

EDUCATION WEEK

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Students Taking Spanish, French; Leaders Pushing Chinese, Arabic

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo

Portland, Ore.

The melody of children's voices fills the morning air as a kindergarten class at Woodstock Elementary School here begins the day with a folk song. Once the boys and girls settle on the carpet, teacher Shin Yen reads from an oversize picture book, stopping often to prompt her pupils to repeat new words and answer questions about the story and characters.

LANGUAGE
: Mission Critical

About This Series

March 29, 2006

Lingual Mismatch

The nation's future economic stability and security will require greater language proficiency, experts say.

- [Students Taking Spanish, French; Leaders Pushing Chinese, Arabic](#)
- [Scarcity of Language Teachers Retards Growth](#)
- [Data Scarce for Gauging Scope of Language Study](#)

The scene would be familiar to most American grade schools, but for the exotic tones and inflections of the language. This and other classes for grades K-5 are conducted completely in Mandarin Chinese, under one of the rare but growing immersion programs designed to build a pipeline of U.S. students with advanced skills in what are now deemed critical languages.

Though Portland's school system has quietly fostered the initiative at Woodstock for eight years, Spanish and French classes offered throughout the 48,000-student district are still by far the most popular—both here and across the nation.

At a time when many policymakers and business leaders are clamoring for American children to take up the languages of Asia and the Middle East to help buttress the United States' international competitiveness and national security, the policies and resources are as much of a mismatch as the languages that are being taught.

More than 90 percent of the nation's secondary schools offer Spanish courses, serving nearly 5 million students, based on a 2000 survey. That may not be so surprising a statistic, given the country's rapidly growing population of Spanish-speakers and the demand in the public and private sectors for professionals who can communicate in that language. Far fewer schools offer French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Russian, in descending order.

But only 1 percent give students the option of learning Chinese—20,000 students, more or less—and far fewer have Arabic classes.

At this point, few public schools are up to the task of teaching those languages, or any language, to the level of proficiency experts say is needed. The languages considered most critical to the nation's economic and security interests are also among the hardest to learn and the least commonly taught, largely because they are "tone" languages, which require learning different pitches for similar words. And few models, materials, or teachers on which to build new offerings are available.

April 5, 2006

Heritage Potential

The United States is home to millions of “heritage” speakers, children who speak a language other than English at home. Few schools capitalize on those skills.

April 12, 2006

English Abroad

Many countries are introducing or upgrading policies to require students in government schools to tackle the study of English in earlier grades. Still, many schools struggle to find trained teachers and to institute rigorous and effective instructional programs.

NCLB Pressure

Current participation rates are inadequate as well. While national surveys show that enrollments in foreign-language courses have been rising, and that more instruction is being offered as early as elementary school, the growth has primarily been for Spanish. American students are generally left with only an introductory knowledge of a language and minimal skills for reading, writing, and speaking it.

What’s more, elementary school language classes—offered during the developmental period when students tend to learn languages with greater ease, according to research—are increasingly difficult for schools to maintain in many places. In the midst of the emphasis they must place on reading and mathematics to satisfy the demands of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, some experts say, schools are feeling pressure to give up other subjects, including foreign language.

“The momentum is there, and interest is rising in terms of making knowledge of other languages and culture a priority,” said Michael Levine, the director of the international education initiative of the Asia Society, based in New York City. “The big issue is our capacity to respond to the growing demand for these skills. We don’t do language instruction in a consistent and developmentally appropriate way. It’s choppy. ”

Long-Term Commitment

Gearing up, as Mr. Levine and others point out, will require an intensive, long-term commitment. Just 14 states have foreign language requirements for graduation, three of those mandating it only for the college-bound, according to a 2004 study by the Council of Chief State School Officers. A handful of states, such as Wyoming, require schools to teach a foreign language to all students beginning in 1st grade.

In the meantime, a small number of educators are turning to pioneering colleagues like those in Portland, or working to formally prepare students who speak a language other than English at home.

Video Translation

See Jocelyn Pabst, a 6th grader at Hosford Middle School in Portland, Ore., speak Mandarin Chinese and then translate what she says into English.



(QuickTime file: 2.2MB)

Interest in learning Chinese has steadily grown in this Oregon district and elsewhere as more parents, educators, business leaders, and policymakers acknowledge the increasing cultural, economic, and diplomatic demands of a global society.

