

# A Wonderful Trip to Indiana in May 2011

By Anna Chang

## Introduction

The trip to Indiana in May 2011 has been a wonderful experience. The two-week visit allowed me to have a quick but deep understanding of American education. I had the opportunity to visit four elementary schools in Indianapolis and Portland. Each school has its own distinctive features. Among the four schools, Adams Central Community Schools were where I spent a few more days doing classroom observation and activity participation. In this report, four themes will be presented. First, a brief profile of Adams Central Community Schools will be introduced. Second, the idea of “No Child Left Behind” implemented in Reading Recovery and Title 1 in ACCS will be discussed. Third, my classroom observation focused on biology-literature course and guided reading. The last but not the least will be my personal culture experience.



## Introduction of ACCS

The Adams Central Community Schools have been successful academically for generations. In the school community, there are Adams Central Elementary School, Adams Central Middle School, and Adams Central High School. Each was recognized with a **Four Star** Recognition. To qualify as a Four Star School, a school must be in the top 25% statewide in four categories based on ISTEP+ testing. The categories are math, language arts, passing both math and language arts, and attendance. Less than ten percent of all schools in the state achieve this distinction. Due to the efforts of the students, families, staff and community for the support of education, they allow the excellent performance to happen in ACCS.

Adams Central Elementary School is a wonderful school community where families, teachers and all staff members work together to provide a positive learning environment for students. With

over 500 students, it provides as many opportunities as possible for students while still meeting the needs of individuals.

Kindergarten classes are filled with both academic and social experiences that set a strong foundation for elementary curriculum. Throughout the grades, students are exposed to a strong language arts program based on Indiana State Standards. Through guided reading, interactive reading, and ongoing monitoring of student progress, students grow into strong readers and writers. If difficulties are found, they provide interventions including small group Title 1 support and Reading Recovery.

Classroom teachers meet the Indiana State Standards in math. Student instruction focuses on computation, math application and problem solving. Teachers integrate science and social studies throughout the curriculum with non-fiction reading instruction, hands-on activities and research.

During a 5-day week, students are to be exposed to art, music, physical education and computer instruction as well. The teachers of these subjects work closely with the classroom teachers to support grade level instruction. According to Mrs. Laurent, the elementary school principal, the physical education classes stress exercise for life, team building and respecting differences of abilities. In art class, students are exposed to style, color, texture and famous artists. As we observed, student work is framed and can be seen throughout the school building, brightening the halls, conference rooms and offices. In music class, students learn about tone and rhythm through vocal and instrumental instruction. Computer instruction moves students from basic computer skills to research and design programs. To create a multi-faceted learning environment, throughout the year, the teachers and staff plan exciting activities to enhance the educational experience. Like Elementary Track Meet, Word of the Week, and many more special days...they make learning in ACCS filled with fun.

The children do recite the Pledge of Allegiance each day. This is a law in the state of Indiana. During the morning pledges, students are given a moment of silence. The children are not forced to pray in public schools; yet, this moment allows both the children and the staff to say a prayer if they choose. At Adams Central, Christianity is very important. Their choir sings all Praise Music. Praise music are songs referring to God and Jesus. The impact of Christianity at Adams Central builds positive students who care about each other and practice kindness.

The astonishing figure on the wall of the school hall impressed me very much. As of this May, 61,652 books have been checked out (from last August)!!! According to some teachers interviewed, they were very proud that their students not only checked out these books, but they read them! The school values reading and provides as many great books as possible to keep students reading.



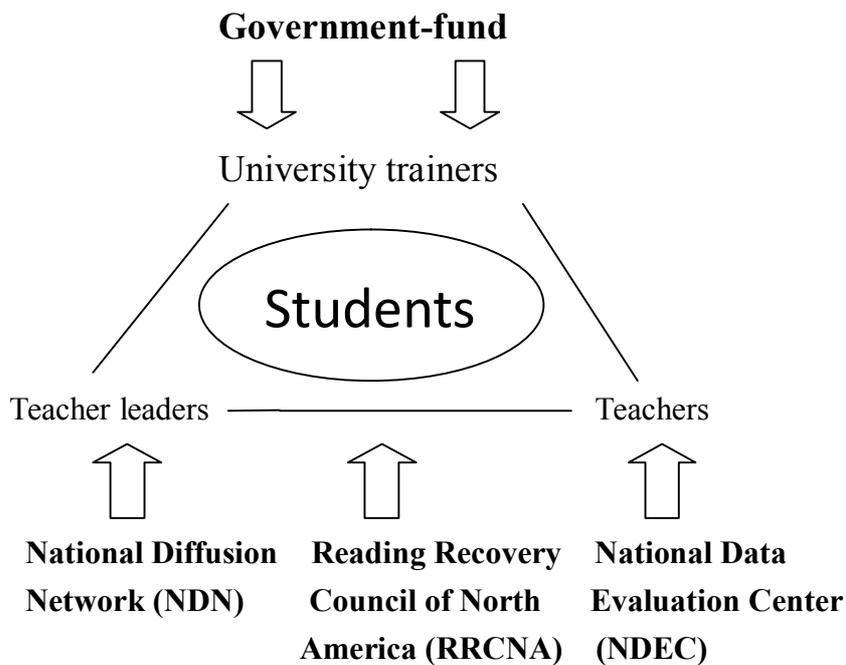
Adams Central is a great place to learn, grow, and love. Teachers are very proud to be part of Adams Central Elementary. Like Mr. Pettibone, the school superintendent, said, “Building students with strong academics and social skills to venture into a competitive world who care for others are truly lofty goals.” As we can see, the entire staff at Adams Central works hard to make this happen.

