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## As China booms, so does Mandarin in U.S. schools

By Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY

SAN FRANCISCO — Martha Rios traces her finger over a vocabulary word for the first-graders assembled around her. She's volunteering in her son's sunny classroom at Starr King Elementary School. At their desks, the children bend over their papers, carefully practicing this week's words.

Sebastian Rios writes one and is about to move on to the next when his mother stops him. "Mira," she says in Spanish, pointing out where he's made a mistake.

Sebastian erases, then rewrites the character. *Xin*, the Chinese word for heart, has four strokes, not three. The vocabulary word is *kai xin*, or "happy."

It's a scene playing out in more and more classrooms across the nation: Students — from kindergarten on — learning Mandarin Chinese, in some cases instead of Spanish, French or other languages that have long been more popular in U.S. schools. It's partly a reflection of how parents increasingly see China's emergence as an economic power as something for which they should prepare their children.

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The number of elementary and secondary school students studying Chinese could be as much as 10 times higher than it was seven years ago, says Marty Abbott, spokeswoman for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

When the council surveyed K-12 enrollment in foreign language classes in 2000, there were about 5,000 students of Chinese, Abbott says. The council is collecting data for another survey, but Abbott says early figures suggest the number of students now studying Chinese has "got to be somewhere around 30,000 to 50,000."

Nationwide, there are Chinese programs in more than 550 elementary, junior high and senior high schools, a 100% increase in two years, according to The Asia Society, an educational group. In May, when the College Board offered Mandarin Advanced Placement exams for the first time, 3,261 high school students took the test.

At the college level, enrollment in Chinese-language classes has increased 51% since 2002, according to the Modern Language Association, a language and literature education organization.

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Spanish remains far and away the most popular foreign language for U.S. students: It's the choice of 80% of those who study a foreign language in America's grade and high schools, Abbott says. French is a distant second, with Latin and German vying for third-most-popular foreign language.

"But I think what's going to surprise everyone in this next survey we do is how close Mandarin is going to come to Latin and German," she says. "Chinese isn't the new French — it's the new English," says Robert Davis, director of the Chinese-language program in Chicago's public school system, which has 8,000 students studying Mandarin.

"It's not romantic. It's not because you're going to have a great time in Paris," he says. "It's very pragmatic."

That's the motivation of Martha Rios and her husband, Antonio, for having Sebastian learn Chinese, and why they moved 80 miles last summer from Gilroy, Calif., to San Francisco. Sebastian and about 70 other students at Starr King take all but one class a day in Chinese, one of 25 to 30 such immersion programs nationwide. More widespread one-hour-a-day language classes in Chinese also are gaining popularity in schools nationwide.

"My husband read about this program in the newspaper, and we wanted it for our son," Martha says.

Originally from Mexico, Sebastian's parents believe that if their son grows up speaking English, Spanish and Chinese, the world will be his oyster.

"It's for the future," Martha says. "Our families thought it was a marvelous thing. We are using the correct tools for him to succeed."

The Rioses aren't the only family to go to great lengths to take part in Starr King's immersion program. Another family came 400 miles, from Orange County, so their three daughters could attend the school.

San Francisco's program is only 2 years old. Starr King, the first of two schools to offer Mandarin immersion, eventually will have 120 students in kindergarten through fifth grade studying Chinese, says principal Chris Rosenberg. More want in: "We had 20 parents show up for the school tour this week."

Students start out spending 90% of their day hearing only Chinese — reading it, writing it, learning math and science in it. One hour a day is spent working in English. By the time they finish the fifth grade, half of their classes are in English and half are in Mandarin, and they should be able to read, write and speak both languages fluently.

That's a skill the Department of Defense is eager for more Americans to have. It classifies Mandarin as a "critical foreign language" and in 2007-2008 will put about \$10 million into Chinese-language programs. Such funding historically has been directed to colleges, but now it's moving into grade schools.

In Portland, Ore., Woodstock Elementary has 200 students in a Mandarin immersion program; the school won a \$700,000 Defense grant this year.

When the Portland program began in 1998, the largest number of students were girls adopted from China, followed by children from Chinese-American families. But that has shifted in recent years, with a larger proportion of students coming from families with no connection to China.

"If you go to the fifth-grade class and then down to the first and kindergarten classes," Woodstock principal Mary Patterson says, "you can really see the difference."

