

From the Superintendent...

I recently returned from 16 days in China as a participant in the China-U.S. Principal/Superintendent Shadowing Program. It was such an unbelievable experience that I find myself having difficulty effectively conveying the impact it has had on me as an educator and an individual. Nevertheless, I want to share a couple of reflections here, but hopefully will have an opportunity to talk more about it in the upcoming weeks and months.

As background, a year ago, John Ritchie, L-S Superintendent/Principal, had just returned from a similar trip and suggested I participate this year. Based on his experience, I applied and was accepted along with 15 superintendents and principals from the greater Boston area. We began our preparations, regular meetings and language lessons late last school year. Then last October, I was fortunate to host Ms. Yan Weihong in Sudbury. Ms. Yan is the Assistant Principal of Nanchang #8 Middle School. Nanchang #8 is a school of 2,600 students in grades 7-12; Nanchang is a city of 1.3 million people in Jiangxi Province, southwest of Shanghai. During her visit to Sudbury, she met school and town staff, visited classes and learned about U.S. educational practices. She and I spent a great deal of time talking about our students, schools, towns and countries. I felt somewhat prepared for my April trip to China.

Now I realize that no amount of reading, talking, listening to others, or watching movies and documentaries could have adequately prepared me. China must be experienced. I have to remind myself that I am not the first, or only, person to visit China. Some of you were born, or have lived there; some of you travel there on business or to visit relatives. So forgive my excitement and desire to share. I'm certainly not an expert, but I have deepened my understanding of this incredible developing country and my appreciation for what potential role China may play in our future and the future of our children. I'll limit my reflections here to education and schooling.

We learned that China is educating more students than the entire U.S. population. About 1 in every 5 students in school in the world is in a school in China. The sheer magnitude of their population drives policy making, practices, and expectations. I visited a rural school, several primary, middle and high schools in Xian, Beijing and Nanchang (some of these were regular schools, some "key" schools where the top scoring students enroll, and some affiliated with universities.) By necessity, class size ranged between 40 and 60 in each of the schools, the instruction was direct with little interaction among students and limited discussion between teacher and students. Students sat in straight rows and were attentive throughout each of the 45 minute lessons. In one 5th grade classroom, the desks had a bar attached to the desk that kept students from slouching on the desks during class. Students stay in a classroom throughout the day and the teachers come to them, except for special classes like phys. ed., music, computers, etc. Starting in the 3rd grade, content specific (math, Chinese, politics, English, science) teachers teach each lesson. School generally starts at 7:30 a.m. and students have 4-5 lessons before they leave for a 2 hour lunch. Most go home, some have lunch in shops around the school, and seniors spend the 2 hours, eating lunch at school and studying for the college entrance exam.

School resumes at 2 p.m. and students have 2-4 more lessons. Students may participate in after school activities and arrive at home between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. Middle school students reported to me they routinely have 4 to 4½ hours of home work each night. When I asked them if they went to bed about 11 p.m. after doing homework, they laughed and said no - they spent some time on the internet before going to sleep.

Unlike U.S. classrooms, I did detect that Chinese teachers have difficulty assessing if each student is learning during the lesson. It's only through correcting homework can they ascertain if a student understands the content. Correcting 40-60 homework assignments is arduous, which is why teachers teach only 2-45 minute lessons each day. The remainder of their day is spent correcting homework, planning future lessons, or collaborating with colleagues.

The education of special needs students is another area of difference from what we value in the U.S. In China, students with disabilities attend "special" separate schools, not the regular or key schools of the city. Students with mild learning disabilities will attend regular schools and be included in the classroom without any additional services or supports. These students receive support from the classroom teachers in the same way as any student in the class. Not surprisingly, they often are not successful students. When I inquired if parents had an option to send their child to the regular city schools, most educators indicated that the options available were the "special" school where teachers were trained to help the student, or teaching the student at home.

I found competition to be deeply imbedded in the Chinese culture. A high stakes test at the end of elementary school determines which middle school one can enter; the same is true at the end of middle school for determining one's high school choice, and at the end of high school to determine which college one can attend. There are frequent references to which schools, or even programs within a school, are the best or rated high in comparison to others. These are points of pride. There are even competitions for teachers that begin at the local level, move to the provincial, then national level. In these competitions, teachers teach a lesson, with "experts" observing and rating them. Winners are declared and awards given. Again, officials are quick to cite the number of award-winning teachers that teach in their city or school. Interestingly, when I suggested this concept was not typical in U.S. schools, a principal in a key middle school indicated that maybe our system was a little more "humanitarian."

The extreme emphasis on competition creates high levels of pressure on students, teachers and principals. Students know what is at stake and what options exist if they do not perform well on the test. A large percentage of students who score poorly on the middle school test will opt out and try to find employment. Teachers stay with a class throughout their years in a school so the teacher feels responsible if a student does not perform well on the exam. The principals indicate they feel great pressure for their students to perform well so that the reputation of the school can be maintained or improved, and their performance as an educational leader will be valued.

We did learn that the Ministry of Education is considering policy changes that reduce the pressure and competition that currently exists in the educational system. Schools are now prohibited from teaching core content subjects on Saturdays (stopping short of prohibiting school on Saturday), primary schools are also prohibited from posting rankings of students, and more colleges and universities are being created and the entry levels lowered to allow more students to attend college. This latter issue is interesting given that there is currently a 25% unemployment rate for college grads in the country.

So what is the implication of what I observed and learned from Chinese education? I was impressed with the policies and practices employed within large classes and with limited resources and with Chinese educators who are open and hungry to improve and learn from other countries and cultures. I was asked many times what I thought about their lessons or their schools and what could they do to improve. I also learned that we do things quite well in the U.S. in keeping with our culture, our population and our core values.

Nevertheless, I saw a country that is a burgeoning world economic and political force. It is already in many ways, but the potential for even greater global influence remains highly probable. Given that, in order for our children to compete, to co-exist, to understand and to benefit from China, they must come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the country, its culture and its people. China has a wonderful openness about it. They welcome and encourage interchange with other countries. The officials of Nanchang are interested in developing a relationship with Sudbury; the officials of Nanchang #8 Middle School (grades 7-12) are interested in expanding the new relationship with Sudbury Public Schools. I share this interest. Over the next several months, I will be meeting and talking with folks here to explore how this relationship might be advanced. I envision our teachers and students traveling to China in the near future and hosting teachers and students from China. I envision interested students beginning to learn the Chinese language. It is face-to-face interaction that will provide the basis for greater understanding and for greater opportunities for cooperation in our future. To borrow an old idiom, we need to think globally and act locally to enrich the lives of our young people. China must be experienced.