

Idea for Chinese school studied  
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Recognizing China's ties to the Northwest and its rising global prominence, a group of local residents is pushing the Eugene School District to add Mandarin Chinese immersion to its school-choice menu.

The group coalesced last winter in the wake of publicity about a federal grant given to the University of Oregon to work with Portland schools to develop a kindergarten-through-college Chinese immersion program. It submitted a formal proposal to the district this spring.

"Government and industry have recognized that the country faces a language crisis," the proposal reads. "Here in Eugene, our close geographic location to China and growing social, cultural and economic interest with China have reached a point where teaching Chinese is now of vital importance to our community's future."

Key players in the effort include researchers Carl Falsgraf and Amy Harter of the UO's Center for Applied Second Language Studies; David Bong, chairman of Language Learning Solutions; Jen-Jen Hwang-Shum, principal of the private Eugene Chinese School; Helen Liu, a parent and organizer of a recent Chinese language summer camp; David Tam, chairman of the Asian Council and president of the Chinese-American Benevolent Association; and Beth Smith, director of services for Holt International Children's Services' China program.

Tom Henry, the school district's deputy superintendent, said he and other officials think it's "a great idea" and will explore it further. The district has long offered popular elementary, middle and high school immersion programs in Spanish, Japanese and French, most involving immersion for half the school day.

"We are one of the most experienced districts in the nation with immersion programs, so this is a natural," Henry said.

The group envisions the school somewhere in the Churchill High School region, the only area lacking an immersion program. It would start small and grow, continuing on through middle and high school. "This is a need, and it's a wonderful way to fill a gap," Harter said.

But Henry said the group's time line, which calls for the school to open next fall, is too ambitious, especially given uncertainties over the future location, size and number of district schools.

Prompted partly by dwindling enrollment, the Eugene district will launch a comprehensive study of demographics, boundaries and facilities this fall. The end result is likely to be some school closures, consolidations and relocations, as well as plans for a 2008 bond measure to build new facilities.

At the same time, the district will be reviewing its three language immersion elementary schools, as well as a fourth alternative elementary school. Four other alternative elementary schools were reviewed last winter.

The reviews are meant to determine whether the schools offer truly distinctive programs, serve a diverse population and are viable. Critics of Eugene's system of open choice and alternative, or "magnet," schools say it has weakened some neighborhood schools by siphoning children from educated, involved and comparatively affluent families, thereby worsening the achievement gap separating students by income level and race.

While the language immersion schools are sure to earn high marks for distinctiveness, it's possible the reviews could lead to changes in location or enrollment practices aimed at diversifying the student base.

Given the flux, Henry said, it's not the time to be signing off on a new alternative school.

"To be adding something prior to engaging in that process doesn't seem to be an appropriate step," he said, "but we will be looking at the possibility."

In fact, the district agreed to include dollars to research the program in a recent grant request. The three-year, \$552,510 Foreign Language Assistance Program grant would earmark \$40,500 for the Center for Applied Second Language Studies to design a questionnaire and conduct a feasibility study. The district should learn this fall whether it will receive the grant.

Harter coordinates the center's K-16 Chinese immersion partnership with Portland public schools, known as the Flagship program. The first-in-the-nation program got under way last fall with a \$700,000 federal grant from the National Security Education Program, with the goal of producing students with sufficient mastery of the language to communicate at a business level.

"You can't do it for an hour a day for a couple years in high school," Falsgraf said. "Every other country in the world has figured this out; we're just getting there."

Soon after the grant announcement, the UO center's phone began ringing. "We were inundated with phone calls from people in the community saying, 'This is in Eugene?', and we were saying, 'No, it's Portland public schools,' and the question was always, 'Why not Eugene?'" Harter said.

The school proposal emerged over the next few months after a series of meetings involving center and community members, including Liu, a Taiwanese-American with

two American-born daughters, ages 7 and 11, attending Ridgeline Montessori Public Charter School.

The new school wouldn't open in time for her daughters, who have learned some Chinese at home and through private lessons. But Liu believes that other native Chinese and Taiwanese parents would jump at such an opportunity, as would parents of China-born adoptees and other parents who recognize the benefits of Chinese immersion.

"I think it's a no-brainer," said Liu, who recently organized a Chinese-language summer camp through the UO that drew 38 children, with a waiting list. "Everybody says, 'Why wouldn't we do this?'"

Proponents said they're disappointed with the district's reluctance to move faster and to seek more grant money. But at this point, they said, they don't intend to instead seek status as an independent public charter school, preferring to wait and hope that the district will embrace the plan.

"We were hoping this would be a priority," said Falsgraf, who believes there are only about a half-dozen public Chinese-language immersion schools in the nation, including a Portland elementary school. That number will quickly grow, he predicted. "It's an important issue. There's seed money out there today, and we feel like you gotta kind of strike while the iron is hot."