

**A BLUEPRINT  
FOR CHINESE IMMERSION  
PRESCHOOLS IN THE  
UNITED STATES:  
IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES**

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# A BLUEPRINT FOR CHINESE IMMERSION PRESCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES: IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES

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**About CELIN @Asia Society** The Chinese Early Language and Immersion Network @Asia Society (CELIN) was established with a mission to support the growth and sustainability of Chinese early language and immersion programs across the United States, to ensure that students have opportunities to develop high-level multilingual and intercultural competency for advanced study and work in an interconnected world, and that teachers and programs have the expertise and resources to help students achieve this goal.

# A BLUEPRINT FOR CHINESE IMMERSION PRESCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES: IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past few years, universal preschool, and whether or not it should be free, has entered the public discourse and policy discussions from the White House, Congress, and different levels of the government. The inequity exposed by the socio-economic gaps exacerbated by COVID-19 has increased the level of urgency in addressing this issue. While policymakers discuss legislation and funding, the education community can contribute to the discourse by providing research findings and examples of best practices around the nation. In turn, it can benefit by thinking ahead about how universal preschool can be optimized in all localities in the United States.

This paper, along with two CELIN Briefs, [\*An Emerging Field: Chinese Immersion Preschool Education\*](#) and [\*Surveying Chinese Immersion Preschool Programs and Teachers in the United States: 2020-2021\*](#), offers a blueprint of how to provide high-quality English and Chinese immersion preschool experiences for all children. It begins by discussing the vision, goals, rationale for, and research supporting the value and importance of Chinese language immersion preschools. It then describes the state of the Chinese immersion preschool field in 2020-2021 and discusses the challenges that the field faces. It concludes with seven recommendations aimed at building the infrastructure for a system of demand and supply for Chinese immersion preschools.

## THE SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Advocate for and build the Chinese immersion preschool field through engagement and collaboration.
2. Develop a framework about Language Immersion Preschool for All and a Guide for Chinese Language Immersion Preschool.
3. Conduct research; build the knowledge base; and disseminate information, best practices, strategies, and resources.
4. Develop Chinese language immersion preschool program evaluation and child assessment tools for preschool to grade 2.
5. Provide workshops and professional development opportunities for parents, teachers, and key stakeholders.
6. Collaborate with policymakers, universities, teacher organizations, the community-at-large, and publishers to increase the supply of teachers and materials.
7. Identify and share funding, opportunities, and resources.

As a field, which includes Chinese language programs in PreK-12; institutions of higher education; teacher programs; communities-at-large; and national, state, district, and private policymakers and stakeholders,

we can collaborate to implement the activities described in the recommendations and build a network of high-quality Chinese immersion preschools throughout the United States. As a nation, we can co-construct a shared vision and instill the political will to develop a globally competent, multilingual citizenry who can successfully navigate a world that is deeply interconnected. As each child comes to the door of learning, let us give them a key to

explore what is beyond our physical borders. This paper invites readers to imagine the possibilities and power of raising change agents who can make the local community and the world a better place for all.



*Students are learning about the life cycle of a butterfly—in Chinese.*

# A BLUEPRINT FOR CHINESE IMMERSION PRESCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES: IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES

## INTRODUCTION

We support the idea of universal preschool and advocate for adding language immersion experiences for all children. Here, we use Chinese as a case study for how to do it.

Over the past few years, universal preschool, and whether or not it should be free, has entered the public discourse and policy discussions from the White House, Congress, and different levels of the government. The inequity exposed by the socio-economic gaps exacerbated by COVID-19 has increased the level of urgency in addressing this issue. While policymakers pass legislation and funding, the education community can contribute to the discourse by providing research findings and examples of best practices around the nation. In turn, it can benefit by thinking ahead about how universal preschool can be optimized in all localities in the United States. This paper, along with its accompanying CELIN Briefs, supports the idea of universal preschool and advocates for the vision of adding language immersion to preschool. Building on this vision, it offers a blueprint for how to provide high-quality English and Chinese immersion preschool experiences for all children.

We recognize that the notion of offering Chinese language immersion preschool education may seem unrealistic to many policymakers, educators, and community members. However, in examining the linguistic landscape and resources of the United States, this

idea is not out of reach. The World Language Education field and heritage language communities can be enlisted to be part of the effort. According to U.S. Census data, in 2015-2019, 21.6 percent of persons age 5 years and above spoke a language other than English at home ([Quick Facts, ACS](#)). We have the opportunity to help all students become bilingual and biliterate in English and another language (including their home language, if it is not English) and to put in place PreK-12 educational policies and practices that will set the stage for developing the globally competent citizens that the 21st century requires.



*A preschooler holds up her painting of the Chinese word for "good fortune."*

We select Chinese as a case in point for various reasons, which are discussed in Section 2, Rationale for advocating for Chinese language immersion preschool. Further, because Chinese language instruction and immersion education are not widely available in the educational system in the United States, and Chinese is perceived to be a difficult language to

learn, the arguments and blueprints offered here will provide a model for many languages that are not commonly offered in schools but that are critically important for American national interests within and outside our borders.

The number of Chinese language programs in the formal K-16 education system in the United States has grown since the National Defense Act Title VI of 1958 first introduced Chinese as a foreign language into higher education institutions (Wang, 2012a, 2012b). Over time, the Chinese language has been introduced in younger and younger grades in the K-12 system. In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese was established as one of the foreign language courses in high schools. From the 2000s onwards, a proliferation of Chinese immersion programs has been established in K-8 schools nationwide (American Councils for International Education, 2017; Asia Society, 2005; Asia Society & The College Board, 2008; Wang, Everson, & Peyton, 2016). A similar upward trend in Chinese language programs in the younger years (early childhood programs) can be observed by anecdotal evidence from communications within the Chinese Early Language and Immersion Network ([CELIN@Asia Society](#)). However, we do not yet have a framework and guide for bringing Chinese language immersion experiences to young learners.

To begin to address this, a trilogy of papers has been published to document and advocate for Chinese language immersion preschool education. The first of the series is a CELIN brief, *An Emerging Field: Chinese Immersion Preschool Education*, which reports on a meeting convened by CELIN@Asia Society in New York City in 2020. In addition to describing the participants and organizations involved and the key points of discussion, the Brief follows a four-year girl, Cleo, as she goes about her day in a Chinese immersion preschool program. The Brief includes a literature review about the value of preschool and Chinese language immersion education and why language immersion in preschool is beneficial for building a foundation for language, literacy,

and lifelong learning.

The second paper, a CELIN Brief, *Surveying Chinese Immersion Preschool Programs and Teachers in the United States: 2020-2021*, reports on two national surveys of Chinese immersion preschools and teachers in the United States in 2020. In addition to reporting the findings, the Brief discusses implications at the teacher, program, field, research and teacher development, and policy levels.

This paper is the third in the trilogy and builds on the content of the two Briefs. It is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the vision, goals, and rationale for advocating for Chinese immersion education. Section 3 describes the state of the field in 2021 and the challenges that we face. Section 4 makes recommendations for how to build a system of Chinese immersion preschool education, followed by the Conclusion.

The primary audience for this paper includes policymakers at all levels from the public and private sectors, preschool administrators and teachers, parents, teacher developers, researchers, and prospective program builders or funders. The recommendations can be adopted to plan and implement Chinese language immersion preschools at the local, state, and federal levels. The lessons learned and insights and principles discussed can apply to all languages. The decisions to adopt which language, and what language immersion model, are local, depending on the availability of a student population, community contexts, funding, teaching staff, schedules, resources, and community and parental demands, among other factors. Readers are welcome to imagine the possibilities of applying the recommendations to preschool programs in any language.

## VISION, GOALS, AND RATIONALE FOR ADVOCATING FOR CHINESE LANGUAGE IMMERSION PRESCHOOLS

### DEFINING CHINESE LANGUAGE IMMERSION PRESCHOOLS

The term “Chinese language immersion preschool” can be unpacked in two dimensions. On the one hand, the trilogy of papers described above focuses on [preschool programs that are organized and operated by professionally trained adults and in which learning is combined with play](#). By this definition, we focus on educational programs that serve children in their preschool years, starting at three or four years old, until they reach age five or six and are ready to enter kindergarten or elementary school, based on their local educational contexts and requirements. These preschool programs may be private; parochial; faith-based; community-based; company-subsidized; or funded and operated by local, state, or federal entities. We do not include nursery centers, private home care centers, or daycare centers that provide custodial care to infants and toddlers, as these warrant a different discussion.

