

Asia

Society



Creating a Chinese Language Program in Your School

An
Introductory
Guide



Case Study: Chicago Public Schools

- **Urban public school district**
- **Grade span: K–12**
- **Model: FLES plus Traditional**
- **Students learning Chinese: 3,500 and growing**

A nudge and a promise—that’s what got Chicago Public Schools’ Chinese language and culture program going. In the mid 1990s, feeling that the historical, cultural, and political importance of Asia was neglected, Asian-American parents in Chicago took their concerns to administrators in the Chicago schools. Administrators listened to the issues raised by these parents—and they acted. In 1999, the Chicago Public Schools created a new position in the Office of Language and Cultural Education to infuse more Asian languages and cultural studies into the schools. Shortly thereafter, Chicago’s new program in Chinese language and culture was launched in three schools.

Today that program has expanded to include 20 schools (ten K-8 and ten 9-12 high schools) operated by twenty-two full-time teachers. From an all-black elementary school on the West Side to a nearly all-Hispanic elementary school on the South Side, to more diverse schools throughout the city, some 3,500 students are learning Chinese. For many students, Chinese is their third language after Spanish and English.

The schools have benefited tremendously from support at the top, starting with the mayor. “Chicago is a global city. The business community wants a workforce that can compete globally, and we want to give all our young people the opportunity to succeed in this flat world”, says Mayor Richard M. Daley. But schools also have support from community members and school administrators. “The Chicago Public Schools could not have started any of the programs without the support of principals, teachers and parents,” says Robert Davis, Manager of the Chicago Chinese Connection Program for Chicago Public Schools. At every school, a School Council, made up of parents, teachers, administrators, and community representatives, approves all programs, staffing, and budgets.

Acknowledging that long sequences of language learning produce greater functional language proficiency, the Chicago Chinese program begins with a Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) model that provides 30- to 45-minute blocks of instruction three to five days per week for grades K-8. In the high schools, instruction is provided for one class period daily. Numerous professional development and networking opportunities are afforded the Chinese language teachers. Local community partnerships have been forged between the schools and Chinese businesses and cultural resources so that students may go into the community to see Chinese in daily use, as well as making it possible for the community to come into classrooms to further enrich the language learning experience.

Teacher recruitment, as in most Chinese programs, demands constant attention. The Chicago Public Schools have staffed their program with a combination of locally available teachers (most are Chinese heritage speakers who have bilingual certification) and visiting teachers from China, particularly through a recruitment initiative with Shanghai. Davis underscores the need for more American universities to offer Chinese teacher preparation programs so that Chinese language teachers may be more easily available to schools as they initiate and expand programs.

Chicago’s program has also received support from the Chinese Ministry of Education, in the form of textbook donations, as well as exchange programs for educators and administrators. The National Office for Teaching Chinese as Foreign Language (Hanban) also recently provided support to open a Confucius Institute in Chicago as a resource center on Chinese language and culture for teachers and parents.

The existence of the twenty programs in Chicago is testimony to the partnership between political, business, school, and community leaders and to their shared conviction that learning and teaching Chinese is an important endeavor in the twenty-first century. Further information about Chicago’s program of Chinese language and culture instruction can be obtained by contacting the coordinator at (773) 534-0021 or rdavis@cps.k12.il.us.

Case Study: Springfield Chinese Language Program

- **Urban public school district**
- **Grade span: 1–12**
- **Model: FLES plus Traditional**
- **Students learning Chinese: 800**

At a time when many communities are just beginning to examine the possibilities of starting a Chinese language program in a single school, Springfield requires the services of seven full-time teachers to meet the growing demands for instruction in Chinese. And it takes place in the context of a school district that is very supportive of language learning across the board, offering French, Spanish, Latin, and Italian as well as Chinese. Out of nearly 1,900 students enrolled at the High School of Science and Technology, for example, more than 1,400 are enrolled in a foreign language course, and close to 300 are enrolled in Chinese. Half the student population of this high school is Latino, one-third African-American, one-fifth Caucasian, and less than 2 percent of Asian or Pacific Islander heritage.

Begun as a high school program in 1987, the program drew on a seed grant of \$40,000 from the Dodge Foundation to get its financial jump-start but quickly moved on to district financing. Springfield's Chinese language initiative became so popular and well received by the community that parents of middle school children began asking for it. Now the program runs from seventh through twelfth grade and enrolls 800 students in six levels of Chinese. Chinese is also offered in one K–8 school. The district will be one of the first to prepare students for the new AP course and examination in Chinese Language and Culture.

