



October 25, 2006

education

U works on state's Chinese program

By Cati Vanden Breul

The University is playing a key role in implementing a statewide initiative to increase Chinese language course offerings in Minnesota schools.

Over the past few years, the number of elementary, middle and high school students learning Mandarin Chinese in Minnesota classrooms has increased more than 60 percent, according to the Minnesota Department of Education.

The Legislature adopted a proposal from Gov. Tim Pawlenty this year to develop and provide school districts with common curriculum guidelines for a K-12 Chinese language program.

The China Center, a division of the University's Office of International Programs, is teaming up with the education department and school districts around the state to make the goal a reality. The University is the only college in the state that prepares Chinese language instructors to become licensed.

"We're working together to look for resources and opportunities on how to create programs that benefit Minnesota and China," said Hong Yang, director of the center.

A task force comprised of higher education representatives, educators, native Chinese speakers, business leaders and department staff will set curriculum standards and present recommendations to the legislature by Feb. 1, said John Melick, recruitment and pathways coordinator for the education agency.

"We are looking at ways to provide more (Chinese) teachers, improve teacher preparation programs, expedite teacher licensing and develop a common curriculum," Melick said.

Stephanie Connolly, an education department spokeswoman, said the taskforce's main goal is to give more students the opportunity to learn Chinese.

"It's not a language that's widely taught and we want to get more students exposed to it," Connolly said.

Yang said the China Center aims to bring qualified Chinese instructors to Minnesota and create partnerships between the state and China.

"As far as teachers' exchange, there are so many schools that need (teachers)," Yang said. "We can exchange English teachers in China for Chinese teachers to come here."

He said students who learn Chinese will have an advantage in the global market because of China's increasing economic growth.

"It's all related to trade activism," Yang said.

The University's Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition is helping St. Paul develop a Chinese language curriculum for its schools.

"We're trying to get an articulated (kindergarten through college) curriculum to be sequentially ordered so that

kids going from one year to another would have a seamless transition to another class," said center coordinator Karin Larson.

The St. Paul school district received a three-year, \$680,000 federal grant to expand its Chinese program, and the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition is written into the grant as a partner, Larson said.

Ling Wang, who's in charge of the University's Chinese language program in the Asian languages and literatures department, said students will benefit from learning Chinese at a young age.

"The learning load is much heavier in college than in K-12 and the younger they are, the easier it is to learn another language," Wang said. "It's certainly more difficult for adults than for a 14-year-old child to learn."

She said Chinese is the most spoken language in the world and an especially difficult language for Americans to master.

"Students often say it's like learning three languages at one time; speaking is different from writing and writing is different from pronunciations," Wang said.

Despite the challenges, interest in Chinese at the University has been increasing each year. In fall 2001, approximately 146 students took the language. This semester, there are 264 students studying it.

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