

communicator

The Monthly Newsletter of the National Association of Elementary School Principals

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Chinese Language Programs Are on the Rise

Although foreign language instruction has decreased overall in elementary schools, the number of Chinese language programs nationwide has steadily increased over the years. The reason, many say, is because as adults today's children will need to be able to compete in the global marketplace—in which China is making a huge splash—so proficiency in Chinese will give students a definite advantage.

Going Global

With approximately 1.3 billion people in China who speak Mandarin—that's about one-fifth of the world's population—and the rise of China's economic status, it's no surprise that more and more schools are adding Chinese to their foreign language offerings, says Yalan King, director of the CAIS Institute, a nonprofit organization that advocates Chinese language and culture education nationwide.

"Over the last several years, it's really exploded," King says of Chinese language programs. "They're popping up all over the place."

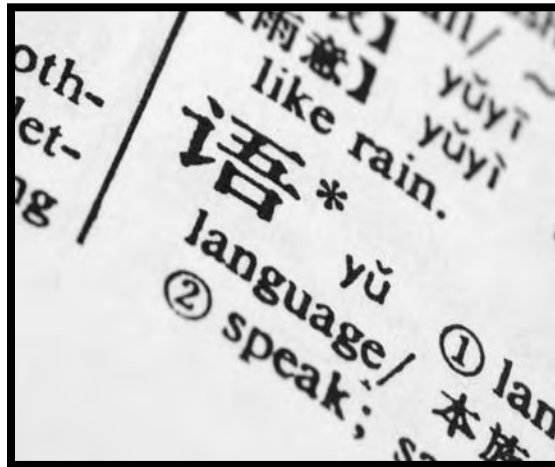
According to preliminary results from the National K-12 Foreign Language Survey conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics, the number of elementary schools offer-

ing a Chinese language program has swelled tenfold, from 0.3 percent in 1997 to 3 percent in 2008.

Behind critical thinking, communications skills is the second-ranked attribute businesses look for in

potential employees, King explains. To compete in a global economy, "people really do see that we need that skill set," she adds.

In its report titled *International Education and Foreign Languages: Keys to Securing America's Future*, the National Research Council concluded that "language skills and



During the past decade, the number of elementary schools offering Chinese language programs has grown by 1,000 percent.

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cultural expertise are ... urgently needed to address economic challenges and the strength of American businesses in an increasingly global marketplace.” The report went on to assert, “Professions such as law, health care, social work, and education call out for an international dimension that reflects the changed world environment and increasingly diverse U.S. population.”

Both parents and school districts see clearly the correlation between advanced foreign language skills and laying a good foundation for future careers. “In order for their children to be competitive with a country like China, our kids are going to need that language capability to be on a level playing field,” says King. And since Chinese is a difficult language to learn—it takes three times longer to become proficient compared with the romance languages—it’s most beneficial for students to start learning at an early age, adds King.

Preparing for the Future

Chinese language instruction in elementary and middle schools varies in format from after-school lessons to full immersion programs. For example, at Las Flores Elementary School in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, students receive 30 minutes of weekly Mandarin Chinese instruction. On the other hand, students at Potomac Elementary School in Potomac, Maryland, participate in a partial immersion program in which half their academic day is taught in Chinese. Principal Linda Goldberg says that since the immersion program began in 1996, there has been a steady increase in interest from parents hoping to get their children into the program, which is limited to about 25 “very coveted” spots per grade level.

“Learning a second language in this type of intense way is great for the students,” says Goldberg. “They’re like sponges.” The K-5 school has three teachers on staff to teach Chinese, and parents can

request that their children enter the program as early as kindergarten, where they may remain throughout the elementary years. The program is topped off with a fifth-grade trip to China during spring break, where students can practice their acquired language skills and experience the culture firsthand.

Starr King Elementary School in San Francisco also has an immersion program, which started with two kindergarten classrooms in 2006. Today, 110 students out of about 300 are enrolled in the program.

Starr King’s program, like many others, does not comprise only Asian students. Parents of all races and ethnic backgrounds are finding Chinese language classes beneficial for their children. “The program has a very diverse group of students,” Starr King principal Chris Rosenberg says. “The largest group is white, second largest is Asian, and then there are close to 10 percent African American students as well.”

At Bigelow Middle School in Newton, Massachusetts, students in grades 6-8 have had the option to study Chinese during the past nine years. This year, about 70 of the school’s 503 students are enrolled in the class. Principal Todd Harrison says the majority of the students are of Asian descent, “but there is a sizeable minority of varied ethnic students.” This is proved in the school’s statistics: While the percentage of Asian students at Bigelow is 6.4, about 14 percent of the total student population participates in the Chinese language program.

“China is a huge trading partner with the U.S., so these students are learning a language that can benefit them in their future careers,” Harrison explains. “For Chinese heritage students, taking Chinese also increases their knowledge of their cultural heritage and their ability to communicate with their extended family.”

Many of the programs do not focus only on language comprehension, but also incorporate culture study. For example, the elementary language program in the Jericho Public Schools District in New York “affords students the opportunity to learn about other languages and cultures, extend their multicultural awareness, develop a broader world view ... and deepens their understandings in social studies,” says Barbara Bauer, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

Challenges

When the Chinese language program launched at Starr King Elementary three years ago, Rosenberg played a key role. He participated in community meetings and planning sessions, and made visits to other schools with similar programs. However, “staffing, curriculum development, assessment have all been hard to address, as with any start-up program,” Rosenberg says.

King says that many schools face staffing and curriculum roadblocks. “It’s challenging to find a credentialed Chinese teacher with experience teaching in North America,” she says. Also, because there is not yet a standard curriculum for Chinese language instruction, teachers are left to design their own programs—an expectation that must be made clear when principals hire their faculty, King stresses.

Proficiency in foreign languages is among the 21st century skills expected of U.S. students, and though not yet as popular as Spanish or French, Chinese instruction is on the rise. Fortunately, schools and school districts are beginning to take on the challenge and exposing younger and younger students to a language and culture that is predicted to be in increasingly more demand as they grow older.

—Vanessa St. Gerard