

Building a Successful and Sustainable Language Immersion Program: The Portland, Oregon, Mandarin Dual Language Experience

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THE LANGUAGE FLAGSHIP



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Executive Summary

For two decades, Portland Public Schools (PPS) (Portland, OR) has offered a Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program with preschool and kindergarten entry points. In the last decade, PPS has partnered with the University of Oregon to build a well-articulated K-16 Mandarin immersion and world language program.

This ethnography study, funded by The Language Flagship, examines the historical development of the PPS program, sets forth key components of the PPS model that other districts may replicate, and examines catalysts and disruptors to the language immersion model.

Historical Development of the Program

In the late 1990s, PPS responded to parent and educator interest in offering a Chinese immersion program. The PPS Mandarin Dual Immersion Program opened in September 1998. PPS selected Woodstock Elementary School as the site of the immersion program to combat declining school enrollments. Today, enrollment in the elementary immersion program has doubled, and the school receives more applications than spots available. The program expanded to Hosford Middle School in 2003 and Cleveland High School in 2006. The district added a second site at King School, which will expand to a nearby middle school and then to Jefferson High School in 2014.

In 2005, the National Security Education Program awarded PPS and the University of Oregon

a grant and challenging task: to establish the nation's first K-16 Chinese Flagship Program that not only graduates students who are professionally proficient in Mandarin at the Superior level, but also provides a model for replication by other schools.

Language immersion has the potential to address educational disparities.

The first cohort of PPS alumni graduated in 2006, and many of them

continued their language study at the University of Oregon. To date, thirty-six PPS graduates have been accepted in the UO Chinese Flagship program.

PPS Model

The PPS Mandarin Dual Immersion Program employs a three-pronged approach consisting of: content-based instruction, direct language instruction, and experiential learning. Fifty percent of class time is conducted in Mandarin in grades K-5, 33 percent in grades 6-8, and 20 percent in grades 9-12.

Students in the eighth grade prepare an inquiry-based project on a topic they have chosen and spend two weeks in China completing their research. During that time, they live with a local family and take cultural classes.

High school students may complete a biennial summer program to the Yunnan Summer Institute in China. The institute is a one-month community service program and students travel to historical sites while living with a local family.

Facilitative Approach to Developing an Immersion Program

Research identified twelve essential elements for an immersion program.

1. Foster community support through clear, consistent communication with parents
2. Facilitate communication among parents and teachers, specifically addressing differences in language, culture, and socioeconomic status
3. Garner district support for staffing, curriculum, enrollment, student management, and financial investments
4. Create unity between the immersion and neighborhood programs housed within the same school
5. Develop institutional partnerships to create places for students to continue their learning as they shift from elementary to middle to high school and beyond
6. Maintain high elementary enrollments that can sustain attrition while still maintaining viable student numbers for middle and high school programs through innovation and opportunity
7. Maintain middle school and high school student interest and motivation in language study
8. Employ backwards design to first identify program goals and then establish practices designed to accomplish those goals
9. Hire committed administrative staff whose only tasks pertain to the immersion program
10. Provide qualified teachers with ongoing professional development through professional learning communities that work toward aligning curriculum horizontally across disciplines and vertically across grade levels
11. Track student outcomes with standardized assessments and use assessment data to drive curriculum changes
12. Consistently acquire curriculum resources

Catalysts and Disruptors

Language immersion has the potential to address educational disparities often created by socioeconomic status. If students are given the same amount of instructional time and intensity, the achievement gap in languages disappears – hinting that the “achievement gap” is more of an opportunity gap instead. PPS has chosen to tie its language learning programs to issues of access, which further garners district and community support.

To address the opportunity gap within the district, PPS added an additional Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program at King School in 2014. One hundred percent of students at King are eligible for the free or reduced-lunch program. King School’s student population is also more diverse than other schools in the district: 43 percent are African American, 29 percent are Hispanic, 1 percent are Asian, 13 percent are other and 14 percent are non-Hispanic white.

