

Chicago hub of Chinese learning in US

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Chicago is no longer a "hog butcher, tool maker, stacker of wheat, player with railroads and freight handler" in the US heartland, as poet Carl Sandburg described nearly 100 years ago.

It is now a global city that boasts the largest Chinese language teaching programme of all US cities, opportunities accessible to business people from all over the world, and a strong desire to host the 2016 Olympics, visiting Mayor Richard Daley said yesterday.

In an interview with China Daily, the mayor said Chicago would expand its Chinese-language teaching system at public schools and invite more certified teachers from China to meet the demand for teaching staff.

Daley, who has earned a national reputation for his innovative leadership and community-based programmes, launched the Chinese language programmes at three public schools in 1999.

Now, the city has the nation's earliest and largest language learning system, said Robert Davis, director of the Confucius Institute in Chicago, which was launched last week.

About 20 public schools have Chinese classes and more than 3,500 study the language with the number of learners growing.

A scion of one of America's best-known political families, Daley considered a man of vision was first elected mayor of Chicago in 1989 and has remained in office since. He was rated one of the country's best mayors by Time magazine last year.

His promotion of the Chinese-language programme is part of an effort to build a global Chicago.

"We have to understand the important role that China plays in the changing global economy and be more prepared," Daley said. "Chinese is as important as English as a language of commerce."

The programme, said Daley, is not only to teach the language, but also the customs and traditions of China which is exactly what the Confucius Institute in Chicago tries to do.

Unlike other Confucius institutes set up by the central government to promote Chinese language and culture overseas or similar teaching programmes in the United States that focus on individual and higher education, Chicago's programme involves students from kindergarten to high school and reaches out to society, said Davis.

The response from the local community has been overwhelming of about 3,500 students who learn Chinese, only 2 per cent are of Chinese descent.

One of the incentives to learn Chinese comes from their parents.

"Working parents realize the importance of China and want their children to have better competitiveness in the future," Daley emphasized.

By learning Chinese, the city will benefit in employment, trade and tourism, Davis said.

A key reason for Daley to visit Beijing: To learn from the city's Olympic bidding experience. It's his first visit to the city and his five-day trip started on Saturday.

As a potential bidder for the 2016 Games, it is very important for Chicago to plan early, the mayor, on his second trip to China, said.

"Not just a plan, but also the implementation getting it done early enough to evaluate what to do when crowds come to Beijing in 2008," Daley said, pointing out that there would be 10,000 athletes and 20,000 journalists in the city.

Daley is also promoting his city as a natural business hub for Chinese investors.

Chicago is set to establish a representative office in Shanghai next January to attract more business from China.

A privately-owned Chinese enterprise engaged in manufacturing, which employs about 300 people in Rockford, a city neighbouring Chicago, was cited as an example by the mayor.

Well-developed industrial and manufacturing bases and convenient transportation location make the city convenient for Chinese investors, the mayor said.

About 25 per cent of the flights from the United States to China take off from Chicago. It is also easier to travel from the city to other parts of the nation, with maximum of a four-hour flight.

He keeps up to speed on the world's fastest-growing economy by reading China Daily, cutting out the stories which interest him and sending them to his cabinet.

"The cities' issues are common," Daley said. "I want to see what we can do to address the issues such as environmental protection, culture, and crime."

And he no doubt focuses on preparations for the 2008 Games: "I read everything about the Beijing Olympics."

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