### **Attracted to a 'world language'**

The rising popularity of Mandarin Chinese has been "incredible," says Cynthia Ning, director of the Chinese Language Teachers Association. She attributes the interest to communist China's economic boom as it emerges from decades of isolation, as well as the U.S. economy's increasing trade with China. China is now the USA's No. 2 trading partner, behind Canada and ahead of Mexico.

The Mandarin trend began at schools on the East and West coasts but has spread quickly, Abbott says. "You might

think it's mostly in the high socioeconomic areas, but it's everywhere," she says. "We get calls from urban schools, from New Hampshire, Maine, Iowa. It's really everywhere."

In Chicago, black and Latino children fill the Mandarin classes. The program started small in 1999, with just a few part-time teachers and one coordinator.

Now there are 35 Chicago public schools that offer Mandarin, 22 of them elementary schools. Another 30 schools are on a waiting list for such programs.

Chicago has a fairly large Chinese population, but the push for Mandarin has come from non-Chinese families who wanted their kids to learn a "world language," Davis says. Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, who calls China "Chicago's future," has been a big supporter of the program, Davis says.

In St. Paul, Yinghua ("English Chinese") Academy opened last year. Now the public charter school has 145 students through the fourth grade studying in Mandarin. Three other school districts in the state, Minnetonka, Hopkins and St. Cloud, also have launched Mandarin immersion programs this year.

Thad Ewald of Roseville, Minn., has business connections in China, so he's seen the need for Americans to speak Chinese. But when his wife, Erin, heard about the Yinghua Academy, she had another motivation: academic rigor.

"I like that my kids have to turn in their homework on time and really do the work," Erin Ewald says.

The couple were so impressed with how well their daughter Eibhlin did in kindergarten last year that they transferred their son Lachlan into the school's third grade this year.

### **A reflection of the times**

Interest in languages comes and goes. Latin was the sine qua non- from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 20th century. French has always been the language of culture. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, German was the choice among those interested in science.

In the 1950s and '60s, Russian gained popularity in colleges as concerns rose about the Soviet Union. Beginning in the 1970s, Spanish began to edge out French as the most popular language, a reflection of Latinos' increasing immigration into the USA. Interest in Japanese jumped in the 1980s as Japan's economy ascended.

In 1981, the USA's oldest Mandarin immersion elementary school program was launched. The private Chinese American International School (CAIS) in San Francisco began with four students; it now has 420 from preschool through eighth grade.

Interest in it has soared recently, says headmaster Andrew Corcoran. Despite the school's \$18,000 annual tuition, it has seen a 300% increase in applications during the past three years.

The growth of Mandarin programs is creating a new problem: a lack of qualified teachers. There are only 10 university programs nationwide that offer teaching credentials for Mandarin at the grade-school levels, and most of the programs are new, Ning says.

"I think the next three to five years are going to be really crucial for this area of study," Corcoran says. "Until three years ago, teaching Chinese in the United States was not a career. Before that, you did it at a school like ours, which is rare, or at a weekend or afternoon school."

To help other schools get started, his school set up the CAIS Institute to offer training in how to develop Chinese language and culture programs.

Setting up a Chinese-language program is expensive because it means buying all new instructional materials. But for that there's a lot of support, both inside the USA and from China.

In 2006, the Foreign Language Assistance Program of the U.S. Department of Education allocated \$6.7 million to Chinese instruction and an additional \$2.4 million in 2007. There also were grants from the departments of Defense and State, and from various state government and philanthropic groups.

China also is pushing Chinese as a world language. Its Office of Chinese Language Council International, universally called Hanban (literally "Chinese Office"), is in charge of promoting Chinese worldwide. Part of that effort is creating textbooks and materials for children and adults, as well as teacher training.

Hanban also helps set up Confucius Institutes, which work to promote Chinese language, literature and culture, much as Germany's Goethe-Instituts do for German. There are about 100 Confucius Institutes around the world and 23 in the USA. The newest opened Sept. 8 in Denver.

In St. Paul, the Ewalds marvel at their children's ability to soak up a seemingly impossible language. Eibhlin is so comfortable in Chinese that "she approached a perfect stranger at Disney World this summer and started a conversation in Mandarin," Erin says.

Her daughter's also reading Chinese, sometimes to her mother's chagrin.

"The other day, we were in a shop, and there was a woman with a tattoo," Erin says. "Eibhlin wanted to know why she had the word 'milk' tattooed on her arm."

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