

What a wonderful trip !

The visit to Indiana from May 09-May21,2011

By Melody Yen, Shulin Elementary School

“Teachers are the bridge that connects the past to the future”, said Dr. Long, the superintendent of Jay school corporation. For me, being an English teacher can open another window for the kids to peek through a whole new world. It is very lucky to be an English teacher in New Taipei City. The government sponsored English teachers to go to the States to experience the real English world, to explore the entirely different educational system since 2007. About 105 English teachers had benefited greatly by this program.

It’s my honor to be chosen as one of the fifteen teachers to visit Indiana this year. I want to show my great appreciation to New Taipei City government who provided this precious opportunity, to Taipei Economics and Culture Office in Chicago who coordinated between Taiwan and Iowa, to Dr. Long and Mr. Jerles who helped arranging the host families and schools, to Mrs. Nelson, my host, who made us meals and drove us everywhere, to the principals and teachers of this group, who shared everything they learned during the trip. Without their contribution, we can’t make this trip a meaningful and unforgettable one.

If you ask me what impressed me the most, what is the most eye-catching about this visit. I would say many things are unbelievable and amazing. It’s hard to pick one to express my views. Hence, I want to share what I had seen and learned by two parts---Classroom Observation and Culture Experience

Part I : Classroom Overvation

Dr. Tony Bennett, the superintendent of public instruction in Indiana, is a man of vision and eyesight. He has the ambition to lead the education in Indiana to the top of the list in the United States. The vision of Indiana Education Department is that the academic achievement and career preparation of all Indiana students will be the best in the United States and on par with the most competitive countries in the world. Along with the vision they do have plans to achieve their goals.



1. Create and promote a statewide culture of academic excellence, in which at least:

90% of students pass both Math and English/Language Arts sections of ISTEP+ and End-of-Course Assessments;

- a. **25% of all graduates receive a score of 3, 4 or 5 on at least one Advanced Placement exam, a 4 or higher on an International Baccalaureate exam, or receive the equivalent of 3 semester hours of college credit during their high school years; and**
 - b. **90% of students graduate from high school.**
2. Free Indiana schools from unnecessary regulations and eliminate other barriers to developing new and innovative structures for learning.
 3. Improve instructional quality and enhance school governance and leadership.
 4. Develop learning support systems that facilitate academic achievement and career preparation.
 5. Establish high and clear standards for success, keep score, and ensure that resulting school accountability is transparent to the public.
 6. Provide exceptional customer service while operating with optimal efficiency and aligning all available resources around student learning.

Base on the above plans, I did find some programs which have been took at school to help the students to meet the goals the state expects. **Acuity assessments** and **Chinese program** are the two projects to be talk about in the following section.

Acuity assessments

According to the Department of Education in Indiana, the purpose of the Acuity assessments is to provide diagnostic measures for grade 3-8 students in English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Assessment reports provide standards-aligned performance data, which support an educator's ability to inform instruction at the student-, class-, school-, and corporation-level. There are four types of assessments available in the online Acuity assessment system including Predictive, Standard Diagnostic, Curriculum Map-Aligned and Tailored Diagnostic.

The key components of the **Acuity** Assessment System are as follow:

- Online** Predictive/Diagnostic Indiana Standard Aligned Tests (Offline Testing via Scan/Score)
- Math, Reading, Social Studies, Science Subjects Gr. 3-8
- Online** Reports Within 48hrs! (Student, Class, School, School Corp View)
- Online** Instructional Resources (ELA/Math)
- Online** Item Banks

As I know, over 90% students of Jay County must participate acuity assessments four times per school year. It supposes to be Standard Diagnostic type. I find that Acuity Assessments are easily integrated into the classrooms. Pre-built Diagnostic Assessments give the teachers valuable information about student progress relative to the state standards and state accountability exams.

In addition, the teachers can make use of the reports to involve parents in students' learning. But one thing that I think can be improved is that the system can't reveal the questions that students failed. If the students can review all the questions on line after results gained would be much more helpful.

Somebody might worry about that Acuity Assessments would become a tool of evaluating the teachers' teaching performance. Sorry to know that Acuity is actually the practice test for the ISTEP. If the teachers use the Acuity Test, they are practicing a test that is just like ISTEP. Those teachers who do not do the Acuity usually do not score as well. ISTEP is a Statewide Test. The State is going to use it to evaluate teachers from next year. That will force all teachers to want to use Acuity to practice. They will need to use it if they want their scores to look good.

It is well known that American education has always been noted for creativity, but the focus of the education has swiftd to implementing Standardized testing which takes away the edge. Only conservatives want Standardized testing , the teachers think and opposed to most of it. But you have to do it if you are going to be an educator these days.



