Instructor Cecile Touline asks questions in French during an after-school advanced French class at Cherry Chase Elementary School in Sunnyvale. The program was started by parent-volunteer Aude Phay, a French native via Vietnam and France who wanted her two daughters, Jade and Lila, to be able to practice the language at school.

Speak Easy
Instructor Taruna Bala leads her class through a lesson during an after-school Hindi language class at Farra Elementary School. Bala has been teaching these classes, which rotate between Farra, Lincoln and Worth Elementary schools, for the past five years.

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The Bay Area, the first French after-school class in the district was created. In the spring of 2003, the program has grown to more than 100 students. That same year, Cumberland Elementary School developed Mandarin and Spanish after-school classes, teaching 150 students to date.

Exposure to language and culture should make a lot of sense for parents raising kids these days who are going to be working, hopefully, in people in other cultures and other countries,” Cumberland parent and Mandarin class organizer Nina Ming-Dobkin said. “This experience is something to start with so they have a positive experience when they need to pick up something more seriously later. They don’t feel like they couldn’t do it not high stress. It becomes positive.”

Out of the eight elementary schools in the Sunnyvale School District, Cherry Chase and Cumberland are the only schools with after-school foreign language programs fully funded by district. Students meet on a weekly basis, playing games in each language and learning the basics of numbers, months, and letters to colors and basic phrases.

“I think it’s great that the parents have stepped up to make sure these programs are offered to kids,” said Jen Fong, principal of Cumberland Elementary. “It’s just really special. This community has put the emphasis on the education of the child on the front burner, so we make sure that in education, we have seen foreign language classes take place during an instructional day at the elementary levels. Success, I’m very happy to see my own daughters love going to French class. It’s definitely worth having.”

Sunnyvale’s programs are similar to an established Bay Area-wide Hindi program put on by the nonprofit U.S. Hindi Association, which has been operating since 2006. The program was started up by South Bay resident Ruchita Parali, who wanted to extend Hindi language studies she was doing with children at Sunday schools.

“I was already volunteering in a program and I wanted to develop a program that could teach the skills,” she said. “Not everyone can come to Sunday school to learn Hindi; I thought it would work as an after-school program.”
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are broken up into segments of various skill levels.

It's important the students are consistent with what they learn in regular school, Parat said. Children are taught in the same manner as they would expect to find in a typical school day.

"What makes it special is that we're teaching Hindi the very same way they are learning English," she said.

Since there is typically not a major demand for Hindi material in much of the United States, the U.S. Hindi Association publishes its own material and curriculum. Children do activities such as puzzles and word searches that are very similar to their English counterparts.

Volunteer teachers are mostly local to their communities or live near the school. The typical attendee was either born in India or is the child of parents who are fairly recent immigrants to the Bay Area.

"That would apply to 99 percent of those kids," Parat said.

Similar programs are held in the area as well. A French and Italian program is held after school at Montaire Elementary School, and the Waha Montessori Chinese-American preschool is helping youngsters master Mandarin after school at Dilworth and De Vargas elementary schools.

Part of the motivation for teaching children their parents' native language goes far beyond equipping them with the tools to someday communicate with people living an ocean away.

"Language is a connection to their roots and to their connection of what India is," Parat said. "These kids will always be Americans as well as Indian. There is no separating that, and it is important to have a connection with their culture."

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