“We recognize that it’s such a diverse global society anymore, that our children need to be culturally literate,” said Woodstock Elementary Principal Mary Patterson.

Roughly half of Woodstock’s 340 students participate in the Chinese-immersion program beginning as kindergartners. They spend half the school day learning the vocabulary,

Language Popularity

pronunciation, and grammar of the language, the simplified form of the character-based writing system—about 150 characters each year—as well as math and other content exclusively in Mandarin, the official language of mainland China and Taiwan. They can continue their studies at Hosford Middle School and, later, in high school and college.

As they progress through the elementary grades, the children show increasingly sophisticated skill in the language, eventually being able to explain the solution to a complex math problem or articulate central themes in an assigned reading, educators at Woodstock say.

In Jessica Bucknam's 5th grade class, students recently paired up to explain the relationships of family members on an extended family tree. Ms. Bucknam called on students, speaking rapidly in her native Chinese, to join a humorous skit pairing them as fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles.

A federal grant for equipping kindergartners through college students with advanced proficiency in Mandarin Chinese and deep cultural understanding of the world's most populous country has raised the profile of the tiny Portland program. The publicity since the announcement of the award last fall by the U.S. Department of Defense, and the flood of e-mails, phone calls, and visitors, suggest a significant public interest, observers say.

The \$700,000 grant under the National Flagship Language Initiative will allow Portland to expand classes, train more teachers, and establish a sequential, standards-based curriculum for teaching the language, as well as content-area classes, in Chinese. The students will be eligible for scholarships to continue their studies at the University of Oregon. The model is intended to build a corps of advanced speakers able to go into careers in science, business, and government, while paving the way for more such programs around the country.

"We have to produce at the University of Oregon program [a pool of] scholars from a range of academic disciplines ... who happen to be at a superior level of proficiency in Mandarin and English in reading, writing, and speaking," said Michael Bacon, who provides teacher support for the district's foreign-language programs. "Second, we have to build a replicable model that can be taken to schools and districts throughout the United States."

Budding Initiatives

A study last month by the Committee for Economic Development, a Washington-based research and policy organization of business leaders and educators, called for a comprehensive campaign for improving and expanding foreign-language learning, complete with federally financed incentives and a public-awareness campaign.

Several recent national actions aim to raise interest and improve instruction in Chinese and other languages by expanding options and building the infrastructure that experts say is essential to helping the United States catch up with the more comprehensive language policies of other industrialized nations.

The most popular languages among American secondary students are rarely the same as those identified by the U.S. government as the most critical.

Most Popular

- Spanish.....4.76 million
- French.....1.27 million
- German.....333,000
- Latin.....189,500
- Italian.....79,000
- Japanese....53,900
- Russian.....11,400

Most Critical

| | |
|---------|---------|
| Arabic | Pashto |
| Chinese | Persian |
| Dari | Punjabi |
| Hindi | Russian |
| Farsi | Turkish |

SOURCES: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Fall 2000; U.S. Government Agencies

The U.S. Senate is debating a bill that would pump more than \$1 billion into Chinese-language programs in public schools. President Bush's plan to enhance math and science instruction includes provisions for foreign-language teachers of "critical" languages. The College Board is planning to roll out a Chinese-language and -culture course this fall as part of its Advanced Placement program, and more than 2,400 schools have expressed interest in participating. Other languages—including Japanese and Italian—have also been added to the AP program recently.

State policymakers, too, have pressed for expanded language offerings in schools, largely buoyed by privately supported initiatives by the Asia Society and other organizations that promote international studies. Unlikely leaders such as Kansas, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, as well as hotspots for international business such as Delaware and New Jersey, have drafted aggressive plans for producing students who are proficient in other languages, in general.

And officials in such cities as Chicago, Houston, and Philadelphia recently announced new Chinese-language programs.

In Portland, community members and parents were behind the push for the Chinese-immersion project. From its inception, Woodstock Elementary School has been a popular choice for parents with children adopted from China, but it also has attracted more and more children of diverse backgrounds from across the city.

