

Immersion Education: Creating an Integrated School Culture

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Introduction

Sofia is a bright seven-year-old girl whose parents want their young daughter to learn Chinese. In the town where they live, there is no Chinese-English dual language immersion school. There are several fine local elementary schools, but none of them offers Chinese (or any other world language instruction). There is a school in town called Huamei, which offers a wide array of core academic and enrichment classes in Chinese each week day beginning at 1:30 pm as well as on weekends and in the summer. However, Huamei does not offer any classes in English. Most of the students are heritage Chinese speakers, who come from Sofia's town and other surrounding communities to attend the school. Sofia's parents take her to visit Huamei as well as Ruth Simmons Elementary, a local neighborhood school, and she likes them both. So do her parents. The teachers are friendly and student-focused, the principals seem competent and dedicated to running good schools, and the students are engaged and seem to enjoy learning. In the end, the family strikes a deal with both schools: Sofia will attend Ruth Simmons Elementary in the morning and Huamei in the afternoon. Sofia's parents commit to picking her up every day from one school after lunch and driving her to the other school for afternoon class and after-school activities.

Think about the scenario above. The teachers and administrators at Ruth Simmons and Huamei have no obligation at

all to communicate with one another about anything.

There is no imperative to collaborate. Each school has its own distinct mission; curriculum; schedule; philosophy about student learning; and approaches to managing student behavior, assigning homework, and managing diversity, equity, and inclusion; and the list goes on. The point is this: In the absence of deliberate and intentional collaboration aimed at aligning and integrating the English and Chinese elements of Sofia's education, how many opportunities might be missed? How much redundancy is there? What kinds of mixed messages might Sofia be receiving? If there were a Chinese-English dual language immersion school in Sofia's home town, how might that school's teachers and administrators work together to provide a better, more well-integrated experience for students than the kind of "silo" experience described above?

This CELIN Brief draws on the experiences of several established Chinese-English dual language immersion schools to discuss how to integrate the Chinese and English strands of a school into one cohesive educational program. The leaders in all of the schools have worked hard to break down organizational silos and to create -- with varying degrees of success -- integrated school cultures. The goal of the Brief is to provide some fundamental principles, as well as some practical, actionable suggestions for bridging gaps that can sometimes exist

between the Chinese and English elements of immersion programs. The ideas and information presented reflect input from creative and resourceful individuals at private, public, and public charter schools.

We recognize that each school has its own unique context and faces its own particular challenges. The schools we feature may not completely reflect your school, and some of our suggestions may seem impractical in some schools. Nevertheless, we hope that the ideas presented will inspire thinking, planning, and implementation that make sense in your particular school's context, and that you will be able to work toward creating and improving your school's culture so that the Chinese and English elements are aligned and integrated.

Critical Elements in Establishing an Integrated School Culture

As part of the CELIN Briefs series, Drs. Shuhan Wang and Joy Kreeft Peyton (2018) published a CELIN Brief on [*Key Features of Effective Chinese Language Programs: A Checklist*](#). The checklist is the first tool of its kind to provide valuable focus and guidance for Chinese-English immersion schools that are committed to making progress and improvement in our new field, with relatively limited resources. The authors of this Brief have participated in the development of the CELIN Checklist and have found it to contain a useful framework for, among many other things, addressing issues of immersion school culture. Readers are encouraged to access this resource.

There is consensus among the experienced immersion educators listed in the Acknowledgements, who have contributed to this Brief, as well as in the key components of the *CELIN Checklist*, that the following are critical elements in establishing and nurturing an integrated school culture in immersion schools: 1) Leadership; 2) Faculty, both Chinese and English; 3) Curriculum; 4) Parents; and 5) A commitment to building and accessing professional networks. Here we describe each of these five elements, drawing on the practical experiences of successful immersion schools.

1. Leadership

There are two important dimensions of effective leadership: the governing board and administration and management. Regarding the governing body, traditional public and public charter schools are

accountable to governing bodies, such as a local, state, or district board of education or state department of public instruction. Private schools, whether religious or independent, have governing boards as well. Regardless of their structure, all schools must have a mission statement, a strategic plan, and a budget that is the ultimate responsibility of the governing board. The second dimension of leadership refers to the administration and management within a school, which is discussed below.

