When, in September of 1970, there arrived in Lafayette 30 teachers from France, hopes were high that at last Louisiana was really on the way to becoming a bilingual state, that after so many years of false starts and superficial attempts, something concrete was being done to revive the French language that was slowly being permitted to die by the descendants of the proud and hardy Acadians.

These 30 teachers were the vanguard of a teacher exchange with their mother country. They were to fan out through the state's elementary schools, imparting practical and academic knowledge of French to their young charges. The pupils would then be well prepared to pursue their studies at higher level. By graduation day they would be masters of two languages. Learning at least two languages has long been common practice in European schools and Louisiana seemed to be on the way to being the first to officially inaugurate such an educational trend in the United States.

But during the brief 18 months that the French teachers have been here, the high hopes of those who looked forward to a renaissance of the French language in Louisiana have been disappointingly watered down. Forty-seven teachers have since been teaching in elementary schools but, surprisingly, most of these are in the northern parishes. How can this be, when one considers that Acadiana is the very fountainhead of our wonderfully unique French culture, heritage and tradition? Yet, it is in many of the southern parishes that the French exchange teacher program has been met with very weak response. It is the school boards of the parishes that must implement the program, but so far there has been a most unenthusiastic reception from the southern sector. It can not be the cost. Although the individual boards must pay for the instruction, the French teachers serve at a very nominal fee, much less than domestic ones. The reason is that the teachers accept the assignment in lieu of military service.

Louisiana school board members at their state convention here last week were urged to “either get the French program going, or abandon it completely.” The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, which arranged the swap in cooperation with the French government and the State Department of Education, has striven mightily to rejuvenate the French language in Louisiana. However, without a concentrated effort to implement instruction in our schools, the language will be lost within 10 years, CODOFIL Chairman James Domengeaux told the state school board members.

Such an occurrence would be most unfortunate. The idea of a rebirth of the French language is a noble venture, one that would perpetuate a heritage unparalleled in the Western world. On a more practical level, one must consider the economic benefits that would derive by way of hemispheric and world trade as well as the windfall of tourist dollars.

It is ironic that Lafayette Parish, in the very heart of Acadiana, has gone no farther with the program than a school board committee “recommending” that French teachers be hired. That was almost one year ago. Other parishes have done just as little. We would be the first to concede that school boards have great problems and responsibilities but even these should not deter them from instituting a program that will prove beneficial — now — and for generations to come.

School boards must make a decision by July 1. That's the deadline set by the Legislative Act 408 of 1968 to either begin the French programs or notify the State Department of Education of their intentions.