

Bridge of language links both banks

Education initiative takes off as number of American students learning Mandarin doubles in two years.

NEW YORK — The number of US K-12 students learning Mandarin has doubled to around 400,000 in two years, says Morgan Jones, chief operating officer, US-China Strong Foundation.

The US nonprofit is leading a Chinese language education initiative called 1 Million Strong that seeks to expand to 1 million the number of US K-12 students learning Mandarin by 2020.

The nonprofit has seen a lot of growth since the program was announced in 2015.

"They were somewhere around 200,000 Americans learning Mandarin Chinese. There are currently 400,000 learning Mandarin Chinese," says Jones, who speaks fluent Mandarin himself.

Jones says the number was estimated based on data collected from various resources including American Council on Education that focuses mostly on public and private schools.

"We also look at heritage schools where Chinese-Americans are learning Mandarin Chinese," he says. "We also have our own in-house data team that has been reaching out to immersion schools throughout the United States."

Jones says that "there are many case studies with more schools opening up", bringing in "tens of thousands of students to their school districts and programs".

Three factors have led to the rising popularity of learning Chinese in the United States, Jones says.

First, there's a strong economic relationship between both countries. "I think that's really a huge cost to get people to want to learn Mandarin

“Our mission is all about strengthening US-China relations through students and (the) youth.”

Morgan Jones, US-China Strong Foundation's chief operating officer

Chinese, to get involved in business, to find career opportunities or even compete fairly economically with China, which is key," he says.

Second, learning Chinese helps Americans "dig deeper" into China's 5,000-year history and culture as one has to learn the language to get immersed in that environment. And many Americans are "very interested in that" including Jones himself.

Third, the rapid growth and expansion of private Chinese-learning schools, programs, as well as related online programs, and mobile phone apps, also provides Americans greater accessibility and convenience to learn this language.

Jones, who had lived in Shanghai, China for about seven years, says he is very happy to see Mandarin becomes popular in the US as English does in China.

"Both countries will be able to speak in a language that they can both understand," he says.

"We don't have to be best friends. We also don't have to be adversaries, but if we can

communicate with each other respectfully, that's gonna be able to bridge the gap between both cultures and the best way to start."

"Our mission is all about strengthening US-China relations through students and (the) youth," he adds.

"There's various ways that you can strengthen the US-China relationship on a very immediate level," Jones says.

"(But if you) do that for more long-lasting behavior, you have to start with the youth and you have to start with education."

Jones suggests the best way to start is to get more people to learn Mandarin, "to study, to live there for a significant period of time, to meet teachers, make friends in China and hopefully these are friends who are going to be long lasting for years to come".

The 1 Million Strong initiative is divided into three separate pillars, Jones says.

The first pillar is teacher training.

Second is the curriculum pillar, which makes sure there are proper standards K-12 schools are implementing to learn Mandarin nationwide.

The last pillar is state and local outreach, where teachers will be trained to learn how to better teach Mandarin to K-12 students.

The 1 Million Strong is the second initiative led by the US-China Strong Foundation.

The first, 100,000 Strong, started in 2009 and its initial goal of getting 100,000 American students to study in China by 2014 was not only achieved but also surpassed.

XINHUA

Investing in green sprouts succulent wealth



Zhang Yafei (right) takes care of succulents, or drought-resistant plants, in his greenhouse in Feixi county, Anhui province. After graduating from the United States in 2012, Zhang, now 27, decided to return to his hometown. He started his business from scratch and within five years it flourished, with an annual sale and profit of more than 1 million yuan (\$151,000) and 300,000 yuan, respectively. So far, Zhang has invested more than 1 million yuan in his business. His business also offers job opportunities to local families. XINHUA

Can computers enhance the work of teachers? The debate is on

WASHINGTON — In middle school, Junior Alvarado often struggled with multiplication and earned poor grades in math, so when he started his freshman year at Washington Leadership Academy, a charter high school in the US capital, he fretted that he would lag behind.

But his teachers used technology to identify his weak spots, customize a learning plan just for him and coach him through it. As Junior started sophomore geometry, he was more confident of his skills.

"For me personalized learning is having classes set at your level," Junior, 15, says in between lessons. "They explain the problem step by step. It wouldn't be as fast; it will be at your pace."

As schools struggle to raise high school graduation rates and close the persistent achievement gap for minority and low-income students, many educators tout digital technology in the classroom as a way forward. But experts caution that this approach still needs more scrutiny and warn schools and parents against being overly reliant on computers.

The use of technology in schools is part of a broader concept of personalized



Using computers to do homework and study has become a routine for students in cities all over the world. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

learning that has been gaining popularity in recent years. It's a pedagogical philosophy centered around the interests and needs of each individual child as opposed to universal standards.

The Education Department poured \$500 million into personalized learning programs in 68 school districts serving a half million students in 13 states plus the District of Columbia. Large organizations have also invested in digital tools and other student-centered practices.

At Washington Leadership Academy, educators rely on software and data to track student progress and adapt teaching to enable students

to master topics at their own speed. Sophomores used special computer programs to take diagnostic tests in math and reading, and teachers then used that data to develop individual learning plans.

"The digital tool tells us we have a problem to fix with these kids right here and we can do it right then and there. We don't have to wait for the problem to come to us," says Joseph Webb, founding principal of the school, one of 10 schools to win a \$10 million grant in a national competition aimed at reinventing US high schools.

Math teacher Britney Wray says that in her previous school she was torn between

advanced learners and those who lagged behind significantly. She says often she wouldn't know if a student was failing a specific unit until she started a new one.

In comparison, the academy's technology gives Wray instant feedback on which students need help and where.

Still, most researchers say it is too early to tell if personalized learning works better than traditional teaching.

A recent study by the Rand Corp found that personalized learning produced modest improvements: A 3 percentile increase in math and a smaller, statistically insignificant increase in reading compared with schools that used more traditional approaches. Some students also complained that collaboration with classmates suffered because everybody was working on a different task.

Some teachers are skeptical. Marla Kilfoyle, executive director of the Badass Teachers Association, an education advocacy group, agrees that technology has its merits, but insists that no computer or software should ever replace the personal touch, motivation and inspiration teachers give their students.

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American students learn how to do *suxiu*, Suzhou-style embroidery, in July in Suzhou, Jiangsu province. WANG JIANKANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

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