Editor's Note: None of us can avoid the fact that we are in the throes of a serious economic crisis today. From the federal level to the state level to school districts and even within individual schools, harsh realities have emerged. Shrinking budgets mean that there are often tough decisions to be made, and unfortunately, those decisions have sometimes resulted in the elimination of foreign language programs. However, when our programs are threatened, we are not powerless. There are steps that teachers and other supporters can take—which may lead to protecting and preserving language learning opportunities for our students. In this issue, as well as next month (November 2010), we present some of these success stories.

When columnist Joe Davidson of The Washington Post wrote about Government Accounting Office reports released at a Senate hearing this past summer, he noted that among the important points made by the reports was the fact that a lack of foreign language speakers poses significant problems for the United States ranging from diplomats being posted in countries where they cannot communicate, to domestic agencies that have trouble serving U.S. residents with limited English.

The August 6 column by Davidson also noted that, “A multilingual citizenry and fed-
eral workforce is an important economic security asset in an increasingly global marketplace,” and he added, “the Committee for Economic Development says American companies lose about $2 billion each year because they lack adequate cross-cultural skills.”

Cutting foreign language programs in our schools is a bad decision for the economy and for our nation’s security, but these programs at times still continue to be threatened. However, thankfully, there are some real success stories out there, and talking about our victories can do more than just provide inspiration—it can also demonstrate what others might do to save their own language programs.

Parents Join Forces in Fairfax
Fairfax County, VA, in suburban Washington, DC, is one of the wealthiest counties in the country, and its school system is well respected, yet that has not made its elementary language programs immune from threats. The languages taught at the elementary school level in Fairfax include Arabic, Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, Latin, and Spanish, but in November 2009, as a result of the need for state budget cuts, language immersion programs at 13 elementary schools and a Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) program at 32 elementary schools were at risk. However, the involvement of parents was to have an instrumental role in saving foreign language education in Fairfax and resulted in protecting these quality programs from the budget axe.

Two parents in particular deserve a lot of the credit. Sandy Knox, who helped bring Spanish immersion instruction to Brookfield Elementary, and Tina Meek, whose daughters are in a Japanese immersion program at Fox Mill Elementary, together formed Fairfax FLAGS (Foreign Language Advocacy for Grade Schools), an organization dedicated to preserving these programs.

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Knox says of efforts such as theirs: “There has to be one really passionate person to get it going, but it can’t be just a one-person effort.” She and Meek tapped into the talents of others who shared their cause, including someone who knew how to set up a database, someone who helped set up the website, and a graphic designer who created their logo. “In grassroots advocacy, time is of the essence,” she notes.

The Fairfax parents spoke at school board meetings and other community meetings. They also held a silent demonstration outside a board meeting and held up signs about saving the language programs; the fact that it was raining just makes their commitment seem even more impressive.

Knox says she and Meek had complementary skill sets, which was one of the things that made them a great team. “I had the experience of following the budget and public hearing processes closely for several years, learning to understand the political side, working with the school board, and building contacts along the way,” she explains. “I was also a former project manager, which was helpful in organizing. Tina came from a marketing, writing, and public relations background. We always had a PowerPoint presentation at each of our meetings, which I think made us look more organized and professional. We would then post the links on either our website or Facebook page for those who weren’t able to attend.”

Paula Patrick, coordinator of world languages for Fairfax County Schools, credits the parents working together, even though some had children in immersion programs and some had children in the FLES programs, and they were studying different languages.

“Instead of pitting one program against the other, they joined forces,” she explains. “They talked about how important it was to start language learning early. They also came up with a great strategy by identifying one person from each school to be a liaison. At public hearings and community meetings, they strategically placed immersion and FLES parents who spoke [on behalf of the programs].”

Knox agrees that having a united effort was one of the things that they did right. At the meetings where parents spoke, they also made sure that the messages covered different angles so that they not only presented a wide range of strong evidence, but they also did not become repetitive.

“When we went to the school board public hearings in January, that was the defining moment,” she says. “We had a lot of students from different schools, studying different languages. The adults who spoke talked about different benefits of language learning.” These included cognitive and academic benefits as well as career options in the global economy and in the government and military.

To support these efforts, ACTFL also became involved in the Fairfax fight—sending representatives to testify at the Fairfax board meetings and also writing a number of letters on behalf of the programs. ACTFL also involved Committee for Economic Development (CED) President Charles Kolb to speak out on behalf of the Fairfax programs.

