

Chinese instruction gains traction

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The Chinese chatter filling a first-floor classroom at Payton College Prep on a recent Wednesday flowed from an unexpected source: Among the 26 students, there were almost no Chinese Americans.

In fact, the first three students to offer up presentations in Chinese about their families could band together to start a model United Nations -- one was a Mexican immigrant, another Jewish, a third an African American.

"Chinese is going to be a universal language," Daniela Cuellar, who was born in Mexico City, said after showing off a make-believe Chinese family to her classmates. "Everyone should know it."

In most school systems, Chinese language instruction targets Chinese Americans.

Not so in Chicago.

Over the last six years, Chicago Public Schools has built the country's largest Chinese language program. And among the 20 elementary and high schools offering Chinese to about 3,000 students, just one is in a Chinese-American neighborhood. The student populations at these schools run the gamut, from virtually all Hispanic Juarez High School to Owens Scholastic Elementary, which is 81 percent black.

It's the wave of the future, said Michael Levine, director of education for the New York-based Asia Society.

"If you want to do work with China, there is really a competitive advantage to knowing something about their language and culture," Levine said. "This is very, very valuable stuff for young people trying to work in a global environment."

Pushed by Daley

Chinese instruction is still minuscule compared with Spanish and French classes, but several cities, including New York, Philadelphia and Houston, are tracking Chicago's progress and considering expanding their programs, Levine said. And recent statistics show growing demand.

For the first time this year, the College Board will offer a Chinese Advanced Placement exam after 2,400 schools expressed interest in it. The College Board surveyed 14,000 schools and expected 300 at the most to say yes.

On the college level, student enrollment in Chinese jumped 20 percent, to about 34,000 students, between 1998 and 2002, according to the Modern Language Association. Studying in China is

also way up, jumping 90 percent between 2003 and 2004, to nearly 5,000 students, according to the Institute of International Education.

The growth in Chicago is driven in large part by Mayor Daley, who visited Chinese schools during a visit to the country in 2004. English instruction became mandatory in China two years ago.

"He saw that many of their schools are really pressing their kids to learn English, to compete in the global market," said mayoral spokeswoman Jackie Heard, who traveled with Daley to China. "He came back with the notion that if they're doing it -- preparing their kids to compete -- what are we doing?"

Since then, Chicago has added five more schools, with a wait list of five more. CPS hopes to add two or three new schools this winter, said Robert Davis, who manages Chicago's Chinese Connection program. The main reason for the delay is finding enough qualified Chinese instructors, Davis said.

When Chinese instruction first launched in Chicago, many parents were skeptical.

"At first everyone wondered, 'Why not Spanish?'" said Mindi Miller, a parent at Bell School on the Northwest Side, which began offering Chinese to kindergartners through fifth-graders in 2000.

It didn't take long for parents to buy in, she said.

"We are going to deal with China more and more," Miller said. "It'll just get bigger and bigger. That's not going to change."

Learning culture, history

In addition to language exposure, Chicago kids learn about Chinese culture and history. At Bell School, the first-graders stand and greet the teacher at each session, as Chinese schoolchildren do. They celebrate the Chinese New Year, read Chinese cartoons and learn a little Chinese philosophy as they realize that basic elements, such as fire, water and trees, are at the root of the language.

"A major portion of the instruction is culture -- kids will take that with them," even if they don't continue learning Chinese, said Ken Mularski, Payton's curriculum director.

"It's a time when Asian and Chinese culture in particular are coming to the forefront," Mularski said.

"Educated people should know more about the world, especially as the world gets closer and closer."