

## Spotlight on the Chinese Education Center Elementary School: A Newcomer Program in San Francisco

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Immigration has reshaped American schools in profound ways. Today, one of every four children in the United States is living in an immigrant family, and that number continues to grow (Zong & Batalova, 2015). The dispersal of the latest wave of immigrants has placed many of these children in communities with little history of immigration and in schools with limited experience integrating newcomers. In California, where dual language learners make up 60% of the young children ages 0-8, these learners are less likely than their English-only peers to access high-quality early childhood programs and, by fourth grade, there is a disparity of reading and math skills between English learners and non-English learners (Park, O'Toole, & Katsiaficas, 2017). Newcomer programs that address the social-emotional, academic, linguistic and cultural adjustments students face as they enter the U.S. school system can be an effective model for supporting immigrant and refugee families as they integrate into potentially their first American institution.

This article shares excerpts from an interview with Victor Tam, principal of the Chinese Education Center (CEC) in San Francisco, California. Victor Tam has been a teacher and administrator for San Francisco Unified School District for over 25 years. For the past eight years he has been the principal of CEC, a K-5 elementary school that has welcomed newcomer students from Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking backgrounds and has served the Chinese immigrant community in San Francisco for the last 49 years.



*The Chinese Education Center has served the Chinese immigrant community in San Francisco for the last 49 years.*

While Spanish is the number one language spoken by English learners in all but seven states, Chinese is the third most common language spoken in California, following Spanish and Vietnamese. It is spoken by 4% of English learners nationwide (Batalova & McHugh, 2010). The CEC program meets the specific needs of Chinese-speaking newcomers in the San Francisco area.

**Q: What are the backgrounds of your students?**

A: All of our students at CEC are recently-arrived newcomer immigrants from China. They have been in the country for less than a year. Most have some background in speaking Cantonese but we also receive students who speak other dialects of Chinese as well. Since the educational system in China has Mandarin as the language of instruction, all the students speak Mandarin. Similarly, since China’s writing system is simplified Chinese characters, all the students are familiar with simplified Chinese characters in reading and writing their home language. Additionally, some of our students, typically students from villages, come under-schooled and not necessarily literate in their home languages.

*The majority of our work of the CEC is done in sheltered English while content-teaching is done with a mixture of the students’ first language which, for the CEC, is Chinese.*

**Q: How do students enroll in the Chinese Education Center program?**

A: All students who enter San Francisco Unified School District first apply at the Education Placement Center office. There, counselors interview students and families, also assessing their English language proficiencies if the students’ home languages are not English. Thereafter, students are offered various placements and the families have the opportunity to select a school. CEC can be one of their choices. At CEC, our enrollment is ongoing throughout the school year. One barrier to families choosing our school is our location. We are located between San Francisco’s Chinatown and the Financial District. Depending on where families live, it may take over an hour on public transit to get to our school. We typically open school in the fall with a very small number of students and gradually increase our enrollment through June. Last year, we started school with about 50 students and ended school with about 130 students. Students stay for one full year –or less –depending on the choice of the families.

[The SFUSD district’s English Learner Program Guide (San Francisco Unified School District Multilingual Pathways Department, 2017) offers more details about enrollment.]

**Q: What is the program model and curriculum at CEC?**

A: Our one-year program is focused on teaching students foundational English language skills. The majority of our work is done in sheltered English while content-teaching is done with a mixture of the students’ first language which, for us, is Chinese. We are fortunate that almost all of our teachers are bilingual in Mandarin or Cantonese. Teaching English is based on two programs: *Systematic ELD* and *SIPPS* (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words; Center for the Collaborative Classroom, 2018). Assessments we use include the ADEPT (A Developmental English Proficiency Test; California Reading and Literature Project, 2018), Benchmark Assessment System (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018), and the BPST (Basic Phonics Skills Test; California Reading and Literature Project, 2018) to inform instruction as well as student placement.

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**Q: What type of community support does the CEC have?**

A: A school’s foundation typically rests upon its staff; its students and families; and its community. Our school has a committed, hard-working staff, but our students and families are in transition. The majority of our families are low-income with the adults focused hard on looking for work. That being said, they provide the students with all their basic needs and by prioritizing education as an important step towards success. From there, our school rests heavily upon our community partners. We are so fortunate to have a network of support between local Community-based Organizations (CBOs) and local businesses. They fill in so many of the gaps where other schools have PTAs. Our CBO supports provide help to our families in terms of after-school care; tutoring; medical support; health care; mental health support; social emotional programs; mental health assessments; parenting classes; housing; crisis counseling; shelter; while our local business supports provide material donations; volunteers; tutors; monetary support. Without the generous support of our community partners, it would be close to impossible to provide this high-level of support for our students and families.

