



Foreign Language Association of Georgia Journal

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Advocacy News: Cobb County Parents Work to Keep Foreign Language in Seventh-Grade Core Curriculum

By Michelle Hutchinson

Several Cobb County parents were stirred to action in mid-April when they received a letter from Dr. Kay Wideman, Cobb's Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, informing them that, starting with the 2003-2004 academic year, foreign language would no longer be offered as a core academic subject in the seventh-grade curriculum. Historically, Cobb schools have offered Level I Foreign Language to eligible* middle schoolers by having the course span two years, seventh and eighth grades. Students who performed well had the option of receiving high school credit for the course and moving on to Level II in ninth grade. Now, however, Level I Foreign Language will be compressed into eighth grade; children with an average of 70 or above in the course will receive a "P" for *pass* on their high school transcripts and advance to Level II in ninth grade.

Many parents are disturbed by the move to squeeze the course into one year rather than keeping it spread out over two. The Cobb County School Board and Superintendent give two reasons for the change. The first is to save money; by delaying foreign language study until eighth grade, Cobb will not have to hire as many foreign language teachers. The second reason deals with academic rigor. The School Board and Superintendent feel that middle school courses taken for high school credit (such as foreign language and advanced math) should be taught in one year, just as the high school courses are.

However, in a letter-writing campaign and while speaking before the Board, many parents said that comparing middle school foreign language to middle school advanced math is like comparing apples and oranges because students have been learning math since kindergarten, while children are exposed to foreign language instruction for the first time in middle school. Therefore, parents feel that it makes sense to gradually ease students into it. Middle schoolers agree. Cobb eighth-grader, Emma Stone, a student in the gifted program, gave a presentation before the Board talking about how difficult it would have been to have learned all the material in one year.

Parents have provided the school system administrators with studies indicating that the sooner a student studies a foreign language, the more easily he grasps it. In addition, they have presented the School Board with reports showing that learning a foreign language early positively impacts cognitive and metacognitive processing and enhances academic skills in other subject areas. Parents also pointed out that Fulton and DeKalb counties will continue to offer Level I Foreign Language for high school credit by spreading it out over seventh and eighth grades.

Anticipating that the School Board might not abandon their "academic rigor" argument and return to the status quo, parents have suggested two other options:

- Offer Level I Foreign Language in one year, but do it in seventh grade, and then offer Level II Foreign Language in eighth grade, enabling students to get two years of high school credit in middle school,

or

- Spread Level I Foreign Language over seventh and eighth grades, but don't offer high school credit for the course.

Both of these scenarios keep foreign language as a core academic subject in seventh grade and do not force students to wait until eighth grade to receive foreign language education.

At press time, the Cobb parents had still not had any positive feedback from the School Board or Superintendent, but they will continue to press on by readdressing the issue at community forums and other venues, and by working with the Foreign Language Association of Georgia and the Georgia Coalition on Language Learning.

**Eligible* is defined as any seventh-grader who scored at or above the 60th percentile on his/her last recorded standardized reading test.

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