

# Chinese Teachers Converge

*Andrew Corcoran* reports on the first K-12 conference for the Teaching of Chinese Language and Culture

## In response to the recent explosion in Chinese language

and culture programs throughout the country, the Institute for the Teaching of Chinese Language and Culture at Chinese American International School (CAIS) held its first national conference in March. The three-day Conference for the Teaching of Chinese Language and Culture (K-12) was held at Mission Bay Conference Center at UCSF in San Francisco, CA. In its first year, this national conference drew more than 330 Chinese language educators, administrators, teachers-in training, guest speakers, and exhibitors representing nearly every U.S. state in the country, from Hawaii to New York, as well as Canada and Asia.

"This was an extremely timely and important conference that responds to the growing importance of Chinese in the world today," said Dr. Fred Genesee, a professor of Psychology at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and the conference's keynote speaker. "Educators need to be more proactive to promote interest in China and the Chinese language if the students of today are going to be prepared to do business with China and understand this emerging world power."

American educators are scrambling, according to U.S. newspapers across the country — from *The New York Times* to *The Wichita Eagle* in Kansas — to incorporate Chinese language programs into schools and their districts curriculum. The push is in part coming from the U.S. government, which has now come to realize the importance of Americans being able to communicate effectively with the people of China. Chinese is listed as a Category Four language, which means it takes an English speaker roughly three times longer to become proficient in Chinese as it does for a Category One language like French or Spanish. Given the reality that Chinese takes longer to learn, more and more Chinese language

programs are targeting students at the K-12 levels to maximize proficiency levels. Both the Defense Department and the Department of Education have established programs to promote the study of Chinese language and culture in elementary and high schools through the Flagship Initiative and U.S.-China Cultural Engagement Act. In the process, these agencies and others continue to actively promote new language programs to encourage more students to study critical languages, such as Chinese, Arabic, Korean, and Farsi, etc. The number of students learning Mandarin in traditional U.S. schools has jumped from an estimated 5,000 in 2000 to about 50,000 in 2005, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. In addition, about 160,000 children take classes at heritage schools that teach Chinese language and culture after school or on weekends.

Whilst the growing demand for Chinese language instruction across the United States continues to increase, professional development opportunities for teachers as well as resources for administrators interested in starting Chinese language programs are developing at a considerably slower pace. This often deters the long-term sustainability of new Chinese language programs, promoting the myth that Chinese is too difficult for native English-speaking American children to learn. As many schools have come to realize, creating a Chinese program is not simply a matter of finding a teacher and providing a classroom. In order for Chinese programs to be successful, there must be a platform for these teachers and administrators to exchange ideas and creative solutions to the distinctive challenges they face.

Specifically focusing on challenges and solutions to Chinese language programs at the pre-collegiate level, the first national Conference for the

Teaching of Chinese Language and Culture (K-12) offered over 45 workshops and presentations packed into an exciting three days. The conference provided educators with the necessary teaching tools and the administrative guidance for developing infrastructure to support sustainable and successful Chinese programs. Teaching Chinese to American students presents a number of unique challenges that administrators and teachers alike must be prepared to confront: cultural differences in the classrooms; how to develop appropriate assessments tools and standards by which to measure students progress; teaching simplified characters versus traditional characters; finding educational materials that are engaging and appropriate for the learning levels of American students; and providing adequate support to families that do not speak Chinese at home. During the conference, many of the educators and administrators shared their successes as well as their struggles in an open platform — learning from each other's different experiences in the classrooms. In addition, administrators, teacher candidates, and Chinese teachers developed a professional network that will enable them to continue exchanging ideas.

Chinese language teaching and program resources are still limited. One of the greatest challenges we now face is how to provide educators and administrators the information that they need, especially since Chinese programs are spread all over the country. Not every school has the advantage of a strong heritage community and local cultural resources to rely on like CAIS. Often, schools starting a Chinese program will find themselves isolated within their district, which leaves the new Chinese teacher with little or no immediate support in developing curriculum or getting feedback on different teaching styles. It is important that we continue to provide more professional development opportunities like the conference that bring

together experienced educators and new teachers.

The conference offered several off-site workshops. A visit to the CAIS campus allowed participants to observe students learning in a bilingual Mandarin-English classroom environment. A tour of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco showed teachers how to include museums as a vibrant part of their curriculum when teaching about Chinese culture and language, while a tour of China Books & Periodicals' publishing center provided many participants the chance to discover and purchase much sought-after teaching materials. Generous support from a variety of organizations such as China Books and Periodicals, The Freeman Foundation, and the Wang Family Foundation made it possible for many of the teachers to attend.

Jen Pan, a teacher from Chinook Trail Elementary in Colorado Springs, said: "My colleagues and I learned a great deal and gathered a lot of resources and information. I am looking forward to the next conference." Next year's conference will be held March 14-16, 2008. For more information about this year's conference, including selected session handouts and workshops presentations available for download, please visit us at [www.cais.org/conference](http://www.cais.org/conference). ❧

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