

# It's a Place to Belong: Connecting Summer Learning to Community for Portland's Chinese American Youth

INSIGHTS FROM A RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP



**FBO** FOUNDATIONS FOR A  
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Chinese  
Friendship  
Association  
of  
Portland

THIS RESEARCH PROJECT WAS  
COLLABORATIVELY DESIGNED AND  
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ASSOCIATION OF PORTLAND AND  
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# Summer 2021: CFAP Builds On Youth Development



During the summer of 2021, the Chinese Friendship Association of Portland (CFAP) accelerated its community-led youth programming in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth in the Portland metropolitan region's Chinese community. Months earlier, the Oregon Legislature made a historic \$250 million investment in summer learning and enrichment, including \$40 million dedicated to culturally specific and community-based organizations through a grant program administered by the Oregon Community Foundation. CFAP successfully leveraged Oregon's investment to meet the urgent needs of Chinese community youth, deepen its approach to youth development, and launch unique summer programming that connects youth to their cultural identity and community.

Building on the community's rich assets of Chinese language and culture, professional expertise in innovative pedagogy, and a commitment to elevating youth

voice and leadership, CFAP provided robust bilingual and bicultural summer learning for young people from elementary school to high school. For K-8 youth, CFAP provided a four-week summer camp to 60 children integrating Chinese language and culture through project-based learning, offering a contrast to traditional classroom-based learning. For older students, CFAP invested in youth leadership development, including four-week teaching assistant internships, an innovative dual-credit course at Portland Community College designed by youth, and youth-led virtual courses in computer programming and artificial intelligence.

# About CFP

The Chinese Friendship Association of Portland (CFAP) is among the largest and most active member organizations serving the Chinese community and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community in the Portland metropolitan area. As a volunteer-led non-profit organization, CFAP's presence in the community is fueled by the passion of its leaders to cultivate community, preserve Chinese language and culture, and generate solutions to the challenges experienced by the region's Chinese and AAPI communities. Driven by values of service and bridging cultures, CFAP provides cultural, educational, and civic engagement activities to all ages.

CFAP routinely demonstrates how strong partnership between culturally specific organizations and state government agencies or mainstream cultural organizations can address inequities facing historically underserved communities. For over 20 years, CFAP has

organized the Chinese and AAPI communities to participate in Portland's annual Rose Festival Parade, and more recently partnered with the Portland's Centers for the Arts to produce the Oregon Lunar New Year Celebration. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, CFAP entered into a partnership with the Oregon Health Authority to lead culturally specific outreach, testing, and vaccination efforts, as well as programming for youth and seniors to address the effects of social isolation. By expanding youth programming into an immersive summer learning experience with support from a historic public investment, CFAP is again demonstrating the capacity of culturally specific and community-led efforts to meet the needs of their community while simultaneously pushing for systems change that leads to increased representation, greater access to opportunity and services, and equitable outcomes for Chinese and AAPI youth and families.

## A Community-Centered Research Partnership

This research effort is a partnership between CFAP and Foundations for a Better Oregon (FBO), a nonprofit organization and project of Oregon philanthropy seeking to collaboratively rethink and reimagine how Oregon supports every child to learn, grow, and thrive. By co-designing and co-leading research grounded in the perspectives, experiences, and truths of youth and community leaders, CFAP and FBO aim to elevate insights that help Oregon's philanthropic, state, and legislative partners understand the expertise, strength, vision, and opportunity within our communities to better support children and young people—especially those who are historically underserved by public systems.

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# Research Insights

## INSIGHT 1

### Moving from Youth Development to Youth Leadership

There is a saying that youth are like the morning sun, full of energy and potential. The world belongs to us all, but in the end it is theirs. That's why we say that youth are the future. This country—the whole world—belongs to our youth now and in the future. By doing youth activities, we let them know their roots and culture, so they can build a better future.

BOSHA LIU, CFAP BOARD VICE-PRESIDENT



#### YOUTH ARE THE FUTURE OF OUR COMMUNITY

When considering why youth programming is important to the CFAP community, virtually every response yields a clear and resounding answer: We invest in youth development because youth are the future. Far from cliché, this genuine response reflects community and cultural values.

CFAP is evolving the ways in which it engages and includes young people in the organization. “Since day one, we have been focused on youth development,” recalls Hardy Li, a former CFAP Board President and current Executive Board Member. Looking ahead, he believes that engaging youth as leaders will be a catalyst that brings CFAP to the “next level.” Creating structures, roles, and programming for young people to assume leadership within CFAP is essential to the organization’s current and future work for Portland’s Chinese community.

