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Tech fosters Chinese language learning in U.S. schools

Number of K-12 students learning Chinese on the rise

**From eSchool News staff and wire service reports
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As Mandarin Chinese language instruction becomes more popular in U.S. schools, a lack of qualified teachers has caused some schools to consider using distance-education technologies to conduct classes. Mandarin Chinese is the world's most widely spoken language, but it's only just beginning to surface in U.S. classrooms, especially at the elementary level.

Like most educators whose schools have started Chinese language programs recently, officials with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS)--which launched a Mandarin Chinese language program in 1999--hope their program will help prepare students for life and work in the new global economy, one where emerging nations such as China and India are expected to play a key role, experts say.

Though CPS relies primarily on face-to-face instruction to deliver Chinese language courses, administrators there are looking for technological solutions that can help bridge certain cultural and language barriers in the classroom. "We're looking into distance learning, but funding is an issue right now," said Robert Davis, who works with the district's Chicago Chinese Connection Program. "We do use distance learning to teach other languages between multiple schools in our district, but the Chinese program is new and growing. It's something we'd like to do."

Unfortunately, for a school system the size of Chicago--the nation's third largest--finding a solution that meets its needs, and the needs of its students, isn't easy.

Though the market for technology-based learning tools is growing, Davis said, the district is cautious about implementing new solutions and tries to research each new product thoroughly. Currently, the district's Chinese program makes use of a multimedia program called Chengo Chinese, a joint venture of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the Chinese Ministry of Education. The web-based, flash-based tool is aligned with district curriculum and uses quizzes and games to help students grasp the Chinese language.

Chicago's Chinese program began with three schools and is now present in 20 district elementary schools (grades K-8) and high schools (grades 9-12). Chinese language instruction begins in kindergarten. The district has a total of 613

schools. "Twenty schools isn't huge, but it's significant," Davis said.

So far, the number of students nationwide who are learning Mandarin Chinese is minuscule--about 24,000, most of them in high school. Compare that with the 3 million or so who study Spanish, the most popular language in the nation's schools, followed by French and German.

But that number is growing as policy makers and school leaders aim to prepare students for life and work in the new global economy. Several large school districts in addition to Chicago's have launched Mandarin programs recently, including Philadelphia, Houston, and Boston.

"Clearly, using technology for this generation of kids, who are so familiar with it, is going to be helpful," said Michael Levine, education director for the Asia Society in New York City. "We haven't broken the mold for how to use technology in languages, and these early projects represent a very good--if inadequate-- start in what we hope will become an extremely important use of technology in the future."

The Kentucky Virtual International High School, launched this year, will allow students from any public Kentucky school to receive an international curriculum and diploma. The school was a 2005 co-recipient of the Goldman Sachs Foundation Prize for Excellence in International Education, a program to promote international knowledge and skills in the nation's schools and communities.

The school signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chinese Ministry of Education to help create a virtual Chinese course and to help expand Chinese language and cultural professional development activities statewide.

Students will have to demonstrate proficiency in a language, complete courses in international economics and comparative government, and participate in an international travel experience and service project.

High schools across the country were asked by the College Board's world language initiative whether they'd consider adding Advanced Placement (AP) courses in Italian, Russian, Japanese, and Chinese--and the organization was amazed at the results, said Tom Matts, initiative director.

Fifty schools in the 2003 survey said they'd offer the Russian option, about 175 said Japanese, and 240 said Italian.

"And for Chinese, it was 2,400--10 times the number of any of the other three," Matts said. "We had no idea there was such an incredible interest out there. Of all the new AP courses, certainly Chinese shows the most promise for growth."

In the U.S. Senate, the Foreign Relations Committee is considering a proposal to allocate \$1.3 billion to boost Chinese language and culture classes in public school--and China, too, is doing its part, Levine said. China's education ministry has formed partnerships with states such as Kentucky and Kansas, as well as the countries of Brazil, Australia, and the United Kingdom, to boost teacher exchanges and training.

"Distance learning [is a] great possibility for language courses, because now you can have live chats using the technology, and you can accomplish quite a bit," said Mary Abbott, the director of education for the American Council on the

Teaching of Foreign Languages.

"In previous years, there was quite a bit of skepticism about distance learning, because we didn't have the capabilities we have now, and teachers are more comfortable using the technology," she said.

"I think we're just starting to see the explosion of Mandarin Chinese, and I think within the next year we'll see more distance-learning programs [for studying the language]," Abbott said.

At Woodstock Elementary School in Portland, Ore., students in teacher Shin Yen's kindergarten class quickly learn the Mandarin Chinese names for different shapes.

"Yuan," her students chant as she holds up a circle, without missing a beat.

