

# Parents as Partners in Their Children’s Chinese Immersion Education: Making Decisions and Providing Support

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## Introduction

Mandarin immersion programs are growing in popularity, with at least 246 programs in schools in 31 states and the District of Columbia in 2017 (Weise, 2017; see also CELIN Program Directory: [asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/find-or-document-program](http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/find-or-document-program)). This Brief is written for parents who are considering placing their child(ren) in a Mandarin immersion program, or for those parents whose child(ren) is already attending one. The goal of this Brief is to provide basic information that will make both the decision process and the actual experience clearer for families, as well as offer tips on what parents can do and what resources they can find to make the most of the opportunity that Mandarin immersion offers. This Brief will also be useful for parents of children learning Chinese as a second or foreign language (e.g., in a FLES or other type of program).

## Making Decisions About Learning Chinese

### What is Good About Being Bilingual?

The first questions for parents are: Why do you want your child(ren) to learn Chinese? Why do you want your child(ren) to not

only learn Chinese, but become as bilingual as possible while living in a predominately English-speaking country? The answers may vary, but the fundamental reasoning is that being bilingual is a good thing.

That hasn’t always been the accepted wisdom. Until the 1970s, many believed that bilingual children were significantly disadvantaged linguistically and had smaller vocabularies than their counterparts who spoke only English. In fact, it was common in the 1960s and 1970s for teachers and doctors to tell parents that having their children speak more than one language would confuse them and have negative consequences on their development and intelligence. Astoundingly, this still happens today.

Recent studies done in the United States, Canada, and Europe have found that bilingual and monolingual children acquired language at about the same rate and had similar vocabularies in the dominant language of their community (Diamond, 2012, p. 387). At the same time, the bilingual children had double the vocabulary of the monolingual children, because they knew words in *both* languages (Diamond, 2012).

Studies also show that there are multiple cognitive benefits to being bilingual. For example, bilinguals are found to have enhanced executive brain functioning, higher school achievement, and better business acumen (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012; Marian & Shook, 2012; see also a review of the research on the benefits of bilingualism by the National Education Association, NEA, 2007). There are also books for families raising bilingual children, which provide both a clear review of the research on the benefits of bilingualism and practical advice on how to promote bilingualism in the home (e.g., Bourgogne, 2013; King & Mackey, 2007).

### Why Study Chinese Language and Culture?

Different families have different reasons for choosing a Chinese immersion program for their children. Chinese immigrant families want their children to be literate in the language they use at home. Chinese heritage families want a connection to their history and culture, and a link to a language they may have lost a generation or two ago. Many families choose Chinese because they see China's growing importance on the international stage and believe that Chinese will be a useful language for their children to speak as they enter their careers. Some want their children to learn an academically rigorous subject that requires focus and sustained work. In the past, they might have chosen Latin for their children. Today, they choose Mandarin.

### What Is Chinese Language Immersion Education?

You already know about immersion learning. It is how your children learned to speak the language they speak with you. It's how all babies learn to speak, by being spoken to in the language of those around them. No child is born talking. Instead, their brains listen to the sounds they hear around them and gradually begin to grasp the underlying patterns, eventually forming them into language. Children realize that if they say "more," they'll get more; if they say "up," they'll get picked up. With brains that are hard-wired for language learning, what they understand and can communicate quickly ramps up, and by the age of five or six, they are orally fluent, though with limited vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Immersion programs take advantage of the innate language learning capability of young children and begin language learning in preschool, kindergarten, or first grade. At that point, children have been talking for three or four years and still speak simply. It's the perfect time for them to acquire a second language, while they are still learning their first one.

In an immersion program, from the first day of school your child's Mandarin teacher will speak only Mandarin in the classroom. While it may seem that your child couldn't possibly understand what is going on, children are actually very adept at picking out meaning in a jumble of words they don't understand. It's what they do every day in English or whatever language is spoken at home. Think about all of the words that you taught them as a toddler the exact same way (Milk! Bottle! Car! Flower!), and you can see how it works.

The Appendix (Using Chinese in a Chinese Immersion Program) shows a transcript of a teacher and a class of young students using Chinese on the first day of school. Video clips from Washington Yuying Public Charter School, Washington DC, are also provided. In these three videos, we see students and teachers using Chinese at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year and the progress they have made throughout the year.

Of course, knowing some words in a language doesn't mean you can begin studying geography or algebra in that language. Many parents wonder how it's ever possible that their children will learn academic subjects in a language they don't speak natively. But many of the words that they're learning in school, even in English, are new to them. The teacher must explain what *add* and *subtract* and *long division* are, because you probably don't discuss these concepts during dinnertime. In addition, immersion classrooms use what is known as "sheltered content instruction," an instructional approach used in many classes for English language learners. It works in Mandarin immersion classes as well (Echevarria & Graves, 2015; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2017).

