

Creating Connections to Support FLEX/FLES Programming

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Introduction

In these uncertain economic times, financial concerns lead individuals and businesses alike to limit spending by cutting expenses and curtailing major investments. School districts are not immune to such financial pressures, as they face budget cuts due to a reduction in state and federal aid as well as mandates on how money that is given must be spent. Oftentimes, educational programs deemed “non-essential” are severely trimmed or even eliminated. The 2009–2010 New York State Education Department budget reflects the choices that legislators and administrators are forced to make in light of the financial crisis: the proposed overall budget represented a decrease of 3.3% from the previous year’s budget, including cuts to after-school programming, new program initiatives in math and sciences, and a reduction in funding available for grants in the arts (NYS Executive Budget Briefing Book). Learning opportunities that exist outside of the main academic realm often have little chance of being fully funded by school districts.

Yet, such learning opportunities should not simply cease to exist if a district cannot fully support the cost of running them. Funding can be derived from creative partnerships in which the school district and partnering organizations work together to secure any financial or personnel resources necessary to meet the program’s needs. Organizations such as local community associations, colleges, universities, parent-teacher organizations, or even local businesses can be tapped to contribute to the cause of assisting innovative programming to come to fruition. In this article, I will consider the traditional support system of elementary school language programming and its drawbacks in the current economic climate, and propose one model for securing assistance for such programs that imposes minimal costs on school districts and provides an innovative community support system, linking colleges and school districts. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus primarily on the FLEX program model; however, the ideas and community linkages to be discussed could be easily adapted to FLES models as well.

Traditional Support for FLEX Programs and Current Challenges

FLEX programming typically occurs in the before-school or after-school context in which students and teachers who participate arrive early or stay late to take advantage of the language learning opportunity. The main goal of FLEX programs is to introduce students to a foreign language and culture in order to pique interest and inspire further study at a stage in their schooling when language education is part of the regular curriculum. Often, teachers of FLEX programs are parent-volunteers or teachers at the school who receive a small stipend for extra-curricular program supervision. Sometimes students pay a small fee, ranging from \$2 to \$5 per class, to participate in the program and help to subsidize the cost of materials or teacher salary.

According to the 2007–2008 national survey of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), elementary schools are less likely to provide foreign language instruction than they were 10 years ago, with public schools showing a more dramatic decrease in offerings than private schools (CAL, 4). The reasons for such a decline derive in part from the increased pressure on schools to provide more instruction in core areas such as

mathematics and English language arts, subject areas that require increased testing to verify student progress at different grade levels as mandated by the “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB) (Zehr, 8). In addition to curriculum demands, school districts face budgetary limitations that may require them to hire additional instructional staff for areas supported by NCLB while trimming or eliminating staff in an existing language program.

The current economic climate also impacts families whose children might participate in the program. Given the current economic constraints on families, spending money on extra-curricular activities may not fit a family’s budget. Or, families must make choices based on the perceived value of the activity being offered. For example, it has been my experience that, while most parents support the idea of teaching their children a foreign language, parents are more likely to pay for Spanish lessons than for lessons in a language perceived as “less useful or relevant,” such as French or German. This trend is reflected in the CAL report, which demonstrates an increase in the availability of Spanish language programs (accounting for 88% of available FLEX/FLES programming) compared to French (11%) and German (2%). Interestingly, in 2008, Chinese accounted for 3% of language programs offered at elementary schools, up from only .3% offered in 1997, reflecting the nation’s interest in promoting “critical languages” such as Chinese and Arabic (CAL, 5).

Financial concerns may also determine the availability of teaching personnel. If those who teach the program are volunteers, they may feel pressured to limit their participation if they might otherwise spend their time working in a paid position to improve their budgetary situation. Without a salary incentive, programs may find it hard to secure teaching staff. Districts who provide teacher stipends may find it necessary to divert those funds to other operating costs. In short, charging a student fee, relying solely on volunteers, and/or securing funds to pay a reasonable teacher salary may prohibit program participation for all involved.

Given the limited financial resources of many communities today, it would be unreasonable to try to initiate language programming that might involve significant financial commitment on the part of the school district or community members. Indeed, the less financially constraining FLEX model continues to be the most popular method of providing language exposure to elementary students. Of those public schools that offered foreign language instruction at the elementary level in 2008, 48% of the programs were FLEX programs; 39% were FLES programs, and the remaining 13% represented immersion language programs. FLEX programs remain the predominant model for elementary schools; therefore, developing cost-effective, innovative FLEX programming is an attainable goal in the face of the current economic climate (CAL, 6).

