

A Successful Model of Transforming Traditional Overseas Heritage Weekend Chinese Schools through Collaborations between the Local Public Schools System and the Startalk Chinese Summer Program

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ABSTRACT

While the author and many administrators struggled in sustaining the existing Traditional Overseas Heritage Weekend Chinese Schools (TOHWCS), she found an unique way combining local resources and federal funding to expand the world language program in the local public schools and boost the enrollment of the Chinese school. Through her efforts, three common goals were established between the public school system and the local Chinese School. Resulting from this, the enrollment of the Chinese school increases 60% while achieving to promote Chinese language and culture in the community.

This paper would focus on these three goals- to create a win-win environment for both public schools system and TOHWCS. The first goal is to pilot the Foreign Language in Elementary Schools (FLES) program in two selected elementary and two middle schools using the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) model. The second goal is to set up grade-level curriculum for bilingual classes in TOHWCS. The third goal is to collaborate the language and culture exchange for the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) students through the Startalk funding for teacher training and students Chinese summer camps.

BACKGROUND

Many Traditional Overseas Heritage Weekend Chinese Schools in US were formed from a core group of children of graduate students from Taiwan in the 70s or 80s. These parents spent much time and efforts to organize teachers, students, physical locations, books and schedule, develop curriculum and provide an environment for their children to learn their native language. Over the course from 80s to 90s, many TOHWCS expands with increasing number of students. This expansion of various types of Chinese Schools offers opportunities for many to learn language skills and culture aspects. In the turn of the 21th century, the shrinking number of international students and immigrants from Taiwan force the pupil source of TOHWCS decreases. During the

trend of low enrollment among TOHWCS, many administrators and Chinese language educators worry about the future of the school they spent much energy and effort.

Means on sustaining these TOHWCS occurred at different levels. Locally, the administrators of each school try their best for fund raising, donations, increasing tuition and service fees. Regionally, the affiliation to a broader Chinese schools association such as Washington Metropolitan Association of Chinese Schools (WMACS) or Association of Chinese Schools (ACS), these TOHWCS fought for more government funding to support their schools. The majority of these administrators simply play volunteer role when running TOHWCS, their vision usually end when they finish the 1 -2 year term as administrator. Due to the quick turn-around term as well as the lack of time commitment, networking, resources, structure, and experience, these administrators are in an extreme difficult position to sustain or expand the school. Some Chinese schools established by Taiwanese parents are closed which blocks these students the opportunity to learn the traditional characters as their parents wish.

The scope of getting an attraction from the public school system to initiate any new program is huge especially language programs. Yet, it is not achievable. Through many years of constant outreach, active participation, engagement of the community events, and leadership, the author is members of The Howard County Board of Education Study Commission, Howard County Ethnic Community Roundtable, Howard County Martin Luther King Holiday Commission, and Howard County Human Rights Commission. She volunteers and serves in a local free clinic for the underserved population. Besides health issues, they have limited language proficiency. She also is a long time language interpreter of a local nonprofit organization, Foreign born Information and Referral Network (FIRN) since early 90s. Through these venues, she has the first hand information of the importance to embrace world languages in the public school system.

The author has been an active advocate for the world language program in the community. She had regular meetings with county Superintendent, Board of Education (BOE) members, school principals, local agencies and residents to promote the Chinese language program in Howard County. In 2008, a partnership between the Chinese school and the Howard County Public School System was established which makes the first partnership of its kind in the county. After years, three goals which raise the overall awareness of world language program, expand the county world language program, meet the state's common core requirements, and increase Chinese school enrollment were established between the heritage Chinese school and the public schools system.

GOAL I

Public hearings and meetings are not the only ways to raise the awareness of Howard County public school system administrators, government, and residents to embrace foreign languages. The author would share the experience of culture by inviting local elected officials, BOE members, HCPSS administrators and residents to events such as Lunar new year celebration,

school closing ceremony and picnic hosted by the Chinese School and the Taiwan Economics and Culture Representative Office (TECRO). This is a great opportunity to allow the Chinese school members to directly interact with the local authority, school administrators and community members. Through the building of relationship, most of the elected officials and administrators are able to say a few proper Chinese in exchange of greetings during the event. One unique event is to host a BOE election forum. It serves as a platform for the Chinese community to take part in the local education system, to engage in local elections, and to learn the public schools' visions and operations.

