

NEWSWEEK

By William Lee Adams

Newsweek

May 9 issue - At Dulles High School in Sugar Land, Texas, the roster for Advanced Chinese V begins with Jason Chao and ends with Kathy Zhang. In between comes an unexpected name: Elizabeth Hoffman. Hoffman, now a 12th grader, began studying Chinese in the eighth grade, has spent a summer studying in Nanjing and plans to perfect her Mandarin when she starts college next fall. When asked by her peers—who typically take Spanish—why she is learning Chinese, she responds with a question: "Why aren't you?"

As China rushes toward superpower status, America's schools and government officials are echoing Hoffman's sentiment. Earlier this year Rep. Rush Holt of New Jersey introduced legislation calling for increased funding of programs for less commonly taught languages. "For reasons of economics, culture and security we should have much better facility with Chinese languages and dialects," he says. The State Department has designated Chinese a "critical language," but the most recent data show that only 24,000 students in grades 7 to 12 study Chinese, a language spoken by 1.3 billion people worldwide. (More than 1 million students learn French, a language spoken by 75 million people.)

Still, the number is growing. In Chicago public schools, enrollment in Chinese classes has skyrocketed from 500 students in 1999 to nearly 3,500 students this year—and most of these students are Caucasian, African-American or Hispanic. In the Santa Clara County, Calif., district, enrollment has quadrupled during the same period. In 2007, when the College Board debuts advanced-placement language exams in Chinese and Italian, 2,400 high schools plan to offer AP Chinese—10 times the number that plan to offer AP Italian.

Much of the interest can be explained by China's increasing

competitiveness. "People are always trying to gauge what languages are going to be useful for the future," says Marty Abbot, director of education at the National Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. After the sputnik launch in 1957, and after the rise of Japan's economy in the late '80s, funding for Russian and Japanese language programs grew dramatically—as did enrollment. Stephanie Wong, a student at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, Calif., chose Chinese so that she could speak with her grandfather. (In U.S. homes, Chinese has eclipsed French, German and Italian to become the third most commonly spoken language, after English and Spanish.) Wong also predicts that Chinese will be important if she becomes a doctor, as she hopes: her hometown is nearly 80 percent Asian.

Even elementary-school parents have caught on. "My children will have a distinct advantage if I can keep them interested in Chinese," says Julie Dobson, who enrolled her two children—Elliot, 8, and Lindsey, 9—in a dual-immersion program in Chinese instead of Spanish. At her children's school, Potomac Elementary in Potomac, Md., 30 percent of students receive math and science instruction in Chinese starting in kindergarten.

The next challenge: finding enough teachers to meet the growing demand. Certification requirements—such as tests of English proficiency and American pedagogy—can prevent native Chinese speakers from gaining certification. And teachers often must create their own textbooks and curriculum. "We all have to be pioneers and develop the program," says teacher Sarah Ting of Dulles High School. In spite of these difficulties—and the fact that her school is 300 miles from Mexico—Ting keeps trying. She began with 50 students in 1998 and today has nearly 200. That's progress, no matter which language you speak.