

# Mandarin Spoken Here

## Language Immersion in Action

by Emmalie Dropkin



Imagining children chattering to each other in a Portland, Oregon, classroom in a language other than English is not particularly surprising, but the Albina Head Start and Early Head Start program really might surprise you. If you wander into their bilingual classrooms, you'll find toddlers and preschool children, largely native-English speakers, learning their first few words of Mandarin.

The research consensus is that there are distinct benefits to children being bilingual, and there's a long-term economic case in a diverse country and globalized world for speaking multiple languages. Perhaps most importantly, an environment rich in language and cultures is the best starting point for children to understand their world.



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The Albina program is beginning its third year, firmly established after several years of work to grow the effort. In 2011, director Ron Herndon heard about the Confucius Institute at Portland State University placing native-speaking Mandarin teachers in K-12 schools and his team got to work finding out how Head Start could have a Mandarin teacher of their own. Parents were educated about the importance of their children learning a second language, the opportunities their children would gain if they studied it through high school, and the long-term advantages of bilingualism for brain development — benefits ranging from enhanced selective attention to delayed onset of Alzheimer's disease. Families quickly joined in the excitement for establishing the new program.

The following fall, Jiang joined Albina's classrooms, teaching 28 children their first few words of a new language. Although she'd taught older children as a teacher in China, Jiang found the younger children to be very curious and adapted quickly to their need for the daily half-hour sessions to be exciting, novel, and rich in culture. Working with Albina staff, Jiang studied the program's curricu-

lum and designed Mandarin lessons around it, while focusing on Mandarin sounds, games, vocabulary, and play that allowed the children to interact with her as a native speaker. In this way they quickly expanded their knowledge of the language. At the end of the year, the program recorded a video of their graduation ceremony, complete with songs in Mandarin. In time, that video would draw powerful attention.

The following year brought a challenge: how to continue to support the children's new skills as they moved on to kindergarten? As the program enrolled 68 children in its second cohort, some of the new kindergarteners would return after school for continued Mandarin lessons. While staff worked to strengthen the program, their graduation video had caught the eye of the community. Before the year was over the Portland Public Schools had made a commitment: immersion kindergarten and first grade classrooms would be established in a nearby school with guaranteed enrollment and transportation provided for Head Start children whose families were interested in their continuing to learn Mandarin; a lottery would be set up for other interested children in the community. The half-day immersion setting would allow children

to increase their vocabulary and gain fluency in the language.

Albina added a new teacher this fall. Lily will be guided by Jiang as she adjusts to working with young children. Together, they work with one Early Head Start classroom and three Head Start classrooms. Beyond classroom lessons, the Mandarin program includes celebrations of Chinese holidays and festivals, field trips to the city's Chinese garden, and the experience of Chinese foods and cultural traditions. Head Start graduates in kindergarten and first grade are now attending the Portland Public School program, which will grow with them through the end of high school. Through a partnership between the school district and Portland Community College, children who complete the program could receive free tuition to continue their studies. Early signs are promising; recently, Albina graduates took first and second place in the local Mandarin competition.

Head Start's mission to open a window of opportunity for children has never focused on one aspect of academic readiness. By creating a wide range of experiences for the development of the whole child and striving to make sure each family served has a wealth of opportunities before them, Albina Head Start and Early Head Start has set these young students on a path to success in school and life. We can only imagine where these children will be ten years from now: chattering in Mandarin in their high school classrooms as they prepare to enroll in college. Perhaps they'll look back at their first graduation video, those first few words of Mandarin, and see how far they've come.