In sheltered content classes, teachers use carefully chosen vocabulary to teach a given topic. For example, a fourth grade English language textbook on social studies and the arrival of Christopher Columbus might presume

that the students have a certain level of vocabulary. But if the textbook is directly translated into Chinese, the vocabulary could be too advanced for students in an immersion program. For that reason, the information provided is adapted to students' proficiency levels, so that it is comprehensible to them. The result is not "Simple Social Studies." It is the same social studies that students learn in an English classroom, it is just structured with a set of targeted vocabulary and grammatical patterns and with more varied and creative input (such as using visuals and tapping into students' prior knowledge). Instruction is also carefully scaffolded and contextualized so that students acquire both the language and the content.

### How Has Chinese Language Immersion Education Developed in the United States?

Language immersion programs had their start in Quebec, Canada, in 1965, when English-speaking parents helped launch a French immersion elementary school program because they wanted their children to become bilingual (Wesche, 2002). In the United States, the first immersion program was in Spanish and was launched in Culver City, California, in 1971 (Cohen, 1974). The first Mandarin immersion program in the United States was created at the Chinese American International School in San Francisco in 1981, by a group of Chinese-American parents who wanted their children to maintain their home language and culture (Wyman, 2013; also see the program profile at [asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/chinese-american-international-school](http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/chinese-american-international-school)). In Canada, the first Mandarin immersion program was created as a result of parent demand in Alberta in 1982 (Chinese Language Education in Alberta, 2008). Today, it is offered in six elementary schools, four middle schools, and three high schools (Edmonton Public Schools, 2017).

The number of programs created in the United States was small in the 1980s and 1990s, but increased dramatically in the 2000s. Since then, Mandarin immersion programs have taken off. Their growth is a direct result of both the increasing number of Chinese Americans in the United States and China's rising economic strength (Hooper & Batalova, 2015). As of the fall of 2017, there are about 246 programs in 31 states and the District of Columbia, with between five and ten added each year (Weise, 2017).

### What Are Helpful Terms for Understanding Language Immersion Programs?

Most immersion programs share similar traits in terms of how they are organized, though there are several variations (Weise, 2017). As you look at immersion programs, it is helpful to understand the terms used to describe them, so you can understand what the program you are considering is offering and how it is different from others. Here are some key terms. Although they apply to all languages, we focus here on the learning of Mandarin.

*Immersion and dual language immersion programs.* These are programs in which either all or a significant number of subjects are taught in a language other than English. Depending on the model, the allocation of English and the target language may vary by percentage of instructional time and by content areas taught. At least 50% of class time must be taught in Mandarin during the elementary school years for a program to be considered immersion. For a list of core characteristics of an immersion program, see the definitions offered by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (2004, [www.carla.umn.edu/conferences/past/immersion/terms.html](http://www.carla.umn.edu/conferences/past/immersion/terms.html)).

Among immersion programs, there is variation in terms of time allocated for each language of instruction. For example, there are total immersion programs (100% of instruction is done in Chinese); 90/10 (90% of instruction is done in Chinese and 10% in English); 80/20; 70/30; 60/40, and 50/50. Some programs that teach Chinese and English in the 50/50 model may call themselves a dual language immersion program. Mandarin immersion programs are the second most popular in the United States, following Spanish immersion programs.

*One-way and two-way immersion programs.* You will often hear about two kinds of immersion programs. One is "one-way" immersion, which refers to the fact that most, if not all, students in the program come with grade-level English proficiency and are learning another language in an immersion context. The second is "two-way" immersion, where half of the students speak English, and the other half speak

another language (e.g., Mandarin) at home, or close to that percentage. The idea is for students to learn from one another, as well as from teachers; Mandarin-speaking students can be language role models for the English speakers and vice versa. Two-way Mandarin immersion programs are common where there are large communities of speakers of the language or its dialects (e.g., San Francisco, New York, and Philadelphia). In those areas, two-way immersion allows a district to support students who speak Chinese at home and are learning English, while also providing a program that is of benefit to English-speaking children.

*Preschool programs.* Mandarin immersion preschools are increasingly popular, as parents seek to provide an early start for their children to learning a second (or additional) language. Sometimes these programs are private, and some are part of an immersion school. These can be very helpful, especially for families that don't speak Chinese, because they allow children to be comfortable with the language, making the transition into a formal immersion classroom in kindergarten easier.

