

## Case Study: World Languages Program of Distinction Academia María Reina, Puerto Rico

### the program

Lessons in inclusivity are woven into the fabric of Academia María Reina, and that is especially true of the school's World Languages Program.

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, NY, a Catholic religious community, founded Academia María Reina in 1966. This congregation is devoted to the education and empowerment of young women to become agents of change.

The all-girls Catholic secondary school, located in San Juan, P.R., serves nearly 570 students annually. Approximately 40 percent of the student population is enrolled in the World Languages Program.

Students have the opportunity to take four years of French from ninth to 12th grade or six years of French from seventh to 12th grade. Italian is offered as a four-year program from ninth to 12th grade. Language courses are taught the same number of hours per semester as core courses. The full-language immersion approach is one of the program's key components.

All students enrolled in the Italian program and French six-year program are prepared to take the AP Italian Language and Culture Exam and AP French Language and Culture Exam, respectively, in 12th grade.

The school encourages the students in the French program to take the Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française, or DELF, which is administered by the French Ministry of Education and certifies language proficiency.

To complement their academic programs, students can join the Cercle de Français or Circolo di Italiano, clubs devoted to Francophone and Italian cultures. Students in these clubs organize fun activities in the target language such as the discussion of short films, games and arts and crafts, to enhance their understanding of the culture.

In 2018, María Reina became the first school in Puerto Rico to earn the Program of Distinction in World Languages.

### the process

The Program of World Languages curriculum is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century.

Two primary goals of the program are to empower young women and to create awareness regarding other people and their communities. That is why, in addition to offering rigorous coursework, the faculty felt it was important to give students a strong understanding of Francophone and Italian cultures.

María Reina recently started an exchange program with a Catholic school in Le Puy, France, where, in 1650, the Order of the Sisters of St. Joseph was founded. Every other year, a group of María Reina students travels to Le Puy where they spend two weeks living with French families and experiencing daily life. A few months later, students from Le Puy travel to Puerto Rico, where they stay with a María Reina family and are welcomed into the school community. The staff at María Reina is currently in search of a school in Italy with which to set up a similar arrangement.

In addition, as members of the American Association of French Teachers and the American Association of Italian Teachers, faculty facilitates participation in the French National Contest and the Italian National Contest, which are exams that assess students' language proficiency.



In the spring of 2018, 114 students participated in the French National Contest. Nearly 80 percent of students scored in the 75th percentile or above, including 14 students who earned gold medals, placing them in the 95th percentile. In the Italian National Contest, 85 percent of students scored in the 85th percentile or better.

### lessons learned

- Full-language immersion is key to ensuring that students truly absorb their language education. It also tends to be a challenge that students enjoy.
- Once a student starts a language program, she usually becomes deeply committed to excelling in the program and learning the chosen language and country's culture. This is due in part to the fact that a large portion of the student body is involved in the language program and because there are opportunities, such as clubs, to learn outside of the traditional classroom environment.
- Emphasizing cultural awareness has helped to broaden students' horizons and inspire empathy for others. Students are exposed to French and Italian film and art and take field trips to museums when there are relevant exhibitions. The language program maintains effective communication with the local chapter of the Alliance Française, where students have the opportunity to participate in cultural activities outside of the academic environment.
- Analyzing results of the French and Italian Advanced Placement Exams and the French and Italian National Contests has helped María Reina's teachers assess how well their students are doing in comparison with students throughout the country.
- Providing teachers access to ongoing training and certifications in teaching world languages ensures that they are implementing the best practices in the field and has a long-term impact on students' language proficiency and cultural competency.

### program of distinction benefits

- The Program of Distinction is helping María Reina to recruit more students and gain national exposure through social media.
- Earning a Program of Distinction in World Languages was a significant accomplishment for faculty and has fostered a sense of pride within the school community.
- There has been an increased level of awareness and respect for the program from students, peers in the field, and the broader community. In particular, the exchange program with a Catholic school in Le Puy, France, has elevated the profile of María Reina locally and abroad.
- Through the self-evaluation process, the faculty realized just how valuable the program is and how much it has impacted students both past and present.



### for more information

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