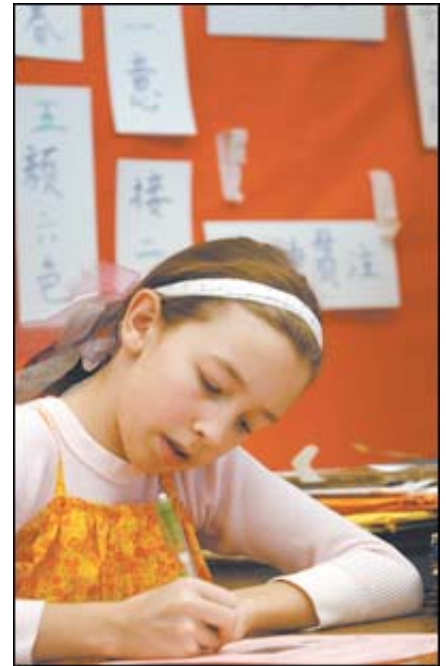
Shrinking Cohorts

Betty Brickson and her family moved clear across town several years ago to make it easier for her daughter, Rachael, to attend Woodstock Elementary. Rachael, who was adopted from China as an infant, is now a 6th grader at Hosford Middle School, where she can converse easily in Mandarin with her classmates about a social studies lesson on ancient civilizations. The program, her mother said, has helped the girl maintain a connection with her heritage and form friendships with other girls like her.

"I felt it was really important for her to connect with her birth culture and country and be able to go back there and access that," said Ms. Brickson, who has been inspired by her daughter's experience to return to college to become a teacher for adults who are English-learners. "I think this program made her feel less different."

Other families have transferred their lives from farther afield—Alaska, California, and Colorado—to enroll their children in Portland's Chinese-immersion program, which now includes grades K-8. The reasons for taking on the rigorous program, which sometimes requires extra tutoring to enable students to keep up with English, Mandarin, or math, are as varied as the students.

Ms. Brickson surveyed those students for a college assignment. Most indicated they hoped their language skills would help them get a college scholarship and a good job, as well as enable them to travel.



Sixth grader Emma Ivie works on a social studies project in Chinese at Hosford Middle School in Portland, Ore., one of the few districts to offer the language.

—Ian Malkasian for Education Week



Teaching assistant Amy Liu works with Andrew Lockeharris during a Mandarin-only social studies class at Hosford Middle School. Her son Andres is also in the district's Chinese-immersion program.

—Ian Malkasian for Education Week

Rachael Brickson is hoping her proficiency in the language will continue to improve enough to win her a scholarship and a place in the small but growing cadre of advanced speakers that educators and policymakers say is needed to help build economic and diplomatic bridges between the United States and Asia.

Jocelyn Pabst, also a 6th grader at Hosford Middle, first tried to enroll in the district's immersion program in Japanese, which her father speaks. But that course was full, so her parents chose Chinese instead, believing that foreign-language proficiency would enrich her life. Her brother, Daniel, is a 4th grader in the Chinese-immersion program at Woodstock.

"When I started the program, I thought it was really exciting to be learning another language," Jocelyn said. "Then, it got more challenging, but I'm still really motivated."

Mandarin Only, Please

In Adrienne Bee's social studies classroom at Hosford, a sign in Chinese lettering requests that students speak only in Mandarin. Students at the school appear to have little trouble doing so, although some instructions and questions are interspersed with English for clarification or emphasis. Jocelyn and classmate Anthony add to the lively chatter as they discuss what they are learning about civilization along the Euphrates River. They quiz each other on translations of related definitions, written in crisp Chinese characters on flash cards, then write descriptions under images of pottery shards and cryptic illustrations unearthed by archaeologists. Both appear confident when asked to discuss their class, in Mandarin, with a district employee who is a native Chinese-speaker.

Anthony thinks his skill at Chinese will give him a leg up on admission to a U.S. military academy.

"Many people can't speak Chinese, so if I can learn to speak Chinese, I'm special," he said.

What makes them all special is their status as the first Portland class on schedule to complete the Mandarin-immersion sequence for their entire academic careers. But middle school is proving a critical point in the students' preparation, as officials here are learning. Only one 8th grader remains from the first kindergarten cohort, and three 7th graders from the second. There are about two dozen 6th graders, and growing numbers in earlier grades.

Keeping students motivated to master the harder academic work of middle school and to continue to progress as Chinese-speakers is challenge enough. Some of the students' skills have already slipped, educators here say. With an array of new elective classes, in arts, music, and other subjects that appeal to preadolescents, the choices afforded middle schoolers can distract them from increasingly difficult language study.