*Strand versus whole-school programs.* About 75 percent of Mandarin immersion programs in the United States are a strand within a larger regular school (Weise, 2017). Depending on the structure and resources of the program, students in a Mandarin immersion or English-only program may or may not take classes together. For example, students in the Mandarin immersion program at Starr King ([www.starrkingschool.org](http://www.starrkingschool.org)) and Jose Ortega elementary schools ([www.joseortegaschool.org/mandarin-immersion](http://www.joseortegaschool.org/mandarin-immersion)) in the San Francisco Unified School District do not attend classes with students in the English program. In the Forest Hills Public Schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan ([www.fhps.net/departments/instruction/dual-language-immersion-education/mandarin-chinese-immersion](http://www.fhps.net/departments/instruction/dual-language-immersion-education/mandarin-chinese-immersion)), students in the Mandarin and English programs take some English language classes together, beginning in second grade (Forest Hills Public Schools, 2017). In whole-school programs, the entire school is Mandarin immersion with no English-only classes, such as in the Mandarin Immersion Magnet School in the Houston, Texas Independent School District ([www.houstonisd.org/mandarinimmersion](http://www.houstonisd.org/mandarinimmersion)). A few schools offer multiple language immersion programs in the same school, and students can elect to

be immersed in Spanish, Mandarin, or French (or another language). Examples include the Denver Language School ([www.denverlanguageschool.org](http://www.denverlanguageschool.org)) and the International School of the Peninsula in Palo Alto, California ([www.istp.org/page](http://www.istp.org/page)).

It is difficult to judge which structure is better, because the design of a program reflects the reality of the local context and the community.

### What Are Challenges and Benefits When Choosing Chinese Language Immersion?

While students should get the same education in a language immersion class as they do in an English-only class, both educators and parents must establish reasonable expectations about the learning outcomes. There are only so many hours in the school day. Therefore, in order to conduct instruction in the target language or bilingually in English and the target language, something must be taken away. For example, some immersion schools have found that their students' spelling and grammar skills lag behind, because they're not spending as much time on spelling and grammar in English. Other programs decide not to teach cursive writing because of time limits.

In middle school, many programs use students' elective period as the time that they offer Mandarin Language Arts. This means that many middle school students don't get to take band, dance, art, or music during their elective time, because Mandarin is their elective class. Especially because Chinese is often the parents' idea, not the students', there can be tensions. "How come I can't take band? All of my friends are taking band!" is something that many immersion parents have heard.

Research shows that, in later grades, however, immersion students do as well as, if not better than, those in English-only programs. For example, a longitudinal study carried out in Portland, Oregon, home to one of the largest public school immersion programs in the nation, found that students who were randomly assigned to an immersion program (Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese) outperformed their peers in English reading by about seven months in fifth grade and nine months in eighth grade (Steele & Bacon,

2016). The study included families that applied for the lottery to get into Portland's popular immersion program and compared those that won a coveted spot with those that didn't, to minimize selection bias.

Earlier in this Brief, we mentioned the many cognitive benefits that language immersion students experience. Understanding that challenges and benefits are part of program choice, parents should not be alarmed when noticing short-term differences in learning outcomes demonstrated by their children as compared to their counterparts in English-only programs. The benefits of learning two languages will become clear as children continue through the journey.

### What Are Questions to Ask About a Program?

The following questions are important to ask when considering a Chinese immersion program:

- What are the language learning outcomes expected of students at the end of each year?
- How literate do you expect students to become in Chinese? Will they be reading at grade level in Chinese as they do in English when they graduate? (See *Understand the Levels of Language Proficiency That Children Will Reach*, below)
- What programs do you have in place to support families so they can support their children?
- How will my child be supported academically if he/she is struggling in English or in Chinese?
- What if my child has a learning disability? Will he/she be able to participate in the immersion program?
- What is the full extent of the immersion pathway? Does the program continue into middle school and high school?

### Providing Support for Your Children

Parents who have enrolled their children in a Chinese immersion program, and those considering this option, will find the discussion and suggestions here helpful.

#### Equip Yourself with a Basic Understanding of the Chinese Language

It is important to keep in mind that all languages have a lot in common, despite their obvious differences from one to another. However, it is also true that there is a prevalent perception that the Chinese language is

difficult to learn. Here, we clarify some confusion about the language, particularly for parents who do not know Chinese.

One obvious feature of Chinese is that it is tonal. Generally speaking, Mandarin has four tones. While it can be difficult for an adult to hear the difference between the word *mā* in the first tone and *mà* in the fourth tone, it can be easy for children, because their phonological windows are wide open. They can tell that the pitches in these two tones are different. They will also learn that different tones may refer to different words (Asia Society, *Chinese Tones*, n.d.).