The author would invite more Asian Americans to actively and firmly voice out the request of the community during the public hearings at the BOE monthly meetings, Howard County council meetings and other capacities. Through these channels and over many years, the Elementary World Language Committee was formed to study the feasibility of implementing the foreign language at the elementary school (FLES) in 2010. This committee is comprised of the Director of the World Language, BOE members, world language teachers, school principals, human resources representatives, central office administrators, and community members. This committee met bi-weekly over a period of six months. With the hard work of this committee, a proposal of combined Chinese and Spanish program was selected by the committee and presented at the BOE and the Superintendent meeting. Through many debates among BOE members and public hearings, the pilot Chinese and Spanish language program was finally approved by the Superintendent and BOE. It was implemented in 2 selected elementary schools. Of which, one is a tier III school. One year later, this pilot language program was extended to two feeder middle schools in order for students continuing their study.

GOAL II

The author and a team of teachers and parents requested the HCPSS administrator inviting them to public schools' open house events, world language days and local library and community events. Its purpose is to outreach to the community and to attract HCPSS students to this Chinese school. Before an anticipated outcome of increased enrollment becomes true, the author started the bilingual program at the school where non-heritage students and their parents are able to learn and practice Chinese language and culture.

There are three key factors drive the success of the bilingual program. The first key is to involve students' parents. Most of these non-heritage students are under 10 year-old. Due to their young age, having their parents to be their practice partners would reinforce their study and improve their language skills. Besides, it is important to recruit parent volunteers. To mobilize them to assist these non-heritage students and their parents to catch up the agenda and eventually achieve their overall study goals. The second key to success is to provide teachers right tools they need inside and outside of the classroom. Its curriculum is based on the STEM criteria and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines. It also incorporates the "Can do statements" developed by the NCSSFL and ACTFL. A curriculum

core group is to help creating learning objectives, teaching points, teaching materials, classroom activities, evaluation tools and online resources for teachers. This would streamline students' learning experience and allow them to practice the targeted language outside of classrooms. To build a successful bilingual program in TOHWCS is challenging. The third key to success is to engage teachers. When a new program is at its infancy stage, it usually takes much time and energy to establish the foundation and to build up from there. Being an administrator, to provide consistent support to teachers, parents and their students is very critical when evaluating the program's success.

The outcome of the bilingual program is expected. Through a vigorous and small class size experience, these non-heritage students are able to reach their potential while they and their parents enjoy learning the language and culture. The program grows from 5 to 65 students over 4 classes in 3 years. Another aspect to be emphasized for non-heritage learners is application. The curriculum of the bilingual program combines language skills development and culture appreciation under the principle of 5Cs. One of the opportunities for them to show off their language skill and culture appreciation is to put together a performance and present it at the lunar new year celebration. The performance could be singing songs, reciting poems, skits, story-telling or more. By preparing the performance, students can apply what they know and learn about this targeted language and associated culture in a more interactive and practical way. Many students were able to continue with this bilingual program for few years until they reach high school level. Then, they are qualified to take advanced Chinese courses in their high schools or community colleges to earn college credits. A few of these students had opportunities to study abroad in Asian countries in college. Some college students even return to Howard County to assist the Startalk Chinese Summer Program and to share their experiences with next generation.

GOAL III

In the wake of international crisis, the US Department of Defense identified mandarin is one among many critical languages. In January of 2006 the former President Bush announced the newest Startalk program under the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI). The mission of the Startalk program is to increase the number of Americans learning, speaking, and teaching critical need foreign languages. Through this program, it offers students (K–16) and teachers of these languages creative and engaging summer experiences that strive to exemplify best practices in many aspects. They are language education and language teacher development. It encourages forming an extensive community of practice that seeks continuous improvement in such criteria as outcomes-driven program design, standards-based curriculum planning, learner-centered approaches, excellence in selection and development of materials, and meaningful assessment of outcomes.