### **Reading Recovery and Title 1**

In ACCS, throughout the grades, students are exposed to a strong language arts program based on Indiana State Standards. In class, through guided reading and ongoing assessment of student progress, students grow into strong readers and writers. If difficulties are found, the school provides interventions including Reading Recovery and Title 1 program.

#### **Reading Recovery**

Reading Recovery has a strong tradition of success with the lowest-achieving children. A New Zealand educator and researcher, Marie Clay, developed Reading Recovery in mid 1970s. In the United States, the program is government-funded and has been implementing in most states since 1980s. Professional development is an essential part of Reading Recovery, utilizing a three-tiered approach that includes teachers, teacher leaders, and university trainers. Professional development for all Reading Recovery professionals begins with an academic year of graduate-level study and continues in subsequent years. With the support of the teacher leader, Reading Recovery teachers develop observational skills and a series of intervention procedures tailored to meet the individual needs of struggling students.



The goal of Reading Recovery is to reduce the number of first-grade students who have extreme difficulty learning to read and write and to reduce the cost of these learners to educational systems. The pull-out program serves the lowest-achieving first graders. It is a short-term intervention of one-on-one tutoring. Individual students receive a half-hour lesson each school day for 12 to 20 weeks with a specially trained Reading Recovery teacher. As soon as students can achieve grade-level expectations and show that they can continue to work independently in the classroom, their lessons are discontinued, and new students begin individual instruction.

In Mrs. Frey's lucid instruction, I took notes of the characteristics of RR lessons. Five language components are the main instruction to be involved. They are phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, fluency instruction, vocabulary instruction and text comprehension instruction. The general procedures of each lesson are : 1. Ss Reading familiar stories 2. Ss Reading a story that was read for the first time the day before 3. Ss working with letters and/or words using magnetic letters 4. Ss writing a story based on the book being worked on 5. Ss assembling a cut-up story 6. T guiding Ss to read a new book that will be read independently the next day. All the way from step 1 to step 6, the learning environment is totally student-centered and the teacher's appropriate assistance was provided only when needed. Mrs. Frey helped students look at their learning strengths and build up language ability from that. She intervened only when students' reading or writing process broke down and withdrew her help when finding students were able to continue the task independently.



Across the United States, since 1984 when Reading Recovery began in the United States, approximately 75% of students who complete the full 12- to 20-week intervention can meet grade-level expectations in reading and writing. The few students who are still having difficulty after a complete intervention are commended for further evaluation. Recommendations may be made for future support. In ACCS, they provide Title 1 as the follow-up remedial support.

#### Title 1

What makes Reading Recovery and Title I different is that : Reading Recovery serves the lowest-achieving first graders who have difficulty in reading and writing; Title 1 serves second graders onward.

Title 1 is the nation’s oldest and largest federally funded program, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Each year the federal government provides a large amount of money to school systems across the country for students at risk of failure and living at or near poverty. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the purpose of Title 1 funding, “is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.” Schools with large concentrations of low-income students will receive supplemental funds to assist in meeting student’s educational goals. Low-income students are determined by the number of students enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program. For an entire school to qualify for Title 1 funds, at least 20% of students must enroll in the free and reduced lunch program. Title 1 students learn in small groups based on their current level of ability. Three major tests are given each year to evaluate if Title 1 students achieve the grade-level expectations.

I felt honored to be part of the Title 1 weekly meeting, participating in Title 1 teachers’ discussion. This chance gave me a glance at how Title 1 teachers work with struggling students. In Mrs. Spalding’s interview, the Title 1 Administrator, she gave me some directions of how Title 1 teachers work with students and proceed instructions in the program. Those are as follow.

#### 1. Motivating Title 1 Students

Finding ways to motivate Title 1 students can be a daunting task. Title 1 students face daily struggles just to survive. Teachers use student motivation techniques that help these students achieve success in the classroom.

