

# Two milestones for Mandarin immersion class

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Two Santa Clara County schools are marking milestones this month - the middle school graduation of the first class of Mandarin immersion students in Cupertino, and the painful birth late Tuesday of a similar program in Palo Alto.

It's not just parents of the Mandarin students who are celebrating. Proponents of school choice, business leaders and advocates of foreign-language education see the growing number of immersion programs as an educational advancement and economic necessity. They argue that more Americans need to become proficient in multiple languages as the world effectively shrinks.

After a six-year battle in Palo Alto, however, Tuesday's decision by the school board to start a program in 2008 left Mandarin immersion opponents dismayed. They had argued that the program would crowd neighborhood schools, exclude the majority of children and cater to a small minority. Lurking beneath the debate was an ethnic resentment usually voiced privately or anonymously.

There's no doubt that foreign-language programs for elementary students are growing quickly. "The trend is to definitely start teaching at a younger age," said Nancy Rhodes of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C.

According to the center, language immersion programs in elementary schools have grown from about 340 a decade ago to about 600 last year. Typically, young students spend almost full-time in classrooms that are taught just in a foreign language. By fifth grade, instruction is half in English, half in the foreign tongue.

"The beauty of it is the model works," said Jack Yang, father of two children in the Cupertino program, which is taught at Meyerholz Elementary and Lawson Middle schools. "It has achieved what was promised: We have children who are biliterate and bilingual."

## Palo Alto program

That promise is what has propelled Mandarin immersion proponents in Palo Alto. Two kindergarten-first grade classes will begin at Ohlone Elementary School, with one class being added each year of the three-year pilot program.

"I'm happy and beyond tired," said Grace Mah, who spearheaded the Mandarin immersion push.

Many of the concerns raised about Palo Alto's program were also brought up when Cupertino's pioneer program began a decade ago. One Cupertino parent at the time questioned the value of language immersion. "Cupertino caters too much to the Chinese," she told a neighborhood newspaper after the Mandarin immersion was proposed to the school board. "Mandarin should be taught at home."

Seed money for the Cupertino program was a \$175,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education. But in the beginning, some parents and residents objected to use of district funds and staff time for the immersion program - just as opponents have objected in Palo Alto.

Parents of Cupertino immersion students countered with a solution of their own: They said they would raise supplemental funds for the program.

"For any successful program, a huge amount of parent involvement was needed to keep it sustained," said Jerry Wang, a NASA test engineer whose daughter Jennifer is graduating from the program after eight years of Mandarin immersion.

Wang was one of the founding officers of the non-profit parent group, which has paid and continues to pay for the extra cost of the Mandarin immersion program: curriculum development, books and materials, and classroom aides.

Most of the initial concerns about the immersion program have faded in Cupertino, replaced by a focus on its success.

## Diplomas awarded

The first six students to complete eighth grade in the alternative school program - one of the country's first Mandarin immersion programs in a public school - received their diplomas Friday evening during a community banquet and fundraiser, celebrated by school and government officials, their parents and peers.

"This graduate class is more than a milestone," said Mary Jew, who supervises the immersion program. "You've got foreign-language students who are communicating completely in Chinese."

Cupertino school officials were worried at the beginning whether there would be enough interest and students to sustain the program, which began with one kindergarten class of 20 students. Today, there are two entering classes each year, with more than 100 students on a waiting list, in the K-8 program.

"It was a bit hard learning social studies in Chinese," said Christine La, 13, one of the graduating eighth-graders, recalling her seventh-grade Mandarin class. "But it made me think more deeply."

Most of the students enrolled in Cupertino's immersion program are Chinese-Americans, but there is growing interest among other ethnic groups. La is Vietnamese-American. In other grades in the program, there are students of Japanese, Korean, Hispanic and Malaysian descent, alongside whites, whose parents view mastery of Mandarin as way for the children to get a leg up in new global markets.

"I want my kids to be bilingual," said Clarissa Shetler, a parent who has two children, a kindergartner and a third-grader, in the immersion program. "I believe the more languages they speak, the better opportunities they'll have in the world."

That sentiment is touted, in English and Chinese, on the home page of the immersion program: "A competitive advantage, a global necessity."

Growing up in Syracuse, N.Y., the child of immigrants from Taiwan, Jack Yang understood early on that "learning Chinese was to be avoided" in his family. The premium then, he said, was to learn only English.

### **Bridging generations**

Today, Yang observes with pride and pleasure, his two children, ages 10 and 7, converse with his parents in Mandarin, which they are learning in the Cupertino program, whose motto is "The Best of Both Worlds."

During language-arts class one recent Tuesday morning, instructor Grace Robinson gave the group of seventh- and eighth-graders directions for the work ahead, all in Mandarin. They then watched an animated video of a child trying to figure out two ways to weigh his elephant. After the video, they explained the two solutions in Mandarin.

The students watched intently, many of them taking notes in Chinese. A discussion followed in Mandarin.

"I'm happy to live in an area of the country where English and Chinese can be taught together," said Yang, an intellectual property attorney.

"Chinese is going to be, like, the No. 1 language in the world," said 13-year-old Jennifer Wang. "It's gonna help us."

All six members of Cupertino's first graduating Mandarin immersion class said they hope to continue with their Chinese studies in high school.

"The best thing is I can actually read a lot of Chinese," said Charlene Gaw, 14. "It makes me feel smart!"

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