



LAUSD talking about speaking more Chinese

To help students compete globally, new classes might be offered

By Naush Boghossian, Staff Writer

Article Last Updated: 03/29/2008 10:16:18 PM PDT

Acknowledging the growing force of globalization, the Los Angeles Unified School District is gearing up an ambitious program to offer Mandarin Chinese language and culture courses at all of its middle and high schools.

The plan, which will go to the board next month, calls for the courses to be offered at about 200 middle and high schools, and each of the LAUSD's eight local districts also would have at least one dual-immersion program in which students started studying the language in kindergarten.

The move would be one of the largest of its kind in the nation and would put Los Angeles Unified on the cutting edge of language and culture instruction in public schools.

Superintendent David Brewer III touted the plan at a Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce luncheon last week. He called it "embarrassing" in his years as an admiral that the U.S. Navy is the only one in the world whose sailors speak just one language.

"It's arrogance. Every student in China is taking English classes," he said.

LAUSD has been working for the past 18 months with Mandarin in the Schools - a local panel created by a prominent national nonpartisan Chinese-American organization called the Committee of 100 - on how to expand the classes in Los Angeles schools.

Representatives of Los Angeles city government, LAUSD and California State University, Los Angeles, are among members of the panel, which plans to launch a campaign to help recruit teachers and raise community awareness of the program.

School board member Yolie Flores Aguilar is sponsoring a resolution for the program, which proposes requiring at least one high school in each of the eight local districts to offer Chinese language and culture courses in the 2008-09 school year.

About 713 of 700,000 students in the district take Mandarin courses at the 14 schools that now offer the language. By 2009-10, each local district would have at least one high school, one middle school and one elementary school class offering a Mandarin language and culture program.

Starting in 2010, local districts that already had Mandarin classes would increase grade levels involved, and courses would be added at new sites.

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.
PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



"It's important because we - not just here in California and in L.A., but across the nation - are significantly falling behind other countries in terms of our abilities to manage in a global economy," Aguilar said.

"I don't think we have a second to spare. The rapidness of the economy in terms of moving in a global direction is not something we should take lightly, and there's no reason to wait."

The nation's second largest school district already offers instruction in foreign languages - including German, Italian, Japanese and Russian - and in American Sign Language to about 77,000 secondary students.

Only one school offers a dual-language program in Mandarin, while 24 offer such programs in Spanish and eight in Korean.

Harry Haskell, director of world languages and cultures at LAUSD, said it's critical that U.S. schools make Mandarin more available.

"Mandarin is and will continue to be a very critical language," Haskell said. "We're realizing right now that because of globalization, it's vital that we have second-language skills because we have to compete with the rest of the world.

"And we are not."

Stewart Kwoh, vice chairman of the Committee of 100, said the Mandarin in Schools committee will work to recruit teachers from among

Mandarin speakers in the greater Los Angeles area, which boasts the largest concentration of Chinese-Americans in the United States.

"There are about 200million Chinese learning English, and less than 50,000 Americans learning Mandarin," said Kwoh, who also is executive director of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California.

"We felt that it was very important for American youth to be able to learn Mandarin to be able to compete in the global marketplace, to understand a fast-growing country and its culture, and to be able to converse on the world stage with Chinese being one of the most widely used languages of the world."

Kwoh said he thinks there will be a demand for the courses, noting the number of students taking Mandarin doubled in one year when the district brought in four guest teachers from China.

"If the school board adopts this plan, Los Angeles would be a pacesetter in the country in terms of aggressiveness of a plan to broaden Mandarin programs," Kwoh said. "This is a very aggressive plan."

School districts in cities including Chicago, New York, Washington D.C., Seattle and Portland, Ore., are already offering Mandarin from kindergarten through grade12.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa long has emphasized the need for students to be proficient in more

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.
PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

than one language to remain competitive in a growing world economy.

And he has repeatedly mentioned that his son took a one-month summer course to learn Mandarin.

"In a global work force, knowing a second language like Chinese or Spanish will be critical to our children's success," Villaraigosa said.

"It's encouraging that the LAUSD leadership recognizes this and is making the commitment now to provide our students every opportunity possible."

Kay Kei-ho Pih, assistant professor in the sociology department of California State University, Northridge, said demand for Mandarin courses has surged in recent years.

And he said that while English will remain the primary language in the global economy for the foreseeable future, the ability to read and speak Chinese will become increasingly important.

"We are very ethnocentric in how we view the world - as demonstrated by a lack of knowledge of international affairs," Pih said. "It's a very practical measure, as China is the No.1 trade partner of the U.S."

"It's very important for American kids to learn not just Chinese, but a foreign language."

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™