To better support youth who lacked opportunities for social connection and community service during the pandemic, CFAP recognized an inroad to go beyond

youth participation and create opportunities for youth leadership

“Youth have always been important to CFAP events,” reflects Kai Zhang, a longtime CFAP Board Member, as he recalls how youth had primarily filled roles as event volunteers or were seen as the beneficiaries of CFAP-led seminars for parents. Now, CFAP has adopted models where youth are identifying, designing, and leading projects for their peers and the community with the support and mentorship of CFAP leaders. This shift in approach is informed by a set of important understandings that CFAP has articulated about the function of youth development for the organization:

- Culture, language, and identity are assets for youth that should be actively developed
- Supporting positive mental health and social connection among youth is essential and must be actively pursued
- Youth agency and leadership is transformative for both the individual and organization

## YOUTH LEADERSHIP PROFILES

### KYLA ZHANG, JUNIOR, LAKE OSWEGO HIGH SCHOOL

When COVID-19 interrupted Kyla's plans for an in-person clinical summer internship, she organized a medical trainee-ship course at Portland Community College (PCC) for herself and peers interested in health sciences. With the support of a mentor, Kyla recruited a PCC faculty member to co-design a virtual course and reached out to Asian American healthcare professionals to guide weekly problem-based learning sessions.

### BEN WANG, JUNIOR, CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

With a passion for technology, Ben developed and taught courses in Javascript to build familiarity and confidence in the basics of computer programming for community members of all ages. He wants to give other youth in the CFAP community a head start in developing the foundational skills in computer science and the confidence to lead.

### JENNY QIAN, SENIOR, ST. MARY'S ACADEMY

Jenny's experience as an intern during CFAP's four-week summer camp solidified her interest in pursuing a career in teaching. Interns served as teaching assistants in classrooms and managers of camp operations to ensure arrivals, lunch, and recess conformed with COVID-19 protocols. Jenny enjoyed helping 5th through 8th graders bridge language learning with cultural understanding.

## PANDEMIC-CONDITIONS ACCELERATED INNOVATION FOR BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

As Oregon transitioned to virtual environments with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disruption of routines opened an opportunity for CFAP to test and build out its new approach to youth leadership. Zhang and Dr. Wei-Wei Lou, a retired Portland Public Schools administrator and CFAP volunteer, were invited to transition CFAP's youth programming to the CFAP Youth Council, a youth-led forum that draws from best practices in developing youth agency and leadership. With many after-school activities suspended and limited opportunities to socialize, Zhang and Dr. Lou convened a group of young people in late 2020 to form the Youth Council. "The pandemic really pushed us to officially incorporate the Youth Council within CFAP," recounts Zhang, "so that kids have a place to show their leadership."

The CFAP Youth Council first co-designed youth-led seminars during the 2020-21 winter break. Council members sourced topics of interest from their peers and offered courses in subjects ranging from origami

and taekwondo to Python language and artificial intelligence, with youth either leading workshops themselves or inviting other community members to collaborate. "During the pandemic, it was youth actually providing activities for other youth, just as we hoped!" celebrates Zhang. "Through [elevating] community learning and youth-led activities," he explains, "the Youth Council will project a positive image and involve more kids; and the youth leaders will become role models to others."

In early 2021, the Youth Council moved to action when it received a grant from the Lake Oswego City Council to organize a community event in response to a surge in anti-Asian hate. The Council also supported the leadership of one of its members, Alicia Li, as she joined the Lake Oswego School Board as a Student Representative.

"The fact that the Chinese Friendship Association is organizing these opportunities for me [to lead] gives me insight into what my potential is, and they are thinking about my future. That's really important to me," shares Cindy Huang, a Youth Council member.



When the pandemic hit, I really felt this sense of urgency around creating the Youth Council to generate more support for youth in the community, and also training them to be in a leadership role: to design programs, do [public service] in-fomercials, host movie nights for youth, or other youth activities. That was important.

IRIS ZHAO, FORMER CFAP BOARD PRESIDENT  
AND CURRENT ADVISORY BOARD CHAIR

## Culture and Identity Form the Foundation of CFAP's Approach to Youth Development

Because it was organized by the Chinese community, I feel like CFAP's summer program brings me closer to my community. It's a place to belong.

CINDY HUANG, CFAP YOUTH COUNCIL MEMBER

### ROOTING SUMMER LEARNING IN IDENTITY AND CULTURE

With the establishment of the Youth Council and positive response from both young people and the broader Chinese community, CFAP expanded its approach to community-based education in the summer of 2021. The centerpiece was a K-8 summer learning camp led by a team of bilingual and bicultural educators. The team created an immersive experience to accelerate participants' Chinese language skills through developmentally appropriate play-based and project-based learning.

