

Mandarin bilingual program kicks off in Coquitlam school

By Janet Steffenhagen, Vancouver Sun September 7, 2010

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Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid visits Walton Elementary in Coquitlam on Tuesday. Walton is the first school in the province to offer K-1 Mandarin bilingual, thanks in part to a \$10,000 grant from China.

Photograph by: Bill Keay, PNG

B.C. would welcome more cash from China to help public schools create Mandarin bilingual programs such as the one that opened today in Coquitlam, Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid said.

"We certainly welcome funding from other sources, especially if it will allow a program that's as valuable as this," MacDiarmid said while joining educators in welcoming children back to school at Walton elementary in Coquitlam.

Walton is the first school in the province to offer K-1 Mandarin bilingual, thanks in part to a \$10,000 grant from China. Several other districts were pressed by parents to offer a similar program but said they couldn't afford it. Only Coquitlam got money from China through its Confucius classroom, established several years ago in partnership with the superpower.

Superintendent Tom Grant said Coquitlam's program is based on one operating in Edmonton and is expected to expand into Grade 2 next year. He said the cost is minimal because the school had excess space.

Interest from parents was intense, and the school allotted spaces via a lottery. Simone Simpson-Ferguson's son was one of about 40 K-1 students who won the draw. There are also 40 Grade 1 students.

"When the program came up, we jumped all over it," said Simpson-Ferguson, who is also studying Mandarin. "To give (children) a head start, any language is good, but if you can get the top two (languages), you are on your way."

MacDiarmid said she's keen about the Mandarin program but said school districts will make their own choices about what language programs to offer and there will be no additional provincial funding. Vancouver hopes to offer Mandarin bilingual next year.

"It's a language that I think will very useful for these children to have," the minister said. "There's been a line up to get into this program. It's a very positive program for B.C."

Today also marked the start of full-day kindergarten for half of B.C.'s five-year-olds. The ministry says 20,000 children will be attending full-day kindergarten this year compared to 5,000 last year, when it was offered only to ESL, special needs and aboriginal children.

Next year, full-day kindergarten will be available for all children and will replace the half-day program.

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