

Learning Mandarin Chinese in the Midst of an Economic 危机

The Mandarin Chinese word for crisis, “wēiji,” is comprised of two characters, 危机, which some decipher to represent “danger” and “opportunity.” Although the English interpretation of wēiji may be centuries old, contemporary pundits, politicians, and therapists often juxtapose these seemingly divergent words to inspire people in the face of insurmountable odds. Good intentions aside and with all due respect, they are slightly mistaken. Their version of the “danger-into-opportunity” paradox certainly sounds plausible; however, the English interpretation of the Chinese word wēiji as two characters representing danger and opportunity has turned a linguistic misstep into an urban myth.

While wēiji does mean “crisis” and the first syllable of the word does convey the notion of “danger,” the jī syllable of wēiji does not exactly signify “opportunity.” In fact, the second syllable more accurately represents an “incipient moment, a crucial point, a precarious time when circumstances can rapidly go awry, or a perilous situation when one should be especially wary.” Wēiji does not mean converting danger into an opportunity for advantages and benefits.

Danger. An incipient moment. A crucial point. A precarious time when circumstances can go awry. Sound familiar? We are certainly encountering an economic wēiji today. The world market has lurched so suddenly that many organizations and individuals are still trying to assess the short- and long-term ramifications. Talk about a calamity when conditions change unexpectedly. Did anyone envision such a rapid regression of our national and global monetary systems?

While the Barrington 220 School District is financially stable, we — like most other public and private entities — are still in a precarious period. No institution, regardless of its fiscal integrity, is immune to this recession and its repercussions. Planning for tomorrow or even next year is

difficult enough given such uncertainty, but we need to strain our eyes beyond present realities to see the possibilities and necessities of the future. Clarity, imagination, and foresight have never been more necessary; yet, we must ground our ambitions and aspirations in practicality and prudence. In the face of fiscal fear, we still have a responsibility to enhance learning for all children in the next decade while living within our means and carefully managing current resources.

More than 200 community members and staff recently engaged in a three-day discussion about the future of our school district. We called it the “2020 Vision Summit,” because our students who began this school year in kindergarten will enter their senior year of high school in the year 2020. We asked ourselves, “What must their education become, what do they need in that span to help them navigate such a rapidly shifting world landscape?” The answers surprised us.

That intense conversation produced six areas of focus for Barrington 220’s next strategic plan: (1) individualized instruction; (2) healthy and environmentally sustainable schools; (3) optimal time for learning; (4) technology; (5) social-emotional learning; and (6) global connections. While each of these will receive its own complement of strategies, goals, and action plans, the last one — global connections — has already received a jump-start.

On March 3, the Barrington 220 Board of Education added Mandarin Chinese to our World Language curriculum. Beginning next fall, students in grades six, seven, and nine can choose to learn Chinese as well as Spanish, French, German, and Latin. By 2012, all students in grades six to 12 can learn Chinese if they choose. A state grant as well as partial matching funds from the school district and a reallocation of staff rather than adding teachers will cost-effectively introduce this exciting new option for students.

Surprisingly, fewer than 50,000 American

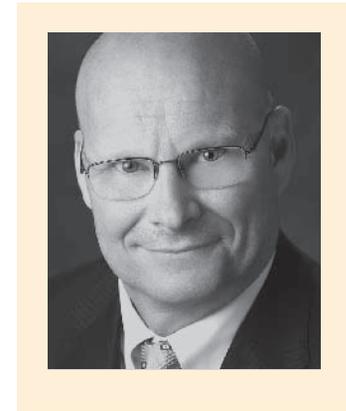


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

Dr. Tom Leonard is the superintendent of District 220 schools. He can be reached at tleonard@cusd220.org or by phone at 847-842-3588

students are currently studying Chinese, compared with 200 million Chinese students studying English. Offering Chinese as a World Language selection keeps our curriculum competitive with 21st-century realities.

Given current fiscal constraints, sustaining this and other worthy programs will be a challenge; however, it is one we must solve to meet emerging expectations. At this time, we are thrilled to diversify our World Language curriculum with the addition of Mandarin Chinese. Doing so includes Barrington 220 in a select group of school systems where students become better global citizens with a worldview broadened by learning this important dialect. And just in time, too. While weathering this economic wēiji, we need all the help we can get to translate such multifaceted Chinese expressions. U