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Adapting, schools look East

Asia - Districts develop Mandarin language courses and other programs in response to a changing world

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When the school year starts at Sherwood Middle School this fall, a new course will reflect how school districts -- even smaller ones like Sherwood -- are using second-language courses to meet changing global and domestic needs.

Adding Mandarin Chinese to its instruction will help Sherwood explore ways to expand beyond Spanish and French.

French and German are on the wane, and languages deemed critical by the U.S. government for Americans to learn -- Mandarin, Korean, Arabic and Russian in particular -- are gaining attention.

To that end, Portland, Medford, Salem-Keizer and Sherwood school districts have all joined a University of Oregon study on the feasibility of creating more varied second-language programs.

Changing dynamics in trade and national security -- and to some degree immigration and heritage ties -- are driving the interest in new second languages, especially Mandarin, said Amy Harter, coordinator of the study and of the Oregon Chinese Flagship Center at the university's Center for Applied Second Language Studies.

The flagship program is part of a national initiative to develop graduates with exceptional skills "in one of many languages critical to U.S. competitiveness and security," a list that includes Persian and languages of Central and South Asia.

With a \$300,000 federal grant, the university center began researching two months ago what languages are taught in Oregon schools, how in-depth that instruction is, what demand exists for broader programs and what more can be provided.

Universities in Ohio and Texas are doing similar studies for a combined analysis by the U.S. Department of

Defense National Security Education Program that may inform creation of second-language instruction nationally, said Carl Falsgraf, director of the second languages studies center.

About 60 people are expected to attend a language summit Friday in Portland that will draw officials from the University of Oregon's center, schools, business and state government to identify what second-language skills are needed in the state.

Business leaders with overseas operations often need professionals proficient in Japanese, Korean or Mandarin to handle intricate details such as negotiating contracts, he said. Those providing services domestically, such as retailers and government agencies, are often looking for those who can connect fluently -- both with individuals and communities -- in Spanish, Russian and Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese.

For the Oregon study, the four school districts will elaborate on the resources needed and the challenges they face in providing second-language instruction.

The flagship partnership between the center and Portland Public Schools has one of the only kindergarten-to-college Mandarin immersion curriculums in the country. The district is expanding its Mandarin program and starting a new one in Russian this fall.

Portlanders who speak Chinese -- Cantonese as well as Mandarin -- increased at least 20 percent from 2000 to 2005, a recent Multnomah County Library study found. Ding Li, an electrical engineer from China who teaches Mandarin in Portland and Beaverton, agrees. "We can feel that the language is becoming hotter."

The UO researchers' initial survey also noted two-way immersion English-Russian and English-Spanish programs in the Woodburn School District and a Spanish immersion program in the Klamath Falls City School District. Mandarin is now taught in some Beaverton and Lake Oswego schools. And Korean is taught in a Eugene School District elementary school a couple of days a week

Sherwood's foray into broadening its offerings came from both fortune and initiative.

In 2005, Anna Pittioni, the middle school principal, led a trip to China with students as part of an exchange program that was encouraged by Washington County officials who had made a trip a couple of years earlier. A group of Sherwood middle schoolers is set to go in June on a second exchange trip.

Now a school in Yichang, China, wants to formalize the exchange relationship and has offered to send podcasts and exchange teachers to instruct Sherwood students in Mandarin.

Some Sherwood middle school students have already begun. Last fall, Julie Afsahi, a math teacher with years of Mandarin study took the Sherwood job, drawn by the China exchange program and a chance to teach Mandarin and Chinese culture in an after-school class. She will teach Mandarin again next year but as a course during the school day.

"I think it's a movement that Sherwood is part of, and it's exciting that it can include a small district," she said.

Pittioni answered an offer from the Oregon Department of Education to arrange for teaching assistants from Japan and Korea, and the school welcomed Huijeong Kim, an English literature major from the University of Seoul in South Korea. She was a teaching assistant this year and might lead a Korean language club in the fall.

Pittioni said language programs must reflect the changing world. She was left shaken when she heard a speaker at a recent conference on critical languages say, "We study the West to understand our past and the East to understand our future."

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