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A Dead Language That's Very Much Alive

By WINNIE HU

NEW ROCHELLE, N.Y. — The Latin class at Isaac E. Young Middle School here was reading a story the other day with a familiar ring: Boy annoys girl, girl scolds boy. Only in this version, the characters were named Sextus and Cornelia, and they argued in Latin.

“I can relate, but what the heck are they saying?” said Xavier Peña, a sixth grader who started studying Latin in September.

Enrollment in Latin classes here in this Westchester County suburb has increased by nearly one-third since 2006, to 187 of the district's 10,500 students, and the two middle schools in town are starting an ancient-cultures club in which students will explore the lives of Romans, Greeks and others.

The resurgence of a language once rejected as outdated and irrelevant is reflected across the country as Latin is embraced by a new generation of students like Xavier who seek to increase SAT scores or stand out from their friends, or simply harbor a fascination for the ancient language after reading Harry Potter's Latin-based chanting spells.

The number of students in the United States taking the National Latin Exam has risen steadily to more than 134,000 students in each of the past two years, from 124,000 in 2003 and 101,000 in 1998, with large increases in remote parts of the country like New Mexico, Alaska and Vermont. The number of students taking the Advanced Placement test in Latin, meanwhile, has nearly doubled over the past 10 years, to 8,654 in 2007. While Spanish and French still dominate student schedules — and Chinese and Arabic are trendier choices — Latin has quietly flourished in many high-performing suburbs, like New Rochelle, where Latin's virtues are sung by superintendents and principals who took it in their day. In neighboring Pelham, the 2,750-student district just hired a second full-time Latin teacher after a four-year search, learning that scarce Latin teachers have become more sought-after than ever.

On Long Island, the Jericho district is offering an Advanced Placement course in Latin for the first time this year after its Latin enrollment rose to 120 students, a 35 percent increase since 2002. In nearby Great Neck, 36 fifth graders signed up last year for before- and after-school Latin classes that were started by a 2008 graduate who has moved on to study classics at Stanford (that student's brother and a friend will continue to lead the Latin classes this year).

Latin is also thriving in New York City, where it is currently taught in about three dozen schools, including Brooklyn Latin, a high school in East Williamsburg that started in 2006. Four years of Latin, and two of Spanish, are required at the new high school, where Latin phrases adorn the walls and words like *discipuli* (students), *magistri* (teachers) and *latrina* (bathroom) are sprinkled into everyday conversation.

“It's the language of scholars and educated people,” said Jason Griffiths, headmaster of Brooklyn

Latin. "It's the language of people who are successful. I think it's a draw, and that's certainly what we sell."

Adam D. Blistein, executive director of the American Philological Association at the University of Pennsylvania, which represents more than 3,000 members, including classics professors and Latin teachers, said that more high schools were recognizing the benefits of Latin. It builds vocabulary and grammar for higher SAT scores, appeals to college admissions officers as a sign of critical-thinking skills and fosters true intellectual passion, he said.

"Goethe is better in German, Flaubert is better in French and Virgil is better in Latin," Dr. Blistein said. "If you stick with it, the lollipop comes at the end when you get to read the original. In many cases, it's what whets their appetite."

Latin was once required at many public and parochial schools, but fell into disfavor during the 1960s when students rebelled against traditional classroom teachings and even the Roman Catholic Church moved away from Latin as the official language of Mass. Interest in Latin was revived somewhat in the 1970s and began picking up in the 1980s with the back-to-basics movement in many schools, according to Latin scholars, but really took off in the last few years as a language long seen as a stodgy ivory tower secret infiltrated popular culture.

Harry Potter books use Latin words for names and spells, and at least two have been translated into Latin ("Harrius Potter et Philosophi Lapis"), as have several by Dr. Seuss ("Cattus Petasatus"). Movies like "Gladiator" and "Troy" have also lent glamour to the ancient world.

"Sometimes you need to know Latin to understand that part," said Adrian McCullough, 10, a sixth grader in New Rochelle who plans to reread the Harry Potter books now that he is learning Latin.

Marty Abbott, education director of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, said it was possible that Latin would edge out German as the third most popular language taught in schools, behind Spanish and French, when the preliminary results of an enrollment survey are released next year. In the last survey, covering enrollment in 2000, Latin placed fourth. "In people's minds, it's coming back," she said. "But it's always been there. It's just that we continue to see interest in it."

Ms. Abbott, a former Latin teacher, said that today's Latin classes appeal to more students because they have evolved from "dry grammar and tortuous translations" to livelier lessons that focus on culture, history and the daily life of the Romans. In addition, she said, Latin teachers and students have promoted the language outside the classroom through clubs, poetry competitions and mock chariot races.

In Scarsdale, N.Y., where Latin enrollment rose by 14 percent to 80 this year, the high school sponsors a Roman banquet on the Ides of March during which students come wearing tunics and wreaths in their hair. Seniors serve bread, olives, roasted chicken and grapes to younger students, and all of them break bread with their hands. Dr. Marion Polsky, the Latin teacher, said that

former students still send her postcards written in Latin and that at least three have gone on to become Latin teachers.

Here in New Rochelle, the district introduced a Latin class for sixth graders last year and is now adding a second Latin class for seventh graders. Richard Organisciak, the superintendent, said the district had spent \$273,000 since 2006 to promote foreign languages including Latin. Last month, the district also started a dual-language English-Italian kindergarten and a Greek class at the high school; it is considering offering Chinese next fall.

The high school principal, Don Conetta, said he had encouraged more students to study Latin, though he acknowledged that he was hardly “a stellar student” himself in Latin and came to appreciate its value only later in life.

“If my Latin teachers could hear me now,” he said. “I took three years in high school, and four semesters in college, and I can’t remember the first line of Cicero’s orations.”

Students like Ciera Gardner, a sophomore, started Latin three years ago with two friends who have since dropped out because of the workload. But Ciera, an aspiring actress, said that she had persisted because Latin would look good on her college applications and that in the meantime, it had already helped her decipher unfamiliar words while reading scripts. “It’s different,” she said. “Everyone says ‘I take Spanish’ or ‘I take Italian,’ but it’s cool to say ‘I take Latin.’ ”

Max Gordon, another sophomore, said that he had learned more about grammar in Latin class than in English class. And he occasionally debates the finer points of grammar with his mother, Kit Fitzgerald, a video artist who studied Latin, while washing dishes after dinner.

“In some ways, it’s really frustrating,” he said. “I’ll hear someone say something that isn’t grammatically correct and I’ll cringe.”