Chinese is also written, not with an alphabet, but with characters. The general process of literacy development is similar to that in English, and a lot of reading and writing skills are transferable from one language to the other. However, the linguistic components and pedagogical approaches of developing Chinese and English literacy are different, especially at the initial stages. For example, in English, children learn sounds (phonemic awareness) and the alphabet and move into phonics and spelling. In Chinese, they start with oral language, learning to write strokes in their stroke order, and then move on to learn radicals, basic characters, and simple words written in Chinese characters. Once they have a foundation in spoken Chinese, they will learn *pinyin*, the Romanization system that shows pronunciation and tones, to help them decipher Chinese characters. It is a misconception that children need to memorize thousands of totally distinct Chinese characters one by one. As students progress to learning more complex characters, they understand that many of them are composed of less complex parts that they already know (Wang, et al, 2008, pp. 49-52). Through the process of learning Chinese characters, their cognitive abilities, learning skills, and critical thinking skills are enhanced. (For more detail about Chinese language and how initial Chinese literacy is developed, see the CELIN Brief on *Developing Initial Literacy in Chinese*, Everson, Chang, & Ross, 2016, <https://asiasociety.org/files/uploads/522files/2016-celin-brief-developing-initial-literacy-in-chinese.pdf>).

Sometimes, you might also be confused by the terms Mandarin, Cantonese, and Chinese, which are used by programs to identify themselves. In the United States, all of these programs teach the Chinese language, and the difference in the names comes from a historic and

demographic context. Mandarin and Cantonese are dialects of the Chinese language (Bolotnikov, n.d.). In older Chinese immigrant communities in metropolitan areas, such as New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, the community language was often Cantonese or another Southern dialect, not Mandarin. The older Chinese language programs in those areas taught Cantonese, reflecting the home language of the students. The newer Chinese language programs in those or other places may choose to call themselves Mandarin programs to differentiate from those teaching Cantonese. Most programs that teach Chinese are simply called Chinese programs, although many may choose to call themselves Mandarin programs. All Chinese dialects, Mandarin included, are written with the same characters.

It is likely that you will hear people ask if the program teaches *simplified* or *traditional* Chinese characters. The former refers to the less complex form of characters adopted by China in 1964, and used today in China and Singapore. Traditional characters, the original and more complex forms, are still used in Taiwan and Hong Kong and by many people in the Chinese diaspora worldwide. A district or a school decides which form it will teach, generally based on community demand (Asia Society, 2006). In the United States, about 85 percent of Mandarin immersion programs teach simplified characters (Weise, 2017). Classroom materials usually come in either simplified or traditional forms. The SAT and Advanced Placement exams offered by the College Board provide students with the choice of which writing form they prefer to use.

While these and other terms may be confusing, the main idea is that language is alive. Its features, uses, and forms evolve with time and with the people who use it. With the spread of English worldwide, the varieties of English have grown substantially. This is also true with Chinese. In a good immersion or language program, children are taught to pay attention to the similarities and differences between their native language, Chinese, and even a third and more languages. This is the reason why learning another language can help children acquire their native language better. Language learning also helps the development of critical thinking and cross-cultural communication. Learners' worldviews are, thus, broadened and become more sophisticated.

## Understand the Levels of Language Proficiency That Children Will Reach

One of the biggest advances in Mandarin immersion programs has been the use of language proficiency scales and assessments, so that parents, teachers, and administrators know if students, after a number of years studying Chinese, are reaching the expected levels of proficiency that are nationally or internationally recognized. (See the CELIN Brief on *Mapping Chinese Language Learning Outcomes in Grades K-12*; Bai, Lien, & Spring, 2015; <https://asiasociety.org/files/uploads/522files/2016-celin-brief-mapping-chinese-language-learning-outcomes-in-grades-k-12.pdf>).

Most commonly used assessments in the United States are based on the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*, developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012). For example, by the end of third grade, most students can communicate their needs, personal experiences, opinions, and ideas in class discussions. By the end of sixth grade, they can maintain conversations with native Mandarin speakers using a short paragraph when they are talking about topics related to the grade six curriculum. By the end of eighth grade, most students can talk with a native Mandarin speaker about unfamiliar topics. They can explain historical events and trends, follow written directions, and write a multiple-paragraph essay or report with teacher guidance (Bai, Lien, & Spring, 2015). For more details about language proficiency levels, see the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (2012).

