

Year of the Chinese Language

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Is your district or school considering Mandarin instruction? These five early adopters have found it a fortunate choice indeed.

Two years ago, Starr King Elementary principal Chris Rosenberg was faced with an awful possibility: His San Francisco Unified school was on the chopping block, slated for potential closure. Enrollment was down sharply: 151 students in 2005 compared to 406 in 1993. Eleven classrooms sat vacant. And despite seven years of steadily rising test scores, Starr King, flanked by housing projects, hardly had parents and students flocking to its doors.

Fast-forward to September 2006. Starr King now hosts one of a handful of K-5 Mandarin-immersion programs in the country. "It's been fantastic," says Rosenberg, himself a former Spanish bilingual teacher. "It's a totally different thing now." In the fall of 2006, 24 families signed up for total-immersion kindergarten classes, in which the children received all instruction in Mandarin. The Mandarin program will likely save Starr King.

Across the country, the demand for Mandarin immersion is so great that districts from Massachusetts to Minnesota are jumping on the Mandarin bandwagon.

The Mandarin Explosion

In 1998, when Woodstock Elementary, in Portland, Oregon, began its Mandarin-immersion program with one blended-first/first-grade class, few might have predicted that the program would nearly quadruple in size and serve as a model for the rest of the country. The original request for Mandarin instruction came from a board member, recalls Mary Patterson, Woodstock's principal. And with long-running programs in Japanese and Spanish immersion, says Patterson, "The district had for some time been vested in second-language instruction."

Still, the Mandarin program did not instantly take off. "In the early years, we struggled to fill each class," says Michael Bacon, immersion education coordinator for Portland Public Schools. "Now we have very significant waiting lists. Families are moving to the neighborhood of Woodstock specifically to be a part of the program. It's not uncommon to receive phone calls from parents saying 'We're moving here from New York, and we want to know what neighborhood we need to be in to get our child in.'"

What's driving the Mandarin explosion? "China's emergence as a world power, as an economic power, and as a diplomatic power," offers Bacon. "The influence of China on the world stage has been dramatic over the past five years." Indeed, more people speak Mandarin, the official language of China, than any other language in the world—over a billion people, compared to 341 million English speakers.

The Latest in AP Exams

Another catalyst is the College Board's decision to offer an AP test in Mandarin for the first time this year, and to partner with Hanban—the Chinese governmental agency that promotes the study of Chinese language and culture—to develop the AP curriculum. Over 2,400 high schools expressed interest in the new AP program, says Andrew Corcoran, head of the Chinese American International School (CAIS), in San Francisco, "which is 10 times that of the other foreign languages which were proposed at the same time." Additionally, CAIS has seen a 200-percent increase in foreign-language applications in the past three years, and has had so many visitors interested in learning about Mandarin-immersion programs that Corcoran decided to hold the first-ever Conference for the Teaching of Chinese Language and Culture in March 2007. Over 330 people participated.

Molly Wieland, world language coordinator for the Hopkins School District, in Minnesota, advocated for a new Mandarin-immersion program that will begin with two kindergarten classes next fall at Eisenhower Elementary School, in part, she says, because "Mandarin is easier to learn when you're younger, so if you start when you're 5 you actually have the capability to use it later on in life." Mandarin is classified as a category four language, which means it's four times more difficult to learn than a romance language. The classification is lost on children, who, compared to adults, aren't intimidated by the difficulty and have an easier time distinguishing tonal differences in the language.

Wieland, like many other administrators, also cites the practical benefits of learning Mandarin: the availability of more federal grants for the school and increased job opportunities for students down the road. Furthermore, adds Wieland, "Mandarin sets us apart from other districts as doing something innovative."

Is the First Wave Over?

The novelty may be short-lived, though, as more school districts follow suit. In 2006, Yinghua Academy, in St. Paul, Minnesota, opened as the state's first Mandarin charter school with a program in total early immersion. In 2007, Yinghua will be joined by three more Mandarin-immersion programs: one at Eisenhower Elementary and two more in neighboring Minnetonka Public School District. The Center for Applied Linguistics, in Washington, D.C., lists 12 Mandarin-immersion programs in its directory, but that statistic is already out-of-date.

