Dear Parents of Incoming Kindergartners and First Graders,

Many people have asked me why I chose to put my son, Hayden in the Mandarin program at Cherokee. It’s a decision I’m daily thankful for taking. When my son Hayden was three, we were in a Montessori program in Virginia. As part of their extra-curricular activities, he was taking Spanish and cooking. One day, while driving home, he said to me --- “Mommy, I don’t want to take Spanish and cooking anymore, I want to take Chinese and computers!” It was set. I put him in the after school Mandarin program and he loved it.

When I was transferred from Virginia to Chicago, I learned about the Mandarin program offered at Cherokee and chose to buy a house in Lake Forest so Hayden could participate in the program. There was a lot of tension about the program at the time and I decided to keep Hayden in Montessori school until last year (2015-16 school year) when he was going into first grade. At that point, the Mandarin program had stabilized and was on a truly successful path forward. It was definitely the right decision.

Aside from his initial interest, there were several short and long term factors that led to my decision to enroll Hayden in Mandarin. Let me share a few of these:

* There are more people in China who speak English than there are people in the US who speak English. Yes, over 300 million people in China speak English. While it’s easy to say “that’s great, they’ll speak English with us,” anyone who has worked internationally understands that business and relationships develop much further when one speaks the local language.
* China holds over 27% of the US national debt. More and more Chinese businesses are investing in the U.S. and around the globe. China’s influence in the world will only grow over the next decades. As a step to prepare my son for the future, I believe having a base in Mandarin will move mountains for him, no matter his profession.
* Learning a language is HARD. Learning Mandarin as an adult is even HARDER! As a child, learning new sounds and characters comes almost naturally as children’s brains absorb the complexity differently than adults.

I had a situation with Hayden when I asked him to translate from English to Mandarin and back and he was having difficulty. I quickly discovered that the issue wasn’t the translation; the issue was that **he was thinking in Mandarin**. His brain was literally segregating the two languages which is key to fluency in any foreign language. This is not harmful. This is incredible, as it generally takes an adult many years of intensive study and immersion to reach this point.

* While we adults perceive Mandarin as potentially too difficult to learn, it is not for children, especially younger children. In fact, Baby Einstein has a DVD dedicated to language sounds from around the world. Children are able to adapt to what they hear. I’ve been told that Hayden’s accent sounds like a Chinese boy his age. This is because his hearing has picked up the nuances he hears when listening to the pronunciation from his teacher, a native Mandarin speaker. It therefore, integrates into his speech. Even in this short time, he’s made great strides and it’s incredible to know that in second grade, he’s negotiating in Mandarin. In the end, whether or not he continues with Mandarin throughout his life, activating this part of his brain at such an early age provides for other learning opportunities in the future.
* Many people fear that learning Mandarin will have a negative impact on other aspects of their child’s studies. I have found the exact opposite. Mandarin has helped enrich Hayden’s understanding of the world and therefore allowed him to become more analytical. While he does have daily Mandarin homework as well as other classroom homework, it has not prevented him from participating in the extra-curricular activities that he enjoys, such as hockey, cub scouts, and chess.
* I was concerned when Hayden started that I couldn’t help him. I’m fluent in Spanish, but have no Mandarin background. To-date, this hasn’t been an issue. With the materials available and fabulous teachers, I’ve been able to support Hayden without knowing any Mandarin.

I believe one of the greatest gifts I have given and will continue to give to Hayden is this opportunity to learn Mandarin. No matter what path he takes in the future, this one skill will help contribute to his success. My plan is to take Hayden to China after fourth grade and before starting at DPM to give him an opportunity to experience the culture first hand. It will be an incredible honor to watch my then 10-year-old help me learn about the country, order food, and speak with people while we’re there.

Thank you for your interest in the Mandarin program for your child. Please feel free to reach out to me, if you’d like to discuss any of this further.

Jill Rhodes

May 25, 2017

*Prior to their move to Chicago, Jill led foreign language programs for the U.S. Intelligence Community, as well as CIA’s National Clandestine Service. Her son, Hayden, will be starting third grade at Cherokee in the fall.*