## Develop Realistic Expectations About Language and General Education Outcomes

Many parents often expect their children to be fully “bilingual and biliterate” by the end of an immersion program. This is not entirely correct. Students who come from non-Chinese speaking homes will not be as fully proficient and literate in Chinese as their counterparts growing up in China, but they will be highly functional and should have an excellent command of the language. They will have much higher proficiency, literacy, content and cultural knowledge in Chinese, and comfort with the language than they would have if they did not participate in an immersion program. A large number of Chinese immersion

programs for grades K – 8 set their target for their eighth-grade graduates at the Intermediate High to Pre-Advanced levels on the ACTFL scale. This means that, by the time students go to ninth grade, they are ready to enroll in a Chinese Advanced Placement (AP) course and take the exam offered by the College Board to earn potential college credits. In some programs, high school students who have completed a grade K – 8 Mandarin immersion program are able to take college-level Chinese classes during high school, graduating with the equivalent of a minor in Chinese before they're even 18. When immersion students spend time living in a Chinese-speaking country, they can easily develop near-native fluency in Chinese, as reported by many parents of immersion program graduates who study abroad for a semester or a year in China or Taiwan.

### Heed the Advice of Immersion Parents and Educators

Here is some advice from teachers and parents for families new to immersion programs.

*Give children time.* Most students go through a “silent period” when they're first learning a language. They spent their first two years of life listening to everything going on around them before they started talking much. It's the same with a new language. As long as their teacher says everything's fine, don't worry that you're not hearing them chatter away at home.

*Don't treat them like circus seals, asking them to speak Chinese on command.* Kids hate this, and the kinds of things they learn in school, such as “Can I have the scissors?” or “Teacher, I finished my assignment, can I go to the book nook?” aren't that useful if they're in a Chinese restaurant and you ask them to order. They're still kids. Don't ask them to do anything in Chinese you wouldn't ask them to do in English. Always err on the side of silence and giving them space. You don't want them to associate Chinese with something they're not “good” at.

*Don't ask them to translate.* Understanding a language and being able to translate it into a different language are two very different skills. Immersion students aren't trained to translate, a skill that requires a lot more cognitive maturity than simply understanding. Just because your child can't translate everything they're doing into English doesn't mean they don't understand it when it's happening in Chinese.

*Understand your own context and motivation: Know what kind of Mandarin immersion family you are.* After spending more than a decade in Mandarin immersion programs as her two daughters went through grade school, middle school, and high school, Beth (one of the authors of this Brief) has identified six types of Mandarin immersion parent (Weise, 2014). As you go through your own journey in Mandarin immersion, it's helpful to remember that other parents at your child's school may have different motivations than your own. Most parents fit into one or several of these categories; this gives you a brief outline of what probably brought other families to your program.

**Pioneer.** These are the first families, who came to a new program in its first years. They are very motivated and passionate about the possibilities, setting the tone for the school for years to come.

**Global.** These families see China's rising place in the world, both political and financial, and hope that speaking Chinese will give their children broader opportunities as adults.

**Academic.** These families aren't as interested in Chinese *per se* but care mostly about being in a rigorous academic program full of education-minded families. For them, Chinese is one area of interest. They might have chosen French or German immersion, if it were available. They are less interested in the language itself, often to the consternation of parents who are there for the Chinese.

**Adoptive.** These families have adopted a child from China or Taiwan and see immersion as a way to keep their child connected with their heritage and culture.

**Heritage.** These are second- and third-generation (and beyond) Chinese American families, many of whom no longer speak Chinese. For them, immersion is a way to reconnect their children with a language and culture they may have lost.

**Chinese.** These are families who come from and were educated in China and are fluent and literate in Chinese. They have two goals for immersion: They want their children to read and write in Chinese, and they want to reinforce the Chinese they speak at home and provide access to the kind of academic language that is learned at school and often not used at home.

## Know What to Look for in Your Child's Immersion Classroom

There are many strategies that immersion teachers implement when teaching the language. These include the following (Fortune, 2014):

*Make input comprehensible.* This means that the majority of what students hear and read in class is understandable to them, so that they can work out for themselves, and with the help of the teacher, the words and phrases they don't know. For example, a teacher talking about "Celsius" in class would use words the students already know (e.g., *temperature, thermometer, hot, cold, boiling, freezing*) to introduce the new word and concept. The teacher:

- Uses body language and visuals to communicate meaning
- Solicits and uses prior knowledge and experience to teach new things
- Breaks information into component parts
- Establishes routines to build familiarity
- Uses a lot of repetition

*Create a visually rich environment.* When you walk into a good immersion classroom, you will see:

- Lots of words, phrases, and written text throughout the classroom and hallways
- Lots of reading resources in the language, including dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias, and books for pleasure reading

*Use teacher talk effectively.* An effective immersion teacher:

- Articulates and enunciates clearly
- Simplifies language when appropriate
- Rephrases and repeats messages in a variety of ways
- Models accurate use of the language
- Limits teacher talk

## Know Where to Find Help and Resources

The most important thing you can do to help your child thrive in a Mandarin immersion program is something you would be doing anyway; supporting them with their schoolwork. You don't have to speak Chinese. Teachers know that the majority of families don't speak Chinese, and they plan for that.

