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# EMPIRE NEWS

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*“Part of the philosophy is making this type of school program available to all kids and all families.”*

**JENNIFER SCHWINN,**  
lead applicant for French charter school



Photos by JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

**Sori Salamati, 5, middle, reads a French-language book “Petit-Coq” to other children at Ma Petite École, a French-language day-care school in Santa Rosa. Some school parents are among a group hoping for a French charter school in Santa Rosa.**

# Quest for French charter

Group calls for K-8 school by next fall, using French language and standards

By **SAM SCOTT**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A group of Sonoma County parents and educators is pushing to create a local French-language charter school, which they say would be unique on the West Coast.

Backers go before the board of Santa Rosa City Schools tonight with a plan supported by the parents of nearly 170 children.

They want approval to open by next fall a K-8 school where students would receive most instruction in French, with English used primarily during language arts classes.

Boosters tout French's value

in travel, culture and business while espousing more general benefits of bilingualism that include mental dexterity, problem solving and ability to multitask.

"It's not just about language, but about using language to develop the brain differently," said Najine Shariat, a local dietitian who grew up in France.

She's been asked why school sponsors are not pursuing a program in Spanish, the county's most prevalent language after English, and one with far more local uses.

Such opportunities in Spanish already exist, she said, and the proposed French school would add something new and needed. When she was president of Alliance Francaise de Santa Rosa, the local chapter of a worldwide francophile organization, she said she was peppered with callers looking for



Teacher Brian Benefield uses flash cards to teach French words to Chloë Morelle, 2, left, and Gabriel Faivre, 3, at Ma Petite École, which offers a French preschool curriculum.



For more photos from Ma Petite École, go to [pressdemocrat.com](http://pressdemocrat.com)



JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

**Nicholas Miller, 4, reads a French language children's book at Ma Petite École in Santa Rosa.**

## **FRENCH:** Immersion touted for mental development

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French schools.

Locally, Cali Calmécac Language Academy, a charter school in Windsor, provides bilingual education in Spanish, but parents seeking a similar experience in French have to pay for private schools in Corte Madera or San Francisco.

Organizers said there are only three such public French immersion public schools in the country, one each in New York, Kansas and Louisiana.

"Part of the philosophy is making this type of school program available to all kids and all families," said Jennifer Schwinn, the lead applicant for the charter as well as the superintendent of Monte Rio Union School District.

Both Schwinn and Shariat have sent their children to Ma Petite École, a French-language day-care school in Santa Rosa.

The school teaches French with no conjugation drills or translation tests. Instead, husband-and-wife instructors Emmanuelle and Brian Benefield immerse the kids in a French environment, letting the youngsters' absorptive minds do the rest.

The results are 4- and 5-year-olds whose comfort with French would put many high school French students to shame.

Schwinn said her son left Ma Petite École able to understand virtually anything she said in French, though his fluency has dimmed since he enrolled in elementary school.

"I'm hoping it's still in there and it just needs to be tapped into again," she said.

French fluency, though, isn't the charter school's only selling point. Modeling itself on French standards, the school plans a longer-than-typical day

that runs from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., with a longer lunch to promote such French ideals as talking during meals and digesting food properly.

There's also an hour for homework at the end of each day and educators plan to include French standards in the curriculum.

Cindy Mogannam, who has two young children, grew up in Lebanon where many people she knew received French education, which impressed her and is the main reason she's interested in the charter school.

"Based on my experience from family and friends, the French system is very structured and very academically focused," she said. "We are really interested in that."

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