



Catalina Foothills Unified School District #16

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BOARD AGENDA ITEM

ITEM NO: 4.1

BOARD MEETING DATE: Tuesday, October 28, 2025

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: Approval of the Gradual Phase-Out Plan for the Mandarin Chinese Immersion Program (second reading)

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

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

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

Program Design and Enrollment

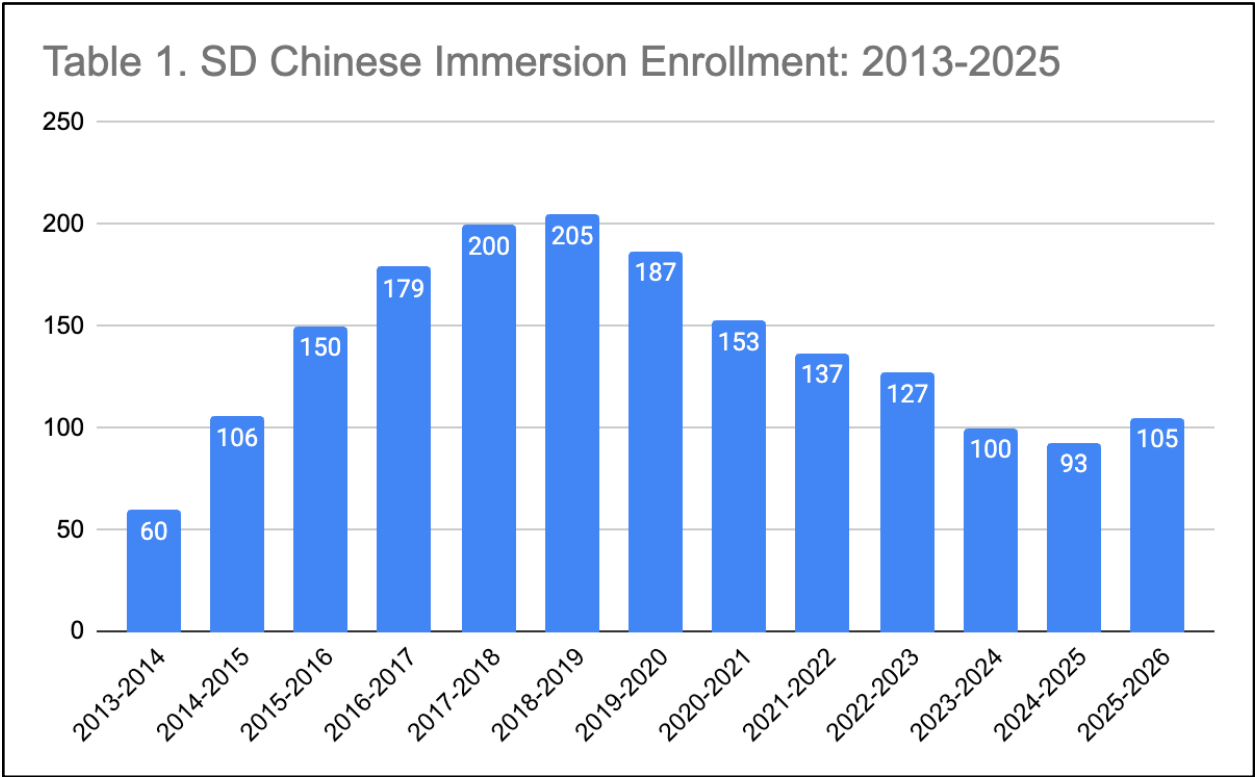
Since its launch in 2013–2014, Catalina Foothills School District’s K–5 Chinese Immersion program has provided students with the unique opportunity to develop language proficiency and cultural understanding through a partial immersion model. The Chinese Immersion program was originally designed as a two-teacher-per-grade 50/50 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.

Immersion programs are most sustainable when class sizes are similar to those in traditional classrooms (*Guiding Principles for Dual Language Education*, Center for Applied Linguistics, 3rd edition, 2018). Because incoming students in grades 2-5 must demonstrate language proficiency that is comparable to that of their grade level peers, mid-program transfers of students to immersion programs are rare, which has been the experience in the Sunrise Drive immersion program. Additionally, as with all school programs, some attrition is expected over time as families relocate, change educational settings, or experience other transitions. As a result, enrollment typically tapers in grades 2-5 in

immersion programs. This has also occurred at Sunrise Drive. For these reasons, it is critically important that kindergarten immersion cohorts begin strong—ideally with a minimum of 50 students shared between two teachers. This initial enrollment helps ensure that by the time students reach fifth grade, the program remains educationally, operationally, and financially viable.

