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Chinese heard in more classrooms

Although still a relatively rare course offering, instruction in its language is increasing as interest in China expands.

BY MEGAN BOLDT
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Mary Bergin was a bit skeptical when she was told another teacher would be coming to her classroom for 20 minutes a week to help her third-graders learn Chinese.

Within weeks, though, her Mounds Park Academy classroom rang with students clearly singing songs in the new language, and the children could confidently call out numbers in Chinese when their teacher held up cards displaying the corresponding character.

"I didn't know how much they'd really retain," Bergin said, "but I've been amazed at how much they've learned. They're like little sponges. It's really the best age to really absorb the language."

Scenes such as that in Bergin's classroom are playing out more often in public and private schools across Minnesota. Although Chinese is still a relatively rare offering, schools are adding the language to their curriculum and teaching it to younger students in an effort to prepare them for the changing global marketplace.

Enrollment in Chinese language classes at public schools increased from 762 students during the 2003-04 school year to 1,233 last year, according to the Minnesota Department of Education.

Despite the growth, enrollment in Chinese classes is a fraction of what it is for languages like Spanish that are more established in schools. There were 117,780 students taking Spanish last year, for example.

"The interest and excitement has grown exponentially," said Daniel Bittman, the agency's director of education licensing and teacher quality. "We really want to make these opportunities available to all students in an equitable fashion."

Some schools have been teaching Chinese for decades. The private Breck School in Golden Valley and St. Paul's public Highland High School first offered it more than 20 years ago.

But now, schools from Woodbury to Maplewood are offering the language, and the state's first Chinese immersion school — where students learn all lessons almost exclusively in the language — opened this fall in St. Paul.

South Washington County Schools started offering Chinese this fall to students at its 14 elementary schools twice a week, before and after school. The class already has attracted 230 students from among the district's roughly 7,000 elementary students.

And the district has received a three-year federal grant of \$175,000 per year to teach Chinese three times a week at elementary schools during the school day.

Staff members are planning how that program will look and deciding whether it will start at only some schools, though the district's goal is to eventually have it at every elementary school, said Barbie Fedorowski, the district's elementary curriculum coordinator.

"We really want to see it in the elementary schools and build the program up, rather than start at the high school and work down," Fedorowski said.

At Mounds Park Academy, every student gets at least a sampling of Chinese. Elementary-level classes have one 20-minute session of instruction in language and culture each week. Middle school students have the class on alternating days, while high schoolers can sign up for the language as an elective.

Andrew Guiang, a junior at the Maplewood school, jumped at the opportunity to add Chinese to the Spanish courses already in his schedule.

Speaking the language isn't difficult for the 17-year-old. But writing is harder because Chinese uses characters to express whole words, rather than building words from individual letters.

Guiang hopes to stay with the language.

"It's an interesting opportunity, and an opportunity that isn't offered at most schools," he said. "If China's economy continues to grow, it could be helpful."

A state task force is looking at how to increase Chinese instruction in schools and establish curriculum guidelines for interested districts. Gov. Tim Pawlenty and state lawmakers earmarked \$250,000 to create those plans, and the group will bring its recommendations to legislators in February.

Bittman said one of the things they'll be looking for is approval to expedite licensing of Chinese teachers because of a shortage of qualified instructors. There also is a need to change teacher preparation programs in Minnesota colleges and universities to produce more Chinese teachers.

The University of Minnesota is the only university in the state that is training teachers to handle Chinese language classes.

St. Paul plans to expand its Chinese program to elementary students next year with the help of a three-year, \$680,000 federal grant. Currently, two middle schools and two high schools offer the language.

Micheal Thompson, the district's assistant director of secondary education, said introducing Chinese language classes to kids at an earlier age is better for them.

"That's where you get the bang for the buck," Thompson said. "The earlier they start, the better. They retain so much more and do much better in high school."

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