

Education

BY KELLY ST. JOHN REGIER



One child, two fluent languages

Parents who want their kids to become bilingual turn to local immersion programs in Spanish and, now, Mandarin.

San Clemente mother Thalia Tong knew she wanted her two children to grow up speaking her parents' native language, Mandarin Chinese.

She drove her now 4-year-old son several times a week to Irvine to take Mandarin classes at A Little Dynasty (alittledynasty.com), a Chinese school in Quail Hill. But it wasn't until he attended an all-day summer camp that his language skills started to really click, Tong says.

"When it comes to language, you need to constantly hear it," says Tong. "With immersion, it's in their heads. It's repetitive. It just works better."

As Tong began to explore options for elementary school, she couldn't find exactly what she wanted: a public school with a Mandarin immersion program, where students would spend most of the day hearing and speaking Mandarin.

So with a group of other interested parents, she pushed the Capistrano Unified School District to create one. Capistrano Unified – which already ran successful

Spanish two-way immersion programs at three elementary schools – agreed.

This fall, Capistrano's Marian Bergeson Elementary School in Laguna Niguel will become the first public school in Orange County to offer a Mandarin immersion program. It will offer as many as two kindergarten classes and one first grade class in which students will be taught 80 percent of the day in Mandarin and 20 percent in English.

With each successive grade level, that ratio will drop; by the end of elementary school, teachers will be spending half the day teaching in Mandarin and half in English, following the standard language-immersion instructional model.

Mandarin-English immersion programs are still relatively rare, with only about 80 in existence in the United States. Many parents believe that helping their children become bilingual in Mandarin Chinese – the world's most widely spoken language – will help them compete in the global marketplace.

Orange County is also home to a

private school, Renaissance International in Costa Mesa (rschooloc.org), which offers a trilingual Mandarin-Spanish-English immersion program. Kindergartners in Renaissance's immersion track spend the majority of their day being taught in Mandarin, and then one hour of English and one in Spanish.

Renaissance has been operating in Florida for seven years. The school's Orange County's director, Carrie Mizera, says she convinced Juliann Talkington, the owner of the Florida school, to bring the program to O.C. because of the great demand for its services.

Mizera wanted to help her 4-year-old son develop the Chinese language skills that she had been teaching him from birth.

"I knew as he starts school, he would lose that fluency, and I worked really hard for him to acquire the language," says Mizera. "Then more and more families came along. It's not just for my family, but all these families and what they need."

Talkington says she designed

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"What we actually see is that, for our students on the immersion track, we actually have to accelerate their English instruction, too, because they perform above their [English-only] peers," Talkington says.

Julie Sugarman, a research associate with the nonprofit think tank Center for Applied Linguistics (www.cal.org), says research shows there is an advantage to exposing children to a foreign language while they are young. Because their brains are more open to hearing the differences between language's sounds, they are able to sound like a native speaker, she says.

"If this is a goal for your children – for them to really know another language and to be able to use it for a variety of purposes – this is really the best method to do it," she says.

The first two-way Spanish immersion programs were developed in the 1960s and began to spread more widely in the 1990s, says Sugarman. The Center for Applied Linguistics maintains a directory of immersion programs across the country. In 1987, it had 30 programs listed. Today, it has more than 400, and their numbers are growing rapidly, especially the number of new Chinese programs.

"They've been around long enough that there's a track record. Now we are reaching a point of critical mass," Sugarman says.

Southern California is home to many public two-way Spanish immersion programs, including programs in Santa Ana Unified, Saddleback Valley Unified and Anaheim Elementary school districts. In the Inland Empire, they are offered in Corona-Norco Unified, Beaumont Unified, Banning Unified, Palm Springs Unified, San Bernardino City Unified, and Ontario-Montclair Elementary school districts, according to the California Department of Education's directory (cde.ca.gov).

Parents who are considering enrolling their child in an immersion program – whether Spanish or Mandarin – should understand that it's a huge commitment, says Kaylee Yoshii, a senior at Laguna Hills High School. This spring, the straight-A student will graduate from Saddleback Valley's two-way Spanish

NEW LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAMS ARE HELPING DEVELOP TOTAL FLUENCY.



immersion program (svusd.org).

Yoshii passed the AP Spanish Language exam as a sophomore (she got a 5, the highest score). Then last summer, she was one of just three students in the United States chosen by the Spanish government to receive a prestigious Ruka Quetzal scholarship, which covered the cost of a \$16,000 six-week adventure trek through Peru and Spain with Spanish-speaking teens from 50 countries.

Yoshii recalls that it was sometimes difficult for her to adjust to the Spanish-language instruction in elementary school. Her parents, who are Japanese-American, do not speak Spanish.

"Even if they were trying to help me

with math, they couldn't help me because the terms were all in Spanish," she says.

Indeed, Tong says the most common question she hears from parents considering applying for Capistrano's new Mandarin immersion Program is just that – "How can I help my child with homework?"

"It takes a lot of faith for parents to trust in the program," says Yoshii. "I am so happy I did it. I'm thankful my parents made me stick with it. An immersion program is the only way to really learn a language.


"Learning a second language is such an important skill to have," Yoshii adds. "It's almost as important as learning math and science. It opens so many more opportunities." 

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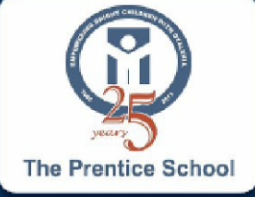
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