The Language Flagship, a federally funded initiative that seeks to change the way Americans learn languages, has been a powerful disruptive innovation. Flagship’s investment has turned the nation’s focus toward outcome-based foreign language learning; provided important opportunities for assessment, data-driven curriculum revisions, and ongoing professional development; and strengthened connections between K-12 and postsecondary institutions thereby creating articulated sequences of language learning.

This ethnographic study is a public-private partnership sponsored by the National Security Education Program (NSEP). The content of the information provided does not reflect the position of the U.S. government nor imply endorsement.

Introduction

For two decades, the Portland Public Schools (PPS) School District has offered a Mandarin language immersion program with preschool and kindergarten entry points. In the last decade, PPS has partnered with the University of Oregon (UO) to build a well-articulated K–16 Mandarin immersion and world language program. PPS is a national leader in the field of immersion education, and districts and organizations worldwide visit PPS regularly to learn about their model.

Recently, the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the UO conducted a qualitative ethnographic study detailing the iterative process involved in establishing, maintaining, and strengthening a quality language program throughout a K–16 pipeline.

This ethnography documents institutional memory, practices, and policies. We hope that this document will serve as a guide for quality implementation of similar programs and will allow others access to the critical components of the PPS model.

The study is based on interviews with key stakeholders who included students, parents, teachers, local administrators, district administrators, and national stakeholders. This report focuses on descriptions of work critical to quality implementation, non-negotiable elements necessary for success, essential variables for consideration, and context-specific factors. The ethnography also investigates how PPS has implemented its programs, how that implementation occurred

historically, how key processes helped and hindered success, how barriers to success unfolded, and how to transfer the successes to other contexts.

In the process of building a successful, equitable, and sustainable PreK–12 Mandarin immersion program, PPS has learned many important lessons. First, keeping a balance of explicit language instruction, content-based teaching, and experiential learning is the key to linguistic and academic success in immersion programs. Second, setting clearly defined proficiency targets that are measured with regular assessment is core to the success of the PPS model. Third, building a

culture of learning through professional learning communities (PLCs) is an effective approach to ongoing and sus-

tained professional development and to facilitating changes in instructional practice. Meaningful PLCs follow a complete cycle of setting targets, regularly and systematically assessing student progress, reviewing data, identifying curricular and instructional adjustments, implementing those adjustments, and finally, adjusting targets if needed. Lastly, building a strong program with effective instruction and strong student outcomes depends on the continuity and consistency of a teaching team. Therefore, supporting and mentoring teachers must always be the first priority.

In the future, PPS hopes to broaden its programs and build a robust, proficiency-aligned, and eq-

*Supporting and mentoring teachers
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uitable PreK–12 pipeline with multiple points of entry and multiple pathways. Graduates from the PPS PreK–12 Chinese Flagship Program should be well prepared to meet the rigorous academic and language proficiency entrance requirements (ACTFL Intermediate High to Advanced Low) of any Chinese Flagship Program in the United

States. With clearly defined proficiency targets, close progress monitoring of student proficiency, and effective use of research-based formative assessment and instructional strategies, PPS will continue to graduate significant numbers of diverse students from its Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program.

Demographic Overview of Portland Public Schools

The PreK-12 portion of the Oregon Chinese Flagship Program is situated in Portland, Oregon, a city of nearly 600,000. PPS is the largest school district in the Pacific Northwest, with over 48,000 students from diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds enrolled in the district's seventy-eight schools. In addition to the Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program, PPS offers immersion programs in Japanese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Originally, the Mandarin program began at Woodstock Elementary School, expanding first to Hosford Middle School, and then to Cleveland High School—all schools in southeast Portland. In the fall of 2015, a new elementary Mandarin program opened in King School in northeast Portland, which will eventually expand to Jefferson High School.

At all four schools, the immersion program operates in conjunction with a traditional neighborhood school within the same building. After graduating from a PPS high school, students can continue their Mandarin study in the University of Oregon Chinese Flagship Program in Eugene, Oregon, or enroll in any of the other eleven Chinese Flagship Programs across the country. Figure 1 shows the four schools on a map of median income by neighborhood.