Despite sustained district commitment for more than a decade, no grade level in the program has reached the desired enrollment target. Beginning in 2019–2020, new kindergarten cohorts trended smaller each year, and overall participation steadily declined. As section sizes fell below sustainable levels, per-pupil costs increased due to fixed staffing and materials, making the program increasingly more expensive to operate.

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

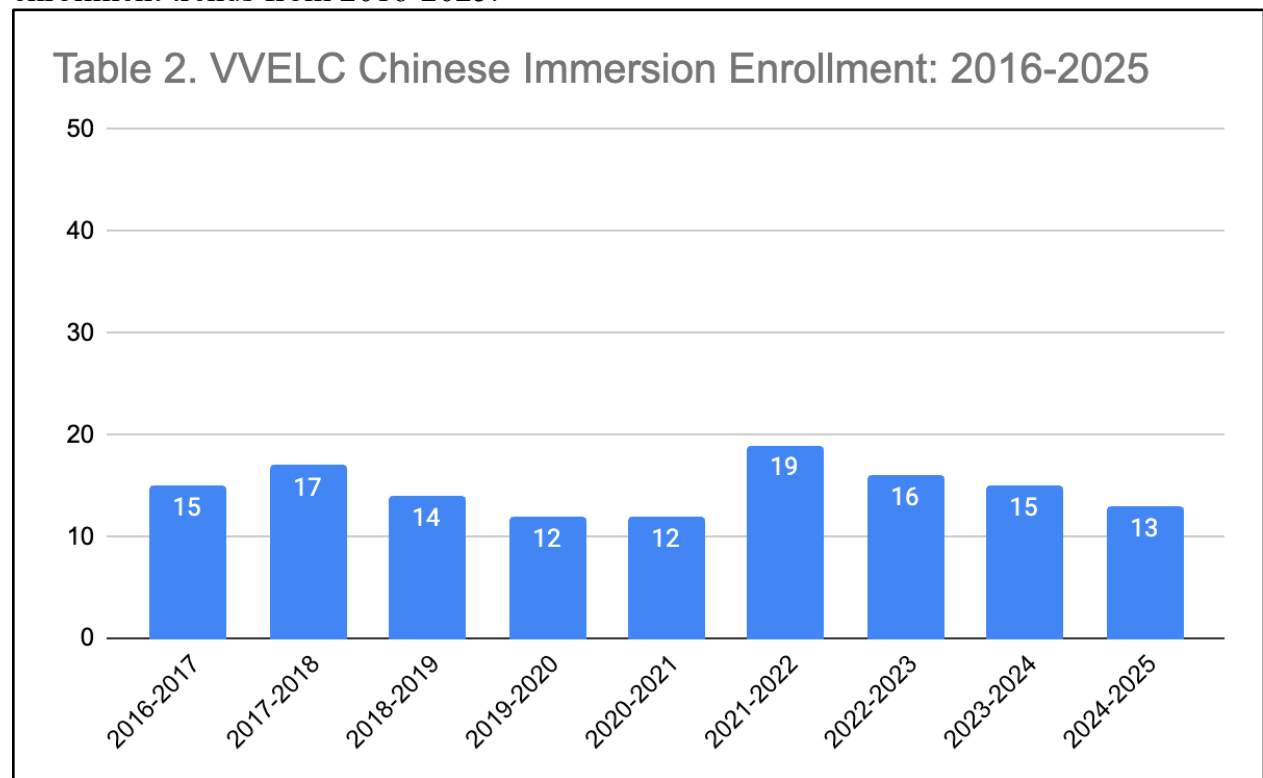


Key trends:

- **Strong early growth (2013–2018):** The program opened with 60 students in grades K-1. In 2017-2018 the program grew to 200 students in grades K-5.
- **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 five students are currently enrolled in Chinese immersion which is 21.9% of the school’s total enrollment.

