Ashland School Committee Minutes
December 2, 2024

Ashland Town Hall
101 Main Street
Select Board Meeting Room

Hybrid meeting: recorded on Zoom

Present:	Laurie Tosti, Chair Marc Terry, Vice Chair Tina Fitanides, Secretary Paul Kendall, Member Marcy Culverwell, Member James Adams, Superintendent Michael Caira, Assistant Superintendent Chris Mathieu, Director of Finance
Absent:	Abhishek Karthik, student representative, Ashland High School

Agenda Review and adoption
Ms. Tosti reviewed the sole agenda item for the meeting. She took roll call and asked the School Committee members to change the order of agenda items – to hear the presentation from the Superintendent on the World Language curriculum at Ashland Middle School, then to open the meeting up to hear public comment on the topic.

Vote:
Ms. Culverwell: Present and AYE
Ms. Fitanides: Present and AYE
Mr. Kendall: Present and AYE
Mr. Terry: Present and AYE
Ms. Tosti: Present and AYE

World Language Curriculum at Ashland Middle School
Superintendent Adams began by saying that this is a difficult conversation. He believes strongly that language is a gateway to diversity in education. He also wanted to emphasize that there are no recommendations to change anything at Ashland High School. Tonight's conversation is solely to focus on Ashland Middle School and World Language.

Currently, Ashland Middle School offers Spanish and French. Enrollment in French at the middle school has been declining for several years. Currently, we have 16 students taking Grade 8 French. We have 33 students taking Grade 7 French.

We have also been struggling to staff the department at AMS. We currently have three full-time Spanish teachers. Although we've had members of the community who are French speakers come forward to offer to help, classroom management, lesson planning and experience grading are all critical components of a successful teacher.

Recommendations: Continue with French 8 this current school year. Give the opportunity for the Gr7 students taking French to switch into Spanish starting in the second semester. The World Cultures class for current sixth grade students would be maintained for this school year. This is currently designed not as a language acquisition class, but more of a project-based class, therefore it is easier to staff. It is designed as a semester-long class, half World Cultures and half Study Skills in the Library with Ms. Sabino.

Next year, 2025-2026, French 8 will continue to be offered - perhaps online or virtually. (We cannot guarantee that the district will be able to hire a certified French teacher to teach in person.) Spanish 8 will continue to be offered. Grade 8 will offer the equivalent of Spanish I at the high school.

Students who take Spanish 8 can then take Spanish II in Grade 9 at the high school.

In 2025-2026, no world language will be offered for Grade 7 students.

In 2026-2027, French 8 will be phased out at AMS.

A summary of these changes, which will take effect over the coming years, include the following:

- **2024-2025 School Year:**
    - French 7 & 8 will continue to run for the remainder of the year.
    - A newly hired Long-Term Substitute (LTS) French teacher will start **on January 6, 2024**, and teach French 7 and French 8.
    - The current LTS French teacher will transition to a Spanish teaching role for the remainder of the year.
    - We are still interviewing and hiring another Spanish teacher to meet our Spanish students' needs.
    - French 7 students can transition to Spanish 7 on January 6, allowing them to be better prepared for Spanish 8. - Ms. Lachapelle will send a clarifying email to 7th-grade French students.
- **2025-2026 School Year:**
    - French 8 will be offered to students who are currently studying French 7. At this point, however, we do not have a teacher, and students may need to take the class virtually, either with an instructor or without.AMS is investigating schedule changes for the 2025-2026 school year, and we are considering moving Spanish teachers onto 8th-grade teams.
- **2026-2027 School Year:**
    - Spanish will only be offered to students in the 8th grade.

No changes to the world language curriculum at Ashland High School have been proposed.

Mr. Terry asked what do middle schools in nearby towns offer for World Language? Superintendent Adams reported that he has been looking at surrounding towns in comparison.

Medway Middle School offers Spanish, French and Mandarin, but is phasing our Mandarin for the 2025-2026 school year. French is also not taught in person.

Holliston offers a French-immersion program at the elementary school level, and yet they are also seeing a decline in their French enrollment numbers at the middle school.

Franklin offers Spanish only at the middle school level. Hopkinton offers French, Spanish and Mandarin classes at the middle school, although they are a larger district than Ashland. Natick offers French, Spanish and Mandarin.

The decline in enrollment numbers in French at Ashland Middle School has been an issue for some time.