Demographically, Portland's residents are 76 percent non-Hispanic white, 9 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Asian, 6 percent African American, and 3 percent some other race. Data drawn for the last U.S. census (2010) shows that, other than English, the most common languages spoken at home are Spanish (7.1 percent), Vietnamese (2.5 percent), Chinese (1.7 percent), and Russian (1.3 percent). In Figures 2 and 3, the schools are marked on maps showing percentages of the population by neighborhood living in households in which Spanish or Chinese is spoken at home. Note that, although Chinese is spoken at home more in southeast Portland than elsewhere in the city, the area is not truly a Chinese-dominant area, as only about 7 percent of households speak Chinese at home. Most of these households speak Cantonese rather than Mandarin.

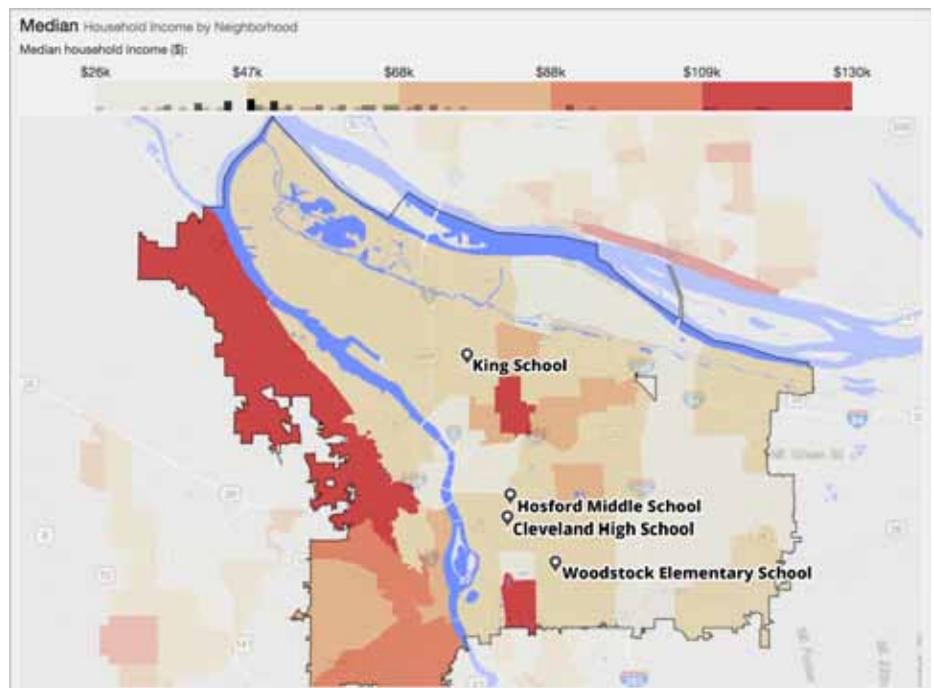


Figure 1. Portland, Oregon, neighborhoods by median income.

