

## Chinese language instruction getting more popular in public schools

*By Carol Chmelynski*

11/08/2005 — Relatively few public students are currently learning the Chinese language, but experts predict the number of K-12 schools offering such instruction will soon soar. With China poised to become the next global economic superpower, policymakers say it's essential that American schools expand their Chinese studies.

Worldwide, 1.4 billion people speak Chinese. An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 K-12 students are now studying Chinese in U.S. schools, but that includes students who are taking private lessons after school or on weekends.

"The numbers about Chinese language instruction are so tiny that I don't think anyone's tracking it very carefully," says Thomas Matt, director of the world languages initiative at the College Board. "The signs are there for tremendous increase. . . . It's the wave of the future."

"It's hot," agrees Marty Abbot, director of education at the National Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "The Asia Society has a goal of trying to get 5 percent of the U.S. student population into Chinese classes by 2015.

The Asia Society expects to publish a handbook on how to start a Chinese instruction program in early spring, with a draft available by the end of 2005, Abbott adds. "They're on the fast track, for sure."

### **Chicago has model program**

Some 3,000 K-12 students are enrolled in the Chicago Public Schools' Chinese World Language Program, a program notable for being entirely in public schools during the regular school day and primarily serving non-Chinese students.

The program started with three schools in 1999 and expanded to 20 this year with five more schools to be added "as soon as we can find certified teachers who meet the No Child Left Behind requirements," says Robert Davis, manager of the Chicago Chinese Connections Program. When that happens, he says, the program will reach 5,000 students.

Much of this expansion was made possible by an annual donation of 3,000 Mandarin textbooks from the Chinese Ministry of Education. That agency has identified the Chicago school district as having the best Chinese language program in the United States.

The district also has a Chinese Cultural Immersion Program that sends Chicago educators and administrators to three cities in China for two weeks to learn more about historical and contemporary China. So far, more than 100 teachers and administrators have participated, Davis says.

Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley calls the district's Chinese language program "part of our mission to help prepare children to be productive and enterprising world citizens."

Many other policymakers also are pushing programs to expand Chinese education initiatives.

Last May, Sens. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) introduced a bill calling for the nation to spend \$1.3 billion over five years on Chinese language programs in schools and on cultural exchanges to improve ties between the United States and China.

"The rise of China comes with a whole set of challenges. But the ability to talk to and understand each other should not be among them," Lieberman said at a press event announcing the U.S.-China Cultural Engagement Act. "Providing our children with the opportunity to understand the Chinese language and culture will help ensure they have a better chance of succeeding in the global economy."

Congress has not taken action on that bill. But the federal government, through the National Security Education Program (NSEP), announced a plan last spring to establish a comprehensive, sequential Chinese language instruction program for students in kindergarten through college.

### **Federal support**

This program, known as the Chinese K16 Flagship Project, was driven by policymakers' concerns about the lack of expertise in languages considered critical to national security. The goal is to increase the number of U.S. citizens fluent in the Chinese language and knowledgeable about the history and culture of China.

A request for proposals drew a flood of interest, and in September the University of Oregon and Portland Public Schools were notified that they had won a \$700,000-a-year grant from the U.S. Defense Department to immerse some 1,500 students from kindergarten through college in Mandarin Chinese.

"This is a significant move," says Abbot. "It signifies that we have incredible needs in terms of building our nation's language capacity and the government is willing to support that with funding," and she adds, "it's ironic that it's not coming from the Education Department."

Michael Bacon, director of immersion programs for the Portland school district, says the participating students, known as "Flagship Scholars," will be treated much like star football players, provided with generous scholarships and individual mentoring. Students will have a rigorous curriculum of content courses in Chinese supported by advanced-level language classes.

Bacon says there are two components to the Flagship program — an immersion program for non-Chinese students and a heritage program for Chinese-American students.

The goal is to attain an advanced level of proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, and both groups will have opportunities to connect with communities of Chinese speakers through service learning, internships, and “externships” in China.

Students will spend a year in China studying at the University of Nanjing, and the University of Oregon is setting up a foundation to help pay for these students’ college costs, says district spokesperson Brenda Gustafson.

“Our goal is not just to turn out language majors,” stresses Bacon. “We’re hoping to create at least 20 superior-level Mandarin-speaking, reading, and writing professionals by the year 2017 in all disciplines, including biologists, engineers, diplomats, and intelligence analysts.”

Bacon says he’s been inundated with phone calls and e-mails from school administrators from all over the country who want to know how to start a Chinese instruction program. He’s also heard from many parents who want to enroll their children, including parents from Kentucky who were prepared to move their whole family to Oregon so their children could participate.

### **Culture and history**

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) school district also has made a commitment to Chinese instruction.

Independence and Olympic high schools began offering Mandarin Chinese classes this year. Next year, the district’s Smith Academy of International Languages will begin an English-Chinese dual language immersion program for kindergartners and first graders. An additional grade level will be added every year.

The district also plans to offer an elective Chinese course at the middle school, focusing on culture with some instruction in the language.

“We feel the timing is right,” says Robbie Kale, Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s director of magnet programs. “We have to face the future and be as competitive as we can be.”

“We’ve received tremendous support — time, expertise, and resources — from our Asian community, the families with Chinese children, and the Asian Chamber of Commerce,” she says.

The district’s next step is to hire Chinese language teachers by the end of 2005 so they can have a half year of planning before the courses are in place next fall.

The Philadelphia school district recently announced plans to expand its Mandarin classes. In the past two years, the number of Philadelphia students studying Chinese increased from 900 to more than 1,700.

Six high schools and three elementary schools offer Chinese lessons, and the Philadelphia school district's CEO, Paul Vallas, wants to double the number of Chinese courses.

"Of all the nations in the world, China will have the most profound impact on this nation's economy. So from an academic standpoint, it's very sound," Vallas told the Philadelphia Inquirer.

When the College Board surveyed schools, it expected about 100 to 300 would be interested in offering an Advanced Placement course in Chinese, says language specialist Thomas Matt. Instead, 2,400 schools expressed an interest.

"Some state superintendents have visited China and have come back ebullient over the thought of offering Chinese language instruction in their schools. They're thinking about developing partnerships with schools in China. We're fostering that," he says.

The College Board is working with the China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language to help develop Chinese language programs in the United States, he says. Starting with the elementary and middle schools "is the smart way, really the only way, to do it if you're going to be successful."

### **More teachers needed**

One of the biggest problems is "the lack of infrastructure, specifically the lack of certified teachers and teacher certification programs," Matt says. "There are not enough teachers to go around."

Some states and larger school districts are borrowing teachers from China to start programs in U.S. schools until there is a large enough pool of certified teachers here, he says.

"Because of the cultural disconnect between Chinese teachers and the realities of the American educational system," the College Board will ask the teachers newly arrived from China to team teach with U.S.-trained teachers for a full year before they can be assigned to classrooms to work independently, Matt says. "We're going to try to ensure to every extent possible the success of the program that we help to develop."

According to Matt: "The Chinese are absolutely an economic and cultural force to be reckoned with in the near and distant future. I think it would behoove us to learn to communicate with them and to learn their cultural mores. The only way to do that, truly, is by learning their language."

"Virtually every schoolchild in China is studying English by grade 3," he says. "The joke is there are more people learning English in China than in America."

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