Governing Board

Boards of education and boards of trustees can seem distant from the daily life of a school. For teachers, board members may seem to focus on issues and priorities that have little effect on how well students learn. Moreover, a properly functioning board will interact primarily with the only employee that it directly supervises -- the superintendent in a school district or the head of school at a charter or private independent school. How can boards be relevant and effective in their efforts to provide quality learning experiences for students in immersion schools? Do their policies and decisions even matter? We have heard more than a few administrators say that their board's involvement with immersion started and ended with a hasty decision to "do Mandarin immersion," without full consideration of the mission, strategic plan, and budget that such a commitment entailed. These are discussed here.

Mission. All of the above notwithstanding, an effective board is critical for an immersion school to thrive. Beginning with the school mission and culture, the board has the power to set the tone in a very public way for the entire school community. A good board focuses on issues at the "30 thousand-foot level": mission, financial sustainability, long-term strategic planning, facilities, budget, and the long-term sustainability of the school or district. Among these responsibilities, school mission is key, and it should constitute the "true north" toward which all school initiatives ultimately point. The mission provides the framework for decision-making about program focus, staffing, and resource allocation. A school must have a mission, supported by the board, that articulates the importance of Chinese immersion in the overall education of the students.

Examples of Immersion School Missions

(All of the schools mentioned in this Brief are listed at the end, with their location and a link to their website.)

Yinghua Academy's mission is "to prepare its students to be engaged and productive global citizens by providing a research-based educational program that includes a rigorous academic program, immersion in Chinese language and culture, and a nurturing and supportive school environment."

Washington Yuying Public Charter School's mission challenges students to "reach their full potential in a nurturing Chinese/English educational environment."

Yuming Charter School aspires to "graduate students with bilingual and biliterate skills in Mandarin Chinese and English."

The International School of the Peninsula (ISTP) educates students "through a rigorous and dynamic bilingual program, inspiring them to develop an inquisitive and responsible international mindset."

At Chinese American International School (CAIS), the community is simply asked to "Embrace Chinese."

The elements of these school missions, and those of many other immersion schools, are not intended to be applied selectively to some community members and not to others. They are all-school missions, including teachers whose language of instruction is not Chinese. Immersion is a whole-community endeavor and not simply a "one-off" that is relegated to a few Chinese language teachers. A successful immersion program requires a collaborative school culture, in which the school's aspirations are codified in the mission and embedded in all aspects of the school program, and leadership starts at the top. It can be a powerful message when a board, the highest authority in an organization, sends this unambiguous signal to the school community.

Reflection: *Look at your school's or district's mission. Is it sending this message of a collaborative school culture to parents, administrators, teachers, staff, and students? If not, it's time to review it and ensure that it does.*

Strategic plan. While the mission articulates the reasons for the school's existence, successive strategic plans provide a concrete roadmap that explains the ways in which the school will achieve the mission over a period of the next three to five years. Strategic planning (or visioning or thinking) is also the responsibility of the board.

Examples of Immersion School Strategic Plans

The Board at the International School of the Peninsula (ISTP), which in addition to Chinese immersion also offers French immersion, recently completed a new strategic plan. According to Chris Livaccari, Chinese program director and middle school principal at ISTP, one impetus in the planning process was aligning the Chinese, English, and French programs at the school. "There was a concern that ISTP felt like two different schools," Chris remarked. At the outset of ISTP's strategic planning process, its board focused on school culture: "We aim to align the academic experience and outcomes for all students, evolving to a 'one school' vision." Strategies for achieving alignment include "aligning the school's two bilingual programs" and a commitment to "hiring international teachers who are experts in and passionate about their fields." The ISTP board ultimately made the decision to adopt the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, after a team visited schools that had already implemented the IB. In Chris's words, "the IB was a lever for integrating our different language programs."

Yinghua Academy recently completed a new strategic plan, which is permeated with aspirations for its already strong Chinese immersion program. Some sample objectives include: "1) Cultivate a physical and social environment that encourages and supports Chinese language development; 2) Provide authentic learning opportunities to better prepare and motivate students to utilize Chinese beyond their Yinghua education; and 3) Advance a deeper understanding of Chinese immersion education among all stakeholders, including parents, staff, and the greater community."