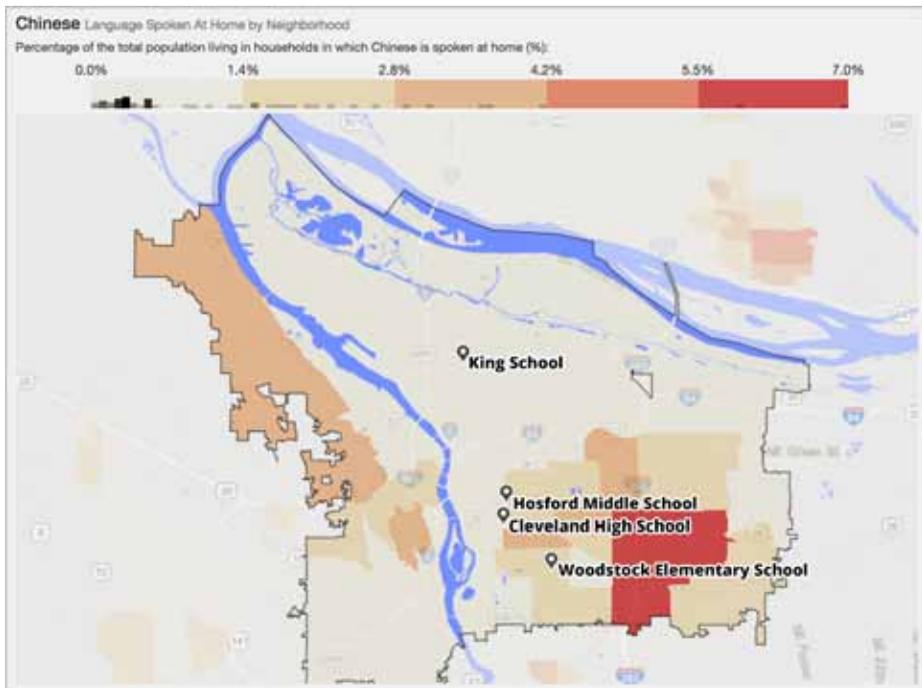


Figure 2. Portland, Oregon, neighborhoods showing the percent of Chinese-speaking households.

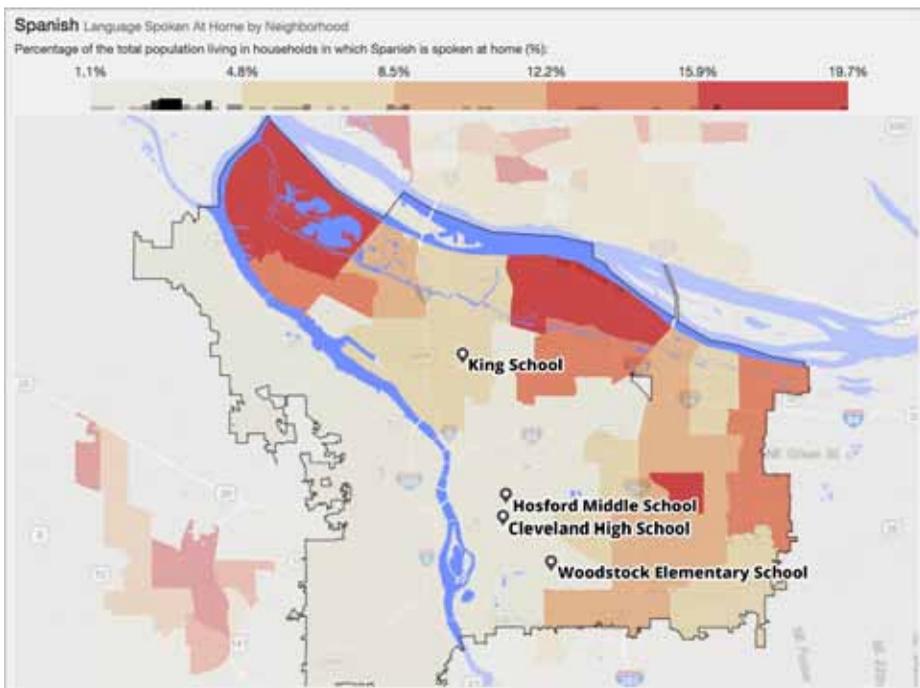


Figure 3. Portland, Oregon, neighborhoods showing the percent of Spanish-speaking households.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide demographic details about the students at each school. Note that in southeast Portland, the families of immersion students tend to have a higher socioeconomic status than the neighborhood school.

At King School, all students have free or reduced lunch, but immersion students are less likely to be students of color than neighborhood school students.

Table 1. Immersion Program Enrollment by School

School	Grade Levels	Total School Enrollment Oct 2015	Total Immersion Students	Students Enrolled with Both LEP and Immersion
Woodstock	K-5	496	321 (65%)	49*
Hosford	6-8	640	126 (20%)	1
Cleveland	9-12	1,600	77 (5%)	
King	K-1**	400	73 (18%)	6***

Limited English Proficient (LEP) is the count of students eligible to receive English as a Second Language (ESL) or Bilingual Services.

*Primary language of most of these students is listed as Chinese. Anecdotally, in most cases, the language is Cantonese.