- **Declining trend (2019–present):** Enrollment fell each year after 2018–19, dropping to 93 students in 2024–2025. That represents a 55% decrease from the peak. We saw an increase in enrollment in 2025-2026. The current year’s enrollment remains 100 students less than the peak enrollment in 2019-2020 and 195 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 the trend.
- **Enrollment in 2025-2026:** Current enrollment stands at 105 students across six grade levels (K–5). By comparison, 2014–2015 enrollment was 106 students across three grade levels (K–2). In other words, the total number of students served today is nearly identical to that of the program’s early years when it served only three grade levels. Average enrollment per grade has decreased from approximately 35 students per grade to 18 students per grade. This shift has resulted in smaller and inequitable class sizes, creating financial inefficiencies as fixed staffing and instructional resource costs must be spread across a greater number of grade levels.

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



Projected Chinese immersion enrollment for 2025-2026 at Valley View Early Learning Center’s (VVELC) was only seven students (five full-time, one attending four days per week, and one attending three days per week). It was financially unsustainable to operate the program. The difficult decision was made 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.

Efforts to Sustain and Grow the Program

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

- Promoted the immersion program through:
 - *Desert Leaf* advertisements and participation in community events
 - Celebrations of cultural traditions, such as the Spring Festival and events at the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center
- Provided students with public opportunities to showcase learning, including:
 - University of Arizona’s StarTalk Summer Camp
 - Chinese New Year celebrations at Centennial Hall
 - Student competitions at the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center
- Created and distributed promotional fact sheets highlighting program benefits via social media and community events
- Produced and shared videos featuring student voices, family testimonials, and research-based information

Flexible Teaching Models & Creative Scheduling

- Immersion teachers began to teach all subjects in both English and Chinese to maintain instructional continuity during the pandemic
- Schools implemented creative scheduling to preserve immersion time for students.
- Administration designed schedules to allow shared student groups across classrooms to continue immersion participation despite smaller numbers
- Currently, immersion teachers:
 - Instruct up to two grade levels
 - Teach in multiple content areas on the English side of the day
 - Share responsibility for Chinese Literacy & Culture, a class previously taught by an additional team member

Extended Learning Opportunities

- Partnered with the University of Arizona’s Confucius Institute to bring visiting scholars who engaged students in calligraphy, art, music, and dance

After the first reading of this proposal on October 14, 2025, the Governing Board asked for additional information in the following areas:

1. A summary of the work of the Immersion Committee
2. Financial costs of the immersion program
3. Enrollment status of the students in the traditional program and in the immersion program
4. Chinese World Language as an option

Immersion Committee

The committee met five times during the 2024–2025 school year. It was established in response to a reduction in Chinese instructional minutes, resulting from staffing reductions and schedule adjustments required to meet Arizona Department of Education (ADE) English Language Arts instructional-time requirements.

The committee's work resulted in increased opportunities for students to engage in Mandarin as follows:

- Teachers provided time between 7:35 am and 8:00 am (5 days/week) for immersion students to engage in additional practice using *Mandarin Matrix*. This was — and continues to be — an optional activity. Attendance for SY2025-2026 ranged between 10 and 20 students per day, depending on the grade level.
- A Community Schools Mandarin class was offered to all Chinese immersion students beginning in January. Community Schools partnered with the UA East Asian Studies Department to secure the Mandarin teacher. The class was offered to K-5 students on early release Thursdays from 1:30-3:00. Fifteen students participated in Quarter 3, and twelve students participated in Quarter 4.

The committee set the additional goal of increased enrollment, recognizing that enrollment drives staffing levels for the program. If enrollment increased significantly, additional staffing could be assigned to the program.

Recruitment of new students was a multi-tiered approach. It included the following:

- Nine school tours conducted by the principal or assistant principal; 46 students (grades K-5)
- A Chinese Information Meeting and tour; 27 families
- Two Kindergarten Show and Tell & tour sessions; 59 families
- Desert Leaf advertisements
- Social media advertisements for Kindergarten Show and Tell sessions, Chinese Information Meeting, and tours
- Print promotional materials designed to highlight the Chinese Immersion program

