

Along with ABCs, some learn Chinese

By Tracy Jan, Globe Staff | June 8, 2005

BROOKLINE -- All first-graders at the Driscoll School can write numbers 1 through 10, name the colors, and talk about plants and the solar system -- in Mandarin Chinese.

They began studying Chinese in kindergarten.

Chinese, a language most school systems don't offer until high school, if at all, is becoming popular in elementary classrooms around Greater Boston, as well as elsewhere in the nation. Spanish still reigns as the most popular language, but parents and lawmakers hope that Chinese soon will become commonly taught. School systems are starting the lessons with the youngest students in hope they learn the language well enough to compete in the new world economy, as China becomes an economic and political superpower.

During the last two to five years, schools in Sharon and Brookline have started elementary Chinese programs. Milton and Needham school systems offer Chinese before or after school. Belmont began offering Chinese instruction to all of its fifth-graders this year. The Carlisle school system is considering adding a pilot program in Chinese for elementary students this fall, and Amherst wants to add Chinese instruction for kindergartners in fall 2006.

The Asia Society in New York City estimates that about 24,000 of the 49.5 million elementary and high school students in the United States are studying Chinese, even though nearly 1.3 billion people speak Chinese in the world; the smallest proportion of US students studying the language are in elementary school. By comparison, more than 1 million students study French, a language spoken by 80 million people worldwide.

"China just is going to be a future power," said Marie Doyle, Carlisle superintendent. "It behooves us to make sure the children are really studying the culture, the customs, and the language. The more they know, the more successful they will be in the business world."

Educators say early exposure to Chinese is critical. Chinese takes nearly three times as long as Spanish to master, according to the

Foreign Service Institute, which trains American diplomats for the State Department. It takes 1,300 hours to achieve proficiency in speaking Chinese, while people need 480 hours to become proficient in French and Spanish.

At the Michael Driscoll School, which began its elementary Chinese program five years ago, about half of the students switch from Chinese to Spanish in the seventh grade. But first-grader Daria Taubin said she plans to continue learning Chinese through high school.

"I want to keep learning, learning, learning and then go to China," said the 6-year-old. "I teach my mom every word I really know."

Her classmate Ibi Agba, who speaks a Nigerian dialect at home, said Chinese has been hard to learn because some of the sentences are too long to remember. But the 6-year-old said he likes writing pinyin, the English pronunciations of Chinese words, and impressing his parents.

"When I speak Chinese to them, they say, 'Wow,' " he said.

Some Brookline parents, though, are not convinced that Chinese is the best way to go. Given the amount of time required for proficiency, some parents say they think their children's time may be better spent learning an easier language, like Spanish.

"After a few years of Spanish you can develop some basic conversational skills," said Bill Gardner, a Brookline teacher who has a sixth-grader at Driscoll who is learning Chinese. "It's not clear to me how many students at Driscoll have developed much conversational fluency in Chinese after five years."

Last week, first-graders wrote sentences describing potted plants on their desks, using Chinese words for little, tall, leaf, and green, as their teacher doled out high fives.

By the time the students are in eighth grade, they should know how to read and write short essays using simplified Chinese characters and to hold conversations in Chinese, said Huajing Maske, director of the Driscoll School's Chinese program.

Driscoll parent Christopher Koch said he's grateful that his second-grade daughter has the opportunity to learn Chinese at such a young

age. When the family goes to Chinese restaurants, his daughter can order her food in Chinese, he said.

"I just see how important this is going to be for the economic future of our kids," Koch said. "It's great to feel we're on the leading edge of that."

The Boston and Cambridge school systems have offered Chinese in elementary schools for about a decade. In Amherst and Needham, the presence of many adopted children from China is playing a role in introducing Chinese to students. Needham began the instruction on a fee basis this year, while Amherst wants to start offering Chinese to kindergartners in one school in fall 2006.

School officials say that starting and maintaining Chinese-language programs in elementary schools is a challenge. Textbooks are scarce, as are qualified teachers. Paying for the programs is also tough when some school systems are reducing foreign language offerings.

Many area Chinese programs started with grant money, on the idea that the school system and municipality would eventually pick up the tab. Brookline used to offer Chinese in two other elementary schools, but their grants expired last year. The school system hopes the town will pay for additional Chinese programs, along with Spanish and Japanese, by fall 2006.

Financial help could come soon from the federal government, which wants to see Chinese language instruction grow. Two weeks ago, Senators Joseph I. Lieberman, a Connecticut Democrat, and Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican, introduced a bill that would provide \$1.3 billion in federal money over five years to pay for Chinese language programs in American schools, as well as cultural exchanges to improve US-China relations.

Another push for Chinese, educators say, is coming from the College Board's decision to add a Mandarin Chinese Advanced Placement program in fall 2006. The board administers the college-level AP tests.

"The fact that Chinese is now under the AP umbrella, that gives it an importance that other, less commonly taught languages might not have," said Gracie Burke, world languages director in Milton, which

began its Chinese program two years ago.

If funding were not an issue, she would also like to add Arabic, because of heightened awareness of the need for Arabic interpreters, Burke said.

"At a time of national crisis we sort of go, 'Oh, my goodness' and realize languages are important at that particular moment," she said. "But the crisis goes away, and we sort of go back to the way we were, monolingual."

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