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With a Changing World Comes An Urgency to Learn Chinese

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Pearl Terrell was so determined that her great-granddaughter Shayla begin learning Chinese that she spent two weeks this summer driving 100 miles a day from her home in West Virginia to a middle school in Frederick County so the soon-to-be fifth-grader could learn the language.

The U.S. government flew 10 teachers to Washington from China this month and gave them a five-day crash course in Dupont Circle on how to teach -- American-style -- before dispatching them to schools across the country. Although the number may seem small, the scramble to recruit and train these teachers for the start of this school year underscores the urgency the Bush administration is placing on establishing Chinese programs in U.S. classrooms.

After years of insisting that the world speak English, of grants and initiatives that established foreign language programs in fits and starts, Americans have awakened to a far more global playing field and the need for specialized languages, economists say. And nowhere is that more evident than with China.

"China is being mentioned everywhere in relation to everything from business, international affairs -- even the war on terror," said Kenneth Lieberthal, a professor of political science at the University of Michigan. "You buy things in the store -- they're made in China. . . . No one is hearing about France as the way of the future."

More than 1.3 billion people worldwide speak Chinese, and about 885 million of those people speak Mandarin, China's official language and dominant dialect. In the United States, only about 24,000 students in grades seven through 12 study the language, according to a report from the Asia Society, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group that seeks to build ties between the United States and Asia. But educators say those students reflect a steady growth in the number of Americans wanting to learn Chinese.

"People are finally beginning to pay attention to Mandarin as a major cultural and economic prospect for students," said Michael H. Levine, executive director of education for the Asia Society. "The push is coming from the defense [community] and government and grass-roots interest from parents."

In January, President Bush unveiled a \$114 million initiative aimed at increasing the number of

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so-called critical languages, such as Chinese and Arabic, taught in U.S. schools. The 10 Chinese teachers are the first recruits in a program the Bush administration hopes to expand to include teachers of Russian, Korean, Farsi and other critical languages.

"This is the largest initiative of its kind focused on language in half a century," said Thomas A. Farrell, deputy assistant secretary for academic programs at the State Department.

There is no official tracking of Chinese programs, but about 96 public and private U.S. schools offer Arabic, according to the National Capital Language Resource Center, a joint project of Georgetown and George Washington universities and the nonprofit Center for Applied Linguistics. This fall, for example, Springbrook High School in Silver Spring will offer Arabic for the first time.

Chinese language courses are not new, particularly in the Washington area, where schools have long had an international bent. In Montgomery County, Bethesda-Chevy Chase and Richard Montgomery high schools have offered Mandarin since the late 1980s. Fairfax County schools have offered it since the 1990s.

But what is new is that interest in such courses no longer comes exclusively from Asian parents, who viewed the programs as a way for their children to maintain ties to their culture. Increasingly, it's non-Asian parents who want their children to learn Chinese, citing the desire to remain competitive for the best jobs. For example, in the Chinese language program offered in Frederick County this summer, only two of the 16 children were Asian.

"They want their children to have an edge, and they see Chinese as helping them get that," said Paula Patrick, foreign language coordinator for Fairfax public schools, where about 1,200 students take Chinese.

This fall, more than a third of Maryland's public school systems will offer Mandarin -- more than twice the number that offered it last year. (Some U.S. schools teach Cantonese, the dialect widely spoken in Hong Kong and the language spoken by many early Chinese immigrants, but far more offer Mandarin.)

In Virginia, where five school systems offer Chinese, educators in Fairfax launched a program last year to offer lessons to 1,000 students at two elementary campuses. That's in addition to the programs it offers at three high schools, where about 200 students are taking part. In Montgomery, where 17 schools offer courses, program enrollment increased 59 percent last year, from 656 students to 1,041.

In the District, H Street Community Development Corp. offered Chinese language training to 11 high school students this summer. At Washington Latin School, a public charter school slated to open next month in Northwest Washington, educators are hoping that their Mandarin program will be a draw for families when formal courses are offered in 2008.

School systems in Philadelphia, Houston, New York City and Portland, Ore., are poised to launch Chinese programs. Chicago public schools teach more than 3,500 students in the largest program in the nation.

Kathryn B. Groth, vice president of the Frederick school board, whose system will start a Mandarin program this fall, said she welcomes the global focus.

"I think Americans who used to feel other people needed to learn [English] now realize that the time has come when that doesn't work anymore," Groth said. "I've heard from people who say: 'Forget the engineering. Learn the foreign language. If you want a job, the foreign language is going to sell your engineering.' "

For her part, Terrell, the West Virginia great-grandmother, easily could have enrolled her great-granddaughter in Spanish or French courses and saved a lot of gas money. Terrell never considered foreign language a must-have when she was growing up, but she has changed her worldview.

"China is an up-and-coming country," Terrell said. "And if [Shayla] learns Chinese, it will be good for her -- and maybe she can teach me some as well."

In the sun-dappled classroom in Frederick County, Shayla and her classmates were more than eager to show off their language skills. Ariana Sadoughi, 9, of Frederick ticked off a list of Chinese phrases she had mastered: *ni hao* (how are you?), *xie xie* (thank you).

In another corner of the room, Xinchun Song was showing another group of students how to write the Chinese characters for big sister, little sister and mother. At one point, she separated the two characters that combine to form the word "mother," explaining to the children that when separated, one character translates to "horse" and the other represents "female."

"Does that mean my mother is a female horse?" one boy asked with alarm.

"No, no, no," Song said as she tried to explain the complexities of Chinese writing.

Yet even as U.S. educators are being pushed to expand Chinese programs, they are running into obstacles. It is difficult to find people qualified to teach.

Only a few universities in the United States offer teacher certification programs in Mandarin, according to Levine, of the Asia Society. Last year, George Mason University added a program to certify Mandarin teachers, but only two people have enrolled.

That's why exchanges such as the one that brought the 10 Chinese teachers, as well as two Arabic instructors from Jordan, to the United States are so critical, said the State Department's Farrell.

"This will help us get a jump-start," he said. The initiative to bring foreign teachers here will be complemented by a similar effort to send Americans overseas for language training, he said.

Still, some fear that school systems -- particularly those that serve mainly poor and minority children -- might not be willing to make the investment in adding language classes because they are focused on pushing students to meet reading, writing and mathematics goals required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The Chinese government, however, is trying to do what it can to promote Chinese language. Hanban, or the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, a nongovernmental organization funded by the Chinese government, has been instrumental in providing materials and in some cases helping school systems recruit teachers from China.

This summer, Hanban worked with the National Association of Independent Schools, a group representing U.S. private schools, to send a nine-member delegation to China that recruited 19 teachers for 16 schools.

Hanban has also forged a partnership with the College Board, the organization that administers the SAT and Advanced Placement exams. This fall, the College Board will begin offering AP Chinese courses in select schools. Hanban will help the organization recruit instructors from China to help teach the courses.

For their part, the Chinese teachers who trained in Dupont -- still full of energy after a long day of lectures on "The Culture of the American School" -- were eager to share their language and traditions with U.S. students.

Said Shijun Chen, a high school teacher from Beijing: "We feel very excited and very lucky to bring our culture here. It will be a really good challenge for us."

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