Chinese Program

I. Background

Dr. Long, the superintendent of Jay School Corporation, always says that the

world is shrinking very quickly and school that does not have global component really runs the risk of not preparing students for the future. In order to be on par to the most competitive countries in the world, Jay School Corporation started Chinese program which is already in its fourth year in U.S. from last school year. They hired a Chinese teacher from Confucius institute headquarter to teach at Westlawn Elementary in Jay county. I stayed at Westlawn about three days and had some discussions with the Chinese teacher. It is said that the Volunteers to Teach Chinese in the United States program is jointly organized by Hanban and the American College Board · National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). In the following section, I am going to talk about the application criteria, responsibilities, and the situation on site of the program.

II. Application criteria of Chinese teacher to USA

Based on the information of Confucius Institute headquarter, the applicants must meet the following requirements:

- a. Working teachers with a minimum of three years teaching experience at elementary and high schools, colleges, and registered private schools.
- b. The minimum qualification is a bachelor's degree in education, or in arts majoring in Chinese, English, or other foreign languages, or other relevant specialties.
- c. Have Chinese teaching qualifications.
- d. Have a good command of standard Mandarin with a certificate of Mandarin Chinese at Grade A, Class II at a minimum.
- e. Good in oral and written English.
- f. Experienced and skilled in foreign language teaching and class organization and interaction.

III. Responsibilities

Volunteers recruited must take one-month pre-departure service training in the Institute and one-week pre-teaching training in UCLA. About the responsibilities they have to take, first, they have to work 35-40hours a week like a full-time job. This includes various Chinese language teaching activities arranged by the American school.

Second, they have to devote efforts in spreading Chinese culture at the school as well as within the local community and serve as an envoy for Chinese culture.

Third, they have to get along well with students, students' parents and colleagues, and are enthusiastic in all activities run by the school and community. This should be the most important part of all. Finally, they have to return to China as scheduled.

IV. On-Site Situation

The Chinese teacher teaches at Westlawn Elementary and West Jay Middle school. She teaches 5th-8th graders, 45 minutes per day from Monday to Thursday, 9 weeks a cycle. After 9 weeks, she'll teach the other classes.

There is no text book for Chinese teaching. The teacher has to design her curriculum and have the lesson plans well-prepared. She started with giving each student Chinese name according to his/her English name just like the first class we do with our students while teaching English. Then all the lessons are centered on personal information - name, gender, family, country, body parts, horoscope, days of week, pets and so on. It's a little bit difficult to teach how to write Chinese characters and four tones in such limited times. The teacher just focuses on listening and speaking but she still gives them the hand-outs with Hanyu Pinyin on it. The students used to Hanyu Pinyin gradually and kind of can sound it out. Mostly, the teacher uses activity-based approach to instruct students to learn Chinese.

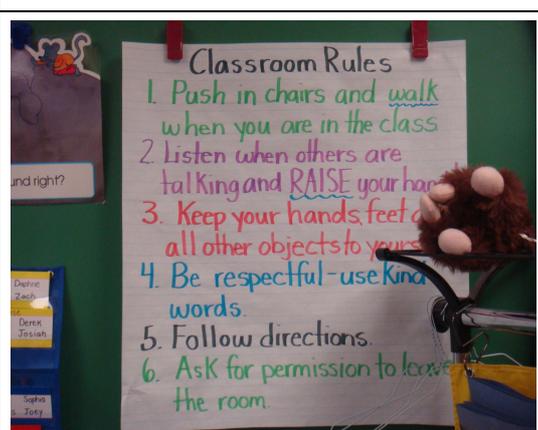
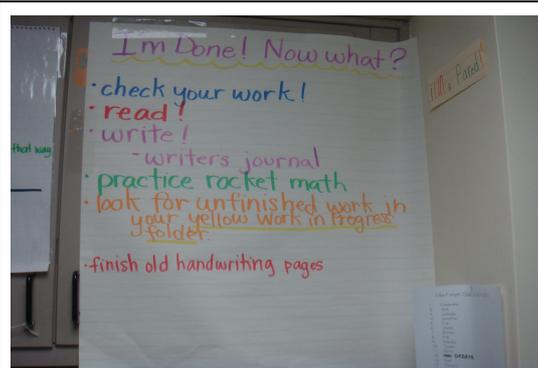
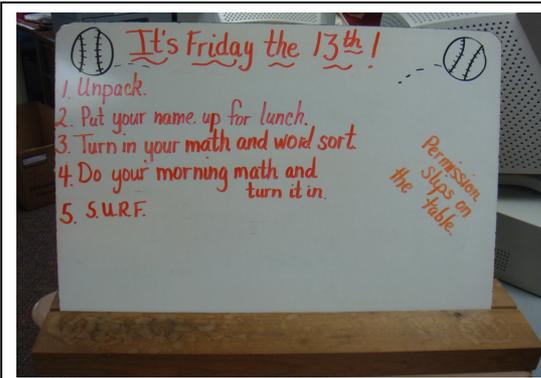
Chinese Program is an entirely new program at Westlawn Elementary. Just like Taiwan's English education at elementary school 10 years ago, the school is still testing the water and exploring the best way of teaching Mandarin. So it's still lack of systematic teaching. Moreover, the biggest problem is that the students show no interests in learning Chinese. The reason is mostly because they see no reason why they have to learn Chinese in stead of Spanish or French. Besides, the poverty line in the school is about 70%. Many kids come from unemployed family and still indebted to social welfare which results in the kids' lack of motivation to continue schooling. They believe that the country will take care of them, so they don't have to receive higher education no mention learning Chinese. Hence, how to motivate students to learn Chinese becomes a big challenge to the teacher.