These efforts to increase Chinese proficiency through programming, environment, and experiences have ignited new fire in middle school students: 1) A new successful blue ticket incentive program is focused on teachers catching kids speaking Chinese outside of class, and 2) Students have the opportunity to create and lead mid-day activity clubs, such as Chinese painting, Asian cooking, ping pong, and Chinese movies.

The Chinese American International School (CAIS) board, in its statement of strategic vision, articulates long-term goals specifically in terms of Chinese and English integration: “CAIS students enjoy learning and achieve their individual potential through an engaging, innovative, *integrated* dual language curriculum and skilled instruction.” “The CAIS curriculum in Chinese is relevant, innovative, and integrated with international learning and technology.” The CAIS vision also recognizes the importance of teachers with skill sets that are unique to immersion education -- *including teachers in the English language classroom*: “With an emphasis on a positive work climate, benefits, and compensation, CAIS is able to attract, develop, reward, and retain world-class Chinese-English dual language immersion faculty.” Additionally, the school’s board-endorsed philosophy of diversity, equity, and inclusion includes language saying that, “The attitudes and aptitudes that are cultivated through Chinese immersion extend far beyond language and prepare students to engage respectfully with a diverse world.”

Reflection: *Does your school or district have a strategic plan that articulates the mission and goals and lists specific activities for the next three to five years?*

Budget. For some, the language of mission and strategy can sound like platitudes, somewhat removed from the heavy lifting of day-to-day operations in a school. A strong school board will put its money where its mouth is. The true priorities of an individual or organization are reflected in decisions about resources. The district’s or school’s budget is ultimately the responsibility of the board. This means that the lofty aspirations expressed in a school’s mission and strategy ought to be reflected in the

school’s budget. Here are some questions that can be asked by the board of an immersion school:

- Are resources equitably devoted to Chinese-focused professional development?
- Are there resources for learning specialists in Chinese as well as in English?
- It is often assumed that Chinese language teachers will adapt to U.S. culture and society on their own. To what extent are resources devoted to ensuring that this is happening in our program?
- Are there resources dedicated to giving non-Chinese speaking teachers opportunities to learn more about Chinese language and culture?

These kinds of mission-consistent initiatives cost money, and it is the responsibility of the board to connect ideals and dollars. Here are two examples of budgets that align with a school’s mission and strategic plan.

Examples of School Budgets

At Yuming Charter School, the school sends a team of five or six teachers and administrators to the [*National Chinese Language Conference*](#) (NCLC) every year (often as presenters), a significant commitment of resources for an urban school with a tight budget.

The Chinese American International School (CAIS) invests significant effort and dollars to create and maintain a student service team that consists of learning specialists and counselors who include both English and Chinese speakers.

At Yinghua Academy, priority is placed on having a budget that includes special education teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as speech pathologists, who are native Chinese speakers.

Reflection: *Use the questions above to reflect on your school’s or district’s budget and its alignment with your mission and strategic plan.*

Administration and Management

We all work for someone, and even at the highest levels of administration -- principal, executive director, director of curriculum and instruction, head of school, and superintendent -- there is usually someone to whom administrators report. In the organizational chart, administrators exist in a precarious zone that is somewhere between the board and classroom teachers. They are responsible for turning the mission, strategies, and dollars that the board gives them into effective learning and teaching. At a highly functional school, skilled administrators guide teachers in the direction of school priorities while also remaining attuned to teachers' needs. This is potentially risky territory, and credibility is critical. If the strategies used do not resonate with or are not understood by those responsible for implementing them -- teachers -- the result can be cynicism, frustration, or even obstructionism. If the challenges and legitimate needs of teachers are misunderstood or ignored by their supervisors or not communicated clearly to the higher levels of administration and the board, how can the board develop priorities and strategies that are relevant and effective?

The administrative challenges and potential dilemmas described above characterize many schools. In an immersion school, there is an additional level of complexity; because immersion education is so complex, the boards need to be more patient, knowledgeable, and understanding. When teachers come from different countries and cultures, their needs and challenges are potentially more complicated and diverse. One question that arises is, "Why would anyone want to be an administrator in a Chinese-English immersion school?" We have found that the teachers and administrators who have willingly gravitated toward immersion are, by nature, energized by challenge and tend to be solution-focused. Nevertheless, we have found these qualities to be important in successful administrators at immersion schools.

