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Bold strokes on language

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FROM SATURDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

EDMONTON — David Rody-Wu is talking about the weather with the rest of his kindergarten class. As his teacher, Diana Andrews, points to a weather chart, the other children join in the discussion, volleying effortlessly between Mandarin and English.

It's a kindergarten class that is anything but typical, measured by Canadian public-school standards. In Edmonton, however, the class at Meyonohk Elementary School is an example of a system that encourages second-language learning, and not just in French.

"It's easy," six-year-old David said later about his ability to speak both Mandarin and English. His tiny classroom is wallpapered with the children's drawings, the alphabet and Chinese characters.

The Edmonton public-school system has been offering a bilingual Mandarin language program, one of the largest and most comprehensive outside of China, for more than two decades.

Running from kindergarten to Grade 12, about 50 per cent of the coursework is conducted in Mandarin, from science and language arts to culture and arts. The curriculum is standardized.

About 1,570 students (2 per cent of the school district's total student population) are currently enrolled at 12 schools across the capital city, with close to 15 per cent of the students coming from non-Chinese families.

But while worldwide interest in Mandarin has exploded as China grows as an international economic and political superpower, only one other public school board in Canada — Calgary's — has adopted Edmonton's model.

"You've got a situation where language policies in places such as Ontario have been timid and unimaginative," said Jim Cummins, an expert in second-language learning at the University of Toronto.

"It's kind of ironic that the province with by far the most enlightened language policies is the most conservative."

Most Canadian school boards that teach Mandarin offer it either on a limited basis (from kindergarten to Grade 4), or as an after-school or part-time course.

In Ontario, it would even be illegal to offer a Mandarin bilingual program. According to provincial law, only English and French can be offered as either as a bilingual or immersion program.

Stuart Wachowicz, director of curriculum for Edmonton Public Schools, said second-language learning has been a priority for the board, which has 79,127 students.

He said it is critical for students to start such programs young because studies have shown they have a cognitive flexibility that disappears as they age.

The board offers bilingual programs in seven languages, including Hebrew, Arabic and Spanish.

Like the other alternative programs that the district offers students, what helps make them all so successful is the board's 31-year-old open-boundary policy. As long as a school is not full, a student can attend it. In fact, more than half of the system's students do not attend their designated schools.

It is innovative and consumer-oriented approaches such as these that have earned Edmonton a reputation as having one of the best public-school systems in the world.

The district, which also allows school-based budgeting, is widely credited with listening closely to what type of programming parents want for their children, according to the U of T's Mr. Cummins.

He said Edmonton's large bilingual program got its humble start in the 1970s after parents requested that the board make Ukrainian instruction available.

So, if the Edmonton board has so many lessons to teach, why aren't other districts lining up to learn?

Armando Cristinziano, the Toronto District School Board's program director for languages, said Mandarin is by far the language parents and students request the most. However, he said offering it as a bilingual program would not only be illegal, but also difficult because there are ample requests for many other languages.

"Equity is a big thing at the Toronto District School Board, so which language would you choose?" he asked.

Currently, the country's largest public-school board offers training in more than 45 languages, including Mandarin.

Still, the Edmonton board's Mr. Wachowicz is surprised that other school districts in Canada and the United States haven't followed Edmonton's lead by offering a comprehensive Mandarin bilingual program, which got its start with parent demand in 1982.

"I don't know if it's because our program isn't very well known, but we receive very little interest from other districts," he said. Most of the outside interest in the program comes from China, he added.

Chinese Ministry of Education officials and politicians have made several trips to Edmonton over the years to study the program. They have also partnered with the school board, including running a pilot program this spring to test a learning-assessment tool used in China. Called the HSK, it's the gold-standard Mandarin proficiency test.

Mr. Wachowicz said that while there are a lot of start-up costs with a language program such as Mandarin, maintenance is not expensive. At Meyonohk Elementary, for instance, most of the teaching materials and books come from Taiwan, where the prices are relatively low.

"In reality, it's no more expensive than teaching mathematics or English or science. It's certainly far less expensive than teaching physical education," Mr. Wachowicz said.

Peter Wong, 48, has two daughters enrolled in Edmonton's Mandarin bilingual program. He is also the president of a volunteer parent organization, the Edmonton Chinese Bilingual Education Association, which supports the public school board's efforts.

He said that when the program started 24 years ago, most of the Chinese residents in Edmonton spoke Cantonese.

Mr. Wong said that despite that fact, the decision to go with Mandarin was made after the community was canvassed. The parent volunteers phoned every Chinese-sounding surname in the Edmonton telephone book.

"It was a forward-looking decision by these pioneers at that time," Mr. Wong said. "It was the right one. This is a language that is changing and shaping the world today."

While neither Mr. Wong nor his wife speak Mandarin (both know Cantonese), they are excited about the "doors" that the language will open for their daughters, Jessica and Heather.

He said the association is always trying to promote the program, but has found it is often just as hard to get the attention of Edmonton parents as it is to interest other school boards.

"It's a struggle," Mr. Wong acknowledged. "Some parents, especially new immigrants, just want their children to learn English."

Julia Elashuk, principal of Caernarvon School in Edmonton, said the Mandarin bilingual program was once so popular that there used to be a draw for spots in the kindergarten class at her school.

But, she said, in the past five years interest has waned slightly.

She said the Edmonton school board is going to have to appeal more to second- and third-generation Chinese parents to enroll their children by extolling the cultural and economic benefits.

Florrie Purdon wishes the word would spread to more non-Asian parents like her.

Ms. Purdon, who was raised in rural Alberta, and her husband, Peter, enrolled their children, Emma, 13, and Liam, 11, in the Mandarin program after hearing about it at a dinner party when the children were preschoolers.

Ms. Purdon said that through the years, she has often received confused looks from both non-Asian and Asian parents who wondered why they would want their children to learn "the hardest language on earth."

There were several reasons why the Purdons enrolled their children, she said, but mainly they wanted to open doors for them. Liam is now in Grade 6; Emma is in Grade 8.

"With the economy the way it's going, I keep saying 'thank heavens.' The choices and opportunities they will have will be tenfold over another Caucasian."

Liam said he enjoys learning Mandarin, even if his parents can't help him with his homework.

"I get extra help at school," he said. "It's easy — sort of."

Back at Meyonohk Elementary's kindergarten class, Ms. Andrews was preparing to end another school year.

She thought back to September, when this class began.

"It was a real dog-and-pony show," she recalled with a deep laugh. "Most of the kids just want their mommies, so imagine how hard it is to teach them another language."

Many of her pupils entered the program this year not knowing Mandarin or English. Most can now write at least 50 Chinese characters and speak basic Mandarin.

"They've really come a long, long way, but this is just the start. This is just the start."

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