as U.S. Robotics of Schaumburg and Cummins-Allison of Mount Prospect as well as to those who have chosen France as their European distribution center such as Caterpillar. This strategy might also seemed shortsighted in view of the potential consumers in the over 20 countries in Africa where French is spoken.

This decision, unfortunately, prevents any of the parents in District 64 from choosing for their children to begin at an early and advantageous age to study the language and culture that have given us the cathedral of Notre-Dame, the language of ballet and diplomacy, the poems of Baudelaire, many of the ideas and ideals that led to our emancipation from England, the crunch & creaminess of crème brûlée, the handbags of Louis Vuitton, the art of the Impressionists, and the novels of Victor Hugo. Nor will their community be able to discover that France has not stood still since the 17th century and that most of our airplanes take off and arrive on French landing gear, that the HIV virus was isolated in France, that the remote-parking lot train at O’Hare was built by a French company, and that our CTA train cars are built by Bombardier of Quebec.

It seems that a vocal group of parents who are focused on one language has distracted the school board from the reality that, of the languages that are taught in our schools, French is the only language besides English that is spoken on every continent. At stake is not only the opportunity to appreciate the culture of France, but also to understand the cultures of Algeria, of Mali, of Bora Bora, of Madagascar, of Martinique, of Quebec, and of our own Louisiana. Diversity is a core belief of most Americans. Global understanding is a stated goal of our education community. Having the choice to study French reflects that belief and can make a significant contribution toward that goal.

I would encourage you to reconsider your decision in order to reflect the need of our young people to become citizens of a world that they understand because they have learned to speak the languages of those they will encounter.

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