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Interest in Chinese grows statewide

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By Don Davis | Worthington Daily Globe

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The South Washington County School District students joined 1.3 billion Chinese in the annual event.

Woodbury students and more than 5,500 others across the state studying Chinese are part of a mushrooming movement starting in the Twin Cities area and moving out. The number of Chinese-language students in Minnesota public schools has grown five-fold in recent years, with no end of the interest in sight.

To put the growth in perspective, there are more Minnesota students learning Chinese now than in the entire country in 2000. And with the Chinese economy growing to the point that, in some economists' minds, it will surpass the American economy by 2030, Chinese is becoming a language of commerce around the world.

Knowing Chinese is important. "It is a first step when you sit at a table for negotiations," said Martin Graefe of Concordia Language Villages, which uses immersion techniques to teach a variety of languages at its Bemidji facilities and in Twin Cities classrooms.

It is not just language students learn. Language classes also teach culture of foreign countries, so students learn about giant China.

"The culture is really different from American culture," said Taiwan native and South Washington County schools' Chinese teacher Pan, whose students learned more about culture than language when they celebrated the moon festival. "Students will not have much contact with Chinese culture outside of our building."

Gov. Tim Pawlenty recognized China's importance in 2006 when he called for more Chinese classes. There were 1,233 Minnesota students taking Chinese then; now, 5,572 are in Chinese classes.

"Solid progress has been made, but certainly more needs to be done as we look at the opportunities and challenges created by China's emergence," said his spokesman, Brian McClung.

Also in 2006, President George W. Bush launched an initiative to increase funding for foreign language teaching, including Chinese and Arabic.

Some federal funds remain, but the recession dried up state money to expand Chinese classes.

Karen Klinzing, an assistant Minnesota education commissioner, said the Pawlenty administration puts a high premium on improving core subject teaching, such as in English, science and math. But foreign languages also are important, she added.

"If there were money," she said, the state would fund foreign language class expansion.

Even without boatloads of state money, the number of Chinese language teachers has grown from seven in 2001 to 36 this year. However, those are heavily concentrated in the Twin Cities, with many school districts elsewhere unable to afford Chinese classes.

The state Education Department has yet to compile a list of districts offering Chinese this school year, but last year among the 26 districts with Chinese programs, the few outside the Twin Cities area included Alexandria, Mankato and Fairmont.

The list is growing. Willmar schools, for instance, received a five-year University of Minnesota grant to develop a Chinese program.

Several state-run Twin Cities colleges offer Chinese, along with Minnesota State University Moorhead, St. Cloud State University, Bemidji State University, Winona State University and Rochester Community and Technical College.

Private Concordia College in Moorhead and its Bemidji-based Language Villages is a leading Chinese language resource.

In the college itself, 12 students took Chinese two years ago; 27 are in classes this year.

There is "a strong public awareness of need" for Chi-nese classes, said Mary Rice, who is in charge of language, literature and culture classes at the Moorhead school.

Most taking the classes are interested in business or global studies.

Rice predicted that interest in Chinese will blossom, like happened with Spanish in the 1980s.