On the other hand, we focus on preschools that

offer Chinese language immersion learning experiences to all students, whose home languages may be Chinese, English, or any other language. By Chinese immersion, we refer to programs that spend at least half of the instructional time in Chinese, which aligns with the definition provided by Fortune and Tedick (2003, <https://carla.umn.edu/immersion/FAQs.html>). In such a preschool setting, language allocation might take a number of forms. Ideally, a preschool may use Chinese 100 percent of the time, with a minimum of 50 percent of the time using Chinese as a medium of instruction and interaction. Many PreK to grade 5 programs may have different configurations of instructional time in Chinese and English. (See the following for more detail: the [CELIN Preschool Brief](#), the many schools described in the CELIN Program Profiles (<https://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/program-profiles-pre-k-12>), and the CELIN database of schools (<https://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/find-or-document-student-program>).



Children explore the five senses with objects. As they talk about each object and their sensations, students develop social and literacy skills at the same time.



*A teacher helps a young learner write her own book in Chinese.*

## VISION

Our vision is that all children, age three and above, can enjoy equitable opportunities to be enrolled in high-quality Chinese (or other non-English language) immersion preschools, or at least can learn Chinese as a world language (see Mission below), in urban, suburban, and rural settings in all 50 states and the territories of the United States. All children have the right to receive the highest-quality preschool education, so that they will develop cognitive skills and build the foundation for mastering learning in all content areas and in at least two or more languages upon entering kindergarten. They will be prepared to become creative global citizens, workers, and leaders who can communicate, collaborate, and innovate with people of diverse cultures and backgrounds to find solutions to make the world a better place for all.

## MISSION

Our mission is to advocate and make recommendations for strategies and actions for high-quality Chinese language immersion preschool education to realize this vision. We recognize that there are already many dual language immersion preschool programs for students learning English. The goal of these programs is to make sure that English language learners with a home language other than English have sufficient English proficiency when they enter Kindergarten and beyond. Our orientation is different. We argue that all children, including English-speaking children and those with different home languages, can be immersed in Chinese or another world language in preschool so that they have a head start in becoming bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate (or multilingual, multicultural, and multiliterate) for life. Such a head start will prepare them to be globally minded and competent in living in and leading our intricately interconnected world.



In some areas, where full-time Chinese language teachers are hard to find to implement an immersion model, a preschool may consider having Chinese or a World Language as a Special, like Arts, Music, or Physical Education, providing language exposure for 15-30 minutes per day. This is not ideal and does not lead to true bilingualism. Nevertheless, it helps expand children's linguistic parameters and rouses their curiosity about other cultures and people. This option may be a good starting point, which is better than none. Readers are reminded to keep the key question in mind when reading this paper: *How can we offer equitable learning*

*opportunities for ALL children, particularly through language immersion preschool programs?*

## WHAT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESCHOOLS

Early Childhood Education (ECE) centers or preschools are places where young children generally first meet the world outside their home on their own for sustained periods of time. Together with their teachers and peers, children build a community and learn social, collaboration, and cooperation skills. They learn and begin to participate in the expectations, skills, and traits of school and the larger society. Like all schools, preschools are intended to develop cultural continuity; they are institutions that both “reflect and impart their cultures’ core beliefs” (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009, p. 1).

**High-quality early childhood education helps children grow physically, cognitively, socially, culturally, and emotionally.** As children begin to become more aware of the world outside themselves and their homes, their relationships with the surrounding environments and people with whom they interact regularly affect the development of their brains (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>). Growing up in a stress-free environment, children are able to connect their brain to the rest of their body, which is intertwined with lifelong health (Center on the Developing Child, n.d., <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/connecting-the-brain-to-the-rest-of-the-body-early-childhood-development-and-lifelong-health-are-deeply-intertwined>). Their brain is able to develop higher executive function -- a set of skills related to information processing, planning, comprehension, multi-tasking, concentration, emotional regulation, and motor skills (Center on the



*Playing and learning go together. A student hones her perceptive and motor development by using play dough to form Chinese numerals.*

Developing Child). Time spent in high-quality programs supports cognitive development. Of four measures of cognitive development (language, concept growth, spatial concepts, and memory), children's language, concept growth, and spatial concepts show increased growth during the school year but not over the summer months when they are not in school. Only memory develops steadily year-round (Huttenlocher, Levine, & Vevea, 1998).

**Preschool is a time when children begin to develop their sense of self within a group.** It is a time when they develop social skills, self-awareness, and self-confidence (New York City Department of Education, 2021). Children bring skills as "typical" preschoolers, but also as individuals. Helping them to grow and develop means recognizing similarities as well as differences, and talking with them to learn who they are, what they value, and their individual strengths (<https://news.yale.edu/2016/02/09/preschoolers-need-more-play-and-fewer-scripted-lessons-says-early-childhood-educator-erik>).

In preschool, students develop conceptually and linguistically, learning the words they need to describe their experiences (Piaget, 1987; Piaget & Inhelder, 1997) and socially constructing their world. Sociocultural theory posits that children's development is affected by their environment; language heard from others shapes their thought; and what they think about and how they think about it is influenced by the culture and society in which they live (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).

**Children's ways of thinking and early academic skills are expanded** when they play independently and are actively involved in and play with teachers and trusted adults through games, shared reading, dialogue and discussion, and other structured activities that engage higher-order thinking, including making predictions and responding to thought (not fact) questions (NAESP <https://www.naesp.org/resource/why-pre-k-is-critical-to-closing-the-achievement-gap/>, Hechinger



*Teacher leads a morning meeting using a panda puppet speaking Chinese. Students pay close attention, signaling they understand the agenda for the day.*

<https://hechingerreport.org/new-research-finds-magic-8-preschool-classroom-practices/>). Early childhood education is widely recognized to be of great value.

**Quality preschool programs have been shown to improve children’s learning outcomes later in life in academics, health, and general well-being** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Children who attend quality preschool programs are placed in special education programs and repeat grades at significantly lower rates, have higher rates of high school graduation (McCoy et al., 2017), show more readiness for school, and have higher test scores and lower rates of school failure and dropout (National Association of Elementary School Principals, NAESP, 2021).

**Quality preschool programs have been shown to help reduce the achievement gap.** Differences in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores across countries are, in part, predicted by the availability of preschool education, among other factors (NAESP, 2021). Recognizing the benefits of preschool on children’s school engagement in the long run, the Preschool for All Initiative (Office of Early Childhood Development, 2013) has provided funding that resulted in a number of state initiatives across the United States to make preschool available to all students through public and public/private initiatives.

**Strong research data show that oral language and vocabulary acquisition in early childhood helps lay a strong foundation for literacy.** An extensive meta-analysis of approximately 300 studies shows that early literacy measures correlate with later literacy achievement. These analyses examine the effects of code-based instruction, shared book reading, home/parent

interventions, preschool/kindergarten interventions, and early language teaching (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). The following practices in preschool classrooms contribute to oral language and vocabulary development: Repetitive and interactive read-alouds improve comprehension and productive skills (McKeown & Beck, 2014); oral vocabulary and word retrieval in early childhood education, along with print awareness, predict word-level reading and reading comprehension in second grade (Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002); and oral definitions of vocabulary predict reading comprehension in kindergarten in English (Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Snow, et al., 1995). In another meta-analysis of 67 studies of early childhood vocabulary interventions, explicit instruction of vocabulary in multiple contexts, with repeat exposures, through definitions and examples, was more



*First day of immersion school, where this student will learn, play, and make friends bilingually.*

effective than implicit instruction alone, and explicit instruction supplemented by meaningful practice was even more effective (Marulis & Neumann, 2010). The findings from these studies focus on first-language readers of English. The implications for quality preschool programs are clear: oral language and vocabulary acquisition help children build the foundation for reading and writing in later grades.

