

Beijing chooses Edmonton for key Confucius institute

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It was the high marks of Edmonton students that really grabbed the attention of the Chinese government.

Long known in Canada for its second-language instruction, Edmonton's public school board began offering China's standard language proficiency exams to children in its bilingual program about five years ago. When they got the highest scores outside Asia - for Grade 12s, grades good enough to study at a Chinese university - bureaucrats contacted administrators in the far-flung Alberta capital.

"We've had very, very strong results. And the Chinese ministry was so shocked, I guess, or taken aback, by those results that they began to look at us very seriously," said Stuart Wachowicz, the board's director of curriculum and resource development.

Shortly afterward, Edmonton Public Schools applied to host a Confucius Institute.

On Sunday, the links between the board and the Chinese will culminate with the official opening of the Confucius Institute in Edmonton, the first ever to be exclusively established at a school district. Confucius Institutes are non-profit organizations that promote Chinese language and culture internationally. There are more than 100 institutes, typically at universities, in 50 countries, and they are overseen by an agency of the Chinese Ministry of Education.

The Edmonton institute, which moved into its home at the Alberta School for the Deaf this week, has a library with more than 10,000 volumes of books, DVDs and other resources provided by the Chinese government.

The institute, which was announced in December, also provides training for teachers of Chinese as a foreign language, develops instructional materials, promotes educational exchanges, offers translation services and certifies language credentials. Officials also hope to promote business ties between Canada and China.

The Chinese provided \$100,000 in startup funding and may give more for projects, based on requests. "To build a bridge of understanding is quite important because all too often, I think at the present time, we tend to be looking - either from a governmental or a media perspective - at China through 10- or 20-year-old lenses. And I don't think there's an appreciation of just how fast China is changing," said Mr. Wachowicz, the institute's president.

Edmonton's Mandarin program, which has 3,000 students from Grades 1 through 12, began 26 years ago when the city's Chinese immigrant community asked the board for Chinese-language instruction for their children and grandchildren. Now, however, 15 per cent of pupils are from non-Chinese backgrounds. Students in the bilingual stream spend up to half their days learning in Mandarin.

Some critics, including Canada's spy service, believe the Chinese government is using Confucius Institutes to cement power. In an intelligence report made public last year, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service says the spread of the institutes is a calculated use of "soft power" by Beijing. And once the Beijing Olympics are over, the agency said the institutes will "take a more prominent place in China's efforts to increase its standing in the world."

However, Wenran Jiang, acting director of the University of Alberta's China Institute, calls speculation about the Confucius Institutes' political agenda "total nonsense."

"Their primary mission is to spread the Chinese language. If you say these are cultural exchanges carrying some political leverage - of course it is. Every country does that. But these are not political tools of the CCP, the Chinese Communist Party, to come to corrupt Canadian institutions. There's no framework [under which] they could do so. They can only function in terms of a supporting role," said Mr. Jiang, whose two sons are in the Edmonton board's bilingual Mandarin program.

Mr. Wachowicz noted that board officials have reviewed books from China for inappropriate content, but have not found anything objectionable.