



RILKE SCHULE

ALASKA'S NEW GERMAN IMMERSION SCHOOL

BY SUSAN REESE

Although Anchorage had successful language immersion programs in Spanish, Japanese, and Russian, and a K-8 lottery school, Northern Lights ABC, that offers German in seventh and eighth grades, until recently there was no German offered at the elementary school level. In March 2006, a group of parents and German teachers decided to rectify that situation when they joined forces and started the process of chartering a tuition-free German immersion school.

Jo Sanders, an Anchorage German teacher with 45 years of teaching experience and a past president of the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG), was the project leader, but she was assisted by a committed and dedicated team of volunteers. All of their hard work and dedication paid off when on December 4, 2006, the Anchorage School District approved the application for the Rilke Schule German School of Arts and Sciences. The school is named after Rainer Maria Rilke, who is considered one of the greatest poets and writers of 20th century German literature. One of his famous poems is "Der Panther," so naturally the school's mascot is a panther.

"In getting our German charter school off the ground, we worked with other programs around the country, such as the German-American School in Portland, the Twin Cities Immersion School in Minneapolis, the German School of Milwaukee, and the Albert Einstein School in San Diego," Sanders explains. "Our local school district, which has immersion programs in Spanish, Japanese, and Russian, helped us considerably. We were fortunate to be chosen by the German government for financial support through the Central Office for Foreign Schools in Cologne, Germany, and have also been given four German teaching interns by the Amity organization."

OPEN FOR BUSINESS— THE BUSINESS OF LEARNING

Rilke Schule opened in August 2007 with 186 K-8 students—the majority in K-2. "Our building wasn't finished until February, so we held classes in a giant church," says Sanders. "You can imagine teaching in a school where you can't put anything up on the walls, and you have to completely clear out the classroom twice a week! It was really tough, but with the parents, kids, and teachers all pulling together, we made it."

Rilke Schule's diverse population of students all study German, but in addition to the challenging, high-quality bilingual education, the school also offers a unique after-school program with activities ranging from sports, robotics, and Legos, to arts, drama, music, and as demand arises, other languages such as Chinese, French, Korean, and Spanish.

In the school's first year, Sanders taught a German kindergarten class to 20 students in the morning and 20 more in the afternoon. "We had one native speaker in the 40, all the rest were beginners, and most were not of German heritage," she notes. "Of course we did lots of singing, dancing, and active games to teach the language, as well as normal instruction in reading, science, and math in German."

Among the ideas Sanders utilized in her classes was one she got during an AATG summer seminar that included a visit to the Concordia Waldsee Language Village—the Sprachmeister necklace award. "In the fourth quarter, more and more of the children were trying to use German, so I announced to the whole school that anyone who could stay completely in German for their half of the day (for the older kids, during their one-and-a-half hour class) would get one star on the wall chart and get to wear the Sprachmeister necklace the next day," she explains. "We made 20 wooden German flag necklaces with 'Sprachmeister' calligraphied on them. The first day the first child won a Sprachmeister and sported it in class. The next day was a sensation—suddenly everyone wanted to speak only German! By the end of the year, all but one of the kindergartners had made it through at least one day in German. The school champions were the kindergartners, with three kids who had 28 stars and more than 20 who had passed 10 days. After 10 days, they got to keep the necklace; most wore it every day. The last three weeks one rarely heard a word of English in any of the kindergarten and first grade classes. Needless to say, the parents were delighted!"

RECOGNITION OF SUCCESS

In the spring of 2008, the school's success was further validated with a donation from the German government. The Bundesverwaltungsamt/Zentralstelle für Auslandschulen announced that it would support Rilke Schule with €15,000 (\$23,454) annually and also agreed to pay for a German teacher. Through careful planning and discussions, the school's Academic Policy Committee decided what to purchase in order to provide



Above: The front of the Rilke Schule building. Below: Assistant Teachers from Germany at the Rilke Schule in fall 2008: Elisabeth Schmitt, Christiane Schmitt, Stefanie Krieg, and Benedikt Nakes.

a more authentic German language and culture learning environment. Rilke Schule also received word that it has been placed on the list of German Immersion Programs Abroad.