And the inevitable question of relevance comes to the fore.

"At this point, they have a wide range of proficiency levels,"



Adrienne Bee leads her social studies class at Hosford Middle School. Students in the Mandarin-immersion program spend a portion of their day using the most widely spoken Chinese language.
—Ian Malkasian for Education Week

Portland: Mandarin Chinese Immersion

Woodstock Elementary School

Grades: K-5
Participation: 155 students

Most students start the program as kindergartners at Woodstock Elementary School. Few students are accepted after kindergarten unless they have some prior experience learning Chinese.

Hosford Middle School

Grades: 6-8
Participation: 27 students

Most students continued from Woodstock Elementary. Others transferred from a local private international school.

Ms. Bee said of her class of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. “If they are motivated to keep learning [Chinese], they really excel. But it is hard to keep them motivated now.”

As incentives to keep them studying, district officials are planning activities to give the students opportunities to use their skills in real-world situations, including a trip to China when they are 8th graders.

No Need?

Building the program has been a process that, eight years in, has put Portland in the spotlight, alongside long-standing Chinese programs in San Francisco and newer ones in Chicago and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C. But such intensive language programs, particularly in critical languages, are still the exception in a field that has long been relegated to the margins of the education reform debate, observers say.

Despite growing demand for such Chinese programs, public schools are “largely unprepared to meet this need,” according to a report released last summer by the Asia Society that calls for short- and long-term strategies for getting 5 percent of American high school students studying Chinese a decade from now.

Such a goal could be a starting point for building language skills on a continuum toward proficiency, said Mr. Levine of the Asia Society. But while some students should become proficient, others should have extended exposure to other languages and, perhaps, a working knowledge that can be used in their work and travel.

“Not everyone has to be completely proficient in another language,” he said. “But we should be working toward having a much larger percentage of people who can speak, interpret, and think and listen to other languages for a living. Then, there is a secondary demand for people who understand other languages and have some working knowledge of it.”

In fact, some critics have questioned whether any need for a corps of language experts exists. Andy Mukherjee of Bloomberg News wrote in an opinion piece last month that money being proposed to gear up more students for Chinese proficiency could be better spent on improving math and reading instruction.

Overall, however, public sentiment is slowly changing to be in agreement with the need for students to have proficiency in other languages, according to Nancy Rhodes, the director of foreign-language education for the Center for Applied Linguistics, a research and advocacy organization in Washington.

“We are seeing changes in parents’ attitudes about what they want their children to study in high school. They want them to study languages for their career; that’s something you wouldn’t have heard 20 years ago,” she said. “Still, we need increasing public awareness about the importance of starting early and the importance of knowing another language.”

Coverage of new schooling arrangements and classroom improvement efforts is supported by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL.

Franklin and Cleveland High Schools
Grades: 9-12

Schools will establish Chinese-immersion programs to allow students to continue their studies and prepare for advanced study at the University of Oregon.

SOURCE: Portland Public Schools



6th grader Rachael Brickson refers to her English-Chinese dictionary to find a word for the class.

—Ian Malkasian for Education Week

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

"Attention to Teaching Foreign Languages, Cultural Understanding Urged," February 15, 2006.

"Elementary Youngsters Immersed in Russian Classes in Alaska School," January 12, 2005.

"College Board to Add Japanese to Language Offerings," December 8, 2004.

"Arabic Offerings Rare in Schools," May 26, 2004.

"Preschoolers Study Foreign Tongues," March 24, 2004.

"Schools Tap Talent for Home Languages," April 2, 2003.

"Foreign-Language Instruction Resurfacing in Elementary Schools," November 6, 1991.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Expanding Chinese Language Capacity, a 2005 report available from **InternationalEd.org**, looks at what it would take to have five percent of American high school students learning Chinese by 2015.

The **National Flagship Language Initiative**, housed at the University of Maryland's **Center for Advanced Study of Languages**, awards financial support to U.S. universities that promote the teaching and learning of certain foreign languages. Learn more about the **NFLI curriculum**.

"**Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security**" is available from the **Committee for Economic Development**. 

Hosford Middle School offers language immersion programs in **Mandarin Chinese** and Spanish.

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