



Catalina Foothills Unified School District #16  
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## **BOARD AGENDA ITEM**

**ITEM NO: 5.2**

**BOARD MEETING DATE:** Thursday, September 25, 2025

**NEW BUSINESS ITEM:** Consideration of the Gradual Phase Out Plan for the Mandarin Chinese Immersion Program (first reading)

**SUBMITTED BY:** Sheryl Castro, Executive Director of Curriculum and Assessment

**PRESENTED BY:** Sheryl Castro, Executive Director of Curriculum and Assessment

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Presented for your consideration is the Gradual Phase Out Plan for the Mandarin Chinese Immersion Program at Sunrise Drive Elementary School.

### **Enrollment and Sustainability Challenges**

Since its launch in 2013–2014, Catalina Foothills School District’s K–5 Chinese Immersion Program has provided students with the unique opportunity to develop language proficiency and cultural understanding through a partial immersion model. The Chinese Immersion Program was originally designed as a two-teacher-per-grade model, ensuring students spent half of their instructional day in Chinese and the other half in English. At that time, the program was built around the expectation that each grade would have approximately 50 students shared between two teachers—about 300 students in total across grades K–5.

Unfortunately, the program never reached that level of enrollment. While the district remained committed to sustaining the program for more than a decade, anticipating that participation would grow, numbers instead began to steadily decline starting in 2019-2020. Each new cohort brought fewer students, resulting in increased costs for the program. As numbers fell, the original model became unsustainable: immersion teachers were left without English partner teachers, and classes had to be combined

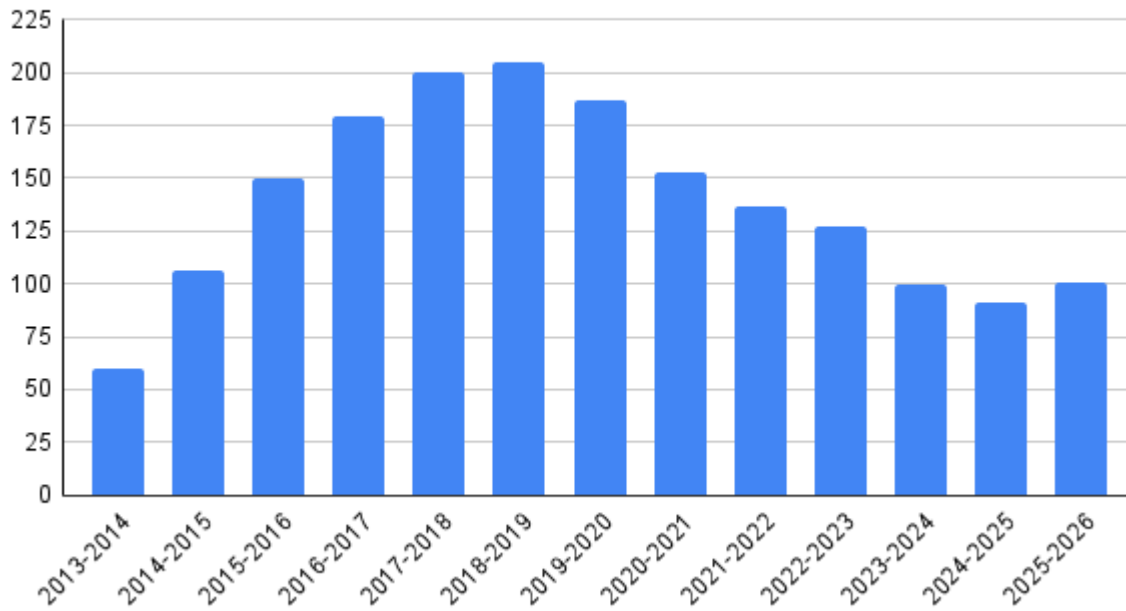
or shared among multiple classrooms. This shift has meant that the program is no longer delivering the 50-50 immersion experience as originally designed.