Building on research-informed best practices, summer camp co-director Dr. Lina Lu remarks that "this program and way of learning is unique" in comparison to traditional approaches in Oregon public schools. The summer curriculum drew from rich aspects of Chinese culture to create a natural and applied setting for language learning. Children were invigorated to learn and practice Mandarin as they reenacted the fables that underpin Chinese idioms, studied the Chinese Zodiac, explored China's regional culinary traditions, practiced the arts of Chinese calligraphy and paper folding, and performed Chinese traditional waist drumming and gong fu fan dancing.

"I wanted to create an interesting, relaxing, and joyful environment for students to learn language," explains

Dr. Lu. "So we combined language learning with play, including hands-on cultural projects. It's important to me that kids learn by singing, by dancing, by listening, speaking, drawing."

Inspired by the Youth Council's approach to leadership, the CFAP summer camp integrated eight high-school aged summer interns into the camp's operations. Intern responsibilities ranged from serving as teaching assistants to providing technology support, and above all to be mentors and models for the younger children. "Interns experienced profound individual and collective growth during the four-week experience," recalls Dr. Lou, who also served as a summer camp co-director. "It was truly transformative."

From assuming leadership roles and working as a cohesive team to improving their own proficiency in Mandarin, the summer camp interns developed their self-awareness and self-confidence through leading cultural learning to younger peers. "I felt like I've been really separated from my own culture for a long time," said one summer camp intern. "This experience and interning made me remember who I actually am along with the kids here too."

## CONNECTING LEARNING TO HOME AND HERITAGE

The CFAP summer camp's approach was designed to extend learning into the home and encourage families to build on camp curriculum through their unique family traditions, culture, and experiences. Every day, camp participants returned home with specific questions or activities to explore with their family. Simultaneously, children applied their Mandarin language skills while exploring their family's story, identity, and connection to different places, foods, traditions, and art. Families became actively engaged in camp through the regular invitation to put their children's learning into personal context and make meaning with their children through dialogue and discovery.

"When my students started this summer camp, they did not speak Chinese at home," said one of CFAP's lead educators at summer camp when reflecting on the children's growth over the summer. "Now they start speaking Chinese at home, which makes me feel so proud. They try to use what they've learned in school, and put it into practice with their families." Parents also reflected earnestly on the value of deepening their children's interest in Chinese language and culture:

- We teach Chinese at home, but we don't do a good job introducing Chinese culture. I'm so impressed with what you've done!
- My children are very reluctant to write [in Chinese characters] at home. Camp made learning Chinese more than just repeating words. You made it about real and interesting experiences that enhance their sense of self-identity.
- We are Chinese, but my husband and I are not fluent. Getting culture and linguistic exposure is important to us.

Parents felt connected to the summer program because learning transcended spaces. It brought learning home in fun and active ways that promoted intergenerational sharing, dialogue, and deeper understanding. Of those who participated in an evaluative survey, families rated the focus on Chinese language and culture (91%) and the opportunity for play and fun (94%) as the most important components of the summer camp. CFAP's camp model amplified the unique ways that culturally relevant learning can connect the classroom to the home and engage families in meaningful learning. While the in-depth and applied Chinese language and culture learning offered at CFAP's camp is unique, this approach to incorporating family knowledge and experience is rich and applicable in all learning settings.



## Desire to Pursue Both Program Sustainability and System Change

Part of culture change requires that you are part of the change, part of the change of American culture. If you don't participate, you are not part of the culture.

KAI ZHANG, CFAP BOARD MEMBER AND  
YOUTH COUNCIL MENTOR



### LEVERAGING COMMUNITY ASSETS WHILE ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

CFAP's vision for youth programming goes beyond simply offering summer and extracurricular enrichment experiences to young people. Community leaders are seeking to address gaps in culturally relevant learning in public schools and society at-large.

"Part of being connected to CFAP is exposure to my culture and language. But in a school setting, I don't get that much exposure, and I'm surrounded with people I don't feel much connection to," said one member of the CFAP Youth Council. Adults in the community share a similar perspective: "The community really needs this, and we need more than this," says Dr. Lou, reflecting on the positive community reception to CFAP's summer programming.

These reflections hold a tension: a clear both...and perspective that emerges for many of the CFAP stakeholders involved in this research study:

*Both ...*

*the need to create and sustain community-led learning rooted in culture and language ...*

*and ...*

*the urgency to organize for a public education that partners with communities as experts and leaders to shape culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy across subjects.*

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## SERVICE TO COMMUNITY: THE WILL AND CAPACITY TO LEAD FOR EQUITY

CFAP's organizational values are deeply rooted in service to community. Indeed, *service* is a recurrent and deeply meaningful watchword for how community leaders approach their work to achieve equitable outcomes for the community, including by cultivating youth leadership.