**Oral language and pre-literacy practices develop skills that, once developed in one language, transfer to other languages.** Extensive research findings from language education provide evidence for positive language, knowledge, and skills transfer. Cognates in English, French, and Spanish are obvious examples for potential language transfer. Between Chinese and English, phonological awareness leads a learner to bridge oral and literacy development. Comprehension and other reasoning skills in reading, commonly shared writing features in writing, and study and learning skills in

cognitive thinking are examples of positive transfer (Cummins, 2013; Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). There are many significant benefits that language immersion education brings to learners, even very young ones.

## GOALS AND EFFECTS OF LANGUAGE IMMERSION EDUCATION

Research provides strong evidence of the positive effects of immersion/dual language education. In a longitudinal study in Portland Public Schools (PPS) in Portland, Oregon, a group of researchers examined the performance of students in dual-language immersion versus monolingual education. The district uses a lottery that randomly assigns students—both native English speakers and English Learners (ELs)—to language immersion in its schools. This study represents the largest random-assignment study of dual-language immersion in the United States to date, which also allowed the researchers to track students across a diverse array of immersion schools in Japanese, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish for up to nine years. The findings show that students randomly assigned to immersion programs in kindergarten outperform their counterparts in fifth grade reading by thirteen percent of a standard deviation, and in eighth grade reading by more than a fifth of a standard deviation, and these estimates do not appear to vary by students' native language. Conditional on their EL status at school entry, lottery winners are three to four percentage points less likely to be classified as ELs in sixth and seventh grade. The effects of lottery winning on mathematics and science performance are indistinguishable from zero in most cases (Steele et al., 2017).

Research on Canadian French immersion programs continues since the inception of the



*Students learn to talk about their day. They combine social and literacy development in one activity.*



*Language and STEM are a great combination. Science requires a certain precision when we communicate. Here, children are able to learn technical and scientific language alongside everyday words and grammar.*

programs in the 1970s. All research findings suggest that, for best results, immersion programs should be sustained over time, for at least five years (Gándara & Escamilla, 2017). Collier and Thomas (2017) have conducted longitudinal research on one-way programs (most or all of the students are from one language background, usually the dominant language, and learning the target language or both languages) and two-way programs (approximately half of the students are from the dominant language and half from the target language background, content is taught in both languages, and students serve as resources for each other) in the United States that span four decades.

**Taken together, this substantial body of research demonstrates five major benefits of language immersion education:**

1. Academic achievement: All children can succeed
2. Proficient bilingualism from childhood to adulthood

3. Cross-cultural and global competence
4. Critical consciousness for equitable access and social justice
5. Creative and innovative educational design and implementation of language immersion education

The CELIN Brief, [\*An Emerging Field: Chinese Immersion Preschool Education\*](#), offers detailed explanations of these benefits and the relevant research. Additional benefits are discussed below.

**Bilingual cognitive advantages from brain-based research include:** Bilinguals show a higher degree of creativity and are better than monolinguals at solving problems and managing conflicts (Dreifus, 2011). They exhibit divergent thinking, the ability to find novel or hidden meanings, and better pattern recognition (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). They may have a larger working memory, be more efficient in cognitive/sensory processing, and have better visual-spatial skills (Blom et al., 2014).

**Bilingual children are found to show more cognitive flexibility and higher executive function, including the ability to ignore distractions and to multi-task** (Bialystok, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 2012, 2017). Increased inhibitory control, or the ability to refuse a reflexive response and make another choice, has been exhibited by bilingual students as compared to monolingual students in a Head Start program, and monolingual students in the program who acquired a level of bilingualism during this time showed stronger growth in inhibitory control, compared to children who remained monolingual (Santillán & Khurana, 2017). Some studies have suggested that young bilingual children have advantages over monolingual children in perspective-taking and theory of mind

Chinese has the largest number of native speakers in the world. It is also the second most useful business language, after English.

and the recognition that others may hold perspectives different from their own, and that these effects of bilingualism last a lifetime (Kamenetz, 2016). Being bilingual may also stave off the onset of Alzheimer's disease (Craik, Bialystok, & Freedman, 2010).

**Childhood is an optimal time for beginning bilingualism.** First, children in a Chinese immersion preschool focus on meaning-making instead of on the accuracy of grammar points. Their focus is on getting their meaning across so they can play with friends, eat, or get some toys. Second, they are not shy about making mistakes, regardless of which language they use. In all of their languages, they are exploring how to say something to achieve their purpose. Third, research suggests that accent and prosody (the rhythms of speech) are more “native-like” if the acquisition of an additional language starts before the teenage years, particularly when learners have input from native speakers of the language. Finally, time is on their side. They can acquire an additional language in a more naturalistic manner, through play, learning, and an eagerness to communicate.

**Starting language learning at an early age gives children the time needed to develop high levels of bilingualism and biliteracy, provided that they have the opportunity to continue to learn the languages.** At the very least, through learning a new language early, their linguistic parameter will have been expanded, setting the stage for acquisition of many more languages, including their native language.

### **RATIONALE FOR ADVOCATING FOR CHINESE IMMERSION PRESCHOOLS**

In addition to linguistic, cognitive, and educational benefits, there is a host of reasons

why we should begin to expand the learning and teaching of Chinese in our schools. **First, the U.S.-China relationship is one of the most critical international relationships in the 21st century.** China has become a superpower, sharing the world stage with the United States and other developed nations. It should be clear why the study of Chinese language and culture is important for the United States to be engaged with the shifted world order. Yet, as we advance into the second decade of the 21st century, we still have to make a case for the perpetual question, why is the study of Chinese language and culture important for the future U.S. citizenry and workforce?

**Second, Chinese is an important global and business language.** The Chinese language has the largest number of native speakers in the world (Eberhard, Simons, & Fenning, 2021) and is used in China, Taiwan, and Singapore as an official language and by millions and millions of Chinese diasporas throughout the world. It is also the second most useful business language, after English (Lauerma, 2011).

**Third, the different linguistic system of the Chinese language challenges learners cognitively, who must tap into existing and different ways of learning and processing information.** As explained above, because Chinese is more challenging and takes a longer time for English speakers to learn than Indo-European languages, such as French or Spanish, studying Chinese helps children acquire grit for being persistent (Duckworth, 2018), developing learning strategies, and having an attitude and habit for lifelong learning.

**Fourth, learning about Chinese and Asian cultures through learning Chinese enhances the overlooked aspects of the world culture**

In the United States, fewer than 500,000 students are studying Chinese in the entire K-16 spectrum, including those who attend weekend Chinese heritage language schools. In contrast, English is a compulsory subject of study for students beginning in Primary 3 and continuing through high school in the Chinese national curriculum. The 260 million primary and secondary school students in China are, to a certain degree, bilingual and biliterate in Chinese and English.

and U.S. history in the existing Social Studies curriculum in the United States (Clydesdale, 2021; Kenworth, 1951; Waxman, 2021). China is one of the major ancient civilizations in the world, but its history and culture are taught only superficially in U.S. schools. Students are woefully deprived of the opportunity to learn about China, Asia, and areas outside the United States and Europe, which results in a severe knowledge deficit about the changed and continued shifting world order. In a Chinese language classroom, students learn about Chinese, Asian, and other cultures' geography, histories, customs, traditions, and how they perceive themselves and interact with the world. This content-rich approach not only fills the gaps in the U.S. curriculum, it also affords opportunities for students and teachers to engage in discussions about identities and racial relationships from diverse perspectives. This aspect of learning Chinese culture and history is especially beneficial for students in the United States to understand and engage more deeply with members of the Asian diaspora who are living here and are often considered as "other" Americans.

**Fifth, students of Chinese language have more tools and sources to seek information, knowledge, and perspectives from primary sources, instead of relying on second-hand sources.** For example, students can learn about the advancements in informational and digital technology; research in medicine; youth and pop cultures; and educational, economic, social, and political policies and practices in China, Asia, and other parts of the world from multiple sources. It is dangerous to rely solely on mass and social media for information about China and related issues. More than ever, it is critical to understand China from multiple perspectives.

**Sixth, our planet is facing an unprecedented crisis that requires international coordination and collaboration, especially between the United States and China.** Global threats are no longer about a specific nation, or We vs. They. COVID-19 is a chilling example of a global threat. Climate change, energy, air, water, health, migration, and the divide and inequity between the poor and the rich are all pressing issues. Global competence for engaging in effective communication, understanding multiple perspectives, sharing ideas, finding solutions, leveraging resources, and taking actions for change are prerequisites for today's youth, who will inherit this planet from us. It is our moral responsibility to equip them with the right tools.