Over the years, the district has taken steps to sustain and strengthen the K–5 Chinese Immersion Program. These efforts reflect our commitment to the program and to the families who chose it. Some of the measures taken to address enrollment challenges include the following:

- **Community engagement and publicity:** The immersion program was actively promoted through Desert Leaf advertisements, participation in community events, and celebration of cultural traditions such as the Spring Festival and events at the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center. Additionally, teachers ensured that Sunrise Drive students had regular opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in community events and activities (i.e., University of Arizona’s StarTalk Summer Camp, Chinese New Year celebrations at Centennial Hall, student competitions at the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center). Promotional fact sheets were created and shared via social media and community events to showcase the program’s benefits. Videos that highlighted student voices, family experiences, and research from an immersion parent who is a language acquisition expert at the University of Arizona were produced and shared with the community.
- **Flexible teaching models & creative scheduling:** During the pandemic, immersion teachers switched to teaching all subjects in both English and Chinese to preserve continuity of instruction. As enrollment dipped after the pandemic, the necessity to engage in creative scheduling that preserved students’ time in immersion classrooms became the norm. School leaders designed schedules that ensured shared groups of students across multiple classrooms to provide access to immersion despite low numbers. For example, currently Chinese immersion teachers are responsible for up to two grade levels of instruction and also teach in multiple content areas on the English side of the day. Immersion teachers have also shared responsibility for the teaching of Chinese Literacy & Culture (a class that was previously taught by one of the team members).
- **Extended learning opportunities:** Teachers invited visiting scholars from the University of Arizona’s Confucius Institute to engage students in cultural products and practices such as calligraphy, art, music, and dance. Chinese teachers also offered before-school enrichment opportunities to increase exposure to the language and culture.

Table 1 shows Sunrise Drive Chinese Immersion Program enrollment trends from 2013-2025.

Table 1. SD Chinese Immersion Enrollment: 2013-2025



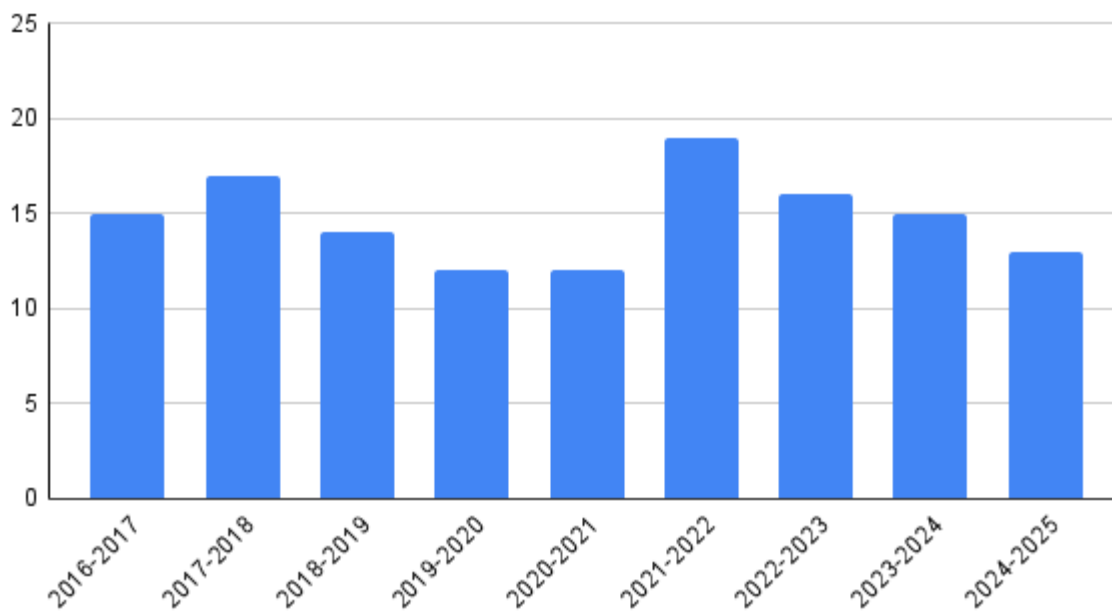
Key trends:

- **Strong early growth (2013–2018):** The program started with 60 students in 2013–14 and more than tripled to 200 by 2017–18.
- **Peak enrollment (2018–2019):** Enrollment reached its highest point at 205 students which comprised 37.2% of Sunrise Drive’s total school enrollment. (One hundred students are currently enrolled in Chinese immersion which is 20.8% of the school’s total enrollment.)
- **Declining trend (2019–present):** Enrollment fell each year after 2018–19, dropping to 91 students in 2024–25. That represents a **56% decrease** from the peak. We saw a slight increase in enrollment in the current year (from 91 students in 2024-2025 to 100 students in 2025-2026). This current year’s enrollment is still 105 students less than the peak enrollment in 2019-2020 and 200 students less than the desired enrollment of approximately 300 students.
- **Year-over-year changes:** Early years saw large annual gains (up to +77%), but since 2019 most years have shown declines ranging from -7% to -21%. In short, while the program initially grew, declining enrollment since 2019 is a consistent trend.
- **Enrollment in 2025-2026:** While current year’s enrollment stands at 100 students across six grade levels (K–5), in 2014–2015 enrollment was 106 students with only three grade levels (K–2). In other words, today we are

serving fewer students per grade level and fewer students overall than when the program was in its early years. This imbalance has created significant financial challenges, as the cost of staffing and resources must now be spread across 6 grade levels with about the same number of students as spread across 3 grade levels originally.

Table 2 shows Valley View Early Learning Center’s Chinese Immersion Program enrollment trends from 2016-2025.

Table 2. VVELC Chinese Immersion Enrollment: 2016-2025



For SY2025–2026, Valley View Early Learning Center’s (VVELC) projected Chinese Immersion enrollment was only seven students (five full-time, one attending four days per week, and one attending three days per week). Due to low interest, we were financially unable to operate the program and made the difficult decision to discontinue Chinese Immersion at VVELC beginning in 2025–2026. As a result, Sunrise Drive no longer has a preschool feeder for the elementary immersion program, and we anticipate this will further impact enrollment in the coming years.

While we deeply value the achievements and benefits this program has brought to our students, we have reached the point where we can no longer deliver it as designed, and it is no longer financially sustainable. For these reasons, we recommend a gradual phase-out of the program, with the final cohort of current

kindergarten Sunrise Drive Elementary School Chinese Immersion students completing fifth grade in SY2030-2031.

### **Phase-Out Schedule**

The District remains committed to the students currently enrolled in the Chinese Immersion Program at Sunrise Drive Elementary School and recommends the continuation of the program for any student currently enrolled in it. Therefore, we recommend a gradual phase-out of our K-5 Chinese Immersion program. We recommend that this phase-out begin in the SY2026-2027 school year, with Kindergarten Chinese Immersion no longer being offered. Each year thereafter, one grade level will no longer be offered until the program concludes with fifth grade in SY2030–2031.

Additionally, given the great value that we place on the expertise and dedication of our current Chinese Immersion teachers at Sunrise Drive, we are committed to ensuring they continue to be part of our district. Each of them holds full teacher certification and is highly qualified to teach in English-only classrooms. During the phase out we will offer this option should they wish to continue their careers in a non-immersion setting.

The gradual phase-out schedule is outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Chinese Immersion Program Phase-Out Schedule	
School Year	Grade Levels Offered
2025-2026	K-5
2026-2027	1-5
2027-2028	2-5
2028-2029	3-5
2029-2030	4-5
2030-2031	5

We recognize that the decision to phase out our elementary Chinese immersion program will be disappointing to students, families, and CFSD staff who have supported the program over the years, and we share in honoring the dedication and

impressive outcomes it has produced. The program has opened doors for students to develop valuable linguistic and cultural skills, and we are grateful for the teachers, parents, and students who have sustained it with passion and commitment. While the program's structure can no longer be sustained, the values it embodies—global awareness, curiosity, and respect for other cultures—will remain a central component of our educational mission.

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**RECOMMENDED MOTION: I move the governing board approve the Gradual Phase Out Plan for the Mandarin Chinese Immersion Program, as presented.**