As Patrick notes, most board members had studied languages in high school, but many did not know how much language instruction
has changed since then, so part of the strategy involved educating the board. Coming prepared with the research to back up specific arguments was critical. The Fairfax supporters had research that showed studying languages starting in kindergarten is best for children and they could show how it helps students in other areas such as math and language arts. “The board couldn’t argue with it,” Patrick says.

After all this hard work, the commitment of the parents and educators in Fairfax County paid off and the Fairfax County immersion and FLES programs were preserved in the county schools’ FY2011 budget. However, with the economy still struggling to recover and the future uncertain, Knox and Meek are planning to keep their website and Facebook group open—just in case.

Nipping It in the Bud in Westport

Sometimes cuts to language programs can be stopped before they even get a chance to get started, and that has been the case in Westport, CT, according to Candy Rice, FLES teaching administrator for Westport Public Schools. Westport prides itself on its rigorous academic curriculum that includes a K–5 Spanish language program that has always had administrative support. However, Rice says there has been concern because of some talk about cutting the kindergarten Spanish program, and she adds that, “There is always a possibility at budget time that it will be put on the table for discussion.”

That concern has led her to talk directly to the superintendent and the assistant superintendent, and fortunately she has some pretty compelling evidence for them to use at board of education meetings. “When we tested our FLES students, the data favored the FLES program and the learning that had occurred,” Rice explains. “We used the Center for Applied Linguistics SOPA [Student Oral Proficiency Assessment] and tested students at the fifth and eighth grade levels. We had results from two cohorts—one that reflected the kindergarten through grade five Spanish program and one that reflected our former grade five only program. The data was compelling: the K–5 students outperformed those with the grade five experience only.”

This is the kind of information anyone can take to a board meeting, as Rice suggests, and point out, as they did in Westport: “We have a strong program. Why would you unravel it?” She notes, “What was critical for us was that we had cold hard facts, and they were very strongly in our favor. Boards these days are looking for that sort of thing. They are looking for a return on their investment. Having that data has been very powerful for us.”

A Lesson for the Board in Scarsdale

Located in Scarsdale, NY, a northern suburb of New York City, the Scarsdale Union Free School District’s enrollment is approximately 4,700 students in grades K–12. The district consists of a high school, a middle school, and five elementary schools, and according to the district’s website, “Student performance is unusually strong. On standardized tests and state examinations at every level, Scarsdale student achievement is typically among the very strongest in region, state, and nation.”

The curriculum includes a K–5 Spanish program, and Scarsdale Middle School offers a first-level course of study in French and Spanish, which meets five days a week. Upon successful completion of this course at the end of
eighth grade, students receive one unit of credit, and are then recommended to either the advanced or honors sequence for the second level of high school language. The World Languages Department at Scarsdale High School offers four years of Latin, and a long sequence is offered to students who began their study in middle school, a short sequence for those who begin in high school. Honors courses are available for “highly motivated and capable students.”

Housed in a separate building on the high school grounds, Scarsdale Alternative School (SAS) is open to sophomores, juniors, and seniors and is part of Scarsdale High School. SAS is a college preparatory school, and all of the students go on to four-year colleges or universities. It offers the courses typically taken in high school including foreign languages, but if a subject such as French is not offered, SAS students can take it at the high school.

According to Sarah Whittington, the chairperson/coordinator of the World Language Department at Scarsdale Middle School, “Our elementary program was instituted five years ago. We developed it year by year to ensure sustainability.” French and Spanish are taught in grades six to eight (in sixth grade for the first time this year).

Unfortunately, due to the current economic climate and the district’s budget consideration, the elementary Spanish program was endangered. In order to prevent the program from being cut, Whittington says some of the actions taken were: “Board of education presentations that included a model lesson involving seven students and myself, a video presentation outlining the program, SOPA assessment of grade five and eight students through the Center for Applied Linguistics, and publishing the curriculum guide on the district website.”

Students, teachers, parents, and administrators were involved in the effort through written and verbal communication. Whittington’s advice for others faced with possible elimination of their language programs includes promoting the program at board of education meetings, using their district website, and involving parents at the elementary level. In Scarsdale, they also involved the district’s superintendent for curriculum in the effort.

