

Children of Asian Casino Workers Reshape Connecticut School

Written by Administrator
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At Connecticut's casinos, the staff can speak to you in nearly any Asian language.

The diversity of the workforce at the casinos, which cater heavily to Asian gamblers from New York, is changing the complexion of nearby public schools that have been hiring more language specialists and adding new cultural traditions.

At the Mohegan Elementary School, down the road from the Mohegan Sun casino, many of the casino workers' children are preparing for a celebration Wednesday of the [Lunar New Year](#). A dragon parade, with puppets drawn by students in the English-learners program, will march before the student body as Chinese music plays over the loudspeakers.

Chinese families account for about 20 percent of the student body, according to educator Lisanne Kaplan, who sees familiar faces among dealers and other workers when she visits the casino.

"When I look around at the tables, I think, 'Parent. Parent. Uncle. Parent,'" said Kaplan, who oversees the programs for students learning English as a second language.

Mohegan Sun and its nearby rival, the Foxwoods Resort Casino, bring dozens of buses full of Asian-American visitors every day to this corner of rural southeastern Connecticut. The casinos have Asian marketing teams that develop and promote clubs, restaurants, concerts and table games such as Sic Bo that appeal to the hugely important Asian demographic.

As part of the strategy, Foxwoods President Felix Rappaport said it seeks employees with the right language skills.

"We have the capacity to communicate with people in pretty much any Asian language you can think of," he said.

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Mohegan Sun's ongoing celebration of last week's Lunar New Year will include concerts by a [Hong Kong](#) pop singer, Chinese cultural craft demonstrations and an appearance by winners of the Miss New York Chinese Beauty Pageant. Riders on Asian bus lines are receiving traditional red envelopes with \$5 to \$100.

The English learners at Mohegan Elementary also are receiving red envelopes, but with stickers inside, not cash.

Chinese students make up the majority of the 52 students who qualify for special language instruction out of roughly 350 students at the school, Kaplan said. The casino opened in 1996, but school officials say the diversity has grown notably over the last decade, with some Asian families coming from New York City and others coming directly from overseas.

The school employs a native Mandarin speaker who doubles as a teacher's aide and parent liaison, as well as a part-time tutor, and the district also has a translator for notes to parents. Signs throughout the school appear in English and Chinese. Principal Allison Peterson said the school tries to make parents feel comfortable by translating as much as possible, including clues for an open-house scavenger hunt.

In Norwich, one of the area's bigger cities, the school district has English learners representing 37 languages and often hires a private contractor to facilitate communications. Sheila Osko, the district's director of language and translation services, said many families choose the city because of its proximity to their jobs at Foxwoods.

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