

# Wednesday, July 2, 2008

## Edmonton visit to learn more about Mandarin bilingual program



Charles, Carolyn and I conducted our own field research trip to Edmonton on June 24. We had heard from various sources that Edmonton Public Schools has an excellent Mandarin bilingual program which has been around for 25 years. Yes, 25 years!!! We had heard that they have 12 schools (enrolment of 2000 students) offering Mandarin bilingual from Grade K-12. We were excited! In the Vancouver School District, only 1 school offers Mandarin bilingual starting at Grade 4, and none in Burnaby, none in North Van and none in West Van.

All 3 of us strongly believed that the earlier we start our kids in any foreign languages the better. So, in our research quest, we wanted to see examples of successes in early implementation (ie start at preschool/Kindergarten level), sustainability of the language program, and to ensure that we do not sacrifice English in favour of the 2nd language (ie how do we ensure that our children master English as well as the 2nd language?)



On our trip, we visited with Stuart Wachowicz. Stuart is the Director of Curriculum, Resource Development and Research Services for the Edmonton Public Schools' Institute for Innovation in Second Language Education. He gave us a great presentation of Edmonton Public Schools' success with their bilingual program. The district offers bilingual programs in seven languages, and second language courses in ten languages. This is in addition to a large and comprehensive French Immersion program. EPSB is also one of the few jurisdictions in Alberta with a mandated second language requirement for all students, requiring study of a second language for the six years between grade 4 and 9, with strong encouragement to continue that study through graduation.



One highlight of his presentation was their study on “bilingual” vs “immersion”. In a bilingual program, 50% of the instruction is in English and 50% in the target language. In Immersion, 100% of the instruction is in the target language. In Edmonton’s studies, they have found that the bilingual method actually improves a child’s command of the 1st (English) language in addition to mastery of the 2nd language by the time the child graduates from Grade 12. The child would be able to read a chinese newspaper and be able to attend university courses in chinese by the time he/she graduates from Grade 12 Mandarin if he/she started at kindergarten. Their studies do note that the bilingual program students do initially start off slower (ie, they “may” not seem to be very good at either languages initially, but will usually suddenly “catch-up” around Grade 4-5 level).



During our trip, we also had the opportunity to visit with 2 elementary schools; Meyonohk and Meadowlark. At Meyonohk, they run an English Core program and a Mandarin Bilingual Program. Families in the catchment can choose to enrol their children in any of these 2 tracks. In the Mandarin Bilingual program for example, the children would spend 50% of their time in Mandarin, and 50% of their time in English. Math is taught in Mandarin. Much thanks to the Principal at Meyonohk, Peter Onyschuk who took us on a school tour and so proudly showed us their progress. At the computer lab, keyboards had chinese characters on them and at the library, there was a section dedicated to chinese materials.



At Meadowlark Elementary, we had the opportunity to speak with the Principal, Ken Lam, who had been a teacher in the Mandarin Bilingual program prior to taking on a leadership position as Principal. We were very impressed that both schools stressed high academic achievement and a global citizenship, 2 very important goals for Charles, Carolyn and I. We were particularly impressed that at Meadowlark, in the Mandarin Bilingual program, students were also given the opportunity to learn French (French is also taught as a third language to all Mandarin students from grades 4 to 6 for 30 minutes two times a week.) How great is that?

The most important piece of the puzzle in the success of Edmonton's Mandarin Bilingual program is parental involvement. The ECBEA (Edmonton Chinese Bilingual Education Association) was formed some 26 years ago to spearhead the adoption of a Mandarin Bilingual program in the Edmonton public school system. Over the years, the Association's strength is impressive. Parents volunteer on the board (to consult with the school board on curriculum development, new school sites, etc) and also on fundraising. The ECBEA plays a major role in student recruitment to ensure sustainability of the program. We were graciously hosted by Past-President John Yee who drove us all over town visiting the 2 schools as well as to our various meetings. We are very grateful for his hospitality and his willingness to share what they have learnt with us.



We are also grateful to Dr Xin Xin Fang (Special Advisor on Chinese Language and Culture to the Govt of Alberta) who hosted us for dinner together with various Past Presidents and Board members of the ECBEA, who shared so many past success stories with us. Having a strong parent advisory council (in this case, a formal association, registered as a non-profit charitable organization) is key to the equation, in order to ensure sustainability. In Edmonton's case, it is truly a partnership between the school board (administration & educators) and the families (parents & students).

Another important takeaway from our research trip to Edmonton was that having our children learn a second language daily (50% of the time) is going to be much more beneficial in generating proficiency than a weekend class (typically one hour, once a week). This will also free-up a child's weekend time for physical activity (play sports) and family time.

Now, if only Vancouver can "start" a Mandarin Bilingual program; we are, after all, the gateway to the Pacific!

Source: <http://www.mandarinforbcschools.org/blog/index.html>