A triangle comes next, and they call out, "San-Jiao." Then a square--"Zheng-fangxing"--and so on down the line.

The Woodstock class is on the front lines of the effort to get more students learning Mandarin, a nod to China's emergence as a global superpower of the unfolding century.

The Oregon program, though, is the first in the country to track students from kindergarten to college. The school district and the University of Oregon won a \$700,000 grant from the U.S. Defense Department for the program last fall.

The idea is for students to move from the Portland school system to the university, where scholarships will be offered to students who will take a standard college curriculum taught largely in Chinese. Students also can opt to spend their junior year abroad, studying at Nanjing University in China.

The goal, organizers say, is for the program to be a model that other schools and universities can duplicate, and for students to emerge ready for the workforce, with a native fluency in Chinese.

Eight years ago, when the Woodstock program began, the majority of students were of Asian descent, Woodstock principal Mary Patterson said, many of them adopted daughters whose parents wanted them to feel some kind of connection to their native country. Now the program is increasingly mixed ethnically, she said; for the first time this year, the program had a waiting list, and interested parents had to be turned away.

It's long been accepted that the younger a child is, the easier it is to introduce him or her to a second language, said Patterson.

In September, most of Yen's 24 students couldn't speak a single word of Mandarin, one of the most difficult languages to learn. But three months later, the students were singing songs in Mandarin, laboriously printing Chinese characters, and following Yen's instructions, delivered in Mandarin, with no need for any English translation--jumping up to impersonate trees, mountains, and

frogs at her command.

Teaching begins slowly, Yen said, with repetition of about 20 to 25 Chinese characters, since Mandarin has no alphabet in the Western sense--just 3,500 base characters that are then combined to form other words. Each year, students learn about 150 characters, she said, via constant repetition and memorization.

By the time students get to fourth grade, they are relatively fluent; Lily Rappaport, 9, said she sometimes dreams in Mandarin, after five years in the program. Being in the program has its disadvantages, she said; for one, her parents can't be much help with her homework.

"I am the only one in my family who really speaks it," she said. "I have to figure it out by myself."

In the higher grade levels, students at Woodstock take not just language-learning classes but also math and science courses that are taught in Mandarin.

In Jessica Bucknam's fourth-grade math class, students answer her questions on graphing and remainders in easy, practiced Chinese. She mixes in some language learning with the math as well, asking students whether a wrong answer needs a smiley face or a frown next to it and waiting for their answer in Chinese.

Yen and Bucknam are both native Mandarin speakers, but finding teachers for the program is among the greatest challenges, Patterson said.

Levine, of the Asia Society, agrees. Where to find the teachers to meet the increasing demand for Chinese classes is the "\$64,000 question," he said. "For the Chinese language, or any other kind of critical language, we're going to need to find many, many more teachers."

That's where some experts say technology can help, especially in the most rural and remote locales, where tapping instructors with special skills is difficult, if not impossible.

"Technology can play a really critical, supportive role, and in some instances it can spread one teacher's expertise much more judiciously, particularly in rural areas," explained Levine. "Some [distance-education] programs are supplementary, and some will help home-schooled children who wouldn't normally have access."

Education officials should try for more teacher exchanges with China, he said, and consider alternative certification programs for some of the many Chinese speakers who live in the United States but are not licensed as teachers. Teacher preparation programs at universities also could ramp up efforts to train language educators.

"There are great big multiples of kids who are studying the European languages, but when we think about our economy, and the new markets we are expanding into, it is time to recalibrate some of our attention," Levine said.

President Bush recently announced a national initiative, the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), to help U.S. students master critically needed foreign

language skills to help the nation remain competitive. NSLI is a partnership between ED, the U.S. Department of State, and the Department of Defense.

The initiative aims to expand the number of U.S. citizens beginning and mastering critical-needs languages at a younger age, increasing the number of advanced-level foreign language speakers, and expanding the number of critical-needs foreign language teachers.

"It is not simply a matter that not enough Americans are learning these foreign languages--we don't have enough teachers to teach these foreign languages," said Barry Lowenkron, assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor, during a briefing on the initiative.

"We were struck by the fact that less than 2 percent of high school students in the United States combined today study Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Korean, Japanese, Russian, or Chinese. We need programs to help them study. We also need teachers to teach these critical languages," he said.

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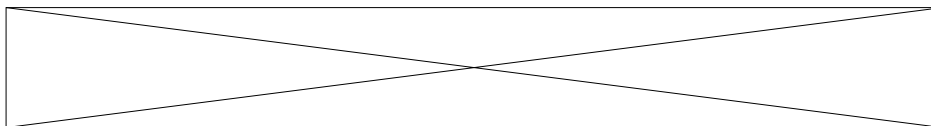
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