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SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA

Oui! SR approves French charter school

Founders say
K-8 campus
will be first
public program
west of the
Rockies

By **GUY KOVNER**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Santa Rosa parents, teachers and school officials are enthused by the prospect of 140 students learning to *de parler en français* next year at a unique French-language charter school.

"This is so exciting, this is history-making," said Jennifer Schwinn, a veteran educator who was one of five proponents of the Santa Rosa French-American

Charter School.

The K-8 school, which has been in the planning stages for more than two years, won unanimous approval from the Santa Rosa school board Wednesday night and is scheduled to open next August in Santa Rosa.

It will be the sixth charter school in the Santa Rosa district, but the first French-immersion public charter school west of the Rocky Mountains and the fourth in the nation, the founders said.

The only others are in New York, Louisiana and Kansas.

"I have to tell you, it's been an awesome ride," said Najine Shariat, a Santa Rosa dietician and another founding member.

The lengthy organizing process, she said, "is not for the faint-hearted."

But enrolling students won't be a problem, Shariat said, as 195 parents have signed a petition expressing their intent to send their

TURN TO **FRENCH**, PAGE A5



Associated Press

Soldiers join ceremonies marking the end of U.S. military mission in Baghdad, Iraq, on Thursday.

SOLEMN, QUIET END TO WAR

[Handwritten signatures and scribbles at the bottom of the page, including a large signature that appears to be 'Jennifer Schwinn']

*"I have to tell you,
it's been an awesome ride."*

NAJINE SHARIAT, a founding member
of the Santa Rosa French-American Charter School

FRENCH: More than 140 students expected to enroll next year

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kids to the school, including more than 140 who will enroll next year. Prospective students come from Sonoma and Napa counties, and some on the list would come from New York and France to attend the new school.

Shariat, who will enroll her daughter in the school, said she expects a waiting list for admission, with enrollment starting at 140 and constrained only by classroom space and teachers.

"The sky is the limit," she said.

A charter school in Windsor, Cali Calmécac Language Academy, offers bilingual education in Spanish, but parents seeking elementary education in French now have to pay for private schools in Corte Madera or San Francisco.

Boosters tout the value of French in travel, culture and business, as well as the benefits of bilingualism on academic achievement.

Board president Larry Haenel said the approval was a cinch. "We're always looking for innovative ways for children to experience education," he said.

Officials were impressed by the school's French-immersion program, as well as its "rich curriculum," level of parental involvement and interventions for students struggling academically or emotionally.

"There was no downside" to the proposed school, he said.

Andy Brennan, Santa Rosa Teachers Association president, said the union supports dependent charter schools, which are sponsored and operated by the Santa Rosa district, as the French-American school will be.

Personally, Brennan said that teaching youngsters a second language makes them more proficient in their native tongue, as well.

The student's age is a major factor, he said, noting that by 12 or 13, children begin to lose

the facility to reproduce sounds in a foreign language.

"A little kid can easily pick up three to four languages," said Brennan, who speaks English, French and German.

Students at the French-American school will start out with lessons primarily in French, and by middle school will study about half in English and French. In third and fourth grade, they will have an option for taking Mandarin or Spanish as a second foreign language, Shariat said.

Schwinn, a Santa Rosa resident who is superintendent of the Monte Rio Union School District, intends to enroll both her sons in the new school.

Learning a foreign language is "a cognitive exercise that improves brain function" at any age, she said.

Research has shown that such learning can help stave off Alzheimer's disease and other dementias in elderly people by building additional connections in the brain.

Schwinn said she was motivated to start the French charter school because her younger son attended Ma Petite École, a French-language day-care school in Santa Rosa, for three years and was left with no opportunity for more language lessons until junior high.

The first step toward establishing the charter school is hiring a director and finding a site.

Doug Bower, Santa Rosa associate superintendent, said he expects to present the school board with several options for a site at the January board meeting.

The charter school will be governed by the school board, with its own advisory board comprised of parents, he said.

Teachers will be credentialed and members of the teachers union.

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