## 2. Lesson Plans and Tutoring for Title 1 Students

The primary job of a teacher is to create exciting, effective lesson plans. Title 1 teachers and students connect for effective learning to occur. Teachers are available for tutoring as these sessions can lead to big gains in the classroom.

## 3. Title 1 Student Struggles and Meeting Student Needs

Title 1 students face daily struggles other students will never understand. These students struggle to survive, find food and stay out of trouble. Teachers must meet these students' needs and help them succeed in the classroom. At times, unconventional methods reach these students.

## 4. Student Documentation and Intervention of Title 1 Students

Teachers working with Title 1 students document how they meet students' needs. While, this can seem like a laborious task at times, it can prove valuable in the long run. Student documentation leads to interventions and establishing plans of action for students get back on the path to success.

The spirit of "No Child Left Behind" is clearly fulfilled in the well-organized, scientific assessment-based pull-out instructions. In order to prevent or reduce the cost of these learners to educational systems, the US government and schools altogether take a step ahead to take care of those who are encountering learning difficulties, providing as much manpower and resource as possible to meet each individual needs. The government truly carries out the goal: Ensuring that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards. Since Taiwan education has the same goal as the US education, Taiwan government should take these good thoughts and strategies into consideration. Instead of letting each city/county "fight alone" with struggling kids, I suggest these effective approaches are good examples of preparation for nationwide implementation of remedial instructions in Taiwan.

## **Classroom Observation**

Thanks to Mrs. Laurent, the elementary school principal and Mr. Pettibone, the superintendent, I had a chance to visit several teachers' classes, participating in their great activities and spending some time interviewing the teachers. Each teacher's teaching experience and their kids' outstanding performance were very impressive!!! Teachers generously shared what they were

working on and explained the motives behind each activity. Kids behaved so well that I was very comfortable walking around the campus and felt myself fitting in the big family. A variety of resources, books and teaching aids are provided to make the classrooms full of hands-on learning experience/activities, help teachers' instructions more effective and make students' exploring the world possible. Respect is the great atmosphere found between teachers and kids in the school. The interactions between the principal and kids, the superintendent and kids or between colleagues seen down the school halls are harmonious.

In Adams Central, horizontally, teachers of different subjects work closely with the classroom teachers to support grade level instruction. Vertically, the elementary teachers have strong connections with middle and high school teachers in some theme-based projects. The idea behind the strong connection is that : in some ways, the middle/high school subjects learning could be related to elementary kids' grade level concepts. So teachers of elementary and middle/high will be working together, giving the elementary kids more opportunities to be exposed to more in-depth, extended knowledge. In Mrs. Bluhm's second-grade class, I was lucky to see how high school biology concept was lucidly introduced to kids through non-fiction storytelling and hands-on activities presented by high school students. In next paragraph, a general idea about how teachers of different grades and subjects work together will be introduced.

Mrs. Isch, the high school literature teacher, worked with a high school biology teacher to have their high students, based on both their language skills and biology knowledge, write a story related to current biology class topics and make it into a picture book. The project is called "BioLit". The story book has to be understandable and easy to read. It is to be presented to elementary kids. High students were grouped into four or five. They were responsible for the story plotting, book drawing and making, storytelling, and follow-up activities designing.... In Mrs. Bluhm's second-grade class, four high students were presenting their picture book which was about environment protection. I took some notes of how those awesome high school students presented their BioLit project to second graders.

Step 1 : High school students listed and explained several steps need to be followed when making a book. This is to give second graders a general idea about how a book is come up with.

Step 2 : Introduction of the picture book called "The Dream." First, go over the cover, having second graders guess and talk about what will be seen and heard in the book. Second, vocabulary was introduced along with the meanings of each vocab.

Step 3 : One student led the book reading. The other three stood beside to maintain the class order.

Step 4 : Time for Q & A!!! To review the whole story, students prepared some multiple choice questions. They gave away lots of sweets for those who got the questions correct. Later, they have kids practice new words they learned from the picture book in their own journals.

I also had a chance to see the other group presenting their project in kindergarten. The previous steps were similar and their after-story activity was much easier. They had kids write down their names and draw as many things they could relate to the story as possible. Kids' were highly attentive to those big brothers and sisters' presentation and tried their best to work out each given

activity. This was a fantastic feedback they gave to high school students. It is really a mutual teaching and learning success.



