

State Teens Learn Chinese Online

by Christine MacDonald

ROMULUS – Jessica Dick doesn't look like a global pioneer, tucked into a quiet corner of the Romulus High School library studying alone on a computer.

But the 16-year-old is one of a growing number of students in Michigan and across the nation learning Mandarin Chinese, a language that's becoming more popular as China's global influence increases.

The country has one of the world's largest economies, and some argue that Michigan -- with its sagging automobile industry -- needs to do more in the classroom to partner with and profit from the emerging powerhouse.

Much of that push in the state is coming from one place: the United States-China Center for Research on Educational Excellence at Michigan State University.

This fall, the 2-year-old center will launch online language classes statewide and open three preschools in Michigan that combine Chinese and American teaching methods. They will also take local educators to the country to observe classrooms.

"Chinese is a language that is rising up in the world, and it will soon be a part of our business language," said Dick, who uses one of the center's video games to practice pronunciation and learn about Chinese culture. "This is almost like taking an adventure into the unknown. It's a glimpse into another hemisphere."

Few schools teach it now

Only a handful of Michigan schools -- such as the Bloomfield Hills district and Detroit's Foreign Language Immersion and Cultural Studies school -- teach the language. Most districts can't justify hiring a teacher for Chinese because there isn't the same demand as more commonly taught Spanish and French.

That's why the MSU center is launching classes online. It's the broadest effort yet to teach the language statewide, opening online classes to 240 high school students this fall in a partnership with the Chinese government and Michigan Virtual High School. Those numbers are expected to grow every year, with the plan to teach middle school students and even adults, such as business owners wanting to better market products overseas.

It's crucial for students to learn Chinese and other in-demand languages, such as Arabic, to compete in today's economy, said Yong Zhao, who heads the MSU center. There is a huge shortage of Chinese speakers in industry, and businesses are spending millions training employees, he said.

"We need students to be more aware of the world," Zhao said. "They need to know more world languages."

Beyond just learning a different language, knowing more about a country's culture is the key to doing business in those areas, said Lou Glazer, president of Michigan Future Inc., a nonprofit that studies ways Michigan can succeed in the Information Age.

"Ultimately, this is a global world where everybody is doing business with everybody else," Glazer said. Chinese people value relationships and trust in business, so taking time to get to know each other at meals and other meetings is important, Zhao said.

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"If they talk straight business, they won't get any business at all," he said.

The Chinese also tend to prefer avoiding conflict, so many top business leaders have their staff negotiate on their behalf, unlike American business leaders who may take on that role, Zhao said.

Participating schools will pay about \$375 a semester for their students to take the classes. Students who want to take classes in the summer will pay their own way.

Currently, there is a statewide pilot program with about 25 students, including Dick, at Romulus High. She is learning the often-challenging language so she has a competitive advantage selling to customers in China when she launches an online bookstore.

But it's not easy. The only other person at the school taking the class is her twin sister.

"It's not a slack-off class," Dick said. "You have to be self-motivated."

Educational styles unite

Zhao has a unique perspective on both countries.

He grew up in a rural village in southwest China. There was no electricity, and he would read Communist-banned books before his father tore out the pages to wrap dry noodles. After attending school in China, he became a prominent researcher on using technology to help kids learn and worked with the U.S. government on bridging the gap between the two countries.

His work at MSU helped garner the \$5 million donation from the Hong Kong-based Sun Wah Education Foundation to start the center.

Zhao and his staff at the center are developing a unique multiplayer online video game to teach students Chinese. The creators envision thousands of people playing and learning from each other.

And Zhao is working with schools in East Lansing, Lansing and Bay City to start preschools using Chinese and American teaching methods.

Combining both methods helps address each country's educational weaknesses, he said. American schools are criticized for not being rigorous, and Chinese schools are faulted for not fostering creativity.

The 3- and 4-year-olds will attend school all day, about six hours. One half will be in an American-style classroom, in which kids get to decide what they want to do, for example, whether to read a book or count blocks. Individual expression will be encouraged.

The rest of the day will be spent in a Chinese-style classroom learning a specific curriculum.

Students will sit at rows of desks while an instructor teaches from the front of the room. There will be more focus on academics and discipline at an earlier age, like Chinese schools have, Zhao said. The students also will learn Chinese.

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The schools are expected to add a grade each year. Lansing school officials say they haven't started enrollment but are getting calls from interested parents.

"It's a culture and language that is becoming very connected to business," said Sergio Keck, Lansing's bilingual director. "Parents are excited."

Tom White saw the differences in the two methods firsthand last fall when he and about 15 other education officials went to China with Zhao.

Another group of teachers and principals will leave this summer.

White, executive director of the Michigan School Business Officials, said he was struck by the deep interest that Chinese people have in America and he is convinced Michigan in particular needs to become a strong partner with the country.

"Rather than view them as a kind of enemy . . . we need to look at ways to scratch each other's back," White said.

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