**Q: Many newcomer programs serve only secondary education students (Short & Boyson, 2012). What are some of the needs of newcomers at the elementary level that you feel CEC is able to address?**

A: First and foremost, CEC aims to build the academic foundation for our students’ English language development. The Frankfurt International School identifies these linguistic differences (Frankfurt International School, 2018) between English and Chinese that can pose a challenge to our students. While many teachers know that Mandarin and Cantonese are radically different languages from English – English coming from an alphabetic language and Chinese not – the differences are also based in the phonology, vocabulary, syntax, and discourse levels of language. For example, in Chinese, the concept of time is not reflected through different verb tenses and forms as it is in English. In terms of phonology, English has many words that end in consonants, and in Chinese they are more likely to end in a vowel, thus English words that end in a consonant are more difficult to pronounce, which may also affect reading diagnostic tests. Additionally, Chinese is a tonal language, which means the pitch of a phoneme can distinguish word meaning, rather than signal emphasis or emotion as in English. These types of differences affect students’ reception and expressive language. When the variation between languages is this great, the younger the students are when they are addressed, the easier for the learners’ acquisition of English. Our elementary program allows for these newcomer English Language Learners a transitional year to develop those English literacy skills that they would have less access to in most other schools.

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**Q: What makes your program unique?**

A: Our program is unique because we provide an intentional space and time for our elementary level, Chinese-speaking, newcomer immigrant students and families to transition to the Western school system. Especially for students coming from a non-alphabetic language system, learning English is extra-challenging. We support students' acquisition of English by explicitly teaching foundational English skills that focus on phonology and build their English vocabulary. We focus a great deal on helping students develop their social emotional learning skills, as well. Amidst such a drastic transition, it is very easy for students to lose their sense of self-confidence as learners. For example, in the more traditional Chinese family culture, children are often shamed for failure. At our school, we work hard to educate families AND students to understand that "failure is a natural and often important part of the learning process". We definitely support and nurture the whole child at our school and, in this transition, these students are often fragile and *need* such supports. In our history, there is story after story of how pivotal a role CEC plays in this transitional first year by setting the foundation for our students' long-term success in our educational system.

*The CEC program provides an intentional space for elementary-level, Chinese-speaking, newcomer students and families to transition to the Western school*

**Guiding Questions on Serving Newcomers for School Leaders**

Newcomer programs are unique ways to serve students who are experiencing American schools for the first time. While most serve secondary education students, elementary level programs do exist and provide an intentional, focused transition year to provide foundational English language and literacy skills in addition to cultural and social-emotional support. Community-based organizations can be essential supports for students and families, providing wrap-around services from health care to tutoring.

There is no one-size-fits-all for serving newcomers, and in many locations, a full newcomer program may not be possible (Short & Boyson, 2012). There are numerous considerations when building a newcomer program including the number of newcomers per grade level, their educational background, capacity of the local educators to speak the students' languages and the likely the duration of the immigration or refugee wave of arrivals. Additionally, the newcomer program models range from a summer orientation or after-school and weekends program to a partial or full-day program. School leaders must consider the program that will best welcome newcomers and prepare them for learning grade-level content and literacy. Based on some of the best practices in newcomer programming, guiding questions for administrators to consider if they are working in schools with large populations of newcomers include:

- How well do you know about your students' backgrounds, including language dialects and home literacy skills?

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- What are your strategies and processes for learning about your students' language and literacy skills as well as grade level content area knowledge upon enrollment?
- What are your strategies for making students and their families feel welcome to your school?
- What are the linguistic and cultural capacities of your teachers to meet the needs of the student population in your area?
- Is there any flexibility to your school day or creative ways you can serve students and their families?
- What are the professional development and curricular needs of your educators?
- If established as a newcomer program, what is the plan for transitioning students from the newcomer program to a grade-level classroom? How can you support the transition?
- Does the curriculum teach both English language and acculturation to American schooling in a positive and nurturing environment?
- Is comprehensive data collected that includes students' first language proficiency, content area understanding with goals for growth?
- Does your current program allow for developing students' home language and literacy skills?
- What helps your students build confidence as learners?
- What are critical needs that students and families have and how can you support those needs?
- Are there gaps that can be filled by partnering with community-based organizations, such as public libraries and after-school programs?

For more information about the best practices of designing and maintaining a newcomer program, CAL's extensive review of secondary newcomer programs includes case studies, a searchable database of programs and a summary of what works well (Short & Boyson, 2012). Additionally, you can follow or contact Principal Victor Tam on Twitter @PrincipalTam. You can reach CAL Solutions for your professional development and technical assistance needs via Twitter @CAL\_LangLit and email at [solutions@cal.org](mailto:solutions@cal.org).

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### About the Author

Annie Laurie Duguay, Director of Language and Literacy at CAL, leads the PreK-12 Professional Development area, preparing schools and educators for meeting the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students. Prior to joining CAL, Annie was a certified ESL teacher and taught in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She holds two master's degrees: an Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an M.A. in Immigration and Settlement Studies from Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada.

### About CAL

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a non-profit organization founded in 1959. Headquartered in Washington DC, CAL has earned an international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual and dual language education, English as a second language, world languages education, language policy, assessment, immigrant and refugee integration, literacy, dialect studies, and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children. The mission of the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is to promote language learning and cultural understanding by serving as a trusted resource for research, services, and policy analysis. Through its work, CAL seeks solutions to issues involving language and culture as they relate to access and equity in education and society around the globe.

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