

Behind the Success of an Italian Language Program



Left to Right: Professor Maria Gioconda Motta, Chairperson of C.A.S.IT; Professor Rosemarie Grasso from the Eliot School; Traci Griffith Walker, Principal at the Eliot School.

A few weeks ago, The Hynes Convention Center hosted thousands of people for the three day convention of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL). The beautiful Italian language was once again represented by the non-profit organization C.A.S.IT and one of its gems: the Eliot Elementary School in Boston's North End.

At the Convention, members of C.A.S.IT proudly shared highlights of the last fifteen years. Maria G. Motta (Chairman), Adelaide Guarracino (President), and Katherine Lopez Natale (Vice President) praised how the combined support; commitment, and dedication of the Italian government and CASIT has kept alive the Italian language in public schools across New England. And in the hearth of the North End, the Eliot school is proof this success. The story was told at the ACTFL.

The North End is one of Boston's colorful neighborhoods of Boston. On the streets, you can still hear people having in depth conversations about local and foreign politics or the latest soccer match but the area has been changing in recent years. Many families of Ital-

ian decent have moved out of the red brick multi-family buildings to the suburbs and their language followed. But one day in 2007, a new perspective in the form of an enthusiastic young principal joined the Eliot School and flooded that building with her love for Italian language and culture. That same year C.A.S.IT Chairman Motta and the new principal Tracy Griffith teamed up and decided that Italian needed to be reborn in such a neighborhood full of Italian flavor. "It was time that this school helped Italian to flourish again" Mrs. Motta states every time she reflects on the turnaround. Every student had the opportunity to take Italian and by September 2008, the new journey had begun.

Children as young as four were also immersed into the foreign language twice a week. The sounds of Italian rang from each classroom. Those same children are now in first grade and not only can understand all the instructions given in Italian, but they are also learning how to read and write at the same speed as a first grader of Italy. In fact, the instructor, Rosemarie Grasso employs the methodology based

on Italian curriculum. She also works closely with her colleagues to integrate Italian into the other content areas. For example, when first grade is learning the continents and nationalities, the next week "Maestra" Grasso talks about "continenti" e "nazionalita," when middle school is studying the Romans, "Professoressa" Grasso brings in books about "i romani" and introduces the past tense. Teaching in multi-level classes is a challenge, but Miss Grasso knows she can count on C.A.S.IT and the Eliot school team to find appropriate material and professional development.

Inside the walls of an old stately brick building, students from age 4 to 14 sing, play, and talk in the language of culture: Italian. Surely even the principal Griffith will greet you correctly by saying "Buongiorno" or "Buonasera," depending on what time you decide to walk in. The blending of passion for education and

Italian is the recipe for C.A.S.IT's success in all of its programs across New England. "Yes, it is true. Italian is alive and well in the North End" comments Mrs. Motta "and we will have it no other way."