Sweet Home School District FLEX Program: Phase I

The Sweet Home FLEX Program began as the French Club at Willow Ridge Elementary School in 2007. Students in third through fifth grade were eligible to participate in the six-week program, free of charge. The club was held one day per week, immediately after school for one hour and was run by a parent-volunteer with supervision by the school counselor. Initial interest in the program was overwhelming, with 36 students signed up for the first session, representing more than 20% of the eligible students. In order to accommodate the large number of students, they were divided into three groups of 12, with each group attending one of three consecutive sessions. One

half-hour was devoted to the introduction of thematic vocabulary, with games and songs used to reinforce the vocabulary. The second half-hour was devoted to cultural education on a Francophone nation, including geographic information, trivia, and cultural traditions. Program materials were created by the volunteer teacher, who drew on a variety of resources including her own collection of children's French books and workbooks. At the conclusion of each class, students could return home on the district's late bus, be picked up by parents, or attend the on-site after-school program.

In 2008, participation increased by 30% as new third graders joined returning participants in the program. It was necessary to create two larger sessions of 24 students each. During each session, vocabulary and culture were taught simultaneously to groups of 12, with students switching sections at the halfway point. Previous participants were placed in the same group so that they could be exposed to different vocabulary from what they had previously experienced. The program was extended to eight weeks to allow for the addition of a "parent showcase" during the final class in which students demonstrated some of the information and vocabulary that they had learned. While the increased student participation was an encouraging sign of the program's success, we encountered a number of logistical pressures that forced us to consider alternative models of program organization.

Anticipating that student participation would continue to increase in the program, we faced the prospect of adding additional 8-week sessions to keep the classes a manageable size. Extending the 16-week commitment of the volunteer teachers became problematic in their balancing of other family and work commitments. Furthermore, as more students returned to the program year after year, we needed additional lessons to provide a thematic progression of vocabulary and cultural information. Recruiting additional teacher volunteers with French language and teaching background was not a viable option for our small school community. Hiring additional teachers was cost prohibitive as we had no income source and were committed to keeping the program free to student participants. Finally, we approached the district in regard to expanding the program to additional elementary schools and possibly expanding the number of languages offered, thus placing additional emphasis on the need for more teachers. This was our primary concern as we moved forward with the planned program expansion.

Sweet Home School District FLEX Program: Phase II

The program's needs had evolved to include multiple language teachers and staff supervisors, and easily reproducible materials to enable consistency across the programs. While working at Canisius College, I met several students who were majoring in both a foreign language and elementary education. It seemed logical to recruit students with these specific interests to serve as teachers in the program. In this section, I will discuss the process for planning the program expansion as well as considerations for organization, funding, and developing community connections. (At the time of this printing, the new program is not yet underway, so this discussion will reflect the planned program as it will take place in the fall of 2009.)

In order to expand the program, district officials and I met several times with elementary school principals and potential teacher supervisors from each school to explain the program's history and hear concerns about how the program would fit with their respective schools. Their concerns included adding the program to an already full

slate of extra-curricular activities; ensuring that any volunteers were properly supervised by a teacher or staff member at the school; minimizing teacher preparation so as not to overburden staff members; determining whether student-volunteers would need background checks; and having an outside coordinator recruit, train, and schedule volunteers among the three schools.

Given my familiarity with the program, I was the logical coordinator and liaison between the schools and the college students who would become our volunteer teachers. The issue of student background checks was investigated by district officials, and it was determined that students did not need background checks if they were directly supervised by school staff and they did not exceed a certain number of contact hours with the elementary students. While a number of other extra-curricular activities were normally scheduled at each school, we were able to determine different days that each school could offer the after-school program so as not to interfere with the district music program in which a majority of fourth and fifth graders participate. Having resolved some basic logistical concerns, the main issues of student teacher recruitment and program materials were addressed.

Recruiting students involved contacting dual language and education majors to determine interest and to discuss the benefits of the program to the student volunteers. Students are not paid for their participation, but they receive a number of potential benefits. One possible benefit for students is the completion of a service-learning opportunity that can be required of certain Canisius courses. Service-learning involves the “incorporation of community service within academic courses together with structured reflection upon that experience in the context of the course” (Canisius College Office of Service Learning). The college has an office devoted to collecting and referring such opportunities to students who need to fulfill service-learning requirements for courses in education, psychology, languages, sociology, communication, etc. If a student volunteer is enrolled in a foreign language or education course that requires service-learning, he or she can satisfy the requirement through participation in our program.