Whittington notes that, “The lesson demonstration was powerful for the board and was televised on the community network. The board members were interested in how lessons are devised and were keen on what skills the students showed. The statistical data was of great interest to our board in making the decision—the correlation of time and money to the skills developed. We will assess the grade five students when they reach grade eight (2012) and compare those results to the grade eight assessments in 2009 to show the impact of beginning the language study in elementary school on oral proficiency.”

Her department spent summer curriculum development time writing the sixth grade program for the first cohort of elementary students arriving at the middle school grade six this fall.

“At the end of this year, we will be involved in reworking the seventh and eighth grade curriculum to reflect the addition of the sixth grade program,” Whittington explains. “The following year, the high school program will be affected. Currently, our seventh and eighth graders receive one high school credit upon successful completion of the middle school course. We anticipate that with the sixth grade year the students will accomplish somewhere between one and two years of a high school course. That, we will be following carefully this year.”

**Collaboration and Connections in Wyoming**

In Wyoming, a six-year foreign language pilot program that was funded by the state had the misfortune to end precisely when the economic crisis hit. According to Cassandra Celaya, foreign language content specialist with the Wyoming State Department of Education, of the 48 districts in the state, 10 participated in the pilot program. Last year, when the budgeting for the program ended, Celaya says, “We went back to the legislators, but with the recession, a lot of programs are being cut.” Unfortunately that was the fate of this program. However, two of the districts decided to continue the program using their own funding.

One of those districts was Uinta 1 School District, and Celaya credits teacher Celeste Hatch, a para educator in the Spanish program at Uinta Meadows Elementary School, with playing a major role in saving the program there. [A para educator in this instance is someone who works with a teacher in the classroom to provide instruction and reinforce curriculum.] Hatch brought attention to the program at her school by putting up visuals in the hallways, and she brought attention at higher levels when she and her students presented to the school board.

“When Celeste went before the school board and made a presentation, she pointed out two main things,” Celaya explains. “First was that the state had already provided and trained the para educators that taught the program. The second was that the teachers were seeing results on the state tests that showed improvement.” That covered the two most important things to most school boards—saving money and raising test scores.

Celaya was involved in the training of the para educators for the program, and she says that although one of the initial concerns was that the program would take time away from teaching other subjects, they trained the para educators to work in collaboration with the classroom teachers.

“What we have proven in six years is that we actually reinforce learning in the classroom,” she says. “Science and social studies are taught in Spanish. The students made a lot of connections with what they were learning, and when they did reviews, the students were able to recall information a lot better.” Celaya says that not only did the students do better in science and social studies, but the program also helped them in math and reading.

**Advocacy and Sustainability**

Celaya understands that creating a great language program is only half the battle, so when she was training para educators for the Spanish program in Wyoming, she talked to them about how they
would have to become advocates for their program. Hatch obviously listened and it certainly paid off for her school.

Margot Steinhart, an adjunct lecturer in French at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, is the project coordinator of the French Language Advocacy Wiki (https://frenchadvocacy.wikispaces.com). She says that while crafting a quality language program is absolutely essential, the maintenance of that program also depends on visibility and building a base of support in the school or institution and in the wider community.

“Persuading the public and the decision makers of the value of the foreign language program to students and to the nation’s future requires constant reminders,” notes Steinhart. “Of course, promoting language programs is challenging and time consuming, but once a network of intra- and extra-curricular support has been established, the ongoing task can be made less daunting and more rewarding. In this way, networking and visibility can act in tandem to produce a vibrant and continuing language program.”

Susan Reese is a contributing writer to The Language Educator. She has written for numerous education publications and is based in Arlington, Virginia.

