

Reflections On the Trip to Iowa

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School Visited: Crestview Elementary School, West Des Moines, Iowa, U.S.A.

I consider myself really lucky to participate in this visiting trip to Iowa, although we missed the connecting flight and had to sleep overnight on the floor in the L.A. airport. If I were given a second chance to visit schools in the U.S., I will go back to Iowa again. I miss the warmth the people we met extended to us, including my host family, the teachers and staff of the Crestview Elementary School, and the officials from the Department of Education. As normal, people are shy when meeting strangers. There is no exception to Iowans. However, from the people I met there, if you are willing to ask questions, you will find they are so eager to share and load you with a wealth of information they know and happy to offer help if you need any. This reminds me of one saying, "There are no strangers in the world, only friends to be met." If you are willing to open your arms to embrace friendship, the Iowans are more likely the friends to be met.

Not only the Iowans impressed me a lot, their education impressed me no less. It is not because their education system is new to me, or better, or any different from ours, but because they really do the right things to make their

education better, from a teacher's perspective, in a most economical and efficient way.

First of all, they have regional service agencies (so-called Area Education Agency, AEA) that provide school improvement services for students, families, teachers, and school administrators. Their services include special education support, media and technology, a variety of instructional services, professional development, and so on. In addition to these services, the AEA office building itself has a **Production/Graphic Arts Center** that provides lamination, die-cut letters and symbols, full-color posters, decodable text, and assessment materials. So, if a teacher has come up with any instructional ideas that need to use posters, flashcards, teaching props, or computer graphics, he/she only has to fill out a request form and the AEA specialists will transfer his/her ideas into real materials at a minimal cost to the teacher. Furthermore, the AEA has a library that provides **Printed resources** to support reading achievement that include young adult collections, graphic novels and special collections (e.g., book on tape/CD, high interest-low vocabulary books, book props, etc.) It also provides **Media materials** available for free loan to teachers at all grade levels to support learning in all curriculum areas. The collections include VHS videos, DVDs, video for duplication (free if you provide the tape), CD-ROM software for school purchase, and audio books. With this kind of support, the teachers and schools can save time and money to make or buy them. Being a teacher, I am really envious of this service because I do spend a lot of time in making teaching props, media, posters, flash cards, and so on, which usually makes me very exhausted everyday, not to mention the money I spent in buying teaching resource books, CDs, and story books for use in my classroom. (The AEA provide a wide range of services. What I am going to mention hereafter is also domain of their services.)

Secondly, they really take care of every student's diverse learning needs so to help all children reach their potential, no matter who is gifted or who needs special education. For those children who need special education, the AEA takes early intervention to support educational needs of young children,

birth to five years of age, and their families. According to research findings, many children are found out to be at the level of failing when they begin school. It is intended that through this effective early intervention the children's learning achievement can be altered in a better way and reduce their burden of catching up with the classroom learning after they begin school.

There are also some lowest achievers who have no learning disability but are struggling with reading to catch up with classroom teaching. To address the needs of these children, almost every school has the so-called "Reading Recovery" program set up in place. This program is carried out on one-to-one tutoring for lowest-achieving first graders. Individual students who are identified to take this program receive a half-hour individually designed lesson each school day for 12 to 20 weeks with a specially trained Reading Recovery teacher. The instruction components covered in this program include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. As soon as students can meet grade-level expectations and demonstrate that they can continue to work independently in the classroom, their lessons are discontinued, and new students begin individual instruction. However, if the students make significant progress but do not meet grade-level expectations, additional evaluation is recommended and further action (such as reading group, reading specialist) is initiated to help the students continue making progress in their classroom learning.

