If there's one thing Acadiana's cultural economy does well it's rally around a cause and git 'er done.

When the community realized that the Council on the Development of French In Louisiana had taken a $100,000 budget cut — roughly 40 percent of its operating budget — thanks to a line-item veto by Gov. Bobby Jindal, supporters of CODOFIL's mission to preserve and promote our state's Francophone heritage jumped into action. A group calling itself FrancoJeunes began an aggressive fundraising campaign, trumpeted by supporters on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

In the month and a half since the group's formation, FrancoJeunes has raised nearly $26,000. But that's not enough.

On Sunday, Aug. 26, at Cochon Restaurant in Lafayette, luminaries of the local music scene will band together to help CODOFIL during Lâche Pas, a benefit concert from 5-10 p.m.

LâCHE PAS!
Event raises funds for CODOFIL

PARLEZ VOUS?
French immersion isn't just a cool idea; it helps students excel and preserves the local culture.

By Zachary Richard

"I am going to say this in English so that everybody will understand."

It was not unusual to hear this phrase in public in South Louisiana not so long ago. This would occur in any gathering at which French-speaking Cajuns were present. The hegemony of the English language is a fait accompli in Cajun Country and has been so since the 1950s. The erosion of the language has been constant in our society beginning with the Louisiana Purchase and the arrival of C.C. Claiborne in New Orleans.

In 1960, approximately 85 percent of the population of Southwest Louisiana spoke a foreign language. Most if not all of them, like my grandparents, were monolingual French speakers. Today one would be hard-pressed to find anyone with whom to speak French. The last bastions of the language, the barbershop and the feed store, are on the verge of falling. The question has become: why should we devote resources to the preservation of a language that has become outmoded, if not irrelevant?

The most convincing response to this question is the absolute efficacy of bilingual education and the undeniable benefits afforded to our young immersion students.

Given the advantages of foreign language immersion, it is surprising to me that many parents of our school children are not clamoring for bilingual education everywhere in the state.

There exists a window of opportunity between the ages of 4 and 7 when the young brain has yet to become hard-wired to a specific language. Into this window can be thrust a different language that the child can assimilate with relative ease. The young brain, thus challenged, develops enhanced deductive skills — the major advantage of bilingual education.

PARLEZ CONTINUED ON PG.16

ThelND.com THE INDEPENDENT I AUGUST 8, 2012 I 15
programs develop capacities whose benefits are appreciable and long lasting. Although precise statistics are not available, it is generally accepted by educational professionals that French immersion students outperform their non-immersion peers on standard (English language) battery exams. This is not because French immersion students are necessarily smarter. While socio-economic and family contexts affect the performance of immersion students, it is undeniable that the benefits of the program are considerable.

Why then are local school boards reluctant to implement immersion programs? Two reasons: the perceived difficulty of managing the program, and the lack of understanding of its nature. Years ago in Opelousas, at a meeting to promote French immersion that ultimately led to the implementation of the program at FRENCH IMMERSION IN LOUISIANA IS BASED ON THE CANADIAN MODEL, WITH 60 PERCENT OF THE SCHOOL DAY TAUGHT IN FRENCH AND THE REMAINING 40 PERCENT IN ENGLISH.

Park Vista Elementary, I was asked by a parent whether her child would be able to attend college if she was enrolled in French immersion. The answer is that her child would have a better chance. The question ultimately is whether we collectively appreciate the importance of our culture and whether we are prepared to make the effort to develop and promote those aspects of our experience that enhance and enrich our lives. The question goes beyond language and speaks to the fundamental manner in which we see ourselves.

A close friend of mine once challenged my devotion to the French language by telling me that we could turn back the way things were. My response is that the vision I have of French in Louisiana is not seen through the rear view mirror of my pick up truck. I like my computer and my air-conditioner, and have no desire to go back in time. My vision of bilingual education is forward-looking and based on the assumption that it is worth the effort to create a more enlightened and better educated society. And that we should not squander opportunities. The question is: do we care? Discarding the French language like a pair of worn out cowboy boots will make us collectively poorer and will rob our children of a valuable cultural and, yes, economic asset.

The French language of Louisiana should not be viewed as a vestige of the past like some knickknack on Antiques RoadShow. It is rather an opportunity to be taken advantage of. The question ultimately is one of identity, not simply our identity as Cajuns, but a broader sense of identity as a community: conscientious, open minded and sensitive to not only our heritage but also to the possibilities that it represents.

A native of Scott, Zachary Richard is an award-winning singer-songwriter.