

# 'Best Chinese language program'

**Tim Lai, The Edmonton Journal**

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EDMONTON -- At Meyonohk school, the dawn of the Year of the Dog is as big as Christmas.

Red and gold decorations line the walls and there's lots of quiet chatter anticipating the delicious food to come. Students have spent their lunch hours in the gym perfecting their dance routine with a long, colourful dragon. Parents have been sewing sequins, building drums and dusting off vibrant fans.

It's no surprise that the Chinese New Year is such a big deal at this elementary school in Mill Woods. The Edmonton public school district's Chinese-English bilingual program was born here and at Kildare 24 years ago. The program has since expanded to 12 schools throughout the city, teaching about 1,600 students in English and Mandarin.

"And we would like to see this program grow by 100 per cent in 10 years," said Stuart Wachowicz, director of curriculum with the district.

The academic strength of the program will be tested in March when students in Grades 5 to 9 take the HSK, the gold-standard Mandarin proficiency test, to gauge whether they could hold their own with native speakers.

Officials with the Chinese ministry of education were impressed by Edmonton's program when Wachowicz presented it to them last summer.

"It is viewed by them as the best Chinese language program outside of China," he said.

But Wachowicz acknowledges there are challenges in the future, such as finding enough qualified teachers and trying to keep enrolment from dipping at the kindergarten and Grade 1 level.

Edmonton's program was standardized about a decade ago and became the model for the province. About 50 per cent of the coursework is conducted in Mandarin, from language arts and science to arts and culture.

Students can enter the program at kindergarten or Grade 1 without any prior knowledge, but entering later requires an assessment. Outside of the bilingual program, thousands of students take Mandarin as a second language.

## Bilingual model has expanded into 12 city schools



Grade 8 students at Ottewell junior high school perform a new spring dance as part of their Chinese New Year celebrations.

JASON SCOTT, THE JOURNAL

Mian Mian Xie explores both the language and the culture in her intermediate Grade 8 class at Ottewell junior high. Simplified and traditional characters are written on the board, but her class also practises Beijing-style opera.

Her students say they wouldn't switch out of the program because they know it will help them further their careers in the future. Even though almost all were born in Canada, they

speak a combination of English, Mandarin and Cantonese at home. Some are even working on a fourth language.

"Because of the Mandarin, their English and other languages don't go down, but rather it goes up," said Xie.

The program also encourages students to look beyond Alberta's borders. Xie is taking a group of students to China later this year.

"The bilingual program is not only important to Edmonton, it's very important to the world," she said.

Parents were instrumental in getting the program started 24 years ago and much of the credit for its successful development is due to them, said Jacqueline Lessard, assistant principal for French and international language with the Calgary Board of Education.

"I believe the strength of the Edmonton program is that the genesis was community-based and remains that way," she said. Calgary started its bilingual program in 1998 and currently teaches 115 students.

Victor Wang, a Grade 6 teacher at Meyonohk, cannot stop talking about the contributions of parents and their vision for their children as five mothers scramble in a resource room, scrutinizing the props for the Chinese New Year assembly and gala.

"Parents are really looking forward to preparing their children for better jobs," said Wang, noting the limitless opportunities as China rapidly ascends as a global power. He said the district's decision early on to switch from Cantonese---the original language of the program---to Mandarin demonstrates the community's foresight. "That was a revolutionary decision," added Wachowicz.

But students aren't the only ones benefiting from the internationally renowned program. "I learn from them, too," said Christine Tan, a Cantonese-speaking mother of two daughters at Meyonohk who increases her knowledge by helping with homework. "I grew up not learning Mandarin, so I feel like I missed out on a lot of things. With Chinese newspapers, I can't read and I wanted my kids to learn those things."