



PHOTO: SANDRA BRADFORD

Barrington District 220 superintendent, Dr. Tom Leonard, visits with elementary students during their art class. These children are painting colorful Chinese opera masks. Each color signifies a different emotion or characteristic. This elementary school showcased a poetry lesson, science and many forms of art, including dance, voice, band, handwriting, knotting, papercutting, and a folk orchestra.

Sunrise or Sunset? *It depends.*

Have you ever looked at photos of the sun on the horizon and wondered, “Is that a sunset or a sunrise?” There are obvious resemblances between the two when a snapshot is your only reference; clearly, a sunrise provides one viewpoint while a sunset offers a very different outlook. Having enjoyed a week of touring schools in China last November, I experienced the same perplexity as when looking at a picture of the sun on the skyline. The Chinese education system is very similar and yet also very different from ours. It all depends on your perspective.



School board member, Sandra Bradford, visits with an elementary school dance group. While talking to the children after their performance, she was homesick for her three children. Similar to the United States, the Chinese children that are more serious about their art will take private lessons outside of school.

IN EARLY NOVEMBER, FIVE BARRINGTON 220 colleagues and I joined a larger delegation of 400 American educators—including more than 30 from the Chicago area—who were invited to tour schools in China. The trip was sponsored and largely funded by two organizations: The College Board—the U.S.-based nonprofit that develops and administers the SAT college entrance exam and high school Advanced Placement tests; and Hanban—the Chinese organization that promotes understanding the Chinese language and culture. Joining me from Barrington 220 were Board of Education member Sandra Bradford, Rose Elementary Principal Scott Carlson, Countryside Elementary Principal Kimberly Foster-Thomas, Barrington High School Principal Steve McWilliams, and Assistant Superintendent Cindy Jaskowiak.

Our district's interest in Chinese language instruction began in 2008. For three years, we have taught Mandarin Chinese in our high school and both middle schools. After receiving a five-year, \$1.5 million U.S. Federal Foreign Language Assistance Program grant, we are gradually offering Chinese Immersion as a language option in



Countryside Elementary School Principal Kimberly Foster-Thomas gets hands-on instruction from an elementary student in Tianjin. Every student welcomed their visitors and took great pride in sharing their work. Chinese elementary schools spend significant time in writing instruction.

selected elementary schools. With the University of Illinois as a partner, we were the only Illinois district and one of merely two-dozen public school systems in the U.S. to receive the 2010 grant. When the program is fully developed, Barrington 220 students can choose to learn Mandarin in kindergarten through their senior year in college. The Chinese Immersion experience complements our already successful Spanish-English Dual Language program, and it aligns with our strategic initiatives to promote Global Education.

Some wonder why we would travel to China. Accepting an invitation to join the U.S. Education Delegation allowed us to learn ways to implement our Chinese language program effectively, to exchange ideas about student instruction with Chinese educators and to build partnerships with Chinese schools that could generate future teacher/student exchange opportunities.

As with most international affairs, stronger relationships and better insight are often the goals. There are so many reflections and ideas from the experience I could share. Here are just a few of the similarities and differences we observed between schools, students and learning in the U.S. and China.

Teacher shortages in certain subject areas

In the U.S., math and science teachers are scarce. In China, however, teachers of those subjects are abundant. Their teacher shortages are in the arts, music and physical education. The latter might explain the teacher-to-student ratio we observed in some P.E. classes. In one school, we witnessed a lone phys-ed teacher leading 3,000 students through calisthenics in an outdoor stadium. Think Richard Simmons, but in Chinese.

Class sizes

Except for physical education, Chinese law limits most class sizes to no more than 45 students; however, we did visit high school math and language classes as well as some elementary classrooms with 48 to 50 students each. A language arts teacher at Lu He High School in Beijing confirmed her classes sometimes exceed 45 students; yet she only teaches two classes per day for a total of 10 sessions per week. The remainder of her time is spent creating teaching materials (Chinese teachers write their own textbooks) and working with colleagues in a professional learning community.

I shared that the typical Barrington High



This is the northern gate to the Forbidden City, which was the home of Chinese emperors for almost 500 years. It was built in the early 1400s. Walking through the Forbidden City is like walking through history. Inside there are hundreds of buildings including beautiful palaces. The Barrington 220 team was told that people would wait outside the gates for their entire lives hoping to see the emperor.

School class averages 25 students and teachers oversee five sections a day for 25 sessions per week. “How can they survive?” she asked, expressing a definite preference for more students but fewer classes. Similar to students at Barrington High School, most teenagers in China take eight classes per day at 45 minutes each. By contrast, though, students in China begin school at 7 a.m. and end at 6 p.m., with a two-hour lunch during the day. At BHS, our students start at 7:25 a.m. and end at 2:35 p.m., with the typical student taking seven classes at 49 minutes each.


Classroom discipline

The Chinese students we met were well-behaved – not because of our presence, but because that was the daily expectation. As each class began, students bowed to the teacher, who reciprocated. Instruction was orderly and when students worked with a partner or in a group, it was all business. There was no talking out of turn. In the City of Tianjin, I asked one high school principal whether consequences for inappropriate behavior were ever needed. The answer was vague, yet telling: “We do not discipline students, we educate them.” He did not elaborate.

One of our first stops in China was to see the Great Wall, a 5,500-mile series of stone and earthen fortifications built in the 5th Century B.C. to

protect China’s Empire from nomadic invaders. In more mountainous areas, the vista from atop the Great Wall is breathtaking – not to mention the steepness of the steps to climb there. While standing in an ancient guard tower, I wondered what a sunset or sunrise must look like from that vantage point. Today, the boundary between America and China is blurring somewhat while our opportunities for collaboration are coming into focus. As there are distinctions between dawn and dusk, there are also clear contrasts between education in America and China.

The final morning of our visit, we departed Beijing at daybreak. Thirteen hours later, our plane arrived at O’Hare shortly before sunrise—as if time stood still, which of course it never does.

Our travels in China proved the world is constantly moving, while diverse cultures can be both the same and different. We now have a more global perspective with a broader sense of what is good and challenging on the horizon of education in Barrington 220. 

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