

Education might be what brings China and the U.S. closer together.

Should Every American Kid Learn to Speak Mandarin?

By Suzi Parker - January 25, 2013

Suzi Parker is a journalist whose work also appears in The Christian Science Monitor and Reuters.



High dropout rates and failing grades have left school administrators across the U.S. grappling for answers. As teachers struggle to catch students up, a small school district in the heart of the deep South may have found a secret to success.

In Macon, Georgia's struggling schools, administrators have made Chinese language classes mandatory. They hope that by offering Mandarin, students will be better prepared to compete in a global environment.

The youngest students will be the first to learn the language, and the superintendent hopes to have the language in all classes within three years. The teachers in Macon are native Mandarin speakers sent to Georgia by the Chinese government.

The move to bring Mandarin into American schools could turn out to be a very wise decision, and not just for students in Macon.

Dr. Chun Zhang, a Professor of Education at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education, tells TakePart that "there needs to be awareness of China, its culture, language, it's people, and education in U.S. education.."

"I feel that Chinese people are ten times more interested in the U.S. versus us not showing much interest in China. Due to the number of people, it's growing influence, and the role China is playing in the world, our education needs to prepare a generation that will have a global interest, especially in China,." he says.

Academics aren't the only ones who think so.

On January 24, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched the 100,000 Strong Foundation as an independent nongovernmental organization. Previously, the initiative, started by President Barack Obama in 2009, was part of the Department of State. The Foundation's goal is to have 100,000 American students study in China by 2014.

"Our engagement with China today deals with a wide range of the most pressing challenges and the most exciting opportunities," Clinton said at the Thursday event. "And when we began looking at ways to make our exchanges with China more productive, we of course ramped up our diplomatic engagement."

Drew Alexander, the head of Léman Manhattan Preparatory School, is an expert on global education and emerging trends. His school will begin incorporating Mandarin classes beginning with their 3-year-old students next year. Older students already take the language.

"At Léman Manhattan, we constantly look for opportunities to bring world views into the classroom and prepare students for success in our increasingly global economy, where Mandarin is a critical language," Alexander said in an interview. "Young children can pick up sounds and vocabulary effortlessly. As Mandarin is a tonal language, 'the earlier the better' is the rule and it lasts a lifetime."

One school district outside Columbus, Ohio received more than \$1 million in federal grant money for its Chinese arts and language program. The school hosted a visiting teacher from China and created a relationship with a sister school in southern China. Many schools throughout the country are linking to Chinese counterparts.

Some parents have questioned the connection to the Communist country and its influence, especially financially. But most feel the benefits outweigh the controversy.

"With China's growing influence on the world's economy and ecology, Mandarin is quickly becoming the second language of choice. Mandarin fluency benefits both the individual students and the entire world," Alexander says. "Besides being one of the world's most common languages, Mandarin is quickly becoming the world's most popular second language. It is the obligation of a school to provide its students the opportunity to master it as early as possible."