## Culture Experience

Appreciation is expressed to the efforts of Taipei Economic & Cultural Office in Chicago, Dr. Long and Mr. Jerles for making this cultural and educational exchange successful!!! I felt honored to be part of this cultural interaction, getting to know lots of great officials and teachers. During the interactions, I came to understand how conscientious, hardworking, dedicated, creative, and energetic American teachers are. In the US education, they are proud that they seek both excellence and quality. They have strong beliefs and set high goals for education. Under each goal, they fully dedicate their passion, enthusiasm and time to it. Students are expected to be equipped with the academic and social skills necessary to reach their fullest potential in an ever changing world. This is why the US education is still in the leading place over the world.

Also, I would like to elaborate on how much Virginia and I enjoyed our homestay at Mike

and Carol's lovely home. I can hardly say thanks enough to express my deep appreciation to them. We were so blessed to have Mike and Carol as our host family. They are an absolutely wonderful couple. We have been treated very nice and been introduced to a variety of American country life. Getting along with them was just like a family. Humor, generosity, kindness, wisdom and thoughtfulness are the characteristics that impressed me the most.

Daily school visit and recreational activities were well arranged for us to have deep understandings of American education and culture. Everyday we had a "family time" when we went back home after school. We got together, having so much to talk about what we have been through that day. I never dreamt of sitting in a lovely kitchen or in a comfortable living room, playing dominoes, laughing out loud and sharing almost everything with nice American people...and this was all happening to me now! Wow!!!

We have tasted many great cuisines and watched the high school show "Clogging." We were lucky that there is a national park not far away from our house and we had a chance to go jogging in there. On weekend, we fully made the best of our time. In the morning, we went biking along a beautiful river. Then, we drove to a local movie theater to watch a good chick flick called "Waters for the elephant" in the afternoon (Mike got three points for that!!!). Right after this, we went to two Belmont high students' graduation parties. We were invited to write some Chinese words on the wall of one girl's bedroom to show our congrats. This was very interesting. On the last night, we had a wonderful dinner with the elementary school principal couple, Mr. and Mrs. Terry. We did have a lot of fun. Everyday experiences were new, special and unique to me. When I recollect those sweet time, I found it has been deeply engraved on my memory.



## Conclusion

This trip has been an amazing and beneficial experience to me. These good memories in Indiana will not be forgotten. In my opinion, sending more New City Taipei English teachers overseas for short/long time visits and cultural exchange is worthwhile and highly recommended. There are quite a few things that the US does differently than we do in Taiwan. They are good examples and references for us to think over.

First, to reduce the cost of low achievers to educational systems, the US government and

schools altogether take a step ahead to take care of those with learning difficulties, providing as much manpower and resource as possible to meet each individual needs. They have systematic, well-designed, fundamental remedial curriculum/guidelines and make them into a tradition implemented in every school. Teachers are well trained and have rich access to a variety of resources and materials. However, in Taiwan, each city/county fights alone with the struggling kids. Some suburban areas are even lack of good teachers and environment. Thus, more and serious attention should be paid to good allocation of money, teachers, environment design and systematic teaching support, i.e. professional training and resources. Systematic, carefully-designed guidelines and materials should be put forward for nationwide remedial support and implementation.

Second, in the US schools, one concept is not taught alone. They teach the concept while integrating other academic skills with the learning. Kids are given the idea of “interdisciplinary studies” in every subject learning, helping them connect what they are learning to other related perspectives or skills. This is to facilitate kids to have coherence in school learning and make them love learning and become more flexible, creative in production. This is why, as I observed, teachers of different subjects work closely with the classroom teachers to support grade level instruction in ACCS. In Taiwan, we sometimes do interdisciplinary projects but not as many as the US teachers do. We care more about how well kids perform in our class and less about their performance in other subjects learning. This does cause some problems. One of the problems is that knowledge is fragmentally passed on and not coordinated well into school system, and it will be difficult for kids to find real joy in learning as a result. The US schools give us a good example of how we can improve in curriculum design.

Third, I like the idea of “BioLit” project in ACCS. They encourage higher graders to share what they learned to lower graders, expanding those lower-grade kids broader knowledge. The project is to have high school students tell biology-related stories to K-5 kids, yet, make them into picture books. The picture books benefit both the higher and lower graders. This is a mutual teaching and learning success. In Taiwan, we encourage students to make picture books as well. However, those good picture books are usually made for the competitions and are seldom used to their fullest potential. Instead of sending bunches of kids to picture book- making competitions outside school every year, I suggest, like the idea of “interdisciplinary teaching/learning”, teachers of different subjects or grades work together to help students fully make use of their kids’ “home-made” picture books and meaningfully benefit each level of learners.

#### Reference

1. Adams Central Community School website  
<http://www.accs.k12.in.us/jets/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx>
2. Reading Recovery website  
[http://www.readingrecovery.org/reading\\_recovery/facts/index.asp](http://www.readingrecovery.org/reading_recovery/facts/index.asp)