

Quebec and Vermont Strengthen Ties: An Advocacy Piece

Allez-y! Go for it! The Vermont Foreign Language Association is 100% behind the work of our administration to strengthen the ties between Quebec and Vermont. Lieutenant Governor Brian Dubie spearheaded the new friendship by being the only US dignitary at the inauguration of Quebec's Premier Jean Charest. Now Governor Jim Douglas has led a group of Vermont officials and business representatives to a visit to Montreal, Sherbrooke and Quebec City. There they met with their northern counterparts and discussed trade, the environment, education, and security.

For these leaders to succeed, they will need Vermonters who can follow through on their initiatives -- Vermonters who know the French language, and who appreciate the nuances of Quebec culture. Even though many *Québécois* speak fluent English, this does not absolve us of our responsibility to become equal partners in these new relationships. It is a well-known maxim that successful sales are carried out in the language of the customer. Fortunately, Vermont will be ready.

More than any other state, Vermont has a solid core of citizens who speak at least some French, and who are comfortable with the *Québécois*. Some of them come from families of those who moved to Vermont from Quebec during the waves of immigration between 1860 and 1950. Others learned their French at school, and kept it up through travel and cultural pursuits. Vermont's French heritage and proximity to Canada have maintained strong school French programs, and until this fall, every high school in Vermont had a French program. Even after college graduation, there are plenty of opportunities here for further study. UVM and Vermont's four largest private colleges offer advanced degrees in foreign language studies; UVM is host as well to the Department of Canadian Studies. This October, in fact, over a hundred members of the VFLA attended our annual meeting in Montréal, and we studied the history and cultures (Francophone, Hispanic, Italian, and Jewish) of our neighboring metropolis.

Also, luckily, we live in a state where

"non-native language" is part of the Vermont Framework of Standards from kindergarten through twelfth grade. This fall a group of teachers began work, through the Vermont Institutes, on statewide assessments in language K-12. These assessments will encourage school districts to offer the early start crucial to solid achievement, and to continue programs to the point of high proficiency.

Naturally, it is knowledge of not only French that will move Vermonters into key positions in the Global Village. Some will learn Spanish, some German, some Japanese, and others Italian. Once they have mastered one language, they will find that the next one comes more easily. Learning a third language - say, Chinese or Arabic -- will not seem daunting to a person who has been studying a second language since grade school. And of course, a grounding in Latin creates a flexible base for a multitude of linguistic and intellectual undertakings.

In conclusion, the foreign language teachers of Vermont are ready to collaborate with state leaders encouraging young Vermonters to think internationally. Last year Governor Douglas personally welcomed language students to the State House during Foreign Language Week. We see this welcome as an auspicious beginning. When Quebec pays us a return visit, why not invite Quebec's Minister of Education to meet with our Commissioner of Education? The result could be renewed school exchanges from grade school through the college level, and study opportunities and internships for Vermonters in Quebec, and vice versa. To learn more about the VFLA, and to offer your suggestions as to how we can best further cross-border relationships, you can contact us through our website at www.vfla.org.

Sincerely,

Jessica Noyes
VFLA Board of Directors

This letter was recently sent to several Vermont newspapers on behalf of the VFLA in its continued advocacy efforts. To learn more about other recent efforts go to the Advocacy page of the VFLA website.