

German companies outnumber schools offering the language



Ashbrook students Erica Elliott, center, and Austin Pappas, left, give one of the gift bags that members of the German Clubs from Ashbrook and Forestview High Schools made to Ruel Bumgardner, a resident of Abingdon Place during their visit Tuesday afternoon.

John Clark/The Gazette

By **Amanda Memrick**

Published: Monday, December 17, 2012 at 17:47 PM.

Nine German-based companies with more than 2,000 employees call Gaston County home.

But only two Gaston County public high schools offer German as a foreign language.

Ashbrook High teacher Hannah Anderson and Forestview High teacher Sabine Schmid-Rankin make up the entire Gaston County German language teaching staff.

The two teachers say they want to see their German language programs flourish and would love to see the language added to the offerings at other Gaston County schools.

German business

The German companies in Gaston County range from Daimler Trucks North America to Stabilus Inc. Nearly 200 German-owned companies reside in the 16-county region that includes Gaston County, employing more than 13,100 people, according to the Charlotte Regional Partnership.

“I always say if you want to make money, you’ve got to speak German,” Anderson said.

Students who speak German can get a leg up when applying for jobs at German-based companies, the teachers said.

This is the first year that Ashbrook offered both German V and a German Club for students. The German Club has about 25 active members, Anderson said.

Junior Erica Elliott is German Club president and doing her best to get students to join and encourage others to give German a second chance as their foreign language of choice.

Gaston County Schools offers Spanish at all nine high schools. Students can take French I through III at Ashbrook, Cherryville, East Gaston Hunter Huss, North Gaston and South Point high schools. East Gaston, Forestview, Hunter Huss and South Point offer Mandarin Chinese. Hunter Huss offers Latin.

Elliott chose to study German after taking a trip to Gotha, Germany, as part of Gastonia's Sister Cities program, which allows Gastonia students and residents to stay in Gotha for two weeks over the summer and Gotha students and residents to visit Gastonia for two weeks in the fall.

The two clubs partnered for a service project of sharing German food and gifts with the residents of Abington Place assisted living facility. Anderson said she wants Ashbrook's club to reach out more by making German food to serve the homeless and doing more service projects.

"We've had German in the classroom, but we haven't had German in the community," Anderson said.

Ancestry and awareness

Gaston County's German roots run deep. German settlers were among the first Europeans to move into the area by the mid-1700s.

About 13 percent of Gaston County residents — 26,278 people — have German ancestry, according to the Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates.

Elliott, Anderson and Schmid-Rankin want to raise awareness about German so it doesn't fade from the curriculum.

"I feel like if it comes down to it, budget-wise, that these (foreign language classes) would be the first to go," Elliott said.

Schmid-Rankin has been teaching German at Forestview for eight years. She has about 60 students taking German and 18 in the German club.

"My program has been threatened several times to be cut and I just kept fighting," she said.

Anderson, too, feels the pressure to have full classrooms. She's been teaching German for two years at Ashbrook. She has 111 students enrolled in German classes and about 25 active German club members.

"The program has doubled since I've been here," Anderson said. "And what makes the students nervous is if I go away, what happens to them?"

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