The success of CFAP's refocused effort on youth development, including 2021 summer programming,

undoubtedly rests on CFAP's ability to rapidly tap into its existing assets within the community such as:

- A strong vision for youth leadership as a core component of CFAP's organizational structure.
- A rich connected network of bilingual and bicultural leaders.
- Community expertise to leverage from multiple sectors, regions, and generations.
- Strong relationships and social capital to rapidly scale and implement new models.

## HOW CFAP TAKES ACTION FOR EQUITY: A MODEL

Interviews with CFAP leaders past and present reveal a time-tested approach that the organization has employed over decades to confront challenges and move toward lasting solutions. This approach can situate and inform how CFAP pursues the desire to *both* strengthen community-led programming *and* organize for a more equitable public education system in Oregon.

Rooted in CFAP's core values of service to community and achieving equitable outcomes for the Chinese community, CFAP deploys a three-part approach to advancing systems change:

### 1. RESPOND TO MEET THE IMMEDIATE NEED

Whether distributing meals and masks to seniors during the first days of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizing annual social events to build community, or providing seminars to support the college application process for families, CFAP regularly organizes immediate responses to challenges facing Portland's Chinese and AAPI community and the resources needed to meet the need.

### 2. BUILD BRIDGES WITH DOMINANT CULTURE SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONS

CFAP regularly seeks out partnerships with other organizations and state government agencies to reduce barriers to access and increase opportunity. Whether



organizing contracting workshops with state agencies to help CFAP members grow business opportunities, or more recently partnering with OHA on culturally specific outreach to prevent the spread of COVID-19, CFAP serves as a bridge to connect members of the Chinese community with dominant culture resources.

### 3. PURSUE SYSTEM-LEVEL SOLUTIONS

Increasingly, CFAP is leveraging its social capital as a leading culturally specific organization to address important issues facing Portland's Chinese community on a systemic level. From planning community vigils in response to anti-Asian hate to organizing voter registration campaigns in senior housing and advocating for greater representation among city and county staff, CFAP is growing as an important voice and leader for systems change in ways that prioritize equity and address current and historical harm experienced by the Chinese and AAPI communities.



# Implications & Opportunities To Act



The energy around CFAP's youth development work is palpable: Young people are engaged and empowered, families are excited about new and culturally relevant opportunities for their children, and CFAP leaders and volunteers are being recognized for their efforts.

There is a need to continue building and to sustain CFAP's youth-led programming and cultural and linguistic enrichment opportunities, while also developing strategies to advocate locally and statewide for more culturally relevant public education that connects learning to student identity and culture.

Every young person deserves the opportunity to feel the same sense of belonging in their public school classroom as they feel in CFAP summer programming.



# Every CFAP Community Member Has a Role to Play in Shaping Where, When, and How Children Learn

## COMMUNITY LEADERS CAN EMBRACE NEW APPROACHES TO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT BY:

- Exploring new and innovative youth programming that engages more members of our community and supports youth learning, mental health, and sense of belonging.
- Continuing to elevate young people into CFAP leadership roles.
- Getting involved in education advocacy that promotes the important connection between learning, identity, and belonging and the need for globally informed 21st-century education.

## CFAP COMMUNITY MEMBERS CAN PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S EDUCATION BY:

- Getting involved as a CFAP member and championing its innovative work to serve the Chinese community and build youth leadership.
- Sharing our talents and skills to support youth programming and help CFAP grow using our communities' assets and strengths.
- Spreading the word to inform the broader Chinese and AAPI community in the Portland metropolitan area about CFAP and its support for youth leadership and culturally relevant learning.



# Process & Methods

This project is a collaborative research inquiry co-designed and implemented in partnership between FBO and CFAP. FBO believes authentic evidence emerges through authentic partnership that honors community wisdom and perspective at all stages of the research process. FBO operates as a project facilitator and research guide so that community partners are able to engage as experts rather than subjects.

The research design for this project was developed in a parallel process to CFAP's design and implementation of summer programming in 2021. The research aims and questions that underpin these findings attended to the joint objectives and genuine interests, concerns, and curiosities that arose among both CFAP and FBO about the way youth experienced community-based summer learning opportunities. Research methods were qualitative in nature, composed primarily of thirteen interviews and two focus groups with CFAP's organizational leaders, youth leaders, and community-based educators, as well as a parent survey with primarily open-text responses. This study utilized a descriptive coding structure informed by the values and objectives guiding CFAP's summer programming, and then applied a thematic analysis to refine a coding approach for group sense-making. The development of findings emerged through a two-part participatory sensemaking protocol, and CFAP and FBO collaboratively refined research "insights" through the co-development of this report.

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