



Families and friends watch Heritage Elementary and Valor Middle School students perform poems, songs, and stories during their annual Russian Festival at Heritage Elementary School on Thursday, Feb. 6, 2020. COURTESY OF RICK VASQUEZ, WOODBURN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Woodburn Russian classes see dips in enrollment

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Woodburn School District is home to one of the nation's only public K-12 Russian language programs.

But enrollment fell this year after schools switched to remote learning and two new private schools came to town, leaving some to fear the program may be at risk.

District leaders reassigned two Russian-language teachers at the start of the school year. In December, they considered combining some of the elementary Russian classes and transferring three more of the program's 12 teachers to other subjects, at least until numbers increased.

Dozens of teachers and parents opposed the idea, collecting more than 130 signatures on a petition, testifying at a school board meeting and walking out of a professional development training.

They argued smaller classes are more beneficial for students learning such a difficult language — noting Russian has a rating of four on a five-point scale in terms of complexity and time needed to achieve advanced levels of proficiency.

Additionally, they said, Russian teachers were already working overtime to ensure there was a high standard of curriculum available for distance learning. To change the classes, staffing or overall program, they said, would be detrimental to the community.

District officials said they take great pride in their multicultural, multilingual identity, and decided not to merge the classes or move any more staff.

However, some argue the district needs to do more to rebuild and grow the program, assuring its survival.

Oregon's Russian connections

Russian is among the top five most common languages spoken by Oregonians, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Woodburn, in particular, is home to a large community of Russian-speaking residents, including Russian Orthodox Old Believers, who settled in the area after escaping religious persecution in the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

Other religious sects and immigrants from Slavic nations live in Woodburn as well.

There are only a handful of comparable Russian immersion programs across the United States, including in Alaska, Ohio, Colorado, Maryland and Portland Public Schools.

There are tens of thousands of Russian-speaking residents in the Portland area. However, Kelly Elementary School, as reported by the Portland Tribune, lost 68% of its Russian immersion program in one year due to gentrification and the subsequent relocation of a prominent church.

Woodburn's program declines

Like others, Woodburn provides Russian language classes in grades K-12.

But it is the only district in Oregon to offer Russian as part of the high school International Baccalaureate diploma, a program often associated with advanced placement and college-bound students that focuses on critical thinking and is used in 150 countries around the world.

Mavjuda Rabimov, a third-grade teacher with more than 21 years of experience in the district, helped Woodburn develop the curricula it uses today.

She and other educators dedicated years to stocking classroom shelves with translated and culturally relevant books, attending conferences and symposiums, and working with other institutions to improve their work.

Rabimov spoke proudly of her own daughter being one of the first students in the district to earn the IB diploma with the Russian track.

But with remote learning and two new, private Old Believer schools opening in the area, enrollment has declined in recent months.

About 5,600 students are enrolled in Woodburn schools. This year, the district is down by 282 students overall.

While the Russian immersion students only made up about 5% of the district's total population, nearly 33% of the students who left the district this year were in the program.

This dropped the Russian program enrollment from 305 students to 214.

Educators said many Russian-speaking families decided not to participate remotely this year because of cultural norms. These included heightened concerns about too much screen time and unsupervised internet access.

Rabimov acknowledged the drop in enrollment but argued it wasn't enough to merit the district's proposed changes.

"The changes felt rushed, unbalanced and have been done with zero consultations with us," she said.

Rabimov said she believes part of the problem stems from the new administration. In July, Oscar Moreno Gilson became Woodburn's new superintendent, following the retirement of Chuck Ransom.

"Any new person who joins the administration should first understand legacy programs like ours," Rabimov said, adding they should learn the history of the program, visit classes and find out more about each teacher.

"Without that knowledge," she said, "no one has the right to make changes."

Proposed merger, transfers

With some rosters dropping to ten students per class, district leadership suggested a staffing change this fall. Up to five of the district's 12 Russian language teachers would be assigned other classes and the students would be merged into larger groups.

Ricardo Vasquez, communications and community outreach coordinator for the district, said proposed changes did not stem from budget constraints. He also clarified no staff members were being laid off and no money was being taken away from other programs.

Vasquez said the district remained optimistic that late enrollees would increase, but when that didn't happen, they created the new plan.

By combining six classes into three — something he described as a common practice in education — they would still be able to keep each class between 18-21 students.

"These changes allow us to readjust the organizational structure as enrollment fluctuates in order to maintain the program," Vasquez said.

He said Gilson is a strong advocate for dual-language programs and has no intention of cutting them.

Cultural importance

Natalya Feoktistov grew up in Woodburn and is now a parent and substitute teacher. She also serves on the district's Heritage Parent Committee.

She said these programs are vital for the children because they allow them to connect with their cultural identity.

"We currently see a trend in which a generation of immigrant grandparents speak only Russian, and second-generation immigrants have lost the Russian language in the process of assimilating to life in America," Feoktistov said.

"If a child isn't able to preserve their Russian language, they don't just lose the ability to speak a second language," she said, "they also lose the ability to communicate with close family members."

Every year, Heritage Elementary School's language program puts together a Russian festival in which students perform traditional songs, stories and poems, Feoktistov said. Students also exhibit folk art and crafts and study the history of traditional Russian clothing.

"Russian students are a minority in our school district, so having a place for them to connect to their culture is critical," she said. "All of this is in addition to the numerous benefits that come with children growing up bilingual."

Graduating with IB Russian and a seal of biliteracy gives students the opportunity to find jobs that put their language skills to use, she added.

Woodburn regularly needs Russian-speaking workers in health clinics, offices and stores, not to mention

federal positions.

Feoktistov said Woodburn's Russian heritage is also part of the community fabric outside of schools.

"I think of Woodburn as a quilt — made up of lots of different, unique cultures," she said. "That is what really makes Woodburn stand out as a city."

Feoktistov said she was relieved the district chose not to move forward with the proposed staffing changes.

"The stress and impact would have been traumatic," she said.

New ideas to sustain the programs

Vasquez said the district is continually looking for ways to improve and grow its program.

This includes providing educational assistants, supplies, curriculum and the funding of a Russian language program coordinator, who assists in aligning K-12 programs and serves as a mentor for the Russian language teachers.

"Our district's mission and vision are grounded in the belief that multilingual, multicultural education is the vehicle that will create access and equity for our students," Vasquez said.

Rabimov said teachers like her are team players and will do everything they can to regain students and expand the program, which would likely mean larger rosters.

But she argues there are several ways the district could improve enrollment without moving teachers and merging classes.

The district could better promote the programs on social media, at local churches, stores and offices, and via various news outlets, Rabimov said.

Translating more district paperwork into Russian and electing a Russian representative to the school board are among her other ideas.

Feoktistov said the district can do more to connect with Russian families, starting earlier in the year.

She argued this would give them more accurate projections for enrollment moving forward and provide an opportunity to engage with them about other concerns.

"If the district and parents work together," she said, "I think we can bring about a lot of positive change."

The Heritage Parent Committee is holding a meeting for district parents to talk about the program's future via Zoom at 5 p.m. Monday, Jan. 11. Email heritageparentcommittee@outlook.com for more information.

For more information from Woodburn School District, go to www.woodburnsd.org or email Chrissy Chapman, director of "Teaching, Learning, and Assessment," at cchapman@woodburnsd.org.

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