

Students tackle Mandarin at Boise Chinese school

By Bill Roberts
Idaho Statesman

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — At the Boise Modern Chinese School's year-end performance day, young students sang a Mandarin song to show what they had learned in the previous semester.

Girls performed ancient Chinese dances in bright costumes.

In the corner were refreshments for the roughly 100 people who came to celebrate the way their sons, daughters, grandkids, nieces, and nephews are understanding Chinese language and culture.

"Our parents (want) us to learn Chinese, so they enrolled us," said Rachel Brooks, 13, who has attended the school for about four years. "My mom is Chinese and just thought it would be good."

Boise Modern Chinese School has teachers who are compensated for their instruction in Chinese, said Dazhi Yang, a Boise State University associate professor in educational technology who was selected principal in May and volunteers her time.

The school's 107 students meet for two hours of instruction every Sunday afternoon, followed by time to learn chess, play soccer, or practice Chinese dances.

The school teaches Mandarin, because it is the official language of China and is widely understood throughout the country, even though many people may speak a different dialect, Yang said.

Many, but not all, of the school's students come from families where one or both parents are Chinese.

Lisa Brooks came from China about two decades ago. She wanted her daughter Rachel to learn Chinese and the culture. Brooks was raised in rural China, in poverty where the family grew food to survive.

When she sees Rachel learning Mandarin — even though it isn't the language her mother speaks — it makes



her feel good.

"She knows my background more and where I came from and where I grew up," Lisa said.

Parents of children who aren't Chinese see various benefits from sending their children there.

"I think children learning a second or third language when they are young is a good idea," said Katie Scanlan, who has two children, Aidan, age 13, and Maggie, age nine, attending the school. "When you learn it your brain is more wired to pick it up in later life."

Scanlan sends her two youngest children to the school in part because of the diversity it offers.

"It's good for kids to not always be in the majority," she said.

Learning Mandarin is not an easy way to spend a

MOUNTAIN IMMERSION. Boise Modern Chinese School students Caitlin Yang, front, with Catherine Rui and Sunny Gu, perform for family and friends in Garden City, Idaho. The school of more than 100 students meet for two hours of instruction every Sunday afternoon, followed by time to learn chess, play soccer, or practice Chinese dances. (Darin Oswald/Idaho Statesman via AP)

Sunday.

Different tones in the language denote different meanings of words, Rachel Brooks said. "If you don't do it the right way, things can get very confusing."

Understanding how to write Chinese characters strains the brain. Students need to understand not only what goes into a written character, but also which strokes are done first, middle, and last.

"It is hard to write a new character," said Lain Barrett, age 12, who came to the United States from China when he was three years old.

Xiaoping Yang, 53, a teacher and former principal at the Chinese school, says teachers try to make the learning fun with games and word puzzles.

Learning Chinese is important, even if it is difficult, Xiaoping Yang said. "One day, if you go to China, how (else) do you talk to your relatives?" he asked.

But for many of the students learning Chinese, it's not widely spoken outside of class.

"When they talk to us, they use Mandarin," Xiaoping Yang said. "When they talk to each other, they use English."

The adult Scanlans don't speak Chinese and cannot converse with their children in Mandarin.

"They talk to each other," Scanlan said. "I think that is much more beneficial."

The Chinese school offered its first round of Advanced Placement (AP) exams this year for students to earn college credit for their mastery of the language.

Alice Jiang, a 16-year-old, straight-A sophomore at Eagle High School, was one of five students at the Chinese school to pass the AP exam. She's taken Mandarin lessons since she was five years old.

"I have heard that Chinese is one of the hardest languages to learn," she said. "I was born in a Chinese-speaking family and I've gone to China. It is all about being exposed to more Chinese. It helps me learn."

Governor Haley and speaker Ryan offer new GOP answer to Trump

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decision the next day to praise her, with press secretary Josh Earnest saying she deserved credit.

However, Ohio Republican chairman Matt Borges said Trump's approach could become a liability, though he said there's time to correct course.

"No Republican has won the presidency without winning Ohio, and you cannot win Ohio with a divisive message," Borges said as the Republican National Committee convened its winter meetings in Charleston, South Carolina. He said he delivered that message to the candidate personally.

Ultimately, Borges said, Trump and the party will have an opportunity to shift. "Part of this is just the primary process playing out," he said, adding, "I think he understands that we have to have a unifying, inclusive message."

Associated Press writer Bill Barrow contributed to this report from Charleston, South Carolina.

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