General facts

According to a new passed bill, the Indiana state would require that a student who does not pass the reading portion of the third-grade ISTEP be retained unless there is good cause not to retain the student. Schools would have to provide intensive reading intervention and support to students. It is quite astonishing that they really put this policy into practice in elementary schools. And here are other general facts I observed in the classroom.

1. Well-behaved: Most of the students are self-disciplined. They show respects to teachers and classmates. They whisper when they need to discuss with their partners and they raise hands if want to ask or answer questions.
2. Same schedule every day: The education in U.S. focuses on quality in stead of quantity. They have language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies every school day which can help teachers do their teaching deep and wide.
3. Pull-out system: In order to satisfy individual needs, school might pull out the students with lower achievement and teach them at the pace they can learn.
4. Reading Recovery: Reading Recovery is a highly effective short-term intervention of one-on-one tutoring. First-grade and second-grade students who are having difficulties in learning to read and write receive a half-hour lesson per school day for 12 – 20 weeks.
5. Air-conditioned room: To study in the air-conditioned room is luxury to the students in Taiwan, but it is a must in U.S.. It provides a good learning environment especially in summer times.
6. No recesses in the morning: There are no recesses before lunch at Westlawn Elementary . Students move on from one learning to another upon teachers' request quietly and effectively. They always listen to what teachers say and follow directions.
7. Clear instruction: Teachers usually use simple and clear commands to let students know what to do next and keep them busy. In this way, students would focus on the things they have to do without distraction.
8. No laws can force students to go to school: Unlike Taiwan, it seems no laws can force students to go to school. In Taiwan ,school has to report to the Department of Education if a student runs away from school for three days while in Jay county, the principal can only persuade the students who skip classes to come to school.



Part II: Culture Experience

Host family

It's really a precious experience for me to live in an American's family. Mrs. Kathy Nelson, my host, teaches at West Jay School as a music teacher. She is nice and awesome. Whenever we asked for something, she would try to make it come true. We said that we wanted to go horse riding, we did; we said that we wanted to visit the Amish community, we did and we even said that we wanted to see a deer in her backyard. It was a pity that no deer showed up but I believe that Kathy would try to get one if she could.

During my stay at Kathy's house, I did find that different cultural backgrounds result in different life styles. In American family, the family members show respects to each other . Their relationship is close but not interfered. They show their oppinions freely and sometimes argue with each other, but parents won't oblige their kids to believe what they believe. They respect their children as a real and independent person. Another interesting situation I found is that the interaction between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is actually unlike ours in Taiwan. Daughter-in-law may feel comfortable and free chatting with others while mother-in-law is busy with dinner in the kitchen. Really different !!!



Armish People

The Armish are know for simple living, plain dress, and reluctance to adopt many convenience of morden technology. Hence most of them use candles in stead of electricity ,buggies in stead of cars and they don't take pictures because they think that photographs migh cultivate personal vanity. But Amish lifestyle differs slightly from community to community, and, within a community, from district to district. What is acceptable in one community may not be acceptable in another.

It was really great to have the chance to dine with a Armish family whose lifestyle a little bit different from my knowledge. They use electricity even facebook and they take photos. I wondered why and they told me that all the rules were set by their head pastor. If the head pastor allowed them to use electricity then they could do it as well.

Besides their plain dress(everyone dresses the same style), what impressed me the most is the large family. The family I visited has 15 kids and three grandchildren and maybe more than twenty people in total in the family. Having children, raising them, and socialization with neighbors and relatives are the greatest functions of the

Amish family. Naturally, most Amish do not practice any form of birth control and they believe large families are a blessing from God.

It is sorry to know that the Amish do not educate their children past the eighth grade, because they believe that the basic knowledge offered up to that point is sufficient to prepare one for the Amish lifestyle. The girl I met in the Amish family told me that she extremely wanted to go to high school but not allowed to. I really hope that her wish can be carried out.



Conclusion

To see is to believe!

Before I went to the States I heard a lot and wondered a lot; after came back from the States I think a lot and believe a lot. People always say that the students in the U.S. are more creative and show higher interests in learning. I were not sure about that then but now I believe it because of its sound educational system. Their government puts a lot of efforts into education which is the prime element for a country to become strong. And the teachers always work as a team to discuss the curriculum, to design activities, to talk about students' problems and to support each other while facing difficulties. Most of their parents would cooperate with the school to educate their kids. The trilateral support forms a strong base for the kids to learn and grow !