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Parlez-vous Français? New French-American School to Open

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When the new French American School of Tampa Bay opens this fall, six-year-old Anais – the daughter of Old Northeast residents Peter and Dayna Moore – will be among the students. Many schools in the area teach a foreign language as an elective. This one is different. In a 'first' for St. Petersburg, classes at the school will be taught entirely in French – including math, science, and history.

Anais will already have a head start on some of her classmates as she understands French and has just started learning how to speak the language, says Peter, who is fluent in French himself. But the school's co-founders Elizabeth and Willy LeBihan explain that it's not necessary for students to speak a word of French to be successful at the school. "The school is not for French speakers, but for children whose first language is English," says Willy. He points out that students' language skills will begin to develop in a natural, organic way as they hear French spoken on a daily basis while they're in class.

The idea of sending your child to school where only French is spoken might seem daunting to some, but Peter is no stranger to the French school system. He grew up in the New York-New Jersey metro area and attended Lycée Français in New York, a bilingual school that has been in operation since 1935. "My parents weren't from France, but they came from the European system of education," says Peter. After graduating from Lycée Français, he moved to France, where he continued his college education in Paris and Normandy.

He and Dayna moved to St. Pete seven years ago for the quality of life, affordability and proximity to the water. They live in the Old Northeast's historic Granada Terrace neighborhood. Both are self-employed. Peter is a financial investor. Dayna is a psychotherapist with a private practice, as well as a change management consultant. Last year, as it came time to think about enrolling Anais in a local grade school, friends told the family about plans for a new French American School in St. Petersburg. They were intrigued and met Elizabeth LeBihan at an informal get-together.

Although the idea of a French school is definitely a novel idea for St. Pete, it's not uncommon around the world. Nor is it the LeBihan's first experience opening a French school. The couple, who live in Maine, opened L'Ecole Française du Maine outside of South Freeport in 2002. The success of that school – which provides pre-school through grade 12 for about 80 children – prompted them to consider creating a sister school in Florida. St.



Dayna, Anais, and Peter Moore



Willy and Elizabeth LeBihan



Chris Steinocher (CEO/president, St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce); Jean-Charles Faust (honorary consul of France, Tampa Bay Region); Elizabeth LeBihan (co-founder of the French American School of Tampa Bay); Alex Rios (Rios Architecture); Scott Ferris (Axis Construction); and Mike Hargett (Barnett, Bolt, Kirkwood, Long & Koche P.A.)

Pete seemed like a perfect location for several reasons, including that they were familiar with the area having vacationed here for many years.

In 2017, they purchased a building at 2100 62nd Avenue North, not far from Sawgrass Lake Park. This past May at a groundbreaking for the new school, guests of honor included Jean-Charles Faust, the honorary consul of France, as well as Chris Steinocher, CEO and president of the St. Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce.

Over the summer, the LeBihan's were busy renovating the interior of the building and creating a new outdoor recreational area. "We want the school to be as authentic as possible to reflect a full immersion French experience," says Willy. That means even the pencils and paper are being ordered from France. They've also been busy spreading the word about the school's unique concept to education. In addition to the traditional academic curriculum, there's a strong emphasis on art and music.

The school is described as a full 'immersion' multicultural experience which allows children to grow up completely bilingual and able to speak, think, and write in both languages. The LeBihan's say this type of education offers long-term benefits, from a wider range of career options, to adults who are more understanding, emphatic 'citizen's of the world.'

Peter agrees. "A bilingual educational can help make the world seem both accessible and wondrously vast," says Peter. When I was a student and traveled overseas, I was in awe of students I met who could start a sentence in French, continue in mid-sentence in Dutch, and finish in German."

Dayna started taking Spanish classes in junior high and continued lessons as an adult. Although she feels her knowledge of Spanish is still mediocre, she does remember the first time she actually thought in a different language. "The experience was magical," says Dayna. "There are some thoughts and feelings that can never be accurately conveyed through translation. To have access to that broadens oneself. It allows for the dissolution of dichotomies, expanded understanding and participation in global citizenship."

The LeBihan's school in Maine, and now the one in St. Pete, will be part of a network of French schools around the US,

and now the one in St. Pete, will be part of a network of French schools around the US, Canada, and worldwide that are affiliated with the Association of French Schools in North America, Mission Laïque Française, and the French Ministry of Education. The St. Pete school will also be pursuing accreditation through the Florida Department of Education and the Florida Council of Independent Schools. ●