- Print materials distributed across multiple venues (Meet Yourself, Tucson Chinese Culture Center's Spring New Year Celebration, Sunrise Drive Front Office, VVELC Front Office)
- Two videos shared on the school website and social media, and for sending to potential families; one video featured testimonials from parents about their students' experiences in the Chinese Immersion program and at Sunrise Drive Elementary School; one video highlighted the research and evidence supporting students engaging in an immersion program
- Recirculated a third video on the district website and on social media, featuring immersion students to maintain visibility of the program
- Other promotions of the program included:
 - Ads on Facebook/Instagram to attract families to visit Sunrise Drive's Chinese immersion webpage
 - In 46 days, 16,000+ people saw the ads and 444 clicked through to the SD website. The cost for each website visit is 50 cents.
 - The ads were over 6 minutes long. The average time that ads were viewed was 6 seconds (the average time on social media).
 - The ads were shared with every FB group in Tucson that had a connection to the Chinese community (i.e., the Tucson Chinese Group) or was related to enrollment (i.e., Tucson Moms, Catalina Foothills Moms).
 - CFHS marquee included messages for the immersion programs during the open enrollment months:
 - Now enrolling K-5 Mandarin Immersion at Sunrise
 - Now enrolling K-5 Spanish Immersion at Ventana Vista

As a result of increased and targeted promotion, enrollment for the 2025–2026 school year stands at 105 students. The program was originally designed to serve 300 students to operate at full capacity. Based on program modeling, a minimum of 150 students is required for the program to remain operational and financially sustainable.

Financial Impact

Table 3 shows costs related to the Chinese Immersion program in SY2024-2025.

Table 3. SY2025-2026 Chinese Immersion Costs	
Personnel	\$342,909.00
Chinese Literacy Development Resource	\$7,951.00
Visa Costs (budgeted)	\$30,000.00
Promotional Costs	\$1,263.00
Total	\$382,123.00

Table 4 compares the per pupil expenditure at our four elementary schools (i.e., the amount of spending for each student on each site).

Table 4. Fiscal Year 2025 Per Pupil Expenditure			
Site	Total Certified Teachers	Per Pupil Expenditure	Student Count (rounded)
Manzanita	36	\$11,116.66	533
Ventana Vista	28.6	\$12,431.99	376
Canyon View	28.3	\$12,458.76	372
Sunrise Drive	35	\$13,126.72	434

The table above uses Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) expenditures to determine per-pupil spending at each site. However, this data reflects expenditures and student count from the previous year, rather than current enrollment. Nonetheless, the data effectively highlights variations in per-pupil spending. We expect these figures to remain relatively stable, even with minor changes in enrollment at individual sites.

As shown, as the student counts decrease, the per pupil expenditure tends to increase. Among the four elementary sites, Manzanita has the lowest per pupil expenditure (\$11,116.66) and the highest student count (533 students), while Sunrise Drive has the

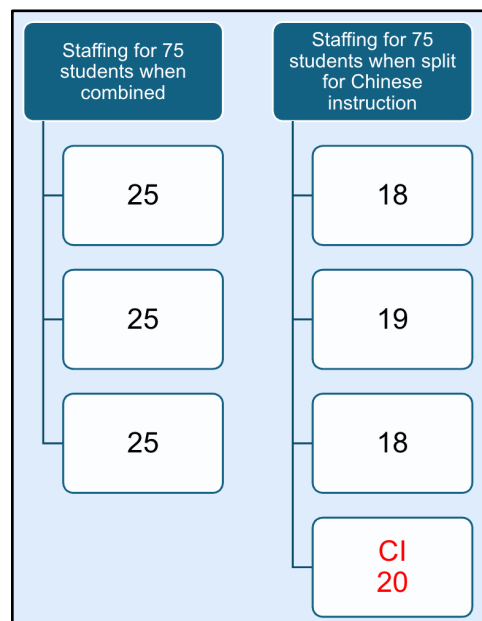
highest per-pupil expenditure (\$13,126.72) and the second-highest student count (434 students).

Staffing Model

When Chinese immersion enrollment falls below program capacity, it affects staffing efficiency across the entire grade level. For example, Figure 1 below illustrates a hypothetical grade level with a total of 75 students.

If 20 students participate in immersion, the remaining 55 students must still be divided among three traditional classrooms rather than two. This results in four total sections rather than three—one immersion and three traditional—with neither the traditional nor the Chinese immersion classrooms at full capacity. Due to staffing ratios, the number of students we can enroll is capped. We must determine capacity for a grade level based on the combined sections. Therefore, for portions of the day, all four classrooms are below capacity.