*A reading game uses Chinese language to build other cognitive skills.*



*Play builds a foundation for a lifetime of learning and communication. At this school, every aspect of development—including play—is bilingual.*

**Last but not the least, the United States has consistently under-invested in world language education, yet China has made the study of English part of its national curriculum for students in Grade 3 and beyond.** In the United States, fewer than 500,000 students are studying Chinese in the entire K-16 spectrum, including those who attend weekend Chinese heritage language schools (American Councils for International Education, 2017; Wang, Everson, & Peyton, 2016). In contrast, English is a compulsory subject of study for students beginning in Primary 3 and continuing through high school in the Chinese national curriculum (OECD, 2016, p. 24). The 260 million primary and secondary school students in China are, to a certain degree, bilingual and biliterate in Chinese and English. In fact, many families in large cities in China rush to start their children learning English at age 3 or 4. Yet, in the United States, Chinese is still considered to be a Less Commonly Taught Language (National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages, <https://ncolctl.org>). The implications of this Chinese-English bilingual deficit

in the United States are beyond imagination. Time is overdue for us to rethink and redesign our educational policy and practice.

There are several policy implications to consider. One is to rethink our world language education. Besides China, the United States is far behind most European countries in world language education. According to the data of Eurostat, the statistics arm of the European Commission, a median of 92% of European students are learning a language in school. In comparison, according to a 2017 report from the [American Councils for International Education](https://www.americancouncils.org/), far fewer K-12 students in the United States are learning a language other than English. Throughout all 50 states and the District of Columbia, 20% of K-12 students are enrolled in foreign language classes, and Spanish is overwhelmingly the most popular language studied (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/06/most-european-students-are-learning-a-foreign-language-in-school-while-americans-lag>). This lack of interest



in studying a language is parallel to American's perception about jobs. In a 2016 Pew Research Center [report on the state of American jobs](#), only 36% of Americans reported that knowing a foreign language was an extremely or very important trait for workers to be successful in today's economy, ranking it last out of eight skills for workers' success. As we mentioned before, COVID-19 and climate change, among other global issues, should serve as wake-up calls to American people. U.S. leaders and workforce need to have the tools to communicate with the rest of the world, and not just rely on others to learn English to communicate with us.

The other implication is to consider how to incorporate research evidence about the value of preschool and language immersion education into educational policies and practices. Since most states and local communities already have the basic knowledge and infrastructure to deliver preschool education, it is not a far-fetched idea to consider and implement language immersion in preschool. If education leaders and communities have a bold vision and the political will, they can develop sound educational policies and practices to make this a reality.



*Learning Chinese, while learning about numeracy.*

## CURRENT STATE AND CHALLENGES OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE IMMERSION PRESCHOOL FIELD

### 2020-2021 SURVEYS OF CHINESE IMMERSION PRESCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

Research findings support the value of preschool in general and Chinese immersion preschool in particular, but what is the state of the field in the United States? As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in February 2020, 24 practitioners and thought leaders in Chinese immersion education in the United States participated in a meeting hosted by CELIN at Asia Society, representing eight Chinese immersion preschool programs, one assessment company, one publisher, two institutions of higher education, and one state Department of Education (Delaware). Meeting participants described their programs from various vantage points: Chinese immersion in the early grades, university teacher education programs focused on early childhood and additive bilingual education, and efforts of state departments of education to develop early childhood programs. Details of this meeting and discussion points are documented in a CELIN Brief, [An Emerging Field: Chinese Immersion Preschool Education](#).

During the meeting discussions, the need to conduct two surveys became clear in order to answer the questions, “What is the current landscape of Chinese immersion preschools in the United States in 2020?” and “Who are the educators in the field, and what are their needs?”

Two surveys were conducted in 2020, and analysis and reporting were completed in 2021. The first survey sought to examine features at the program level, to be com-

pleted by program leaders, principals, or administrators. The second survey investigated the linguistic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and needs of school personnel that included administrators, teachers, and teaching aides. Details of the surveys are reported in the CELIN Brief, [Surveying Chinese Immersion Preschool Programs and Teachers in the United States: 2020-2021](#). In what follows are the key findings that describe the landscape of the Chinese immersion preschool education at the program and teacher levels.

### PROGRAM SURVEY FINDINGS

The program survey consisted of 25 items, including multiple-choice, short-response,



A student uses her fine motor skills to “write” the Chinese character for “mountain.” She’s also learning about the structure of Chinese characters at the same time.

and long-response questions. A total of 19 program directors and school leaders responded to the survey. The overall patterns of the survey findings are discussed here, according to school context, program features, curriculum and instruction, and community involvement. Details for each finding can be found in the Brief.

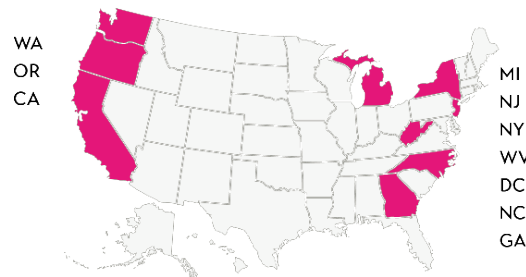


Figure 1 Geographical location of preschool programs surveyed in the United States

**School context.** Approximately one-third of the programs that responded were situated in California, followed by New York, and the District of Columbia. Other areas included Georgia, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Washington, and West Virginia, as shown in the map in Figure 1.

Seven programs were located in suburban areas, and the remaining 12 were in urban areas. Most programs were on the two coasts of the United States, with no programs reported in rural areas.

The earliest program from the sample was established in 1989. Between the years 2000-2010, six more programs were established. The momentum of established programs continued into the most recent decade, from 2011-2020, with 11 new programs. This upward trend indicates an increased demand for Chinese preschool programs in the United States.

Of the 19 programs surveyed, nine were publicly funded, and ten were private. The public programs consisted of charter schools and district school programs. Private programs consisted of non-profit organizations, for-profit organizations, and other private entities. From the sample, just over 20% of programs served communities in low socio-economic areas, while almost 80% served communities in middle- and high-socioeconomic areas.

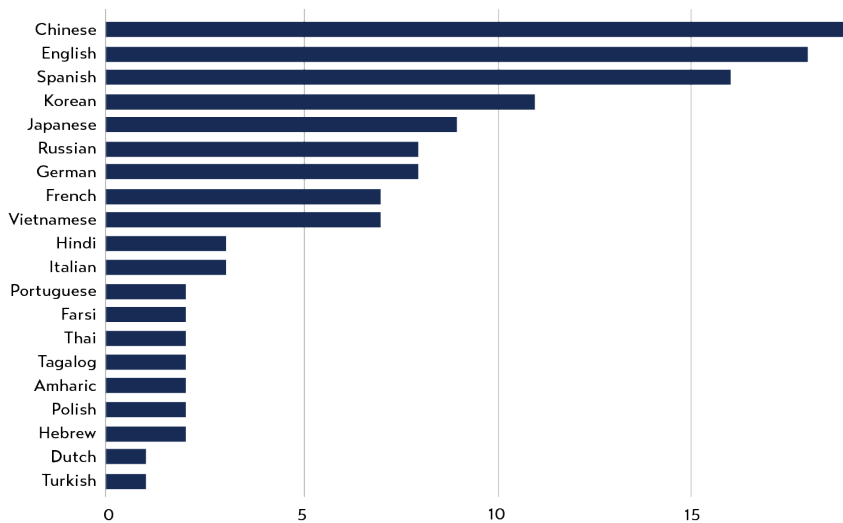


Figure 2 Students' home languages reported by the number of preschool programs surveyed

Twenty different languages were reported as the home languages of students, which are shown in Figure 2.

All programs reported enrolling children whose home language was Chinese. Eighteen programs reported English, 16 programs Spanish, and 11 programs Korean as home languages. Other home languages reported included Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Vietnamese. The breadth and diversity of home languages in these Chinese preschool programs indicate that many children are on track to becoming bilingual or trilingual, if they can continue their language development in Chinese, English, and/or the home language.