Linguistic and cultural knowledge. At this point in the development of Chinese immersion programs, it is not practical or even possible to have native Chinese speakers at the helm of every

immersion school. In the United States, we do not yet have a large enough talent pool of savvy, experienced school leaders who are also Chinese speakers. One thing that non-Chinese administrators can do, however, is to take a real interest in learning as much as possible about Chinese language and culture. This includes both "big C" and "little c" Cultural/cultural knowledge. It is important for non-Chinese administrators to educate themselves about things such as history, politics, geography, the arts, and economics ("big C" Culture). It is equally important to try to understand the attitudes, beliefs, and motivations behind everyday behaviors of Chinese faculty and staff ("little c" culture). Administrators in immersion schools have frequently remarked that faculty meetings tend to be dominated by outspoken teachers born in the United States, whose first language is English. Chinese-speaking teachers who have immigrated to the United States tend to be more reserved in large-group settings.

Reflection: Are these patterns true in your school? Do English-speaking teachers interact differently with authority figures than Chinese-speaking teachers do? Are there differences in approaches to student behavior management? Homework? Learner-centered and teacher-centered instruction? Assessment? If so, why is this, and what is your school doing to ensure that all voices are heard?

In the schools profiled in this Brief, faculty and administrators emphasize the importance of leaders who not only have made efforts to understand aspects of Chinese language and culture, but who also communicate an expectation that non-Chinese speaking faculty, staff, and administrators make the same efforts to be open and to learn. Not only does this build a cohesive community, but it is a model of the behavior and attitudes that immersion education was created to cultivate among students.

A place at the table for Chinese speakers.

Above we mention that in the United States, we currently lack a deep pool of savvy, experienced school leaders who are also Chinese speakers. We hope that this imbalance will improve over time, and it is our observation that in high-functioning

immersion schools, there is a deliberate attempt to identify and develop leadership talent from among Chinese-speaking faculty and to ensure that these voices have a place at the table when important decisions are being made. Here are some examples of ways that some immersion schools have done this.

Examples of Developing School Leaders

Yinghua Academy is a good example of an intentional approach to the development of teacher leaders, both native-speaking Chinese and English. Taking advantage of [Minnesota's Quality Compensation law \(Q Comp\)](#), Yinghua devotes funds to rewarding teachers who take on leadership roles at the school. Teachers who take on official responsibilities as grade level or department leads, or who apply for and are chosen for such positions as Professional Learning Community (PLC) Lead, Mentor Lead, Observation Lead, or Study Abroad Lead receive significant additional compensation. Under the guidance of Dr. Luyi Lien, Academic Director, who has been at Yinghua since the school opened in 2006, grade-level and subject-level leaders have helped guide teams of teachers and students to achieve outstanding academic results.

Yuming Charter School has a particularly bold approach to leadership development among Chinese-speaking faculty. Yuming's Head of School, Sue Park, has assembled a senior leadership team with two native Chinese-speaking members: Xu Xinyi is Yuming's lower school director, and Cecilia Pasqual heads the upper school. While Cecilia had served in administrative roles prior to joining the Yuming team, Xinyi began as a classroom teacher and has grown into her current position through mentoring and increased opportunities. Previous to her current role, she served as Chinese language program coordinator. Yuming Charter School also has an instructional leadership team that includes three Chinese language speakers, who split their time between the classroom and other responsibilities, such as instructional coach, assessment coordinator, and literacy lead. Yuming also assigns mentoring duties to all veteran Chinese language teachers.

Sue Park, who is not a Chinese speaker, represents an approach to immersion leadership that is followed by several of the other schools profiled in this Brief. Washington Yuying Public Charter School, International School of the Peninsula (ISTP), Yinghua Academy, and Chinese American International School (CAIS) have non-native Chinese speakers as school heads, who rely on and serve as advocates for native Chinese-speaking administrators in important leadership positions. At each of these schools, the leaders attribute school success to the strong teamwork between non-native and native Chinese-speaking teams. Not only does this model lend itself to a more nuanced understanding of issues facing Chinese immersion, but, as Cindy Chiang, Chinese curriculum coordinator at ISTP notes, "Because the school has acknowledged my leadership, Chinese teachers are opening up more and sharing ideas; they feel heard. This is the strongest moment for Chinese language faculty in my seven years at ISTP."

