Cantonese Naming Conventions
Reference Guide

What you need to know

- The order of Cantonese names is different from English. Family (or last) names are typically spoken and written first, followed by the given (or first) names. This may be reversed when speaking in English.

- Many Cantonese speakers may also use an English given name, which may or may not be part of their legal name. This English name may be used before or after the Cantonese given name or the family name.

- Cantonese names typically consist of one given name, no middle names, and one family name. Cantonese given names may be written in one (Nam) or two (Yue Oi) parts, and may be hyphenated (Yim-Fong). These are all one name, not a first name and middle name.

- Children typically take the father's family name.

- Women may or may not legally change their family name after marriage; however, when addressing them it is customary to use the family name of the husband.

Registering students

1. Include all legal names in school databases and documents.

2. Ask the parents which names are given names and which are family names. Given names should be placed in the first name field; family names should be placed in the last name field.

3. If the student has an English name, ask the parents if it is part of the legal name. If so, ask if it should be placed before or after the Cantonese given name.

Example

The father introduces himself as Wong Siu Ming. The mother is Law Ka-Yee, and their daughter is Nicole Wong Ching. In this example, the student is introduced with an English given name, a family name, and a Cantonese given name. (First names are in red throughout this guide, and last names are in blue.)
**Remember**

Naming practices vary among the Cantonese-speaking regions in China, and this guide provides only a general overview.

Cantonese does not have a standardized system for transliteration to the Latin alphabet, so the same name may be correctly spelled in several different ways (for example, Yu and Yue).

**More examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student: Chan Tai Man Charles</th>
<th>Student: Yue Oi-Kan</th>
<th>Student: Wong Nam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First name</td>
<td>Tai Man Charles</td>
<td>First name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle name</td>
<td></td>
<td>Middle name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last name</td>
<td>Chan</td>
<td>Last name</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the example of Chan Tai Man Charles, the student’s Cantonese given name comes before his English given name.

**Addressing parents, students, and families**

- Address parents as “Mr.” and “Mrs.” using the husband’s last name. Wong Siu Ming should be addressed as Mr. Wong and Law Ka-Yee as Mrs. Wong.

- Students with English first names are usually referred to in school using that name, so Tai Man Charles may be addressed as Charles. Ask the individual or parents to determine which name should be used in the school.

- When sending written materials to families, address them as follows:
  - To the parents of Charles Chan Tai Man
  - To the Chan family

Use a qualified translator if you are not able to communicate clearly with the parents and student.

School staff members who register students should come to an agreement with parents on a name that respects both their cultural patterns and the constraints of the database. That name should be written out and provided to the families and students in a notice written in the family’s home language, indicating that this is the name that will be used officially at school. Doing so will help students and families remember to use the modified name in school settings.

More information about this and other reference sheets can be found on the Education Northwest website: http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/3130.

REL Northwest, a project of Education Northwest, partners with practitioners and policymakers to strengthen data and research use. As one of 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the federal Institute of Education Sciences, we conduct research studies, provide training and technical assistance, and disseminate information in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. Our work focuses on regional challenges such as turning around low-performing schools, improving college and career readiness, and promoting equitable and excellent outcomes for all students.