For some programs, that will mean making sure that children do all of their homework. For some, it will mean that the children do the work at school. At some point, your child is likely to get worksheets to practice writing characters (a rite of passage for all children learning to write Chinese around the world, including in China).

One thing you will probably want to do is to hone your dictionary skills, so you can help your child look up words in Chinese at home. There are both print and online resources for dictionary use, pronunciation, and translation. Your teacher or school will suggest some resources or print copies that you can use. The section below, Resources for Parents and Children, lists websites, software, dictionaries, and other resources that are available.

Don't be a monolingual household. The best thing you can do to support your children is to add Chinese language use to your daily life at home. For families who speak Chinese, that's easy. Even for those who don't, the wonders of technology and the resources of your immersion school community have made it easier than ever before.

The easiest way to reinforce what goes on in the classroom at home is to add more "Mandarin minutes" to the day. That can be something as simple as getting copies of the songs sung in class in audio form, so your children listen to them on the way to and from school or around the house. You can also ask teachers or other families in your school what local radio stations or apps you can download that play Chinese pop music.

You can also watch cartoons or movies in Mandarin instead of in English. This works especially well with movies your children have already seen in English, as they will be able to follow along with the story more easily and have a better sense of what is being said. Ask teachers or other parents for recommendations or browse online. There is a lively discussion of things you can do to help your children learn Chinese on the Mandarin Immersion Parents Support group on Facebook:

[www.facebook.com/groups/242781425863187](http://www.facebook.com/groups/242781425863187) or search on Facebook for Mandarin Immersion Parent Support. You have to email the list moderator to join, but it's open to everyone. Asia Society's Chinese Early

Language and Immersion Network (CELIN) is another rich source of information and resources, which has a special page for parents: [asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/resources-parents](https://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/resources-parents).

You may also subscribe to the monthly newsletter (free of charge):

[asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/chinese-early-language-and-immersion-network](https://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/chinese-early-language-and-immersion-network).

Make sure that you have books in Chinese in your house. Your child won't be reading a lot in Chinese, especially in the early years, but you want to make sure that books in Chinese are available. Many schools send books home for children to read or have them in the school library. Your local public library may also have books. Make sure that they are written in the same characters that your child is learning (simplified or traditional). There are several online bookstores that sell Chinese children's book. One of the easiest to use is China Sprout [www.chinasprout.com](http://www.chinasprout.com), which has done a great job of making Chinese language books accessible to parents who don't read Chinese. Most of all, don't let your home be a print desert when it comes to Chinese.

Explore what is available online and on tablets and smartphones when it comes to Chinese. There are multiple sites that offer stories, texts, and videos for kids, at the appropriate level for immersion students. Ask the teachers in your school for suggestions that fit with your child's curriculum and check the list of resources below (Resources for Parents and Children).

Last but not the least, look for ways to connect your child with the Chinese community in your area. That includes finding the local Confucius Institute to see what programs are available and finding local Chinese cultural centers or university Chinese clubs. Ask your child's teacher for suggestions. If there are Chinese-speaking families in your program, don't let language barriers keep you and your children from becoming friends. One of the co-authors of this Brief has set up play dates and even arranged soccer pick-up schedules in Chinese, using Google Translate and texting. You can too! Don't be afraid to reach across a "language divide."

## Learning Chinese Beyond Grade School

Immersion programs in grade school are quite straightforward. You choose them, you enroll, your child goes to school and learns Chinese, and life is good. By middle school, the majority of programs tend to shift to one or two classes taught in Mandarin each day, typically Mandarin Language Arts and Social Studies. In high school, there may be only one Mandarin Language Arts class, though high school programs are evolving. One example is Utah, which is designed so that students can continue in the program through the end of high school. Students take the AP Chinese exam in either ninth or tenth grade, and then take college-level Chinese courses (for which they accrue college credit) for the rest of high school. Students can graduate from high school just two classes short of having a minor in Chinese (Utah Mandarin Immersion Parent Council, 2016, [utahimmersioncouncil.org/2017/01/20/what-happens-with-immersion-in-high-school](https://utahimmersioncouncil.org/2017/01/20/what-happens-with-immersion-in-high-school)). Another good example is Portland Public Schools in Oregon ([asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/portland-public-schools-chinese-program](https://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/portland-public-schools-chinese-program)), which is a fully articulated program, from kindergarten through grade twelve.

