

Offering Exploratory World Language in Council Rock

Citizens For Education (CFE) recently met with Barry Desko, CR's Director of Secondary Education, to discuss the Literacy Learning (Reading) classes at the middle schools and how these classes impact the inability to offer a world language introduction course in 7th grade. While the class is actually titled Literacy Learning, most people know it as Reading, so for the purpose of this article, the class will be referred to by its more common name, Reading. Citizens For Education supports reading programs for all learners at all levels of achievement in Council Rock (CR) elementary schools, and CFE also supports 5 days of Literacy Skills in the 7th and 8th grades for those students (with or without a Special Education designation) who need remediation to be successful in their learning.

When (CR) South opened in the Fall of 2002, the middle level grade configuration was changed from three junior high schools (Holland, Newtown and Richboro) of 7th, 8th and 9th grades to three middle schools with a grade configuration of only 7th and 8th grades. At the same time, the 8th grade Exploratory World Language program, that allowed students to receive introductory language instruction in Spanish, French and German to "explore" which language they would like to take in 9th grade, was eliminated. Instead, CR mandated Reading classes for all students, regardless of their reading achievement level, and moved to a full-year first level study of a language to 8th grade. Offering a full year of World Language in 8th grade provided students at the high school an opportunity to pursue an AP level of study in a foreign language.

Currently all Council Rock 7th grade regular education students are required to take both English and Reading. Reading classes are 5 days a week and placement is determined based on 6th grade teacher recommendations, along with the Pennsylvania System of School Assessments (PSSA) and English Language Arts (ELA) testing.

In 8th grade, between 18% and 25% of CR students continue to take a 5 day reading class, Literacy Skills 8. Placement in this 8th grade remediation class is based on teacher recommendation, the SRI (the Scholastic Reading Inventory), 8th grade reading/writing rubrics and district assessments. Some, but not all, of the middle schools also use the reading comprehension program Teen Biz, whose license is paid for by the district. Students not required to take Literacy Skills in 8th grade have the option to enroll in a foreign language.

All of the Reading teachers in Council Rock, except for those who teach Special Education, hold a certification in English and/or Reading. When asked whether a student could test out of Reading, CFE was told that students cannot test out of Science or Math and the district views Reading in the same way. Yet, other school districts use reading assessments to allow students to test into a World Language class in lieu of a reading class. Here is an example from page 8 of the Palisades Student Parent Handbook, which can be found at the following link: <http://www.palisadessd.org/Page/1759>

"The Language Arts and World Language departments together have established the following criteria to determine which students are ready to take a foreign language and which students would benefit from taking another year of reading:

- 1. A score of proficient or better on the 5th and 6th grade PSSA Reading test.*
- 2. A score of proficient or better on the 7th grade Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) Reading test.*
- 3. The student is on or above grade level, with appropriate fluency and accuracy, as evidenced by teacher observation, CBAs, & quarterly assessments."*

When asked, Barry Desko has stated that although the middle school principals continue to think about a world language exploratory program and show an interest in keeping language programs going, at this time they are not in favor of eliminating 7th grade Reading.

CFE is also not in favor of eliminating the 7th or 8th grade Literacy Skills classes for those students who need remediation to be successful. Yet currently, all CR 7th graders must take this Reading class, even those with an already established proficient or advanced level of reading. Even students in Honors English classes who are expected to work at a reading level far above what is offered in Reading are still required to take the class.

Citizens For Education proposes that the district Reading and World Language professionals set criteria (such as grades, students who are proficient or above in Reading PSSA...) that allows students in 7th grade to enroll in Exploratory World Language. See Citizens For Education's position on World Language on our website at the following link: <http://citizensforeducation.com/curriculum/> under the Core Curriculum section.

Since research shows that there are many advantages to studying a foreign language, including increasing academic achievement¹, teaching students who already meet a reading criteria an Exploratory World Language course will give them not only a benefit from the study of a world language, but also help them to make gains in Reading, Math and Language Arts.

CFE believes that the reintroduction of the Exploratory World Language program into the CR middle school 7th grade curriculum should be in the 2018-19 school year when the new Newtown Middle School opens, Holland Middle School's renovations will be completed, and Richboro Middle School closes. Richboro's closure and the school board's indication that the two remaining middle schools will have a balanced enrollment will trigger the reassignment of teachers in September 2018. This would make it the perfect time to adjust staffing to provide for an Exploratory World Language program in 7th grade.

CFE is proposing that during the 2017-2018 school year CR pilot an Exploratory World Language class, and assess the Reading needs of all 6th grade students going into 7th grade in 2018-2019 in the same way the district currently assesses the reading needs of students going into 8th grade. Application of the same assessment criteria will allow all but approximately 18% to 25% of 7th grade students to choose between Reading or Exploratory World Language instruction during the pilot year.

Starting in the 2018-19 school year, only students whose testing supports the need for a Literacy Skills class in order to be successful in their other classes should be required to take Literacy Skills in 7th grade. Students whose 6th grade testing already demonstrates the required proficiency in reading would enhance their educational instruction through the benefits of the 7th grade Exploratory World Language program.

Changing the curriculum to support an Exploratory World Language program and Literacy Skills will not increase instruction cost; it will simply be a shift in expenditures and instructional cost from Reading to World Language. While an Exploratory World Language program will have a first year implementation cost, the cost for materials for the Reading classes will be eliminated.

CFE recommends that the district not only resume foreign language instruction in 7th grade by reinstating the Exploratory World Language program, but also make it available to 8th graders who take Literacy Skills in 7th grade, and whose year-end testing make them eligible for Exploratory World Language. Since colleges only look at the number of years a student takes language at the high school level and the rigor of those languages, students who take the Exploratory World Language class in 8th grade can still achieve 4 years of the language of their choice on their high school transcript.

CFE believes that offering an appropriate Literacy Skills program for some students and an Exploratory World Language program for others will help CR achieve the expectation of being in the top 1% of districts within the state.

¹ <http://www.actfl.org/advocacy/what-the-research-shows>