“I have been working with immersion for quite a while,” says Dr. Tara W. Fortune, immersion project coordinator at the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota, “and I’ve not yet seen the kind of public interest that Mandarin Chinese programs have received.”

When asked about the sudden proliferation of Mandarin programs, Fortune describes what she calls a “domino effect, because we’re seeing a number of districts in close proximity feeling the need to come up with their own immersion model so they can hang on to their families.”

High Academic Outcomes

That’s exactly what husband and wife Richard Alcorn and Kathleen Wang did in western Massachusetts: help start a Mandarin-immersion charter school, Pioneer Valley. “There are very few Chinese-language opportunities in our part of Massachusetts,” Wang explains. “We were interested in making sure that kids in our region had access and the opportunity to learn Chinese at an early age.” And they chose immersion, says Wang, because “It has both high academic outcomes in other subjects, and high academic outcomes in terms of language proficiency. It looks like a very cost-effective, efficient way to introduce children to another language.”

Wang, an elected library trustee, and Alcorn, who does business with China, worked for six years with parents and local school districts to get the Mandarin program off the ground. While there was a lot of community interest and support, no school had the budget or the student population to implement an immersion program. “We didn’t set out to start a charter school,” says Alcorn, “but we ended up there. It was the only vehicle that would support a regional program and give us the critical mass of students to draw from to populate the program.” The school will open in the fall.

While almost every school district cited saw the possibility of a Mandarin-immersion program as a good thing, such was not the case in Palo Alto, California, where Grace Mah, a parent, has been working since 2001 to start such a program. Mah founded PACE (Palo Alto Chinese Education) and approached the district to add another “choice” program like their Spanish-immersion one.

Grants for the Asking

Academic achievement. Increased job opportunities. Choice programs. And grants. Another reason for the recent surge in Mandarin, explains Fortune, is that the U.S. Department of Education gives FLAP grants (Foreign Language Assistance Program) to innovative K-12 foreign-language programs in critical languages. Mandarin is one of them.

The University of Oregon at Eugene and the Portland Public School district have just received a million-dollar-a-year National Security Education Program flagship grant, the first in the U.S. for K-12, according to Michael Bacon, with the goal of producing replicable models for developing curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies in Mandarin Chinese. "The other main goal," says Bacon, "is to produce students at the end of university who will be at a superior level of proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking Mandarin Chinese," and who will thus be able to participate more fully on the world stage.

Language du Jour?

Is the interest in Mandarin more than a passing fad? Or will enthusiasm for the language fade as it did for Japanese studies years ago? "I think that Mandarin immersion has real staying power," says Corcoran of CAIS. "Japan has a little over 200 million people; China has 1.3 billion. China is really emerging as a much greater force in world affairs than Japan. Plus, China is taking an active role in encouraging the study of Chinese."

For Bacon, in Portland, the purpose of the flagship grant is not to start as many Mandarin classrooms as possible, but to help ensure that schools build high-quality, sustainable programs. "Nobody knows right now when they're putting their child in kindergarten if Chinese may be the language to know," says Bacon. "We don't know what will happen politically, economically 10 years from now if Chinese falls out of fad. So we want people to invest in it because it's a great academic and a good cognitive-development decision and a multicultural opportunity for their children." Add to this that it makes good numbers sense for school districts to have Mandarin programs, and it seems that the study will be more than a flash in the pan."

"[Mandarin immersion is] one of the things that really keeps our community invested in the public schools," says Bacon. "We have one of the highest capture rates. In most other urban school districts, if you have 60 percent of kids attending public schools, it's probably pretty good. We have 85 percent. Programs like Mandarin have kept people really invested in the public schools. And I think that's a positive." @ -Christine Boufis

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