Twelve U.S. colleges and universities have Chinese Flagship programs in place:

[www.thelanguageflagship.org/content/chinese](http://www.thelanguageflagship.org/content/chinese)

These programs allow students who are proficient in Chinese to take classes *in their major* in Chinese at a Chinese university. Flagship programs offer intensive Chinese instruction, with the goal of having students reach professional proficiency. Immersion students can get started early in reaching their professional educational goals in both languages.

## Conclusion

Take a deep breath! Reading the discussion here, you might get very excited about the wonders of immersion and the joys of bilingualism. Yes, it is an amazing opportunity, which is becoming available in more and more cities across the U.S.

There are two things to keep in mind about Mandarin immersion. The first is that your dream of raising a bilingual child is just that -- *your* dream. At a certain

point, your children become their own people and begin to dream their *own* dreams. While your children may love learning Chinese in fourth grade, it is possible that in tenth grade, they'll be done with it and not want to continue. Parents say that they tend to see a drop in interest in middle school, and again after students have taken the AP Chinese exam. Parents who have been through this with their teens say that we should listen to what our children are telling us. If they're truly done with Chinese, let them be done. Take heart, though. Even if your child stops studying Chinese when they're 13 or 15, they'll still be ahead of the game if they take it up again in college or afterwards, because the tones will come naturally to them, and much of what they have learned will come back quickly.

For students who continue all the way through high school, the sky's the limit. They will be able to enter college ready to take higher-level Chinese classes, allowing them to either easily add a Chinese minor or major to their other studies, or to study in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Singapore. Their language

abilities and cross-cultural acumen will make them sought after by colleges and later, by employers.

Giving your child the gift of bilingualism is something they will be able to use throughout their lives. Choosing Mandarin immersion for your child is about expanding options. No one expects that every person who speaks Chinese will work or study in China or enter a field where their language abilities are crucial. As parents, our goal is to give our children as many options as possible, so that when they make their way in the world as adults, many doors will be open to them. They have long lives ahead. Just because they are not using Chinese when they are 22 doesn't mean they won't find a use for it at age 32. We can't know whether or not they'll end up stepping through the myriad doors that include 中文 (Zhōngwén, Chinese). What we can know is that we have both added to the richness of their lives and helped create citizens of the world who are comfortable moving between languages, countries, and cultures.

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## Resources for Parents and Children

### Popular Web Sites

HSK Graded Readers [www.yes-chinese.com/zh-cn/reading/list.do?type=2&level=GR-01&topic=](http://www.yes-chinese.com/zh-cn/reading/list.do?type=2&level=GR-01&topic=)  
These books begin with very easy stories that even first graders can read and continue with as they learn.

iChinese Readers [ichinesereader.com](http://ichinesereader.com)

A widely used online reading platform for K-12 programs. It has both fiction and non-fiction books. Many schools have subscriptions, so ask if yours does.

JoyReader [www.chinasprout.com/shop/BSE563](http://www.chinasprout.com/shop/BSE563)

JoyReader is a reading App designed for young students ages 3-12 who are studying the Chinese language. The App runs on the iPad, iPhone and all Android phones and tablets. It contains over 2,000 Chinese and 500 English storybooks, and more than 50 titles are added on a monthly basis. The storybooks are also categorized into themes to support lessons that based on thematic approach.

5QChannel [www.5qchannel.com/2015/english.html](http://www.5qchannel.com/2015/english.html)

This website has great animated stories, available in both traditional and simplified characters. They also have developed a number of apps that you can purchase and download on your phone or tablet, so children can read or watch the content in the car.

Mandarin Companion [mandarincompanion.com](http://mandarincompanion.com)

For kids in the upper grades, these popular stories, retold in Chinese, can't be beat. They come in both paper and online versions and feature retellings of stories like *The Secret Garden*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and *Great Expectations*. They are much more interesting than many easier-to-read books written for middle and high school students in Chinese.

### Dictionaries, Chinese-English/English-Chinese Translation, Character Animation, Flashcards, Memory Games

Yellow Bridge [www.yellowbridge.com](http://www.yellowbridge.com)

This is a 'go-to' online dictionary for many families when they're first starting out in Chinese. You can look up characters; find words; and, on a phone, draw the character with your finger (great if you don't know how to pronounce it). It is worth exploring the rest of their site too. They have some fun games for Chinese learners.