**Program features.** Chinese immersion preschool programs varied in size across the sample. Just over half of the sample (53%) reported serving 1-100 students, 26% serving 101-200 students, and 21% more than 200 students. Most preschools enrolled children aged three years old and above, and only 26% included two-three-year-old children.

The overall average student-teacher ratio in classrooms was 1:13; that is, there was one teacher for every 13 students in the Chinese preschool programs reported in this survey.

From the sample of 19 programs, slightly more than half (53%) were full-day programs, operating for 4-6 hours. About 40% of the full sample offered extended-day programs beyond six hours, while only one program offered a half-day program, from three to four hours.



*Toddlers help count the number of children in class, then record it on the board using Chinese characters.*

In terms of the language education model used, about 85% of the preschool programs surveyed adopted an immersion model, while 15% taught Chinese as a new or additional language. Among those that offered language immersion, interestingly, seven were the 50/50 model, and seven others used 90/10 or 80/20 models (50/50 refers to using Chinese 50% and English 50% of the instructional time; 90/10 is 90% in Chinese and 10% in English, and so on). Three programs were total immersion, with 100% instruction in Chinese.

**Curriculum and instruction.** The Chinese preschool programs surveyed adopted a variety of curricula. The top two most common curricula were the International Baccalaureate early years program (32%) and the Reggio Emilia approach (26%). Five other programs created their own school curriculum, and the rest mentioned the Better Immersion curriculum (11%), Creative Curriculum (5%), Reading and Writing Workshop (5%), and Waldorf approach (5%).

**Parent and community involvement.** Program directors were asked about practices used to communicate with parents as key stakeholders. Almost all programs used phone calls, text messages, or emails and periodic newsletters and notices. Programs also hosted Parent-Teacher Association meetings and open house events, while social media were quite common as well. Interestingly, only three programs conducted home visits as a form of communication or establishing relationships with families.

How did programs involve parents? In addition to participating in parent-teacher conferences, parents volunteered at school events, served as chaperones on school trips, and volunteered in the classroom. Engaging in a different capacity, more than half of the

parents (63%) also held fundraisers for school programs and participated in parent workshops held by the schools.

### TEACHER SURVEY FINDINGS

The teacher survey examined teachers, administrators, and teacher aides based on the following constructs: personal background information, educational background, teaching experience, and professional views and needs. A total of 54 educators responded to the survey – 46 teachers, five administrators, two teacher aides, and one unemployed educator. As above, overall patterns are described here. Percentages for each finding can be found in the Brief.

#### Personal background.

There was a broad but somewhat equal distribution of ages represented in the sample, ranging from 20 to over 60 years old. Collectively, the number of respondents between the ages of 20-40 and 41-60 were about the same, constituting almost one-half of the sample. The largest group, about one-third, were between 41-50, and the smallest group were over 61 years old.

All but one respondent was born outside the United States (98%). Interestingly, when asked about how long they had been in the United States, there was an equal distribution of periods of time. Specifically, 20% of respondents resided in the United States for 0-5 years, 24% for 6-10 years, 26% for 11-15 years, and 30% for 16 years or longer.

Among them, 94% of respondents reported

that Chinese (inclusive of all dialects) is their native language. Other native languages included English, Tamil, and French, each represented by one participant. In terms of English proficiency, about 75% reported they were at advanced or superior levels. About 20% of them self-reported intermediate English language proficiency, while one reported novice English language skills.

**Educational background.** The survey asked respondents to report their degrees and certifications. Interestingly, 74% of the respondents hold an advanced graduate degree, i.e., 65% earned a master's degree, and 9% earned a doctoral degree. Almost a quarter of the sample reported a bachelor's degree as their highest degree, with only one reporting a general high school diploma. When reporting on where these degrees were earned, 65% received degrees from the United States, 30% from foreign institutions in Chinese-speaking countries (e.g., China), and 6% from foreign institutions in non-Chinese-speaking countries (e.g., Australia).

Delving deeper into the degrees earned by respondents, they were also asked about the concentration/major of their degrees. Generally speaking, although there was variation in their reported disciplines, slightly over half were related to education (general, early childhood, school counseling, music education, and educational technology), and the other half were related to language, language education, and linguistics, such



*Literacy development starts early in life. Here, a student is correlating listening with written words.*



*Children learn through exploration. Here, students are encouraged to use Chinese language to share diverse family cultural traditions and holidays. A student makes a Christmas tree while her classmate makes a menorah.*

as Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language; Chinese Language Teaching; Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages; or a major in English, Chinese, or linguistics.

Respondents were asked about details regarding teacher certification; 24% were not certified. Approximately half of the teachers and two administrators were certified in elementary education, while 41% and one administrator were certified in early childhood education. These certifications were primarily obtained in the United States, with the majority earned in New York and California. Other states represented included North Carolina, Massachusetts, Oregon, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. Taiwan, Holland, and China were the foreign countries mentioned where certification was obtained. Eight of the non-certified

teachers indicated an interest in pursuing certification, while the remaining five were undecided.

**Teaching experience.** Respondents were asked to answer questions related to their roles in the program, the age groups of students they taught, years of work experience, and the language(s) of instruction used. Their salaries were also captured in an optional question. First, 85% of the respondents were teachers, 9% were administrators, two were teacher aides or paraprofessionals, and one was unemployed. Almost 91% were employed full-time, while the remaining 9% were part-time.

Respondents reported a range of teaching experience in early childhood education contexts. The largest group had 0-5 years of experience (43%), followed by those with

6-10 years of experience (28%), 11-15 years of experience (17%), and more than 16 years of experience (13%). It is interesting to note that, regardless of their age, almost half of those sampled (43%) were novice teachers, which coincides with the development of the field.

Regarding the language of instruction in Chinese immersion preschool classrooms, approximately three-quarters of the sample used only the Chinese language, and less than one-quarter of them used both Chinese and English (23%). One respondent created a quadrilingual classroom, using Chinese, English, Spanish, and French.

Finally, respondents were asked to report their salaries according to a range, as an optional question. All of them chose to disclose their salaries. The most common range of salaries reported was \$51-70K (48%, including three administrators), and the next range was more than \$71K per year (24%, including one administrator). Among the rest of the salaries reported, 18% (including one administrator) reported \$31-50K per year, and 10% (including two teacher aides) reported \$10-30K. These findings need to be interpreted within the geographic location of programs, as most programs were located in large cities with high living costs. The variation of salaries within the samples, and the comparison with that of the national average preschool teacher salaries, are discussed in the next section of the paper.

**Professional views and needs.** The question about the greatest rewards in teaching was open-ended, which elicited a variety of answers. Many respondents used the following words to express their sense of rewards: “language,” “kids/child,” “love,” “Chinese,” “early,” “learn,” “development,” and “culture”. Taking a closer look at participants’ responses, the following themes were generated: being a part of a child’s language development; fos-

tering a child’s love for language, Chinese, and culture; laying the foundation for learning and building skills; providing a warm environment; helping children build a capacity for understanding, friendship, and relationship; and inciting joy, excitement, and curiosity in young children.

Similarly, respondents were asked an open-ended question related to the greatest challenges that they faced. The challenges most frequently cited included receiving “support,” “parents,” “time,” and “kids.” The following themes emerged: lack of supports from administration; lack of time for helping students develop different skills and documenting their progress; using effective and differentiated instructional strategies; providing comprehensible input using only Chinese; finding adequate age-appropriate curriculum, materials, and resources; keeping students engaged and motivated; working with parents; managing the classroom; dealing with low enrollment; and working with low salaries, compensation, and benefits.

Findings indicated that the three most “strongly needed” supports included teaching materials, professional development workshops, and opportunities to join professional organizations. Meanwhile, the supports that respondents indicated they “do not need” included job boards, certification courses, and curriculum.

Finally, when asked about the technological tools and applications used in their teaching, teachers noted various resources used in their daily teaching experiences. The following resources were most frequently noted, in alphabetical order: Class Dojo, Facebook, Flipgrid, iChinese Reader, Pinterest, Quizlet, Seesaw, Teachers Pay Teachers, WeChat, YouTube, and Zoom.

For more details about the survey findings,

consult the CELIN Brief, [Surveying Chinese Immersion Preschool Programs and Teachers in the United States: 2020-2021](#).