Figure 1. Staffing Example for a Hypothetical Grade Level



Enrollment Status

Table 5 shows the percentages of resident and open enrollment students enrolled in Sunrise Drive Elementary School programs. Chinese immersion enrollment represents 21.9% of Sunrise Drive's total enrollment. Resident students in the Chinese Immersion program constitute 8.17% of Sunrise Drive's total enrollment. CFSD resident open enrollment and non-CFSD resident open enrollment students in the Chinese Immersion program represent 5.03% and 8.8% of Sunrise Drive's total enrollment, respectively.

Table 5. Sunrise Drive Enrollment by Program and Enrollment Status

Enrollment Status*	Percentage Total School Enrollment	Total Students Enrolled (477)	Percentage Traditional Program Enrollment (based on SD total enrollment)	Total Students Enrolled in Traditional Program (372)	Percentage Chinese Immersion Program Enrollment (based on SD total enrollment)	Total Students Enrolled in Chinese Immersion Program (105)
Resident	44.20%	211	60.8%	290	8.17%	39
OEI	13.40%	64	8.4%	40	5.03%	24
OEX	42.40%	202	8.8%	42	8.8%	42

*Note:

- *Resident* - District resident student who lives within Sunrise Drive boundaries
- *OEI* - CFSD Resident Open Enrollment (district resident student who attends a school outside their attendance boundaries)
- *OEX* - Non-CFSD Resident Open Enrollment (student who resides outside district boundaries)

Mandarin Chinese as a World Language (WL) Class

The impacts of moving Chinese immersion to a Chinese World Language (WL) class include the following:

- **Program Timeline**
 - The gradual phase-out schedule would be discontinued.
 - The immersion program would officially end in May 2026.
- **Teacher Reassignment**
 - Chinese immersion teachers would be reassigned to traditional classrooms.
 - Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) positions would be allocated for Mandarin Chinese WL classrooms as needed.
- **Student Participation**
 - Current immersion students as well as students of families who choose Chinese as the WL option would attend Chinese class just as Spanish WL students do:
 - Kindergarten: 1–2 sessions per week (totaling 60 minutes)

- Grades 1–5: 2–4 sessions per week (totaling 120 minutes)

- **Program Equity and Staffing**

- Chinese would be offered as a WL option at Sunrise Drive, Canyon View, and Manzanita to ensure equity.
- This would create the same inequities in class sizes described in the Staffing Models section.
- Each school would need equal FTE for both Spanish and Chinese, since students could choose either language.
- Fully staffing a complementary WL program would require five Chinese teachers across the three elementary sites.

- **Instructional Focus**

- Instruction would shift from teaching content through another language to teaching the language for communicative purposes.

- **Pedagogical Considerations**

- Transitioning from immersion to WL teaching represents a shift in purpose, pedagogy, and pacing, not just a scheduling change.
- Immersion and WL teachers share many research-based strategies (e.g., comprehensible input, modeling, interaction, use of visuals/gestures).
- The application of acquisition-based strategies differs between immersion and WL contexts.

- **Curriculum Resources**

- Additional instructional units (aligned with K–12 Academic Standards for World Languages) would need to be developed and supplemental resources would need to be purchased/created.
- Mandarin Matrix could be used to support K–5 learning in Chinese WL classrooms.

Gradual Phase-Out Proposal

While we value the achievements and benefits this program has brought to our students, we have reached the point where 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 SY 2030-2031.

The District remains committed to the students currently enrolled in the Chinese Immersion program at Sunrise Drive Elementary School and recommends continuing the program for any student currently enrolled. Therefore, we recommend a gradual phase out of our K-5 Chinese Immersion program. We recommend that this phase out begin in the 2026-2027

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 SY 2030–2031.

Additionally, given the value we place on the expertise and dedication of our current Chinese immersion teachers at Sunrise Drive, we are committed to providing them the option to remain 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 to those who wish to continue their careers in a non-immersion setting.

The gradual phase-out schedule is outlined in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Chinese Immersion Program Phase-Out Schedule	
School Year	Chinese Immersion 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

The proposal to phase out our elementary Chinese immersion program was a very difficult decision to make. We understand that it will be disappointing to students, families, and CFSD staff who have supported the program over the years. Many school personnel and families at Sunrise Drive have shown immense commitment and dedication to this program over the years. It is always difficult to end a program that has had strong outcomes. However, it is no longer fiscally responsible to continue the program.

We recognize that 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 commitment of resources and 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.

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