Yellow Bridge, Stroke order generator [www.yellowbridge.com/chinese/character-stroke-order.php?word=國](http://www.yellowbridge.com/chinese/character-stroke-order.php?word=國)

Pleco [www.pleco.com](http://www.pleco.com)

This is the most popular online dictionary for upper grade students, as it is a little more sophisticated but great once they've got a firm grounding in Chinese. It also has a flashcard creator. It can be downloaded to your phone, tablet, or computer, so it's always available, even when there's no WiFi.

### Chinese Flash Cards

There are many flash card making programs out there. Ask which ones your child's teachers like best. It is also helpful to ask upper grade parents, because often someone else has already put the school's vocabulary into a program, and you can use that database. Some popular ones are: Quizlet: [quizlet.com](http://quizlet.com) and Semanda: [semanda.com](http://semanda.com)

## For Adults

If you want to try to learn some Chinese yourself (and make your child feel infinitely superior to you because their accent will be so much better than yours), here are some options:

If you're an audio learner (or if you spend a lot of time in the car by yourself), the Pimsleur Audio Method is great. Spend 30 minutes a day listening and speaking, and you'll get a good grounding in spoken Chinese. You can find their lessons on their website. They're also available on Audible.com. [www.pimsleur.com/learn-chinese-mandarin](http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-chinese-mandarin)

If you're more a visual learner, Rosetta Stone is very popular. [www.rosettastone.com/learn-chinese/](http://www.rosettastone.com/learn-chinese/)

For a more contemporary feel, ChinesePod is a fun podcast that teaches both Chinese language and culture. It often works better if you've got a little Chinese under your belt, but you can start out cold too. [chinesepod.com](http://chinesepod.com)

## Appendix: Using Chinese in a Chinese Immersion Program

### Transcript: Hello, Children

This is an example of an immersion teacher using only Chinese as she welcomes students to her class on the first day of kindergarten.

*Xiǎopéngyǒu, nǐmen hǎo.* 小朋友，你们好。

Hello children (literally 'little friends'), how are you? *The teacher smiles, is very welcoming.*

*Qǐng jìnlái* 请进来。

Please come in. *The teacher uses her arms to usher the children into the classroom.*

*Bǎ nǐmen de shūbāo fàng zài zhèlǐ* 把你们的书包放在这里。

Put your backpacks here. *With a big smile she takes a backpack from one of the children to show everyone what it is.*

*Shūbāo* 书包

Backpack. *She holds up the backpack and has them all say the word several times. A Mandarin-speaking child (or one who has older siblings in the school) says very proudly, “书包 means backpack. She means backpack. We put our backpacks over there!”*

*Qǐng nǐmen zuò zài zhèlǐ* 请你们坐在这里

Please sit down here. *She sits down cross-legged on the rug at the front of the room and pats the spaces on either side of her.*

*Zhèlǐ!* 这里！

Here! Here! Here! *She says, waiting for the first child to sit down next to her. When one does, she beams.*

*Hǎo!* 好!

Good! *She smiles broadly.*

Your child is just 10 minutes into Mandarin immersion and has already learned to understand these words and phrases: Come in, Backpack, Good, Here.

### Videos

#### [Chinese teaching videos beginning, middle, end of School Year 2016-2017](#)

In these three videos, from Washington Yuying Public Charter School, in Washington DC, we see students and teachers using Chinese at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year.

*Beginning* - In the process of establishing routines and procedures at the beginning of the day or the school year, students don't speak a lot of Chinese. This video clip shows sharing time, which is part of Responsive Morning Meeting activities. Every day, students take turns bringing an artifact to share with the class, and the other students try to ask the speaker questions after he or she finishes sharing. Aini laoshi tries to encourage students to use Chinese to ask their questions.

The morning meeting routine helps students get ready for the rest of the day, and sharing can help students make personal connections with each other and feel happy and safe in a Chinese learning environment.

*Middle* - Students get used to working independently during literacy block, while Aini laoshi is conducting differentiated guided reading lessons with each round of small groups. Students all know the expectations and activities that they will do at their stations.

*End* - Summative assessment at the end of a Dramatic Arts Unit - Students explore and learn different forms of expressing ideas in the study unit. In a final project, they work in their groups to choose forms of expressing ideas to create a script and perform the story. They created their own setting, costumes, background music, and characters to perform, using different voices. They also created a survey to assess if their audience (mostly their parents) understand the central message of their performance.