** The program at King School will expand each year to become K-5.

***Primary language of most of these students is Spanish.

Table 2. Total Free or Reduced Lunch Percentages by School Program

School	School Program	
	Immersion	Neighborhood
Woodstock	25.6	40.6
Hosford	12.7	34.8
Cleveland	14.3	26.7
King	100.0	100.0

Table 3. Ethnicity Percentages by School Program, October 2015

School	School Program	Hispanic	African American	Asian	Non-Hispanic White	Other
Woodstock	Immersion	2.5	0.0	43.9	38.3	15.3
	Neighborhood	10.3	1.7	3.4	75.4	9.1
Hosford	Immersion	2.4	0.8	46.0	32.5	18.3
	Neighborhood	8.9	4.1	8.0	68.3	10.7
Cleveland	Immersion	2.6	1.3	50.6	29.9	15.6
	Neighborhood	9.5	3.3	6.8	71.9	8.6
King	Immersion	17.0	30.7	4.5	30.7	17.0
	Neighborhood	32.4	46.5	0.0	9.0	12.2

Historical Development of the PPS Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program

Beginning the Program at Woodstock Elementary School

In the late 1990s, parents and educators urged Portland Public Schools (PPS) to offer an immersion program in Chinese language and culture. The district already had two immersion programs, in Japanese and Spanish, and proponents of a Chinese program saw an opportunity to accommodate a growing interest in Chinese due both to China's increasing economic and political power and to Oregon's position on the Pacific Rim.

PPS selected Woodstock Elementary School to host the immersion program, because its declining neighborhood enrollment had made space available. Cheryl Johnson, an experienced principal who had once taught at Woodstock, began in her role as the program's founding

principal on July 1, 1998, two months before the program was scheduled to start. At that point, there were no instructors, no students, no teaching materials, and no curriculum.

Principal Johnson and fellow administrators began immediately to prepare for the September launch of the program. They first needed to decide whether to teach Cantonese or Mandarin. Although Cantonese was more widely

spoken in the Portland area than Mandarin, PPS decided to teach Mandarin, since the program goal was for high school graduates to conduct business in the language. Mandarin is the most widespread dialect and would thus help achieve that goal. The choice to teach traditional or simplified characters was also driven by the same goal. There were fewer than five Mandarin immersion programs in the country at the time, and all taught traditional characters. PPS decided to teach the simplified writing system because it would provide more opportunities for business interactions with mainland China. This made them the only program in the U.S.

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Principal Johnson hired a part-time coordinator, and together they began the search for a teacher. They believed the program's teachers should be native speakers and decid-

ed that the Beijing variety of Mandarin would be most appropriate. They placed advertisements in venues from San Francisco to Seattle, and a search committee began interviews. Many applicants were native speakers, but had no teaching experience. Fortunately, they found a native-speaking teacher in a local college program and hired her by the end of July. Since she had been trained in the U.S., the teacher was familiar with U.S. educational practices.

The next task was to design the curriculum. The PPS Spanish and Japanese programs used a 50/50 model, with students in K-5 spending half a day of instruction in English and the other half in the partner language. Woodstock Elementary staff looked at the criteria required for students to pass Oregon state exams in math and English in third grade and worked backwards to determine how much time they would need in English to pass. They found that a model with a higher percentage of Mandarin instruction (80/20) would not give sufficient time for students to meet the state requirements and therefore chose the 50/50 model. Once they had determined the number of hours of Mandarin instruction available, they began to plan the details of the immersion curriculum.

Principal Johnson also began recruiting students for the first cohort. Starting with a list of about twenty parents who had expressed interest in a Chinese immersion program, district personnel called each parent. All agreed to start their child in September. Many of these families had adopted a child from China and, as part of the adoption requirements, needed to maintain the Chinese culture for their children. Woodstock staff explained that the immersion kindergarten would have more academic content than a traditional kindergarten, thus requiring regular homework. Many parents had an intense desire to see their child succeed and were willing to accept the more rigorous program; in fact, most were highly supportive of such a program.

The PPS Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program opened September 1998 with a kindergarten/first-grade blended class of twenty-four

students. In 1999, twenty-four new kindergartners entered the program and, by 2000, the program had approximately seventy-three students.