Tips and Tools

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<th>Harness the power of parents.</th>
<th>Remember that your students are your best advertisement.</th>
<th>Present a strong front.</th>
<th>Have your data ready.</th>
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<td>As demonstrated by the case in Fairfax, VA, parents can make the most powerful allies. They are the most invested in their children’s educations, and other stakeholders in the community are likely to listen to them. After all, they have the power to vote out elected officials they feel are not serving the community well—including elected school boards.</td>
<td>What better argument can there be than students who are engaged and excited about learning? Involving your students in clubs and study abroad activities can change their lives and their attitudes. When they are able to demonstrate the extent of their learning to important decision makers and to other members of the community, they may change minds about the relevance and importance of language learning. Having enthusiastic high school or middle students speak to elementary school students may instill excitement about language learning in the younger children. Through events such as language fairs and Discover Languages celebrations, students can take their message directly into the community.</td>
<td>When different language programs are pitted against one another, everyone can end up losing, according to Paula Patrick with Fairfax County Schools. Instead of advocating for one language versus another, or for immersion versus FLES, form a coalition, join forces, and advocate together for articulated sequences of language learning that start at an early age and continue through high school.</td>
<td>In Westport, CT, they had the data in the form of test scores that demonstrated the benefits of early language learning; however, even if you do not already have such data when your program is threatened, there is plenty of research out there that you can use to make your case. ACTFL (<a href="http://www.actfl.org">www.actfl.org</a>) and Discover Languages (<a href="http://www.DiscoverLanguages.org">www.DiscoverLanguages.org</a>) are the best places to start. The Joint National Committee for Languages &amp; The National Council for Languages and International Studies (<a href="http://www.languagepolicy.org">www.languagepolicy.org</a>) and the Center for Applied Linguistics (<a href="http://www.cal.org">www.cal.org</a>) can also provide you with helpful information.</td>
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| Implement ACTFL. | | Alert the media. |
| As your professional association, ACTFL can be a great resource and advocate on your behalf. Keep us informed about what is going on in your area when a language program is threatened, so that we can write letters and take part in other actions that support your efforts. Don’t keep quiet about what you are facing, what you are doing in response, or what you might need from us. Let us know so we can help! | Develop media contacts and use them to publicize your events, your students’ achievements, and any awards or accolades you, your students, or your program may receive. These contacts should include newspapers, television and radio stations, and newsletters. Utilize all forms of traditional and new media as well, including websites, Facebook, Twitter, etc. |

Here are some good ideas gleaned from the success stories of those who have been able to preserve their foreign language programs.
Tips and Tools

The Language Educator

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The Language Educator

Margot M. Steinhart

Dr. Margot M. Steinhart is an adjunct lecturer in French at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, who also serves her profession as president of the American Society of the French Palms Académiques, president of the Alliance Française du North Shore, and past president of the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF). She coordinates the French Language Advocacy Wiki initiative, supported by AATF, the French Embassy, and the Quebec Ministry of International Relations. She has served as review editor for “Course Materials and Methodology” in The French Review and as co-chair of the task force for French in drafting the National Standards.

She received the 2009 ACTFL Florence Steiner Award for Leadership in Foreign Language Education K–12, the 2002 AATF Dorothy S. Ludwig Excellence in Teaching Award, and the 1998 Prix du Chapitre for Excellence in Teaching from the Chicago/Northern Illinois AATF Chapter. She was promoted to Commandeur dans l’Ordre des Palmes Académiques by the French Ministry of Education in 2007. Steinhart has published a number of articles and is a frequent presenter at state and national conferences. “Excellent teachers strive to innovate, and when they commit to opportunities to network informally or formally through professional associations, their level of creativity, and the quality of their resources expand exponentially,” she says.

You need them to be with you—enlist administrators, counselors, and fellow teachers in your cause.

Administrators often have to argue your case before superintendents, school boards, and other decision makers, so you need them in your corner. Counselors need to know the career and educational opportunities provided by language learning. You need them to be with you so that they will encourage students to study languages rather than steer them away from your program. Maintaining strong enrollment is vital to keeping a program alive.

Prepare your case for the community.

Most often the reason for programs being cut is simply an economic one. However, if you can demonstrate that language learning pays economic dividends for the community, it can mean the difference between life and death for your program. Play the “global economy” card with business leaders. If they want to attract the kind of companies that can compete in that economy today, they will need a workforce with the necessary language skills.

Educate the policy makers.

School board members and state and local policy makers may not understand how languages are taught today and all of the benefits. Enlist as many advocates as possible to speak at school board meetings and present cold hard facts—not just an emotional, “my child loves it,” argument. Petitions, e-mails, and letter writing campaigns from constituents should be used to gain the support of local legislators, state delegates, governors, and other policy makers. For local government leaders, take a page from the Fairfax parents’ playbook, and remind them that the reputation of the community is often built upon the quality of the school system—and in the end, that affects property values.

Be your own advocate.

Forget about being modest and humble. Tough times call for drastic action, so you will have to get comfortable with tooting your own horn. Keep all the letters and e-mails you have received from students and parents praising you and your program, especially with regard to how the program has helped your former students succeed in postsecondary education or in their careers.