

from the November 08, 2005 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1108/p02s01-ussc.html>

## Next hot language to study: Chinese

**Chicago schools are leading the way as they try to prepare students for an increasingly globalized world.**

By [Amanda Paulson](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

**CHICAGO** - The fourth-graders at Chicago's McCormick Elementary School don't know Mandarin is supposed to be hard to learn.

For most, who speak Spanish at home, it's becoming their third language. They've been hearing and using Chinese words since kindergarten, and it's now second nature to give a hearty *ni hao* when strangers enter the classroom.

"It's really fun!" says Miranda Lucas, taking a break from a lesson that includes a Chinese interview with Jackie Chan. "I'm teaching my mom to speak Chinese."

The classroom scene at McCormick is unusual, but it may soon be a common fixture in American schools, where Chinese is rapidly becoming the hot new language. Government officials have long wanted more focus on security-useful languages like Chinese, and pressure from them - as well as from business leaders, politicians, and parents - has prompted a quick growth in the number of programs.

Chicago itself is home to the largest effort to include Chinese in US public schools. The program here has grown to include 3,000 students in 20 schools, with more schools on a waiting list. Programs have also spread to places like Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and North Carolina.

Proponents see knowledge of the Chinese language and culture as a leg up in a global economy where China is growing in importance. "This is beginning to bubble up as, 'This is an interesting way to begin to engage with the world's next superpower,'" says Michael Levine, director of education at the Asia Society, which has started five new public high schools that offer Chinese. "Globalization has already changed the arrangements in terms of how children today are going to need to think about their careers.... The question is when, not whether, the schools are going to adjust."

The number of students learning Chinese is tiny compared with how many study Spanish or French. But one report shows that precollegiate enrollment nearly quadrupled between 1992 and 2002, from 6,000 to 24,000.

When the College Board polled schools last year about offering an Advanced Placement program for Chinese, it expected perhaps a few hundred to say they were interested. Instead, 2,400 high schools said they wanted to offer the class, which will be ready by next year.

"It was off the charts in terms of our expectation," says Tom Matts, director of the World Languages Initiative for the College Board's AP program.

Despite the demand, though, developing programs isn't easy. And the No. 1 obstacle, everyone agrees, is having enough teachers.

Finding teachers "is *the* challenge," says Scott McGinnis, an academic adviser for the Defense Language Institute's Washington office and a Chinese teacher for 15 years at the collegiate level. "Materials are easy in comparison. Or getting schools funded."

Just finding Chinese speakers isn't enough, Dr. McGinnis emphasizes, since often there is a large culture gap, or little knowledge of how to teach a language. Certification requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act makes it even tougher. He and Mr. Levine say what is needed is a mix of short-term solutions - like alternative certification and teacher exchanges with China - as well as long-term ones, such as developing certification programs at universities. Only two currently have such fully developed programs in place.

The language itself offers some challenges, too: Chinese is considered one of the most time-intensive languages to learn. For a typical person, it takes 63 weeks of 30-hours-a-week instruction to reach a working proficiency, says McGinnis - nearly three times the amount needed for a similar proficiency in Spanish or German.

Those arguing for more Chinese classes say learning the language is just part of a larger issue: the need for an expanded awareness of the world. "Language is a look in," says Levine. "One doesn't need to be proficient in Chinese languages in order to do business in China. But the exposure and the motivation to show that one understands and respects the Chinese culture is really half the battle won."

Indeed, business leaders are also starting to encourage more global curricula, particularly Chinese. "The more our young people know about cultural context in which they're operating, the better their competence as business leaders," says Charlie Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development, a nonpartisan think tank that is working on a report about the need for global studies and more diverse languages, including Chinese.

In Chicago, the trend extends beyond magnet schools or those with high numbers of Asian students. "The fact that my students are 98 percent low-income and 99 percent Latino, and they are succeeding at this, tells me everyone should have a shot at learning languages," says Virginia Rivera, principal at McCormick.

The program began six years ago and got a big boost when Mayor Richard Daley visited China. Languages are "greatly needed to compete in this world-is-flat society," says Mayor Daley. "We want to give our young people opportunities to advance ... and [Chinese] is a great opportunity to survive in today's economy."

[Full HTML version of this story which may include photos, graphics, and related links](#)

---