Continuing Program Development

Finding qualified teachers continued to be a challenge throughout the development of the program. For several years, Woodstock Elementary obtained teachers through the U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program, a now defunct federal program that brought teachers from China to be

in the classroom for three years.

Woodstock teachers constantly looked for ways to expose students to Mandarin speakers other than themselves.

If finding qualified teachers was difficult, finding appropriate teaching

materials was even more so. Initially, the teachers taught half days and developed curriculum and materials during the other half. They looked at American textbooks and adapted the thematic units to Mandarin. Students learned the content in both English and Mandarin, but subjects were taught in Mandarin first. The day was scheduled with Mandarin instruction in the morning and English in the afternoon. By 2000, staff members were able to go to China to purchase materials, but not all materials available were culturally appropriate for American students. Sometimes only portions of a book could be used. Now, materials from China are more likely to be acceptable, and American publishers have started responding to the needs of immersion schools.

Oregon state standards determined the Mandarin writing curriculum. Teachers began with the content students were required to master and translated it into Mandarin. In the early grades, the half-day Mandarin instruction taught reading, writing, speaking, and some math. When the program expanded to third grade, science was

added to the curriculum. Because the students studied science in Mandarin, the district requested that they be able to take the Oregon state third grade science tests in Mandarin as well. The district had a Chinese teacher state-certified in the testing department who was allowed to grade the tests.

Woodstock teachers constantly looked for ways to expose students to Mandarin speakers other than themselves. One strategy was to acquire a satellite dish and to access CCTV. Students spent fifteen minutes a day watching a program similar to Sesame Street in Mandarin. The school also hosted cultural events, such as a group of students from China who presented a Beijing opera. Cultural events proved successful school-wide, both for the immersion students and for the neighborhood school students.

The district provided little funding in the program's infancy. With a limited budget, PPS could not offer transportation to Woodstock, so students could only attend if they lived nearby or had parents who could drive them. As a result, the program's reputation became one of exclusivity.

Creating a Parent Organization

Woodstock Elementary School immersion parents began to organize in 2000 and formed the non-profit organization *Shu Ren* of Portland to support the Mandarin program at Woodstock, and later at Hosford Middle School and Cleveland High School. *Shu Ren* organizes fundraising events, advocates for the PPS immersion program, provides grants for Chinese-related classroom supplies and field trips, and offers support for parents and students such as after-school homework help. *Shu Ren* does not support the Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program at King Elementary, which began in 2014.

Expanding to Hosford Middle School and Cleveland High School

The Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program seeks to graduate students with Advanced proficiency while developing a higher level of multicultural understanding. The program expanded by adding a new cohort of incoming kindergarteners each year. In 2003, the program grew to include Hosford Middle School (grades 6–8), followed by Cleveland High School (grades 9–12) in 2006. At the middle and high school levels, the curriculum continued to teach Mandarin and to expose students to Chinese culture as they studied core subjects through developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction.

Middle school students receive about two hours of Mandarin instruction daily, including an hour of language instruction and an hour of social studies taught in the language. Eighth grade students also take a third class called the Chinese Research Residency, which prepares them for a two-week capstone trip to China in which students complete field studies.

The high school program at Cleveland High School offers Mandarin language classes and blended learning opportunities in addition to another optional travel experience to China. Students have time for one block class in Mandarin every other day.

Developing Real-World Experiences

From the beginning, PPS has sought to provide Mandarin immersion students with opportunities to use their language and cultural knowledge in the real world. Woodstock Elementary School, Hosford Middle School, and Cleveland High School have all developed strong relationships with sister schools in Suzhou, China. This relationship provides multiple opportunities for educational exchanges.

In eighth grade, students in the Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program participate in the China Research Residency, a year-long research project in which they prepare for, experience, and reflect upon their capstone project of two weeks living and learning in China. Students conduct research that they have prepared, live with Chinese host families, take classes at their Chinese sister school, and complete independent tasks using their Mandarin abilities. Although students are accompanied by adults, they are responsible for designing the activities they want to engage in and carrying them out once they arrive.

