

LEARNING

to Sprechen Sie Deutsch and More: The German Schools of Connecticut



BY POLLY TAFRATE

"Maifest" 2013 at the West Hartford German School

It's 9:30 a.m. on Saturday morning and the German Schools in Stamford and West Hartford, Conn., (often referred to as GSC), are beginning their day. At the Stamford middle school that the GSC takes over every the weekend, there is a Mommy and Me class filled with two year olds, who are learning to sing German songs, play games and follow simple directions. They're encouraged and helped by their parents and by GSC teachers. This is the only GSC class where parents are welcome to participate.

Kindergarteners are having a test. When their teacher points to a picture on the blackboard, they circle the word in their workbooks to show where it belongs in their house. Her question, "Does the refrigerator belong in the bathroom?" is met by giggles, assuring her that they understand what she asked in German. Children who are in the

nine-to-eleven-year-old class continue their yearlong study of conjugating verbs, writing letters and learning European capitals. Some high-school students are preparing for the two Sprachdiplom exams, the official German two-day exams testing mastery of spoken and written German and knowledge of German culture, history and literature. They are a prerequisite for entering a German, Swiss or Austrian university.

Students and parents commit to spending every Saturday morning at GSC throughout the school year. There are tests, report cards and homework. Midmorning recess is a favorite time as students gather with their friends and purchase snacks.

According to the New York Times, "after Spanish and French, German is still the third most-studied language in the United States," despite the fact that it is offered in fewer

and fewer public or private schools. In 1978, the co-founder of the German Schools in Connecticut, Dr. Renate Ludanyi, and some of his colleagues were concerned about this decline. They realized that the distance from West Hartford to Stamford was too far to travel each week. Thus, from the beginning, they created two schools on two campuses.

The school in Stamford has 260 students who come from the surrounding metropolitan New York City area, while the one in West Hartford has 104 students enrolled, from thirty neighboring towns.

Adults have their own classes. Some are sharpening their language skills while their children attend classes, while others are furthering their knowledge for business and social pursuits; and some simply enjoy being able to spend a morning with German-speaking people. Chris Wilson and Peggy

Riotte are two participants in the advanced class. “We speak exclusively in German,” explains Chris. “Sometimes we listen to German radio or read articles from the German magazine, Stern.”

Samantha Hart has come full circle at GSC. She started as a tot, passed both Sprachdiplomes and went on to graduate from Fairfield University in Connecticut. She now teaches at GSC. Samantha’s not the only one to take German into the second generation. She was preceded by Charlotte Bareiss, who first helped her family strengthen their heritage language, then she graduated from Georgetown University with a major in German and became a teacher at GSC. Her younger sister, Isabel, has completed her last DSD examinations and their mother, Annette, remains active on the board.

“Fluency in German helped my daughter get into her first choice of college,” says one mother. A student agrees. “My business studies got me the interview, but I am convinced my fluency in German got me the job.”

Both campuses have two tracks: one for beginners and non-native speakers, the other for advanced students – “heritage language speakers” – those with native and near-native fluency. Classes are offered based on age and language proficiency and are taught by qualified and dedicated teachers, most with German as their native tongue.

These schools are private and non profit. The tuition is reasonable, at \$850 a year with family discounts. In order to keep the teachers paid, the buildings where classes are held rented and insurance and other administrative fees covered, fundraising is ongoing. Parent volunteers fill all



“Fasching” 2013 at the West Hartford German School.

administrative positions and help when needed.

Urs Klarer is an example. He handles advertising and public relations for the school. A Swiss citizen, his 13-year-old triplets and their older brother have attended the Stamford school since they were young. “Because my wife speaks Spanish to the children, not much German is spoken at home,” he says. “When they visit their grandparents in Switzerland or talk on the phone, they’re able to communicate in German.”

Although most students are of German, Austrian or Swiss descent, this is an international school. When Andrew Jurgielewicz’s parents asked him what he wanted for his thirteenth birthday, his response was German lessons. “Keep in mind,” says his mother, Patty, “that neither my husband nor I have any German heritage.”

Others choose to attend to strengthen their academic portfolios. The Public Act 0801380 bill, passed in Connecticut in 2008, allows students who study privately to receive up to four high-school credits in world languages. Selective colleges expect students to take the Standard Achievement Tests (SAT), the Advanced Placement (AP) and three subject tests, with German being one choice.

German culture is embraced through traditional celebrations throughout the year. In September students from the Stamford school design and ride upon a float in New York City’s Steuben Day Parade. In November, both schools celebrate St. Martin’s Day; in December, Weihnachtsfeier;

and in February, the Fasching Carnival. West Hartford celebrates Reimfest in March, and the season-ending Maifeier, where all classes perform German skits and sing songs. Two new celebrations are the Christ Kindle Market at Christmas and Fastnacht on Shrove Tuesday.

Each year in Stamford, every student contributes a page to the annual yearbook, which is written completely in German. Last year’s theme was Deutschland ist mehr (Germany is more), mentioning different specialties such as food, science and culture. West Hartford participates in the Connecticut Organization of Language Teachers (C.O.L.T.), joining about 25 to 30 other schools with students reciting a poem or singing a song in the language they’re studying.

These German schools prepare students to enter the world of international business, art and politics with a strong knowledge of the country with the largest European economy and the world leader in industry and science. Increasingly, students opt for university study in Europe. For others it offers a comfort zone to understand enough German to order off a menu, read a map or communicate with relatives.

Both schools have the same goal: to teach the German language and culture while enhancing and fostering United States-German friendships and adding value to the American community.

For more information go to www.germanschoolct.org, e-mail info@germanschoolct.org or call Stamford at 203-792-2795, West Hartford at 860-404-8838. ■



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