



American Association of Teachers of French Rhode Island

President

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Ms. Deborah Gist
Commissioner of Education
Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
255 Westminster Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Ms. Gist,

On behalf of the membership of the Rhode Island chapter of the *American Association of Teachers of French* (AATF-RI) and teachers and students of French throughout the state of Rhode Island, I would like to welcome you to our beautiful state and congratulate you on being chosen as the state's new commissioner of education.

I would like to take this opportunity in writing at the very beginning of your tenure to ask for your support of foreign language education in our state, in particular **French studies**.

In the past several years, our chapter of the AATF as well as other foreign language teaching groups have noticed the decline of some world language programs, the decline of some French programs in particular, as well as the introduction of so-called «critical languages» to the detriment of well established European language programs. What makes matters more difficult is that some schools do not require foreign language instruction for graduation despite the fact that colleges and universities require at least two years if not three or four years for admission. This leaves the foreign language content area of schools in a sort of gray area vis-à-vis the core curriculum. It is unfortunately treated in some schools as just another elective. Some states have now placed foreign language instruction in the core curriculum in high school, most notable California. Our association would like to see that this situation be addressed in Rhode Island.

In the case of French studies, our association has witnessed a certain **contradictory perception** around the state of Rhode Island vis-à-vis the content area's value. On the one hand, there exists a perception among the public as well as education officials that French studies are less important nowadays as compared with, for example, Spanish studies. Indeed, this idea originates from the incredible Hispanic immigration to the state over the last twenty years.

In addition, there exists a popular idea floating around school administrations that schools should discard traditional European languages like French for so-called «critical languages» like Mandarin. While this current «language du jour» has the most number of speakers (on the Asian continent) and the Chinese economy is growing exponentially, French remains the second most influential language in the world after English, used and useful on all 5 continents. I would like to remark that there is a reason for studying European languages like French: European languages are easier for native speakers of English to learn than non-European languages. It takes a native speaker of English two to three years of additional study to become proficient in a non-European language like Mandarin. One should note that less than 50 thousand Americans are learning Mandarin, making it more obvious that millions of Americans are interested in learning a second language other than Mandarin.

If we as educators are to encourage **foreign language proficiency in a realistic way**, then we should encourage students first to learn a European language like French for its **practical benefits**.¹ In fact, the **American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2008 Student Survey** revealed French as the most popular choice as to what language an American student would be most interested to study.²



Member, Francophonie Rhode Island : www.frenchri.org

At our own **University of Rhode Island**, French is currently the most popular world language to study among URI undergraduates. In fact, URI's program in French and francophone studies is rated number two in the country. French being an **international language** spoken in over **40** countries around the world and the only language along with English to be used culturally and commercially on all five continents is cause for Rhode Island schools to sustain their programs in French studies.

Even more important for the growth and development of our students, the French language is a vehicle of tremendous **history, culture, and commerce**. And beyond the practical, cultural, and possible economic benefits from studying French, one should not forget the **influence of the French-speaking world on our region**. From the American Revolutionary War to the Franco-Canadian migration of yesterday, to the Franco-African, Franco-Caribbean, and Franco-Middle Eastern influence of today, it goes without saying that this history brings an acute understanding of where we have been as Americans, as well as how we understand the rest of the world.

Let us give our students what can truly improve the quality of their life so that they become both productive and cultured human beings. With our world becoming evermore interdependent, the AATF-RI believes that it is necessary for American students to continue to be exposed in their formative years to the language, history, and community that French studies bring so that they have the skills to function well in our **ever-interconnected world**.

I ask for your support of foreign language studies and in particular French studies in Rhode Island schools. I would be happy to speak with you further about this subject.

I thank you for your consideration and wish you much success in your very important new position.

Sincerely yours,



Michael Hébert
President, AATF-RI

¹ "A Defense of European Languages", Stephen Brockmann, Carnegie Mellon University.

² American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