The Rilke Schule German School of Arts and Sciences boasts that its educational experience is "like sending your child to Germany every day." Klaus Mayer, chair of the school's Academic Policy Committee, notes that, like any of the district's popular immersion programs, Rilke Schule provides a special experience. "You gain the appreciation of another culture," Mayer says. "It's more than just the language."

"According to the parents whose children attend our school, the things that attracted them most to the Rilke Schule were our high standards, our emphasis on arts and sciences, our personal attention to each child, and the parents' involvement in the school," notes Sanders. "On any given day, there may be a dozen or more volunteers working in classrooms, the library, or individually with

children. The parents are delighted at how soon the children began using German and were especially thrilled when their children conversed among themselves, leaving the uncomprehending parents to guess at the content of the verbal exchanges. We have a partnership with two schools in Germany, and students in grades 6–8 can spend a month experiencing German language and culture firsthand, and then host the students in Alaska on the counter-exchange. Our active after-school program varies from semester to semester, but we offer such things as robotics, yoga, running club, homework club, drama club, band/orchestra, art club, and German tutoring. A very active parents' organization and the local German Club funded a wonderful playground for the students."

At the end of the year, the drama club, which is one of Sanders' projects, put on the *Nibelungenlied*, a full-length play in five acts. "There were about 30 children in the cast. In addition, every class put on a short play in German for the parents for the final programs," says Sanders. "What a successful year!"

She was not planning on doing summer camp right away, but a number of older kids wanted to join the school without previous German experience, so it was decided that German Camp would be offered for eight weeks to catch them up. "We are offering four two-week themed sessions: 'Fractured Fairy Tales,' 'Back to Nature,' 'Medieval Madness,' 'German Legends,' and 'Saga through Drama,'" she explains.

The success continues for the school, and Sanders says that another 100+ students were enrolled for the fall, so there are now more than 250, even with the departing eighth graders. It is a success that was built through the teamwork of parents, teachers, administrators, and school district officials—all of whom had the wisdom to recognize the importance of language learning for their children.

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THE RILKE SCHULE GOALS

1. Students will learn to speak German fluently and will have a deep understanding of heritage, cultural norms, and customs of German-speaking countries and use German to acquire knowledge not available to them in English.
2. Community Service—each child will actively be involved in the community to learn that helping others is part of being a responsible world citizen.
3. The school will have a financial plan to assure sustainability.
4. Students will have pen pals and e-mail pals in German-speaking countries. Regular exchange trips to partner school(s) will be made and the school will host students from the partner school(s).
5. Every family will be expected to fulfill a volunteer commitment to help the school with various needs. Families will also be involved in joint projects, field trips, festivals, performances, and similar activities.
6. Traditional holidays and festivals of the German-speaking countries will be celebrated.
7. The curriculum will meet the Content Standards for Alaskan Schools in all areas.
8. Performance standards in each subject area will be evaluated regularly in order to ensure continuity and effectiveness.
9. Students performing below 'proficient standards' will be offered tutoring for German and/or English subjects.
10. The school, its faculty, and staff will collaborate with other learning entities to enrich the school life. We will work with Anchorage School District German faculty to develop an excellent German high school program to provide our students with an opportunity to continue their advanced German studies beyond eighth grade. We will work with members of the German government, the Goethe Institute, and the American Association of Teachers of German to provide preservice and in-service staff development.
11. Professional development and additional staff training will be emphasized during in-services, as well as on other special occasions.
12. Parents will be continually informed about student progress and school events through: newsletters, website, notes sent home, phone calls or e-mails from teachers, regular and special parent conferences, and the use of student portfolios.
13. Staff will be given the opportunity to improve their German through seminars in German-speaking countries.
14. Upon demand, the school will provide before and after school enrichment programs such as Spanish, Korean, other languages, drama, robotics, chess, choir, sports, and Legos.
15. The school will maintain an active recycling program and will participate in local, national, and international ecological and conservation projects.
16. Classes in German will be offered for parents and other adults who wish to learn German.