Secondly, students enrolled in a foreign language course at any level are required to complete several cultural components throughout the semester. A cultural component requires students to attend a cultural event in the community and then write a reflection on the event, noting its cultural value and what was learned by the experience. Working with individual professors in the language department, I am negotiating the completion of the cultural components through participation in the program, as students are teaching culture and also experiencing the effect of language learning on a new generation within the community.

Finally, students interested in languages and education who are studying to become teachers gain valuable experience working with youth in a supervised classroom situation. Formal student teaching usually occurs upon completion of the student’s major coursework, but this opportunity would allow students to experience the classroom situation earlier in their schooling. Should this partnership prove successful, the eventual goal would be to have dual education and language majors receive academic credit for their participation as part of an internship or independent study opportunity associated with the program.

The goal is to recruit one or two student volunteers to teach each session (fall and winter) at each of the three schools, for a total of 6–12 students. Prior to beginning their

teaching duties, students will attend an orientation meeting with the coordinator and the teacher supervisors from each school. The purpose of the meeting will be to meet one another and gain an overview of the program and anticipated lessons for each week. Instructional methods will be discussed and a resource packet with suggested activities, crafts, and songs will be distributed. Students will be responsible for their own transportation and will contact the coordinator to arrange for a substitute in the event of illness or a scheduling conflict.

When choosing instructional materials, several options were considered. Elementary level materials for languages other than Spanish that provided for flexible thematic programming were difficult to locate. In the end, the district decided to invest in the Muzzy™ language system because it provides a progressive learning system that will allow the enrichment program to address the needs of returning students year after year. The lessons are designed around simple thematic vocabulary that allows for flexibility of activities but also suggests a number of structured lesson plans. Finally, the Muzzy™ system comes complete with teacher resources, student handouts, lesson plans, and cultural notes to minimize teacher preparation and allow consistency across the programs as student volunteers change from year to year. Our district chose to purchase the French, Spanish, and German packages, which aligned with the languages offered in the middle and high schools.

While the initial French Club incurred minimal costs (specifically, a small stipend for the school's supervising staff member and some photocopying/craft materials), the expanded program would require the purchase of additional instructional materials, a small stipend to compensate the program coordinator, and some funds to host the orientation meeting. These costs were estimated at approximately \$1000 in all. After selecting the Muzzy™ system, we realized that the purchase of three different language packages (at about \$450 each) would exceed our budgeted allowance for materials. However, investing in the language materials was considered a one-time cost that would permit the continuation of the program for many years to come. The district graciously agreed to purchase the Muzzy™ packages, allowing us to use funds from a small grant received from the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF) to compensate the coordinator and organize the initial orientation meeting. This small grant required matching funds, which were obtained through the local AATF chapter and several Canisius College offices, including the Department of Modern Languages, the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and the Arts and Sciences Dean's Office.

Conclusion: Potential Partnerships and Resources

As our Canisius partnership develops, we are also examining several other options that have the potential to lead to lasting relationships between the school and the community.

- Bringing the language enrichment program under the umbrella of the Professional Development School program between the Sweet Home District and Canisius College. This program encourages collaborative projects between the college and the district that provide pre-service teachers with an opportunity to gain field experience, as well as providing district teachers with the opportunity to share their expertise as adjunct faculty at the college, for example.

- Developing opportunities for high school seniors to participate and/or lead supervised FLEX classes through an existing career-shadowing program that allows seniors to shadow elementary teachers for several weeks.
- Securing funds for special projects or program upgrades from parent teacher organizations or local community/homeowner's associations. Groups that have close ties to the elementary school are more likely to support homegrown projects that benefit children in their neighborhoods.
- Contacting professional foreign language associations to determine whether monies are available for special themed events/historical celebrations. For example, AATF offers a small grant to fund National French Week celebrations or a celebration of Champlain's exploration of New York.

Language learning in elementary schools should be a priority among legislators and administrators, but until funding becomes available for permanent positions within the schools, FLEX program leaders must work creatively to identify and foster local connections that will make their programs stand out as integral parts of their communities. In doing so, members of the community may see the widespread impact of language learning and its benefits to children and the community at large.

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