New language

Elementary students learning Chinese

By Kevin Flaherty | THE MORNING SUN

On a Thursday afternoon, Nancy Lipka's third-grade class took some time to roll a ball around, announcing their names with each catch.

That might not normally seem beneath a third grader's capabilities, except for one difference. The ball was a qiu, and the students were introducing themselves in Mandarin Chinese.

"I think they have learned a lot," said Lijung Zhu, Mandarin Chinese teacher. "They learned their numbers. They learned how to say hello, how to say goodbye and what to do in class."

As part of the district's program, Zhu teaches students at Meadowlark and George Nettles Elementary schools. Over the 30 minutes Zhu had with Lipka's class at George Nettles, she taught the students how to arrange Chinese numbers one through 10, sang a song with them about friends and finished by rolling the ball.

The numbers one to 10 are: yi (with a horizontal line over the 'i'), er, san (line over the 'a'), si, wu (a 'v' over the 'u'), liu, qi (line over the 'i'), ba (line over the 'a'), jiu ('v' over the 'u'), shi.

"In Chinese, we write out the pronunciation with the word," Zhu said. "That's what the lines are."

But students get even more out of the class, as Zhu also gives simple instructions, like how to get in a line, in Chinese.

"It would be nice if all students learned Chinese," Zhu said. "Thirty minutes in six days may be too little. I hope (it is expanded)."

Lakeside and Westside Elementary don't currently have the program, but Pittsburg USD 250 Superintendent Gary Price said the program also expanded to the middle and the high school.

At Pittsburg Community Middle School, students have Mandarin Chinese available as an exploratory course, where they rotate to another course after several weeks. Students at Pittsburg High School have the option of taking Mandarin Chinese I. Next year, Price said Mandarin Chinese II will also be offered.

"In a year it will be very interesting to see because some students will have had no Chinese, while others will have had some," Price said. "In a couple of years, some of the students coming to the high school will have had the equivalent of a semester or year's worth."

The decision to teach Mandarin Chinese at the elementary school level started a couple of years ago. The district applied for a federal Foreign Language Acquisition Program grant, and received one which allocates close to \$800,000 over a three-year period.

Galena received a similar grant on a smaller scale, Price said.

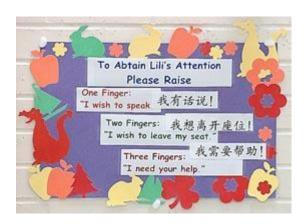
"They were only giving them for what they called critical need languages," Price said. "Mandarin was at the top of the list. There were a shortage of teachers in the United States."

And a shortage of students. Price said there were about 1.5 million students in China learning English, and only about 24,000 American students learning Chinese. That's something he said the district hoped to change.

"It's important, especially when you're talking about the most widely spoken language in the world," Price said. "We will need people to deal with China, which is becoming an economic power and a trading partner.

"At this point, the kids get it something like every fourth or sixth day," Price said. "And (Zhu) really keeps those kids' attention. They love it."

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Signs bearing instructions in both English and Mandarin Chinese ideograms cover the walls in Lijung Zhu's classroom at George Nettles Elementary in Pittsburg. Students in USD 250 are learning Mandarin Chinese under a three-year pilot program funded by an educational grant.

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