

An Issue of Equity

Chinese immersion must be done carefully

In Eugene Weekly's balanced and generally persuasive reporting on stalled plans to start a Chinese immersion school (cover essay, 6/11), one subject that wasn't given much attention was equity. Is there a way to ensure that a disproportionate share of the benefits of an immersion program don't go to children of the upper middle class? What steps are being taken to ensure that a new immersion school is a vehicle for social justice, rather than inequity? It is no secret that inequality has soared over the last 30 years. A Chinese immersion program could provide a magnificent vehicle for either offsetting or exacerbating class differences.

In the short term however, we should be under no illusions that such a program will not directly diminish the American middle class. Across the nation, teachers are being laid off because of budget cuts. The expansion of immersion programs will further reduce the numbers of teaching jobs available to American citizens. Teaching is one of the few middle-class careers left in our moribund economy, and most if not all of the teachers at an immersion school will be citizens of the People's Republic of China or Taiwan.

In the short run, implementing an immersion school will inevitably push more members of the middle class into unemployment and poverty.

On this point, the experience of the UO's Chinese Flagship program is illuminating. I was one of the only non-Chinese nationals in the program. Since it was started in 2006, a majority and sometimes an overwhelming majority of the program's undergraduates — offered college scholarships courtesy of the American taxpayers — were passport-holding citizens of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan or Singapore. Almost all of the professors were Chinese or Taiwanese nationals as well. What was originally designed with good intentions to help American students master Mandarin, was instead a way to pay Chinese citizens to teach Mandarin to other Chinese nationals.

The American people (apart from myself and a few others) were a party to this exchange largely in their capacity as paymaster. The program did help me pass level 10 of the official Chinese government Mandarin exam (level seven is needed to do graduate work at Beijing University). I am immensely grateful for this help. Nevertheless, to a great extent U.S. national resources were directed to the purpose of teaching Mandarin to Chinese passport holders.

As someone with tremendous affection and respect for Chinese culture, I hope that Eugene succeeds in establishing an immersion school. However, the people of Eugene should consider implementing quotas to ensure that most (ideally, all) of the benefits are directed to the children of low-income parents.

In the short run, implementing an immersion school will inevitably push more members of the middle class into unemployment and poverty. Only with strict quotas that largely restrict participation to children of low-income families is it even conceivable that an immersion school will help reduce socially inequality rather than simply entrenching it.

With almost one in seven Lane county workers unemployed, there are more than enough working class students to fill a Chinese immersion school beyond capacity. The last 30 years have seen rising inequality and a hollowing of the middle class — why should a progressive city like Eugene help accelerate such morally questionable trends?

Edwin Way is a graduate student at the UO, studying political science and Chinese through the Chinese Flagship program.

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE LAST DANCE

The Tango Center closes June 30 after a six-year run. It is North America's largest Tango facility, and the first new downtown partner dance hall in Eugene in 50 years. This is a good opportunity to reflect on what we were trying to do, and what we actually managed to achieve.

Our primary goal was to repair downtown. My wife, Olga Volchkova, and I knew that urban repair only happens when people actually fill a space with public activity. We picked the worst stretch of downtown, the spot that needed the most help.

We also wanted to offer something different: a place where people could do something, and learn to do something — not simply a place to watch and listen. In this case, we wanted people to learn the gentle Argentine Tango, which may be both the most simple and the most challenging of partner dances. We wanted a community venue, where the “audience” was the creative talent. Some 10,000 people were able to experience this at The Tango Center, and I think it broadened their understanding of what a lively downtown could provide.

Although we're not able to stay downtown, we played a pivotal role in repairing our neighborhood. We were able to protect perfectly good buildings and businesses from reckless demolition by Urban Renewal, preserving them for our final act — when the relationship with our landlord degenerated, we made so much noise that a nonprofit in the position to buy the block, Lord Leebrick, was able to finally fulfill our mission to turn the neighborhood into a permanent haven for the arts.

If you'd like to be able to say you were there, come to our events this month. Saturday, June 27, is the last big Saturday dance, or Milonga, with an introduction lesson at 8 pm. Tuesday, June 30, is the last big Bailonga, an all-night affair starting at 8 pm.

Greg Bryant
Tango Center Founder

BIRTH COST A FACTOR

While I really appreciate recent letters

pointing out home birth and alternative birthing center options for those who had planned to birth their babies at the Sacred Heart Birthing Center, for me, and others I know, that is not the point. The point is we already chose the Birth Center over alternatives for very specific reasons.

Our insurance does not cover other birthing options. We had a choice between the Birth Center and the hospital if we wanted insurance coverage. The lower cost of the Birth Center was a key factor in our decision. We can barely afford the out-of-pocket expenses after our insurance, let alone something our insurance doesn't cover at all.

A home birth was never a consideration for us. It wasn't something we wanted nor something our small condo would accommodate. The Birth Center was the ideal situation for us — a home birth away from home.

I, like many others, was more than halfway through my pregnancy when the news of the closure came out of the blue, and the thought of having to find new providers and basically start my care over was not something I wanted to do even if I could.

PeaceHealth should have communicated with us expectant parents in a more honest and transparent way long before the closure announcement. They should honor the estimated costs that we began our care with and budgeted our finances around. And they should get the new Birth Center built as quickly as possible, so other families can use the low cost, less invasive services that the nurse-midwives have been offering for more than 20 years.

Kim Harper-Kennedy
Eugene

PROTECT THE STAIRCASE

Last week Rep. Peter DeFazio introduced legislation in the House of Representatives that would protect one of the most rugged and wild areas left in the Oregon Coast Range. This bill would create a Wilderness area for the Devil's Staircase, an area of 30,000 acres near Reedsport.

Taste of India

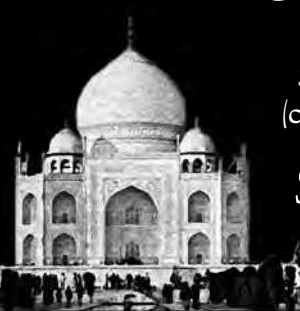
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