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MANDARIN MADE EASY

Valley schools invest in Mandarin programs as China's economic importance continues to rise amid shifting geopolitics.

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Schools embrace Mandarin classes

MARK OLALDE
THE REPUBLIC • AZCENTRAL.COM

In the face of shifting geopolitics, Arizona schools have begun adapting academic programs to better prepare students for a competitive global workforce.

The newest additions to Valley schools are Mandarin language immersion programs. At least five schools already have programs, and more are in talks to do the same.

“Ni hao, wo shi Addison,” a little girl in the red and white striped dress said confidently, introducing herself to her kindergarten classmates at Tarwater Elementary School in Chandler.

About 50 kindergarten students began learning Mandarin this fall in Tarwater’s first year offering an immersion program. The K-6 school in the Chandler Unified District already hired a Mandarin-speaking teacher for first grade as it plans to add one grade level every year.

“Our district’s just been so incredibly supportive of this program,” Principal Jeff Hensley said. “In the hiring people, securing good teachers, it’s just been nothing but a really positive start.”

Addison Jarecki and her classmates are among thousands of students across the Valley learning Mandarin in immersion programs or enrichment classes. Coronado Elementary School in Gilbert, Desert Sage Elementary School in Glendale, Gavilan Peak School in Anthem and Whispering Wind Academy in Phoenix have started immersion programs.

Other schools, including Pueblo Elementary in Scottsdale, Santa Fe Elementary School in Peoria and Keller Elementary in Mesa, have similar programs for Spanish.

Joe Cutter is the director of Arizona State University’s Confucius Institute, which has provided support to Arizona schools looking to create Mandarin programs. Cutter said the growth in Mandarin learning across the United States has



and became president of the parent council that supports the program. “I know how much the Chinese culture is in the business world influencing the U.S., and it would just open doors for him as he got older,” Newcombe said.

Because these programs put students on track to pass the Advanced Placement test as early as their freshman year of high school, Newcombe envisions her son picking up a third language at that point.

Most area programs use a 50/50 model, in which half the day is taught in Mandarin and the other half in English. Math is nearly always taught in Mandarin, in part because it follows logical patterns that are easy for young students to understand.



PHOTOS BY MARK HENLE/THE REPUBLIC
Aaron Anderson (top) listens during a Mandarin class at Tarwater Elementary School in Chandler, while other kindergarteners read along in a book.

K through 16 pipeline because language learning is a lifelong task,” Cutter said. “Students who elect to study language in elementary and middle school and high school will tend to do better in their other courses as well,” Cutter said. He added that studies found, regardless of such factors as economic status, learning a language led to improvements in other areas of education, as well.

At Tarwater, Hensley said natural attrition should allow him to hire a Mandarin language teacher at every level with no need to cut current staff. He hopes to extend the program through the local middle school, which would create a K-12 track as Hamilton High School already offers Mandarin classes.

Organizations such as the Confucius Institute help Arizona schools find qualified teachers, many of whom come from China. The highly selective process vets candidates through the U.S. Department of Education before individual schools submit descriptions of what type of teacher they want.

Originally from northeast China near North Korea, Tarwater’s Mandarin teacher Ying Shao moved her family to the U.S. when her husband took an engineering job in 2003. She taught university-level English in China but switched to teaching Mandarin in kindergarten once in the U.S.

Shao wrote the class’ curriculum and works in partnership with 23-year veteran Anne Jones, who instructs the English portion of the class. Jones has helped Shao adjust to the different learning styles of Chinese and American students.

“We don’t have this many classroom management behavior problems (in China), so the kids sit there very quietly and they listen. Here the kids are just different from Chinese students,” Shao said.

As for her adjustment, she said, “I feel better now that I got to know these kids, and we have very smart, gifted kids in this program.”

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Joe Cutter is the director of Arizona State University's Confucius Institute, which has provided support to Arizona schools looking to create Mandarin programs. Cutter said the growth in Mandarin learning across the United States has accompanied "the rise of China as a world power both politically and economically."

According to the World Bank, China's population exceeds 1.3 billion, and its gross domestic product is expanding 10 percent annually. The International Monetary Fund announced in October that China surpassed the U.S. for the distinction of having the world's largest economy.

Rachel Newcombe enrolled her son in the new immersion option at Coronado



and became president of the parent council that supports the program. "I know how much the Chinese culture is in the business world influencing the U.S., and it would just open doors for him as he got older," Newcombe said.

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Most area programs use a 50/50 model, in which half the day is taught in Mandarin and the other half in English. Math is nearly always taught in Mandarin, in part because it follows logical patterns that are easy for young students to understand.

"What we're trying to do is create the illusion that the teacher only knows Chinese in front of the children," Coronado Principal Mai-Lon Wong said.

The Foreign Service Institute, a branch of the U.S. Department of State, estimates that it takes 2,200 hours of study to learn Mandarin, making it one of the most difficult languages for English speakers. It takes about half that time to pick up Spanish or other Romance languages.

Spoken Mandarin uses four tones, or inflections. The written language is com-



PHOTOS BY MARK HENLE/THE REPUBLIC
Aaron Anderson (top) listens during a Mandarin class at Tarwater Elementary School in Chandler, while other kindergarteners read along in a book.

posed of tens of thousands of individual characters, but knowledge of only several thousand is necessary for reading everyday text, such as in a newspaper.

"It's more effort, but it's effort well-rewarded," Cutter said. "The earlier you start the better, and that's especially true in a tonal language like Mandarin."

To take advantage of children's language-learning ability, schools begin pilot programs in the early grades and add grade levels as the first group of students progresses.

"Our goal in this is to create a kind of

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Hensley said Tarwater emphasizes learning the Chinese culture along with the language, in part to combat cultural stereotypes. He is setting up a partnership with a school in Beijing so the students can video chat or write to other children across the world.

Tarwater has its own parent council for the Mandarin-language students, and talks of eventually taking the students to China are already circulating.

"They're just kids. We want to try and make that connection," Hensley said.