

## Meet Irene Chan, Supervisor Wu Yee Children's Services San Francisco, California

"Jo sun" ("Good morning"). "Niay ho ma?" ("How are you?") Parents leave with a wave; children (ages three to five) sit down to breakfast or go off to paint or read, build with blocks, or spend some time in dramatic play. The air is filled with conversation — most of the words are Chinese, but their passages are in English as well. This is how the day begins at Wu Yee Lok Yuen Child Development Center in the heart of Chinatown in San Francisco.

Wu Yee, meaning "protecting and caring for children," is a non-profit community organization established in 1977 to provide services to children and their families in San Francisco. Wu Yee's main components are four child care facilities serving 140 children (Lok Yuen, Generations, and Golden Gate 1 and 2); Family Center, providing assistance in finding child care and child and family services; the Alternative Payments Department, which assists over 330 families with subsidized child care; and the Early Head Start Program, which provides education, health, mental health, nutrition, and social services to pregnant women and children zero to three years old (including children with disabilities) and their families.

Supervisor Irene Chan oversees both the Lok Yuen and Generations centers. Language is a major component of both programs: Lok Yuen is a model bilingual program; Generations supports interactions between young children and elderly in a senior home.

"I was born in Hong Kong, but my education and teaching experience

have been in the United States. So I know what it feels like when you don't know the culture or the language. This program serves immigrant families; I want it to be a comfortable place for children to learn and a comfortable place for parents as well. If children feel secure and comfortable at school, they will learn better. I work with my staff, helping them to be friendly and caring and to interact warmly. This develops trust. When children and families trust the school and the teacher, it makes it a lot easier.

"When families enroll, I do an interview with each child so they know this place and have a comfortable, known person to identify.

"I grew up in Eastern traditional Chinese culture, but the part of my life in America has been Western style. My goal is to be the bridge to bring East and West cultures together. I believe the center should support the child in keeping the family culture but at the same time help them to learn Western culture. Four years ago, I began working as a supervisor with my former director, Carol Frank, to bring these two cultural styles together in this center.

"With staff, it was very difficult because we had to change their whole style of interacting with the children. I was on the floor, modeling for them how to ask open-ended questions, how to guide and help children involve in activities and provide activities that promote children's learning.

"Parents had a difficult time at first. Traditionally, parents expect their

children to sit, write, and read. Parents do things for their children; they focus on knowing things like your name, the ABCs, English, not on physical development. I had to change their expectations of what would happen in this program. We had parent workshops to help them understand that children learn through play.

"For one workshop, we asked parents to come in as children. We asked them to pick activities they wanted to do. The provider interacted with them, talked them through their play. We helped them see that this developmental stage is the foundation for social skills, when children learn to make friends and solve problems. We demonstrated how teachers help children use language to solve problems and how gradually the teacher steps back and children use their own skills.

"We changed things — the way teachers and children interact, the expectations of parents, what happens in our program. Parents like it; they understand why we don't force children to do writing, yet there are many opportunities for scribbling. We keep a portfolio for each child that we begin on the first day and give the family when the child leaves; they are amazed at what their children have accomplished.

"Norman Yee, our executive director for 20 years, is really behind the staff. He's the one who has to go out and get the money. He's put together a good team for expanding the agency.

"We have been selected to be the

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only preschool program to be part of Comprehensive Asian Preschool Services (CAPS); the other 11 sites nationwide are elementary. CAPS is designed to support families through identification of individual needs and then finding services. The range of needs to be identified is broad (mental health, drug recovery, public health, employment); two family advocates work closely with staff and parents.

“Every opportunity or chance I have, I attend early childhood development workshops, conferences, and classes to learn more new techniques and bring back to our program.

“I’m very proud of my staff and our program. We’ve made dramatic changes and they are working.”