Ms.Tosti asked if there was time and space to discuss the idea of adding a different language to the World Language programming at the middle school, such as Portuguese or American Sign Language? Ms. Adams said yes, but the additions of these classes would be dependent on an overall schedule change at the middle school. The goal and hope is to include the existing World Language teachers to the “team” model at the middle school, so the Spanish teacher would join the English/Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies teachers as a team of teachers for a consistent group of students.

We need to make sure we can staff any new programs and that there would be sustainable enrollment interest before we consider adding a new language to the course offerings.

Mr. Terry asked if the World Cultures class currently offered in Grade 6 would continue this year. Yes, it would, however, it would be phased out in 2025-2026 for grade 6.

Public Comment
At 6:52pm, Ms. Tosti opened the meeting up for public comment. She shared that she received about 10 emails from community members who weighed in on the subject, and she shared these emails with all members of the School Committee. She reminded community members that there is a 3 minute limit on comments. She would take comments from live attendees at the meeting, first, then from attendees who were online.

The first community member who shared offered a concern about students' ability to have access to take AP French (French V) at the high school if French 8 was no longer offered at the middle school.

A second community member shared prepared remarks in support of maintaining the French program at the middle school. She is concerned that eliminating the French program at the middle school could hurt the prestige and reputation of Ashland Public Schools, and hurt property values of homes in the town.

Liz Childress is an educator herself, her grandson is in the seventh grade at AMS, taking Spanish.

Katherine Quill is a retired teacher, and she encouraged the board to consider an online option to maintain the French program.

Another community member contributed that she is French Canadian, and learned English as a second language in third grade. She believes strongly in the benefits of learning a second language, and encourages the board to consider starting languages earlier than the middle school level. She mentioned that she is hoping to enroll her incoming Kindergarten daughter in Holliston public schools to take advantage of their French immersion program. She is happy that the District has any kind of World Language offering. She asked what would replace the World Language course at the middle school, during that currently scheduled hour?

Marin Frickler moved to Ashland in part for the public schools. She is a Canadian dual citizen, with French heritage. She is a music teacher, and also shares the opinion that World language should be offered even earlier than it is now.

Another participant spoke – she is a French citizen. She acknowledges the staffing challenges, but asked why is it a problem to maintain a small section of French for the students?

Many of the participants in public comment are dual-language speakers in support of maintaining the French program at the middle school.

Mr. Terry appreciated the people who spoke and acknowledged the difficult position the School Committee is currently in. He doesn't like the idea of cutting a language. But he recognizes that there is declining interest and declining staff. It pains him to say it, but he doesn't see options to maintain French at the middle school. He notes that this is a wider issue than just in Ashland, that declining French enrollment numbers are more of a regional issue. He would like to focus on the quality of instruction. He would like to keep an online option open to offer French language in middle school, but at the same time, realizes that an online course offering may not be appropriate for students aged 12-14.

Mr. Kendall notes that he values world language. The program has to be sustainable over time. Is there another alternative?

Ms. Fitanides noted that this whole subject makes her sad. She noted that the school committee members do not want to do this, but that quality and appropriate instruction are important. Quality and consistency of instruction are important, and we find ourselves in the unfortunate position to address that.

Ms. Tosti noted that we've been seeing the signs of declining enrollment numbers in French for several years, but the school committee has been reluctant to have this conversation. The staffing emergency circumstances of this year have brought forth the issue tonight. She emphasized that our values are the same as those that we've heard from tonight. We all want the same things, however, budget, teaching and interest realities are forcing the conversation.

Ms. Culverwell noted that consistency with teaching is her biggest concern. She has a current sixth grade student and a rising fifth grader in her family. She feels very strongly about having a two language program offering at the middle school, but understands the reality of the situation. She feels that it is worse for students to have a revolving door of teachers.

Dr. Caira noted that this was a hard pill to swallow, but that we need to follow the data.

Ms. Adams noted that these are not easy or simple decisions. We're committed to having more than one language offered in the district, but we cannot commit to more than one language offered at the middle school.

After significant thoughtful consideration, Ms. Tosti requested a motion from the school committee members. Ms. Terry moved to approve the recommendation of Superintendent Adams with regard to the middle school world language program. Mr. Kendall seconded the motion.

Vote:
Ms. Culverwell: AYE
Ms. Fitanides: AYE
Mr. Kendall: AYE
Mr. Terry: AYE
Ms. Tosti: AYE

Ms. Tosti thanked everyone for their comments and participation. Mr. Terry moved to adjourn the meeting, Mr. Kendall seconded. Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Gretchen King
Executive Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent

Documents used during the meeting