At the high school level, PPS offers a biennial summer program to China that is open to incoming tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade students.

Students visit major historical sites in China, complete service learning projects in both urban and rural venues, and participate in a homestay with a Chinese family.

Obtaining Funding through The Language Flagship

As the initial cohort of students began transitioning to middle school, PPS sought ways to expand and further develop the immersion program. Michael Bacon, then a PPS teacher on special assignment, worked with Carl Falsgraf, then director of the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon, to apply for a grant from The Language Flagship offered through the National Security Education Program (NSEP). In 2005, NSEP awarded PPS and the University of Oregon (UO) a generous grant and challenging task: to establish the nation's

first K–16 Chinese Flagship Program that not only graduates students who are professionally proficient in Mandarin at the Superior level, but also provides a model for replication by other schools. The Oregon Chinese Flagship Program is unique in its continuity and program coordination from elementary school through undergraduate collegiate studies. The impact of The Language Flagship funding on the PPS Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program and on the UO is discussed in detail in the “Catalysts and Disruptors” chapter.

Beginning University Studies

Students who graduate from the PPS K–12 Chinese Flagship Program are qualified to apply for any of the twelve Chinese Flagship Programs at

Students who graduate from the PPS K–12 Chinese Flagship Program are qualified to apply for any of the twelve Chinese Flagship Programs at prestigious U.S. universities.

prestigious universities across the country. These programs help students pursue their chosen area of expertise while continuing their education in Mandarin. Past graduates have pursued

majors in areas including international relations, mathematics, and art history, all the while taking university-level academic courses in Mandarin.

September 2006 was a pivotal year for the Oregon Chinese Flagship Program as the first group of students, many of them alumni from PPS, entered the UO Chinese Flagship Program. To date, thirty-six PPS graduates have been accepted in the UO Chinese Flagship program. In that same year, Woodstock Elementary School doubled its capacity for Mandarin immersion, allowing approximately sixty students to enter the kindergarten class.

Expanding the Program to King School

In 2014, PPS opened another Mandarin immersion school at King School. Currently, the program provides Mandarin immersion for kindergarten through second grade classes, with two full-time Mandarin teachers. The program will be hosted at King through fifth grade, then move to a nearby middle school, and finally, expand to Jefferson High School. Students in the program receive Mandarin instruction for half the day and English instruction the other half, as at Woodstock, but the King program made adjustments to meet the needs of their own learners. King School serves a more diverse student population than Woodstock, providing greater access to students of color and poverty. Many of the King students were from the local Albina Head Start, which teaches two- to five-year-olds Mandarin for twenty minutes per day. Details about the implementation of the program at King School can be found in the “Catalysts and Disruptors” chapter.

Participating in the RAND Study

In 2015, the RAND Corporation and the American Councils for International Education conducted a groundbreaking study that included PPS. The study compared students who were randomly selected in the immersion program lottery with peers who did not receive one of the coveted slots. Results demonstrated that eighth-grade immersion students district-wide were about nine months (or one full academic year) ahead of their non-immersion peers in terms of reading

skills. They also have a 3-point lower rate of classification as English Language Learners (ELLs) by sixth grade. The RAND study, for the first time, overcame the self-selection bias of optional immersion programs to show their effectiveness.

Planning for the Future

In the 2017-2018 academic year, PPS plans to open a third Mandarin immersion program. This program will be located in the heart of the Portland Chinese-speaking community, where Cantonese is the home language of most children. This community represents one of Portland’s fastest growing minority populations. It will be an innovative model that embraces the linguistic and cultural assets of the Chinese-speaking community, aiming for trilingualism in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin. PPS will design, plan, and implement collaboratively with the community a dual language immersion program that leverages the home language assets of the students and offers them, along with their English-speaking peers, the mainstream languages of power: English and Mandarin.

PPS will also design, plan, and implement Pre-K Chinese immersion programs and Mandarin world language classes through district and community-based Head Start programs to provide greater access for students of poverty and color. Similar to the Albina Head Start students entering King School, PPS intends to give priority to children coming from these Head Start Chinese immersion and world language classes during the kindergarten lottery process.