### CHALLENGES FACING THE EMERGING FIELD OF CHINESE IMMERSION PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

The two surveys, along with the earlier discussions of the research literature and the program highlights provided by the focus group at the CELIN meeting, collectively portray the landscape of Chinese preschool education in the United States in 2020. Findings confirm that the field is emerging and growing, particularly in the last decade. This trend is evident in both public and private schools, indicating an increased representation of programs for diverse com-

munities in suburban and urban settings. What is glaringly absent from the sample are programs from rural or midwestern states. Moreover, only about 20% of the represented programs reported serving children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Still, what is exciting is that these institutions are serving children from a range of language backgrounds and are nurturing them to become bilingual or multilingual (Figure 2).

On the other hand, as an emerging field, Chinese language immersion preschool education needs to build a system of supply and demand, along with an infrastructure to allow the system to move dynamically. The following recommendations provide a blueprint of how to build and strengthen the field.



*Preschoolers learn to use language to express and understanding feelings.*



## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

### RECOMMENDATION 1: ADVOCATE FOR AND BUILD THE CHINESE IMMERSION PRESCHOOL FIELD THROUGH ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

Policymakers, governments, and the community-at-large are strongly encouraged to have the mindset and political will to advocate for language immersion preschool education. Borrowing the position statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), “All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that enable them to achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society” (2019, <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity-position>). Our vision

is that this learning can be done in two or more languages. As revealed in the survey data, to date, most Chinese immersion preschools are on the two coasts of the United States, with few in between or in rural areas. Public funding and policy should consider how to institute more quality Chinese (or any language in addition to English) immersion preschools in a wide variety of U.S. locations.

Further, immersion preschool programs should be available to children of all backgrounds, including lower socio-economic and underrepresented groups. This is especially poignant, as many Chinese immersion programs are the result of parent demand. Yet, not all parents are aware of the benefits

### BUILDING A SYSTEM OF CHINESE IMMERSION PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

1. Advocate for and build the Chinese immersion preschool field through engagement and collaboration.
2. Develop a framework about Language Immersion Preschool for All and a Guide for Chinese Language Immersion Preschool.
3. Conduct research; build the knowledge base; and disseminate information, best practices, strategies, and resources.
4. Develop Chinese language immersion preschool program evaluation and child assessment tools for preschool to grade 2.
5. Provide workshops and professional development opportunities for parents, teachers, and key stakeholders.
6. Collaborate with policymakers, universities, teacher organizations, the community-at-large, and publishers to increase the supply of teachers and materials.
7. Identify and share funding, opportunities, and resources.

of dual language preschools, let alone know how to access resources and advocate for their children to find such a program. This, unfortunately, perpetuates the perception that Chinese immersion programs are elite, serving only a small group of families who want their children to become bilingual and biliterate global citizens (Weiss, 2019). The reality for the 21st century, however, is that all children need the opportunity to become globally competent. Public and private funding and policies need to consider how to afford equitable learning opportunities to as many children as possible. Languages may be different, but the opportunity to develop bilingualism and biliteracy should be available to children of all backgrounds and abilities.

Our policy and decision makers must recognize that the monolingual mindset of the United States is a double-edged sword, and all of us are disadvantaged by a monolingual mindset, policies, and practices. As a nation of immigrants, the United States should rec-

ognize the rich linguistic and cultural human reserve in our heritage language communities, instead of continuing to view languages other than English as a problem (Ruiz, 1984). Many of our education policies and funding come at the expense of students losing their home languages as they learn English.

The majority of children are often deprived, in school, of the opportunity to develop bilingualism and biliteracy in English and another language. Students are left with the belief that world language study is a luxury reserved for those bright or college-bound students. All too often, students have to wait until high school to study a world language for two years. By then, many of them have developed the mindset of “doing time” to meet the minimum high school graduation or college entrance requirements. We are missing the golden window for children to develop bilingualism and expand their foundation for literacy and life-long learning when they are young.



*Three children in a mixed-age classroom read Chinese story books together during reading time.*

Immersion preschool programs should be available to children of all backgrounds. The needs of our future citizenry are beyond the basic skills of math, reading, and writing in English only.

COVID-19 showed in bright spotlight the inequity in educational opportunities in the United States. Some children were able to continue studies with little disruption, even at home, while others did not have the resources to do so. As we move into a post-COVID era, we need to take this opportunity to re-evaluate how mismatched our educational policies and practices are with the new world order. The needs of our future citizenry are beyond the basic skills of math, reading, and writing in English only. As a country, we need to help students develop understanding of the people within and without our borders, along with their backgrounds, languages, and histories. Language Immersion Preschool for All, a framework described below, may hold a promising key for us to unlock our thinking and build bilingualism and multilingual- and content-focused literacy as part of the foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions that young children critically need to navigate the world that they inherit from us. The least we can do is provide them with the tools they need. The following are some specific actions that we can take.

- Collaborate with national and state professional organizations in Early Learning, Early Childhood, and World Languages (e.g., ACTFL, JNCL, NCSSFL, relevant language resource centers, and regional language associations), and general educational systems to advocate for equitable learning opportunities for all preschool children; work with policymakers and funding organizations to build a common vision and mission.
- Identify and engage policymakers at local, state, and federal levels; preschools; school districts; states; private entities; teacher preparation

programs; professional associations; and other relevant organizations to collaborate to build the field.

- Specifically, for Chinese, CELIN at Asia Society, the Early Childhood Immersion Forum (ECCIF), CLASS-ES, and many others might join forces to build and sustain the development of this emerging field.
- Build a Language Immersion Preschool Education Talent Pool of scholars, researchers, practitioners, administrators, and teachers, which can be mobilized to provide the necessary information and strategies for program advocacy, technical assistance, and teacher professional development.
- Present at and convene conferences, forums, workshops, webinars, and meetings at local, state, regional, national, and international levels to share information and resources and engage more stakeholders.

## RECOMMENDATION 2: DEVELOP A FRAMEWORK ABOUT LANGUAGE IMMERSION PRESCHOOL FOR ALL AND A GUIDE FOR CHINESE LANGUAGE IMMERSION PRESCHOOL

There is a clear need to develop a framework about Language Immersion Preschool for All, so that programs have a common reference and language to use without causing confusion. As shown in the focus group discussion ([An Emerging Field: Chinese Immersion Preschool Education](#)) and the survey results ([Surveying Chinese Immersion Preschool Programs and Teachers in the United States: 2020-2021](#)), Chinese immersion preschool programs have adopted different curriculum models

and employed a wide variety of immersion models and instructional strategies. While diversity among programs is encouraged and needed for local contexts, there must be a set of acceptable terminology and standards for people to engage with in conversation and in practice. A framework should include, but not be limited to, a clear vision of what a bilingual/multilingual preschooler looks like, definitions of key terms and practices, and direction on how research-based conceptual guiding principles can be used to build a program and move the growing field forward. A framework for language immersion preschools is, by nature, interdisciplinary, requiring the integration of knowledge, skills, and practices from early childhood and language education fields. The task is demanding, but it is not unattainable.

Several excellent resources already exist in the early childhood education field. One of them is The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five (HSELOF, 2015), which identifies five central domains: Approaches to Learning; Social and Emotional Development; Language and Literacy; Cognition; and Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. A comprehensive guide, with rubrics and resources, is available, which has served as the industry's gold standards.

Another useful resource is the [Program Standards developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#):

- Standard 1: Relationships
- Standard 2: Curriculum
- Standard 3: Teaching
- Standard 4: Assessment of Child Progress

- Standard 5: Health
- Standard 6: Staff Competencies, Preparation, and Support
- Standard 7: Families
- Standard 8: Community Relationships
- Standard 9: Physical Environment
- Standard 10: Leadership and Management (<https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/10-naeyc-program-standards#1>)

The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (ACTFL, 2000, <https://www.actfl.org/resources/world-readiness-standards-learning-languages>) and the English Language Arts Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>), along with other national standards, can be tailored and incorporated into the framework for language immersion preschool programs.