Reflection: In what ways are various types of leaders developed within your school or district?

Leadership in schools with immersion strands. In all of the schools described above, 100% of the student population that they serve is enrolled in the immersion program. Yet many schools have immersion strands that exist alongside non-immersion strands. In these schools, potential divisions between immersion and non-immersion teachers, students, and families can pose a challenge to school culture and community building. While the identity and cohesion of the immersion strands may be bolstered by their perceived specialness, for the school as a whole, building a cohesive, unified community is complicated. We have even heard of ill-will or resentment in some school districts in which immersion programs are perceived -- correctly or not -- as receiving more attention, support, and resources than the children and teachers in the monolingual classrooms next door. Whatever the case, perceptions can shape and deter community building.

Example of an Immersion Strand Within a School

Tim Shaw is principal at Meadow Brook Elementary in Forrest Hills, Michigan. Meadow Brook is in its 10th year of running a Chinese immersion strand under the same roof as the school's traditional, monolingual program. Meadow Brook, Tim explained, draws its immersion population from seven attendance areas around the 10,000-student district. When Tim arrived, two years into Meadow Brook's immersion experience, the school had just received a Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which "somewhat drove a wedge" into the school community. Rather than single out the immersion program, Tim has patiently and persistently educated his school community about all of the different programs that make up Meadow Brook. "We have lots of programs," he explains. "We have a gifted program, a cognitively impaired program, and an immersion program, but we are all one Meadow Brook," he tells his faculty, staff, and families. "Leadership in messaging matters." Tim pushed back when some families in the immersion strand suggested holding Chinese program-only events, and recently the school has begun working on Friday projects in grades K, 1, and 3, where immersion students and neighborhood students (Tim's deliberate term for the non-immersion students) work together. The downside, Tim admits, is that the Chinese program students miss their Chinese classes on these days, but he hopes for a win in the area of school community building. The school has a block schedule, which allows for common planning time among grade-level teaching teams from both the immersion program and the neighborhood program. Meadow Brook's grade-level teams include both immersion and neighborhood program teachers, and one of the school's grade-level team leaders is a Chinese language immersion teacher.

Reflection: *Is your program a whole-school immersion model, or is immersion a strand within the school? If a strand, how is it related to the rest of the school?*

2. Faculty

It is a fact of organizational life that the heavy lifting in any initiative is done by the rank-and-file; teachers, staff, and administrators. This should be a positive dynamic, as those at the "runway level" are often the most knowledgeable about content and processes of learning and teaching. We have found that in the most successful immersion schools, teachers view themselves not separately as Chinese-speaking faculty and English-speaking faculty, but as a single, unified dual language immersion faculty, invested in working together to foster bilingual, globally minded students. There are two areas in which a school can work to build this dynamic: time for teacher collaboration and for the building of relationships.

Create time for collaboration. There must be established mechanisms for Chinese and English language faculty to collaborate, and the times, places, and clearly articulated expectations need to be protected from incursions of other school issues. Every school leader with whom we spoke for this Brief has carved out time each week for Chinese and English language teams to meet and discuss issues of professional practice.

Examples of Collaboration in a School

At the International School of the Peninsula (ISTP), the adoption of the IB Primary Years Program (PYP) framework has necessitated this kind of collaboration. Cindy Chiang, Chinese program academic dean at ISTP, explains that for two hours each week, when students are in specialists' classes, the Chinese-, English-, and French-speaking faculty meet together with the PYP coordinator to plan instruction across all languages.

The Chinese American International School (CAIS) achieves this through a slightly different mechanism. For CAIS faculty, each day begins at 7:45 AM with 45 minutes of team collaboration time, and on assigned days each week, Chinese-English teams meet together to plan or address issues of professional practice.

At Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School, similar time and space are devoted to collaboration across languages. Pearl You explains, “In the beginning, English teachers tended to dominate the meetings, so we restructured the meetings to assign roles to different teachers. It took a while, and we had to be deliberate and intentional about ensuring participation across the board. We have been most successful in our planning when Chinese-speaking teachers have taken part—everyone sees this now!”

Build relationships. A second way that successful immersion schools can build esprit de corps (or 团队精神 *tuándui jīngshén*) is less formal and more intentionally social. In recent years, we have learned from the field of positive psychology that happiness leads to success (and not the other way around), and that one of the key factors leading to happiness is positive social relationships with others. In the workplace, this translates into strong social bonds among colleagues, and the immersion schools with the most positive faculty cultures are those in which social relationships between English and Chinese faculty are deliberately nurtured.

Examples of Relationship Building

At Yuming Charter School, faculty organize hotpot dinners, where teachers literally eat out of the same pot. “It is fun to get together and enjoy each other’s company outside of a work context,” Yuming middle school director Celia Pascual says, although she notes that activities need to be planned that appeal to all faculty.

CAIS has formed a “Sunshine Committee” that is tasked with building community among faculty by organizing fun activities. As with Yuming, it was important for the CAIS planning team to be culturally sensitive to activities that appeal to all faculty. “We hit on an idea that both Chinese and English staff loved when we started holding after-school social hours at a location that was right next to the BART light rail station, where many teachers start their end-of-day commute,” explains Linda Vann-Adibé, from the CAIS Sunshine Committee. “We’ve had great participation, and everyone seems to really enjoy it!”

Team building among Chinese- and English-speaking faculty takes time, “but it’s worth it,” points out Tim Shaw, principal at Meadow Brook Elementary School in Forest Hills, Michigan. According to Shaw, “longevity matters,” and as Chinese language faculty stay longer, relationships deepen and improve.

Reflection: *In what ways does your school build relationships and collaboration among all staff?*

3. Approaches for Academic and Social Emotional Curriculum Design

When teachers have protected time to collaborate, with clearly articulated expectations about how to use this valuable time, the result can be innovations in curriculum design that integrate learning and teaching across languages. Kevin Chang, Chinese program director at CAIS, says, “we need to stop thinking about Chinese curriculum and English curriculum and instead, talk about an integrated curriculum; some is taught in English, and some is taught in Chinese.”

Many schools have tried to adopt a workshop model across languages in reading and writing. The idea is that literacy is essentially “meaning making” and that the process is fundamentally similar in Chinese and English. Immersion schools have found this to be mostly true, with some important qualifications. Kevin Chang at CAIS points out the importance of making adaptations to literacy workshop models that reflect a thorough knowledge of the fundamental difference between a phonetic script (English) and a logographic script (Chinese) (See the CELIN Brief, [Developing Initial Literacy in Chinese](#), Everson, Chang, & Ross, 2016, for more details). This has proven to be easier in writing workshop models, because students can make meaning with the vocabulary they have already mastered. Reading has proven more challenging, as there are far fewer leveled reading materials for Chinese language learners (although educational publishers such as [Level Chinese](#) and [iChineseReader](#) are making great efforts in this area), and Chinese words, unlike English, cannot be “decoded” by readers.

This can be a source of discouragement for young readers. Nonetheless, leaders of the immersion schools described here see great potential in developing literacy workshop strategies with applications across languages.

Similarly, many schools have adopted a thematic approach to curriculum unit planning in order to create meaningful connections across languages, as described below.

Examples of Integrated Curriculum

At ISTP, Chinese-, English-, and French-speaking faculty design curriculum together around a central idea. An example is the unit “Who Am I,” in which the central theme is “Notable experiences shape the individual.”

Washington Yuying Charter School has benefitted from the adoption of an inquiry-based approach. As in other schools, each morning teachers post the day’s schedule on the white board, in both Chinese and English classes. Unlike most schools, which arrange schedules by subject (math, reading, social studies), Yuying’s schedule is arranged according to essential questions that are the same across languages.

Social emotional learning is another area in which schools have integrated the experience of Chinese and English. At Yuming Charter and Yinghua Academy, teachers have been trained to develop a [Responsive Classroom](#), and classroom culture and climate are consistent across Chinese and English classes.