The Startalk initiative seeks to expand and improve the teaching and learning of strategically important world languages that are not now widely taught among the government-funded schools in US. Through its funding, many resources made available to those who are interested in

learning a targeted language. It generates a big wave, and it motivates many language educators to apply for the grants with many innovative ideas. Among many language programs, the Chinese language program attracted most of non-heritage students. Along with its great interest and wide open opportunities, there are many US universities had set up study abroad and student exchange programs with their sister schools or cities in Asia. In addition, many non-profit organizations ride with the wave to set up cultural exchange programs. Its mission is to enrich students' learning experience and to form extensive communities to grow more opportunities.

The Chinese language was offered as part of the Black Students Achievement Program (BSAP) of the HCPSS summer school enrichment program started in 2006. The author sees the Startalk initiative a fantastic funding opportunity from the federal government. Late in 2006 winter, invited by the Southern California Chinese School Association, the author representing the local Chinese School recruited four teachers to join the Startalk teacher training program. Meanwhile, the author had attracted a group of 20 middle-school age students to be the first class of its student Startalk Chinese summer camp in Howard County, Maryland. Through the trust and collaboration with the HCPSS administrator, the Startalk Students Chinese summer camp co-existed with its summer school programs, kicked off a week after the regular school ends in June 2008.

Besides utilizing the local teachers who had completed the Startalk teacher training to teach in the Startalk student Chinese summer camp, the author also invited and sponsored 2 student teachers from Taiwan to assist in the camp as volunteers. After several Skype interviews, among many applicants two student teacher volunteers were selected. These two selected student teachers are interested in teaching non-heritage students Chinese and had been certified as second language teacher in Taiwan. They were not able to apply their knowledge nor expand their teaching experience in Taiwan due to its limited resources and lack of support from their affiliated universities. However, due to the reputation of the Startalk program, they were awarded a government grant to cover their travel expenses to Howard County, Maryland. The other expenses such as room and board and transportation during their 4-week stay were covered by the author.

These student teachers gain a lot of hands-on and practical experience from this 4-week Startalk student Chinese summer camp. They participated in the camp from the preparation stage including but not limited to curriculum design, assisting in classroom, creating students' linguafolio, group discussions, culture presentation and activities, individual teaching, field trip, weekly reports and final evaluation. The author observed its vigorous teaching, learning and evaluation experience the Startalk Chinese summer camp can offer to interested teachers of Taiwan. The author ever since invites and sponsors student teachers from various Taiwan universities to join the Startalk team in summer. In return, through their feedback to the Startalk student Chinese summer camp, the program grows stronger and bigger each year. The Howard County Startalk Chinese summer camp for elementary and middle school students received much reputation and was selected as one of the model programs.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many perspectives in promoting world languages in the US public school system. It serves many purposes such as preserving languages and culture for generations, embracing language and culture diversities, fostering community resources and enhancing harmony among all ethnic groups. Here are some fun events the author experienced to promote visibility and collaboration between the TOHWCS, the local government, the HCPSS, local nonprofit organizations, and community members. The author had led World language kick-off events, assisted local government hosted community lunar new year celebration, took part in world language cafe, sponsored world culture festivals, collaborated with school's Parent Teacher Association in the after-school Chinese program and organized summer culture camp to share the Chinese culture and language with the community.

In conclusion, one ultimate goal is to sustain the TOHWCS which could carry on the mission of promoting the Chinese language and culture to all but not limited to the heritage population. There are many paths to achieve the ultimate goal. The take home message of this paper for the Chinese school administrators is to engage, to outreach, to network, and to advocate in all capacity. Once foundations are established in the community, the local resources and the funding would come. Then, it's the administrators' decision to best utilize these means to create a win-win situation that is not only to sustain the TOHWCS but to expand the Chinese language and culture program to the generations to come and more. The author knows there are many challenges waiting to be solved in the long journey. She welcomes comments and experience sharing to create another successful model. There is an old saying that a person can reach other's head through knowledge but speaking in their language can reach their heart!

Authors

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