*Making mooncakes is both a language lesson and a culturally responsive lesson.*

Along with the framework, there is a need to develop a practical guide on establishing, implementing, evaluating, and sustaining high-quality language immersion preschools. Head Start has developed [Effective Practice Guides](#) to accompany The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF), and the NAEYC published [Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8, Fourth Edition](#). The world language field has also developed the following resources that can be used to facilitate the development of this Guide:

- *Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education* (Howard, Olague, & Rogers, 2003; Howard, et al., 2018)
- [Key Features of Effective Chinese Language Programs: A CELIN Checklist](#) (Wang & Peyton, 2018)

Such a guide will be helpful for programs that want to integrate language, instructional time, content, and instructional strategies into the curriculum and assessment,

regardless of the preschool curriculum model adopted (e.g., International Baccalaureate, Reggio Emilia, or a self-created curriculum). The following steps may lead the creation of the language immersion preschool framework and guide:

- Identify and invite a group of national experts, practitioners, and parents in early learning and language fields to work together to develop it.
- The framework will state a clear vision of who a bilingual preschooler is, definitions of key terms and practices, and research-based conceptual guiding principles for building, implementing, and evaluating a language immersion preschool program.
- The program guide will build on the framework, national and state standards for child development, and resources from the early childhood and language learning fields.<sup>1</sup> The guide should include



Students are encouraged to develop their natural interests while learning Chinese. Here, students partake in self-directed, hands-on learning.

elements that specifically address child bilingualism and biliteracy development, and topics unique to Chinese language learning and use, among others.

- Provide technical assistance to prospective providers or existing programs. The hands-on knowledge and experience gained can contribute to further development and refinement of the framework and the guide.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: CONDUCT RESEARCH; BUILD THE KNOWLEDGE BASE; AND DISSEMINATE INFORMATION, BEST PRACTICES, STRATEGIES, AND RESOURCES**

Research-based knowledge and evidence are essential to support the growth of Chinese preschool programs. Considering that the Chinese language system is distant from that of English, research on early Chinese-English biliteracy development should prove to be beneficial for the development of the field.

Research collaborations with programs can help uncover best practices in program development. Considering the diverse socio-cultural contexts of children enrolled in the Chinese immersion preschool programs surveyed (e.g., 20 home languages reported in the survey; Figure 2 above), programs are keenly aware of the fact that a one-size-fits-all approach to curriculum development and pedagogy is not appropriate. Further research may help provide program leaders with a nuanced understanding of how to develop Chinese immersion programs that are effective and reflective of the communities they serve. Specific suggestions include, but not limited to, the following:

- Engage and connect researchers and research centers at institutions of higher education with Chinese immersion preschools to conduct research on site. Serve as a liaison to develop research questions to contribute scholarship to the field.
- Identify a partner to develop and maintain a website or other platform devoted to Chinese immersion preschool education. Collect and disseminate information, funding opportunities, organizations from the early childhood and language education field, research findings, materials, and resources for stakeholders such as policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parents.
- Build a searchable database of Chinese immersion preschools and K-12 Chinese language programs to document the growth and needs of the field.
- Build a searchable database of teacher education programs that include a focus on early Chinese language learning. CELIN at Asia Society has built these databases, which can be continued.

### **RECOMMENDATION 4: DEVELOP CHINESE LANGUAGE IMMERSION PRESCHOOL PROGRAM EVALUATION AND CHILD ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR PRESCHOOL TO GRADE 2**

The early childhood field has developed numerous resources in program evaluation and child assessment. Practically all states have their own evaluation systems, as well as do many national organizations, such as Head Start. For example, the State

of Washington has developed [A Guide to Assessment in Early Childhood, Infancy to Age 8](#) (Department of Public Instruction, State of Washington). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) jointly produced a position paper, [Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8](#) (2003). The document includes the statement of position, program evaluation, and assessment of individual children at different age spans, among others.

The U.S. Department of Health and Social Services has set up the [National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance](#) to support states and communities to set up quality early childhood care and education programs. The Center has developed a rigorous [Quality Rating and Improvement System \(QRIS\)](#) to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs. All of these and many others are resources that language educators and communities can tap into.

The resources on the language side tell a different story. Although ACTFL has produced an excellent language proficiency scale for Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing ([ACTFL Proficiency Scale - ACTFL Levels Explained | LTI languagetesting.com](#), 2012), it is not appropriate for measuring language proficiency of elementary school students, let alone younger learners. The Can-Do Statements jointly developed by NCSSFL and ACTFL ([NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements | ACTFL](#), 2017) can better assess young learners, but there are still gaps in certain areas. Similarly, most existing external language assessment instruments for learners, such as AAPPL ([AAPPL Language Tests | Language Testing International](#)) and STAMP 4-ES ([STAMP 4Se Benchmark & Rubric Guide | Avant Assessment](#)), are not ideal for assessing the growth of preschoolers and learners from K to grade 3. Certainly, assessments, observation protocols, or checklists for use with young learners to document Chinese learning outcomes should be developed and used, in conjunction with the various instruments mentioned above.

- A good starting point might be to map out how a preschool child develops Chinese language proficiency and literacy. Based on data collected from young learners'



Tracing helps preschoolers with their pre-writing skills. This is true for the English alphabet and Chinese characters.

performances, it may be possible to develop an age-appropriate learner profile, so that parents and programs can have a clear expectation for what to look for. A good example of such a learner profile is in the CELIN Brief, [Mapping Chinese Language Learning Outcomes in Grades K-12](#). The proposed Guide can include the linguistic profiles of typical three-, four-, and five-year-old children of diverse backgrounds in Chinese immersion preschools.

- A subsequent task will be the development of evaluation and assurance checklists or matrices for program quality. Building on existing resources selected by a committee, program evaluation and rubrics can be developed.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5: PROVIDE WORKSHOPS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS**

Ongoing and meaningful professional development for practitioners is critical for the success of programs, which is discussed in depth in Recommendation 6, developing a teacher supply system. This recommendation focuses on how programs can find ways to promote parent and community involvement. Considering the shifting demographics of communities enrolling in Chinese early childhood programs, engagement of parents in the program should be tailored to meet the unique needs of the families involved and the community. In addition to opportunities for parents to volunteer at school events, school trips, and in the classroom, preschool programs should also include a

parent education component. Parent education on language and bilingual development, as well as sharing resources with parents to bridge student learning between school and home, would be beneficial. For example, considering the different language backgrounds of families represented in programs, educational materials may raise awareness of similarities and differences between the various home languages and Chinese to foster the development of both languages (e.g., Amaral, 2001). Raising awareness can be done through various communication channels, including a strong and active social media presence.

The last and perhaps most important point is to engage and advocate for potential families, especially those in marginalized groups and with low socio-economic status. This outreach effort is critical to offering equitable learning opportunities to all children. At the very least, families should be aware of the benefits of Chinese immersion education and available resources in the community. The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota has developed [The Dual Language and Immersion Family Education program](#), which provides training, [guidelines, and materials for family education professionals](#). It can serve as an invaluable resource for the emerging field. Seminars and workshops for parents will increase their knowledge about the value of Chinese language immersion education and ways to find a high-quality Chinese immersion preschool, work with teachers and the school, and support their children at home.





*A teacher gives instructions on how to assemble an art project. The conversation enriches children's learning across several domains, including comprehension and vocabulary development.*

**RECOMMENDATION 6:  
COLLABORATE WITH  
POLICYMAKERS, UNIVERSITIES,  
TEACHER ORGANIZATIONS,  
THE COMMUNITY-AT-LARGE,  
AND PUBLISHERS TO INCREASE  
THE SUPPLY OF TEACHERS AND  
MATERIALS**

How to create and sustain a Chinese preschool teacher supply system is probably one of the most fundamental issues in building the field. To meet the demands for quality Chinese immersion preschool teachers, the system must ensure that a sufficient number of high-quality and effective teachers are prepared and available. These teachers will fulfill the dual requirements for early childhood and Chinese language/immersion education. The system needs to connect teacher education programs with program providers to ensure that there are career opportunities for their graduates.