At Meadow Brook Elementary, [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#) have been implemented school-wide, creating a consistent and integrated approach to classroom management across Chinese and English classes.

At CAIS, teachers have in recent years looked for opportunities within the existing curriculum to integrate the social justice standards articulated by [Teaching Tolerance](#). The Teaching Tolerance domains of identity, diversity, justice, and action are emphasized in developmentally appropriate ways across languages from grades PreK through 8.

For example, in an existing unit of learning, second graders look at folktales in both Chinese and English through a lens of upstanders versus bystanders.

Reflection: In what ways are different curricula in your school integrated?

4. Parents

Although our clients are our students, and our program decisions need to be focused on what is in the best interest of the children at the school, students’ parents must have confidence in our immersion program’s mission, staff, and instruction. In almost all cases, Chinese immersion is a choice that parents make for their children. If parents do not believe in us, then they will not choose to have their children in our schools. They need to be our partners. We think about immersion all day long. They don’t. Most of them were educated in a way that is radically different from what their children are experiencing, so even though they have chosen our schools, the information that they have for evaluating our work is incomplete. We need to educate them about what we do, so that they will be our partners, support our work, and feel excitement about their children’s education.

In *A Parent’s Guide to Mandarin Immersion*, author Elizabeth Weise (2014) devotes an entire chapter to the topic “Why parents choose Mandarin immersion.” Weise, who also maintains the popular [Mandarin Immersion Parents’ Council](#) blog, identifies six types of parents who choose Mandarin immersion for their children: (1) Pioneer, (2) Global, (3) Academic, (4) Adoptive, (5) Heritage, and (6) Chinese. It is worth noting that among these types, none can be characterized by a deep, unquestioning, and abiding faith in the virtue of Mandarin immersion, our own biases notwithstanding. It behooves us to understand why parents choose our school in the first place and then speak to those motivations. In other words, we need to make parents fall in love with us again and again. It is also worth noting that in addition to the educational case for courting parents, there is a real business case for this as well. The risk of attrition at Mandarin immersion schools is real. Not all parents and children find our schools to be a good fit, and when a student leaves, it is difficult to find suitable

replacements, given our language proficiency requirements. Fewer students can mean less money from the district, fewer tuition dollars, or damage to a school's reputation if families leave. (See the CELIN Brief, [Parents as Partners in their Children's Chinese Immersion Education: Making Decisions and Providing Support](#), Alexander & Weise, 2018, for more information and resources.)

Examples of Promoting Parent Engagement

Yinghua Academy focuses on building parent knowledge at every step of the child's K-8 educational journey. Parent education sessions entitled "What's the Scoop?" inform students and parents about each new significant chapter of the journey. First, Yinghua educates parents about their responsibility to read to their children in English for 30 minutes per day in the early years. Next, first grade parents' fears about their children learning to read and write in English, as it is not introduced until second grade, are minimized in these sessions. In January of fourth grade, the last year of Lower School, school staff introduce middle school life to parents and students, who rotate through mini-sessions of a typical day with the opportunity to meet subject specialists in all academic areas. Finally, Yinghua parents and students are invited to an annual high school panel, which features an array of premiere private, public, and charter schools as well as Yinghua graduates. The purpose of the evening is two-fold: Yinghua families learn about excellent high school options, and outstanding schools realize firsthand the exceptional preparation of Yinghua students. This last issue—high school readiness—can be particularly anxiety-inducing for immersion middle school parents, who begin wondering if nine or more years of immersion has put their child at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis their monolingual peers. We in the field know that these students are at an advantage, but we need to make sure that parents understand this, in terms of the research on this topic (e.g., Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012; Diamond, 2012; Marian & Shook, 2012; also see the CELIN Brief, [Parents as Partners in Their Children's Chinese Immersion Education: Making Decisions and Providing Support](#), for further discussion and references; and by letting them know our own track records, once we have data to show student learning paths and accomplishments.