Throughout the years, leaders in the Springfield Schools have leveraged community interest and enthusiasm with external forms of support to grow and strengthen the program. The district competed for federal support through the U.S. Department of Education Foreign Language Assistance Program—first, a three-year grant (1996-1999) focused on curriculum development and technological training, and again, another three-year grant (2004-2007) targeting professional development and growth of the program into a third middle school. Partnerships with the University of Massachusetts Asian Arts and Culture

program and the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia have provided professional development opportunities for teachers. And the district works with various Chinese cultural organizations to bring performing arts and other cultural activities to the students. Community interest, strong district language leadership, and professional community and external partnerships have all intermingled to form a solid, well-conceived, and well-implemented Chinese language and culture program that is enormously popular among the students of the Springfield Public Schools.

Foreign language study takes an integrated approach, with support for faculty in other curricular areas. For instance, faculty from the science department accompanied a group of Chinese language students to the New York Staten Island Chinese Garden, then created lesson for other students after the visit. The district also organizes an annual Chinese New Year Celebration that involves teachers and students in many subject areas. Even if students do not continue with their language study later, they take their understanding of Asian culture with them. Not surprisingly, given the focus of the High School of Science and Technology, there is also significant use of technology for language learning through multimedia labs (which also meet the students' technology requirement), accessing international news sites, communicating progress with parents, and piloting of online language assessments

Further information about the Springfield Chinese program can be obtained by calling (413) 750-2000 or by e-mail at meiju@comcast.net.

Case Study: The Chinese American International School (CAIS)

- **Private, independent school**
- **Grades: preK–8**
- **Model: immersion**
- **Student population: <400**

“CAIS students will be bilingual, bi-literate, and bi-cultural when they graduate,” opens the mission statement of the Chinese American International School in San Francisco. This philosophy guides all efforts at the nation's oldest Chinese immersion school. CAIS is

an independent school with just under 400 students, pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Nearly eighty percent of the student body comes from a home where Chinese is *not* spoken.

Determined that immersion education offers the best chance for students to gain the greatest degree of proficiency in Chinese language and culture, founders of the school embraced the concept of learning subject matter in both Chinese and English as the school's operating principle when the school opened in 1981. Beginning with only four students, one teacher, and meager financing, the school has grown to forty faculty members and an annual operating budget in excess of \$7 million.

CAIS started in response to the lack of Mandarin education opportunities in the Bay area. While the San Francisco Unified School District provided elementary school foreign language education in Cantonese (due to the sizable presence of a Cantonese-speaking community), there was no such offering in Mandarin. An influential community member, who was also a parent, marshaled civic and business leaders in the city, as well as university leaders at California State University San Francisco, to provide the brain power and resources to initiate an immersion school to teach Mandarin beginning in the elementary grades. Today that program begins in pre-kindergarten and continues through eighth grade with a goal of helping students attain advanced level speaking proficiency (according to the ACTFL Proficiency Scale) at their exit.

From their first day at school in pre-kindergarten, students spend half the day learning in English and half the day in Chinese. Math, social studies, and science are taught in both English and Chinese. For those who do not come from Chinese-speaking homes, they begin by simply listening to teachers who speak to them only in Mandarin and teach using physical expression. While students in the early grades are allowed to respond in English, the immersion model avoids translation so that students learn to think and study core subjects entirely in Chinese or entirely in English. Students are responding to their teachers in Chinese. In sixth grade, the structure of the school day changes to a 70-30 English-Chinese split with math and science taught in English.

There are numerous elements that make CAIS an outstanding program of Chinese language and culture. One is the great attention the school has paid to the professional development of its teachers, including for teachers without experience in the United States training in how to work effectively with American students and American parents. Another is partnership with schools in China for teacher and student exchanges. Among the challenges at CAIS is finding curriculum materials for immersion programs. Teachers have to develop many of the curriculum materials themselves. As interest in Chinese grows, the school has responded. Through its Institute for Teaching Chinese Language and Culture, the school provides professional development for schools in the Bay Area and beyond.

Continued professional growth is not just a matter of interest for new teachers to CAIS. Driven by its desire to take care of its teachers' professional development needs but realizing that others could also benefit, CAIS has been centrally involved for more than two decades in recognizing the need and planning for professional development of Chinese language educators throughout the nation. Through its Institute for Teaching Chinese Language and Culture, its exchange programs (for teachers *and* students), and its working relationship with East China Normal University, CAIS assists teachers in identifying and meeting the needs for their own professional growth each year. Opportunities to network with each other, to identify promising new materials or create original ones, to delve into topics that deal with better instructional and assessment practices—and more—are offered to CAIS and other Chinese teachers through its emphasis on professional development.

Guided by trusted advisors, administrators who are passionate, teachers who love and nurture their students and parents who seek a different path for their children, the Chinese American International School works its magic. Head of School Andrew Corcoran sums it up best: "We have developed students who are comfortable in two languages and two cultures. It's a potent story and an extremely important one for the times in which we are living."

For further information, contact CAIS at (415) 865-6000 or at www.cais.org.