There is a lack of certified or certifiable U.S.-born teachers who are English-Chinese bilingual and familiar with the research

and pedagogy on early childhood education. This explains why, as revealed in the national survey discussed in the CELIN Brief, *Surveying Chinese Immersion Preschool Programs and Teachers in the United States: 2020-2021*, most Chinese immersion preschool teachers are foreign-born and come to the United States through advanced study at U.S. universities. To an extent, these pathways also explain why the field has such a high percentage of teachers who hold a master's degree or above (65% earned a master's degree, and 9% earned a doctoral degree, 74% in total, Brief, p. 6). These teachers are assets to the field, but the United States needs to take a big-picture view in addressing the teacher supply shortage for U.S.-based and international teachers. Concerted efforts must be made in conjunction with teacher education programs at institutions of higher education and the state Department of Education, along with immigration and visa-granting laws, to build a pipeline of teachers from multiple pathways and points in the life cycle of their professional lives (i.e., preparation,

certification, recruitment, retention, professional development, and career advancement) (Ingold & Wang, 2010; Wang, 2014). This is a national issue with implications for all world languages in PreK-12 programs, which cannot be resolved overnight. It is wise to develop a long-term plan and systematically build up the teacher supply chain for language immersion preschools.

The field can benefit from receiving more international teachers from Chinese-speaking countries and regions; e.g., China, Singapore, and Taiwan. It is necessary to engage in conversations between education entities and the U.S. State Department to grant visas for these teachers.

It is critical that more research on teacher development, early childhood language acquisition, biliteracy development, and many other pertinent topics is conducted and disseminated. It is also critical that research findings are used to guide the development of teachers every step of their careers.

Finally, we must consider the equitable matching of educational credentials, experiences, and salaries, and show teachers the respect they deserve. As revealed in *Surveying Chinese Immersion Preschool Programs and Teachers in the United States: 2020-2021*, the workforce in Chinese preschool programs is highly educated in a variety of specializations, including language, language education, early childhood education, child development, and other relevant fields of study.

This is strikingly higher than the national data that call for a bachelor's degree for lead teachers working with children from birth through age eight (Fact Sheet: Troubling Pay Gap for Early Childhood Teachers, June 14, 2016, U.S. Department of Education, <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USED/bulletins/14f4dfe>). In the CELIN Survey Brief, the issue of teacher education and salary is discussed in great detail (pp. 8-9). This is a national issue that begs for more rigorous discussion in the field, as suggested below.



Matching numerals helps a student develop several cognitive abilities, including visual memory, short-term memory, pattern recognition, and fine motor skills.

“[Pre]school is a critical means of expanding educational equity and opportunity by giving every child a strong start. ... And research has shown that taxpayers receive a high average return on investments in high-quality early childhood education, with savings in areas like improved educational outcomes, increased labor productivity, and a reduction in crime. ... Yes, preschool teachers are paid less than mail order clerks, tree trimmers and pest control workers. ... In fact, most early childhood educators earn so little that they qualify for public benefits, including for the very programs they teach targeting low-income families (Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1).”

Another implication gleaned from the data on educators' backgrounds is that a majority, especially those who are foreign-born or new to the field, need support and professional development for how to better understand the sociocultural contexts and multifaceted



*It's story time! Kids love the characters, adventures, and the life lessons that stories offer. Listening to a story in Chinese also helps children learn words, pronunciation, and sentence structures all at once.*

identities of learners in the classroom. For example, the national average age of female preschool teachers is 38.6 (Preschool & Kindergarten Teachers, Data USA: Preschool and Kindergarten Teachers, <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/preschool-kindergarten-teachers>). The Chinese immersion educators in our survey may be slightly older (31.5% are between 41-50) and novice (43% had taught between 0-5 years), and almost all of them (98%) are foreign-born (CELIN Survey Brief, pp. 5-7).

Professional development workshop topics might include understanding American culture, parents, and family practices; learning and hearing about the lived experiences of multicultural/multiracial families with layered identities (e.g., African, pan-Asian, Latino, and Chinese American families); and understanding frameworks and critical discourse surrounding race, class, gender, and exceptionalities. Teachers would benefit from workshops on child development and language learning with specific topics of early

literacy development, reading and writing, child development emphasizing first and second language acquisition, and childhood bilingualism and biliteracy development with implications for teaching. In the CELIN Survey, respondents also identified needed professional development on technology integration, classroom management, engaging and communicating with challenging parents, and identifying and building a career path. These may be facilitated by highlighting best practices among colleagues within and across early childhood programs.

In addition, age-appropriate, high-interest, and content-rich Chinese language materials are always needed. This is reflected in teacher survey cited in the CELIN Survey Brief (p.8). There is an urgent need to identify and create more Chinese language materials that are suitable for language immersion contexts. There is also a need to be more apps or password-protected platforms for children to use, under the supervision of parents and teachers.

### RECOMMENDATION 7: IDENTIFY AND SHARE FUNDING, OPPORTUNITIES, AND RESOURCES

It is beneficial to identify and share information about policies, resources, and funding opportunities in the early childhood and language field. Government-sponsored early childhood education initiatives and programs on the federal, state, charter, and local levels; and private non-profit and for-profit initiatives, organizations, and programs are all important resources. The big question is, *How can we tap into public and private funding to advocate for high-quality programs for all children, regardless of their zip codes?* Key stakeholders will continue to ask this question and consider ways to increase access to and equity in high-quality language immersion preschools

throughout the United States. From the early childhood side, the Education Commission of the States (<https://www.ecs.org/research-reports/key-issues/pre-k>) regularly reports on how states fund Pre-K education (<https://www.ecs.org/state-education-policy-tracking/>). The Joint National Committee for Languages (JNCL) and other national language organizations may consider joining forces with early childhood organizations to engage in shaping and seeking policy and funding opportunities.

With the increasing number of Chinese programs, developing strategic partnerships with universities, researchers, educational organizations, and parents will be mutually beneficial. By establishing synergistic relationships, stakeholders can uniquely con-



*A class sings a song about pumpkins. Music is fun, but it is also a great learning tool. The repetition of words, the blending of grammar and rhythm, and rising and falling notes all help with language development.*

tribute to the overarching goal of enhancing Chinese language learning in the United States. For example, fostering collaborations between education programs and universities will provide graduates with degrees that specialize in or concentrate on Chinese language teaching, while also serving as a pipeline for job placement. Research programs can work with program leaders and teachers to reliably and systematically understand how to improve Chinese teaching and learning. Organizations such as CELIN at Asia Society can provide networking opportunities to enhance Chinese language learning visibility and propel the field forward through public discourse. Federal and state governments and foundations might also provide grants and other resources to advance the field.

## CONCLUSION

The number of preschool programs that focus on Chinese language development in the United States has grown significantly since 2014. In line with theory and best practices, many education programs ascribe to a “start young” philosophy to immerse and expose children to the Chinese language in the preschool years (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2016). With exposure to Chinese before setting foot in kindergarten or first grade, children develop bilingual and biliterate skills that serve as important scaffolds in the later years of additive school achievement.

This paper offers a blueprint for the nation to build and expand Chinese language immersion preschools. It begins by discussing the vision, goals, and rationale for advocating for Chinese language immersion preschools. It then describes the state of the Chinese immersion preschool field in 2020-2021 and discusses the challenges that the field faces.

It concludes with seven recommendations aimed at building the infrastructure for a system of demand and supply for Chinese immersion preschools.

As a field, which includes Chinese language programs in PreK-16; institutions of higher education; teacher programs; parents with children in programs and communities-at-large; and national, state, district, and private policymakers and stakeholders, we can collaborate to implement the activities described in the recommendations and build a network of high-quality Chinese immersion preschools throughout the United States. As a nation, we can co-construct a shared vision and instill the political will to develop a globally competent multilingual citizenry who can successfully navigate a world that is deeply interconnected. As each child comes to the door of learning, let us give them a key to explore what is beyond our physical borders. This paper invites readers to imagine the possibilities and power of raising change agents who can make the local community and the world a better place for all.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Most states have developed standards for child development, which encompass multiple domains, such as:

- language and literacy
- physical health and motor development
- social and emotional development
- general cognition
- approaches to learning

These standards also indicate developmental milestones within each of these domains

(Build Initiative). Strong early learning standards can be a foundation for

- instructional guidance
- sound general information for parents
- screening and assessment of children who might need special attention
- overall understanding of child development
- development of quality rating and improvement systems

Additional resources include, but are not limited to, national or state standards or guidelines for early learning, assessment guidelines (e.g., Kindergarten Entry Assessment-KEAs), Guiding principles for dual language education (Howard, et al., 2003, 2018), and the CELIN Program Quality Checklist mentioned above.

## PHOTO CREDITS

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