Each year CAIS holds a series of educational events called "CAIS 201" (a continuation of CAIS 101, which is an information session about the school for prospective parents). Topics included in the CAIS 201 series include "Meet the Leadership Team;" "Meet the Board;" EdTEch/TechEd;" "Social Emotional Learning;" "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the CAIS Curriculum;" and "Literacy." The last topic is part of CAIS's ongoing attempt to address the anxiety that parents have about perceived gaps in language immersion education. The attempt of the CAIS 201 event, which is designed primarily for new parents but open to all, is to foster an understanding among parents of the breadth and well-roundedness of a child's immersion education over their nine or more years of immersion education. At CAIS, the Head of School blog also focuses periodically on the larger picture of Chinese society and culture. It is important that parents are reminded from time to time that their child's education will ultimately open doors to a wonderfully dynamic nation, with a rich and evolving culture that goes far, far beyond lanterns, dragons, kites, and making dumplings.

Reflection: What does good parent engagement look like? How does your program support parents by engaging them as partners in their children's immersion education?

5. A Commitment to Building and Accessing Professional Networks

Running or working at a Mandarin immersion school can seem like a lonely endeavor, and teachers often describe feeling alone, as if they are re-inventing the wheel by themselves on a daily basis. This does not need to be the case. The rapid growth of the Chinese language field has been accompanied by more and better resources nationally, if local networks of immersion teachers and programs are not readily available. The [Chinese Early Language and Immersion Network \(CELIN\) at Asia Society](#) is a natural first stop. The web page has many resources, including the CELIN Brief series and the very useful [Directory of Programs](#), which documents a growing number of Mandarin immersion programs in the

United States, with contact information for key people. Educators tend to be collaborative by nature, and the CELIN Directory of Programs provides a handy gateway to immersion educators across the country who are willing and able to collaborate with like-minded peers.

The annual [National Chinese Language Conference](#) (NCLC) has seen more and more sessions devoted to immersion-related topics. It is a wonderful opportunity to swap name cards, scan WeChat QR codes, make plans to meet for dinner, and build longer collaborations. The authors of this CELIN Brief and all of the school leaders who have contributed content to it met originally at the NCLC and are now in regular contact via email, telephone, and WeChat about all kinds of issues of professional practice. NCLC is the largest and most focused conference, but there are other places to meet as well, including the annual conferences held by the [American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages \(ACTFL\)](#), [Chinese Language Teachers' Association \(CLTA\)](#), the [Early Childhood Chinese Immersion Forum \(ECCIF\)](#), and the [Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition \(CARLA\)](#). Whether online, by phone, or face-to-face, successful

immersion leaders are networked with people in the field.

Conclusion

It is clear to those running or teaching in immersion schools that an integrated school culture is needed for program and student success. This culture includes strong leadership with vision and sensitivity to foster multicultural diversity and integration simultaneously; Chinese and English teachers working together effectively; coherent and complementary curriculum and instruction in Chinese and English that engages students, parent engagement and support; and a commitment to building professional networks among administrators and teachers. Collaboration within and across schools is indispensable.

Likewise, as educational leaders of immersion programs, we need to not only run our own schools, we also need to learn from and assist our peers at other schools. While Chinese immersion programs in the United States are like sprouting bamboo shoots across the land, the field needs intentional nurturing and tending to grow into a beautiful bamboo forest.

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Additional Resources

Board Source

<https://boardsource.org>

CELIN @ Asia Society

<https://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/chinese-early-language-and-immersion-network>

Mandarin Immersion Parents' Council

<https://miparentscouncil.org>

Schools Described

Chinese American International School (CAIS), San Francisco, California

<https://www.cais.org>

Forest Hills (Michigan) Public Schools, Mandarin Immersion Road Map

<https://www.fhps.net/departments/instruction/dual-language-immersion-education/mandarin-chinese-immersion/mandarin-chinese-immersion-road-map>

International School of the Peninsula (ISTP), Palo Alto, California

<https://www.istp.org/page>

Meadowbrook Elementary School, Grand Rapids, Michigan

<https://www.greatschools.org/michigan/grand-rapids/1514-Meadow-Brook-Elementary-School>

Washington Yuying Public Charter School, Washington, DC

<https://www.washingtonyuying.org>

Yinghua Academy, Minneapolis, Minnesota

<https://www.yinghuaacademy.org>

Yuming Charter School, Oakland, California

<http://www.yumingschool.org/>

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