


San Francisco Chronicle

SAN FRANCISCO Kindergarten's big triumph Starr King students ace their Mandarin immersion program

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer
Tuesday, June 12, 2007

[Printable Version](#)

[Email This Article](#)

 SHARE

FONT | SIZE: 

Angelica Chang will end her teaching year today exactly as she started it -- speaking only **Mandarin** Chinese to her kindergarten students at San Francisco's Starr King Elementary School.

Since the first day of school, she has immersed her pint-size students in **Mandarin**, operating on faith that they would one day understand her.

As the weeks passed, they did. Soon, they started speaking Chinese back to her. And then to each other.

As the months flew by, the children started reading and writing Chinese characters while also learning English numbers and letters for one hour each day with a different teacher.

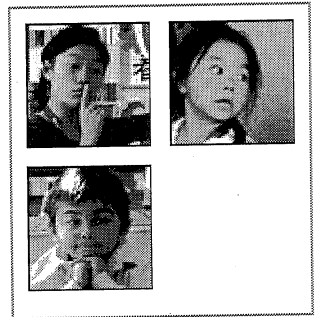
Their progress astounded teachers, school staff -- even their parents.

On Monday, Chang's 13 students sat in a semi-circle on the classroom's carpet with lap-size white boards and colored markers to practice writing characters.

After writing their names, they cleared their board and waited for Chang to give them a word or sentence.

"Nan xing," their teacher said.

"That's too easy," several students said before quickly writing the Chinese character for "boy" and holding it up for her to see.



The next words were harder.

"Shui zhong you hua," Chang said.

A few students paused, trying to remember and glancing at Chang's board for a quick clue.

The students bent over their boards carefully, drawing the characters and wiping away stray strokes.

"In the water there are flowers," said red-headed kindergartner Julian Kleppe, holding up his board.

And finally: "Huo che shang you ren."

"On the train there are people," said Julian, again translating after writing the 22 strokes required to make the characters.

Across the hall from Chang's classroom on Monday, Principal Chris Rosenberg declared the inaugural year of San Francisco Unified's first **Mandarin** immersion program -- which includes Chang's and one other kindergarten classroom taught by Cindy Lai -- a success.

All 26 kindergartners from both classes are expected to continue with the immersion program in first grade, along with seven new students who will likely have some catching up to do.

"It was a fantastic year," Rosenberg said. "Did the kids learn **Mandarin** while mastering the grade-level standards? Yes. It was a big success, a great success."

Thirty-four students are signed up for the program's next kindergarten classes in the fall.

The program is expected to grow by one grade each year through the fifth grade.

In August, the district will launch a second **Mandarin** immersion program at Jose Ortega Elementary School.

In the meantime, Chang and 11 other district Chinese teachers will travel to Beijing for three weeks this summer for language and culture training, a trip set up in partnership with San Francisco State University's Confucius Institute and Beijing Normal University.

The Starr King program is among just a handful of **Mandarin** immersion programs in public schools nationwide. Before this year, only San Francisco high schools offered **Mandarin** as a foreign language. Yet, demand for instruction in **Mandarin** is increasing as China becomes a global economic and political force.

San Francisco schools also offer Spanish, Korean and Cantonese immersion programs.

Parent Jan Larky said it took a leap of faith to enroll her daughter Lia Pickholtz in the Starr King program. The family has no background in Chinese.

Yet, Lia now tells her mom to wait outside the dry cleaner across the street from their Noe Valley home while she goes inside and speaks **Mandarin** to the workers. They ask her when her mother wants the clothes and Lia steps outside to translate for an answer.

"It's been amazing," Larky said. "It's been magical."

On Monday morning, after Chang's students filed out for recess and were out of earshot, the first-year kindergarten teacher switched to perfect English to sum up the year.

She tried to recall the year's first frustrating days, her students' expressions filled with incomprehension and perhaps a bit of fear.

Yet she never wavered in her commitment to speak only **Mandarin** in front of them, often teaching with hope rather than conviction.

"I can't even think back to the first day because they're doing so well," Chang said. "I didn't know what to expect. It's beyond what I could have imagined."

On Monday, she knew she had made it. Her classroom was cluttered with school work crafted by 5-year-old hands and filled with small voices speaking Chinese.

"I did it," she said, laughing and launching into an impromptu dance move that looked like a cross between the cabbage patch and the running man.

Earlier that morning, she asked the children to keep from crying on the last day of school because they would make her cry too.

They assured her they wouldn't cry, but Chang knew it wouldn't matter.

"I'm so going to cry," she said.

Last in a series

This is the last in an occasional series of stories about the **Mandarin**-language immersion program at Starr King Elementary in San Francisco's Potrero Hill neighborhood. It is the city schools' first **Mandarin** immersion program -- one of just a few in the country. Begun this school year in two kindergarten classes, plans call for it to expand one grade at a time as the initial class moves up.

E-mail Jill Tucker at jtucker@sfgchronicle.com.

*This article appeared on page **B - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*

Printable Version

Email This
Article