At Crestview, the school I visited, I actually observed how a Reading Recovery teacher, Mrs. Miller, carried out her lesson. The lesson consists of reading familiar books, reading yesterday's new book and taking a running record, working with letters and/or words using magnetic letters, writing a sentence or story, assembling a cut-up sentence or story, and reading a new book. Although we do have similar program, called Remedial Instruction, the outcomes are limited because the class is mostly consisted of at least 10 students or sometimes between 5 to 10 students. According to my experience, those who need Remedial Instruction usually have diverse learning difficulties and need individually designed lesson. Learning in small groups doesn't help them a lot. It would be more effective for them to learn

on one-to-one instruction instead of small group instruction. Besides, the teachers must be well trained or very experienced in the teaching of the special areas the students have problems with. Therefore, I was quite marveled at this one-to-one instruction from “Reading Recovery” program and I do believe it is most effective for the lowest achievers. Compared with the rich educational resources Iowa provides for their students, I find out we are so poor to help our children struggling with learning. If we are to make our education better, I do hope we can invest more resources in the near future for our education to those disadvantaged students. When our education system is ready to adopt the “Reading Recovery” program, I would recommend to start with the “Mandarin” class. According to research findings, being fluent in the first language is the key success for every student in his/her academic performance. Many students fail because they have reading difficulty in their first language.

For those students who are far ahead of their peers and identified as gifted and talented, the AEA also provides appropriately differentiated curriculum that allows them to make choices concerning the content, process and product of their learning. It is called Extended Learning. At elementary school level, when students are in grade K to grade 3 levels, enrichment activities will be provided to all students as well as small groups. But, there will be an Extended Learning teacher who works closely with the classroom teachers to target and challenge talented and gifted students with some individualized lessons. For students in grade 4 to 6, the Extended Learning students are pulled out their regular classes and meet for two to two and a half hours per week with their Extended Learning teacher for enrichment learning. For students in grade 7 to 12, the Extended Learning classes meet every other day.

The third thing the Iowa education impressed me is their dedication to Character education. At Crestview, the entire staff is dedicated to teaching students about the Six Pillars of Characters, which are:

TRUSTWORTHINESS

- Be honest - don't deceive, cheat or steal

- Be reliable-do what you say you'll do
- Have the courage to do the right thing
- Build a good reputation
- Be loyal-stand by your family, friends and country

RESPECT

- Each of us has a role in creating a respectful climate.
- Treat others with respect; follow the Golden Rule
- Be tolerant of differences
- Use good manners, not bad language
- Be considerate of the feelings of others
- Don't threaten, hit or hurt anyone
- Deal peacefully with anger, insults and disagreements

RESPONSIBILITY

- Do what you are supposed to do
- Persevere; keep on trying!
- Always do your best
- Use self-control
- Be self-disciplined
- Think before you act-consider the consequences
- Be accountable for your choices

FAIRNESS

- Play by the rules
- Take turns and share
- Be open-minded; listen to others
- Don't take advantage of others
- Don't blame others carelessly

CARING

- Be kind
- Be compassionate and show you care
- Express gratitude
- Forgive others
- Help people in need

CITIZENSHIP

- Do your share to make your school and community better

- Cooperate
- Stay informed; vote
- Be a good neighbor
- Obey laws and rules
- Respect authority
- Protect the environment
- Recycle

These characters are taught throughout the day not only in classrooms, but also the lunchroom, the hallway, the library, the school bus, and on the playground. In those places, the expected behaviors will be translated differently so students understand to behave properly in different places. For example, in the library, the students' behaviors in terms of the Six Pillars will be interpreted as follows:

TRUSTWORTHINESS

- Be trustworthy by returning what you check out by the due day

RESPECT

- Respect the books, computers, and furniture in the library
- Treat the books, computers, and furniture with care
- Use quiet voices and pass in a single file line

RESPONSIBILITY

- Be responsible by using shelf markers for books on the shelf and putting them back in their correct places

FAIRNESS

- Be fair by walking by quietly when another class is in the library
- Take turns using the computers in the library

CARING

- Be caring by using good manners, waiting patiently and quietly at the circulation desk and helping others

CITIZENSHIP

- Be a good citizen by picking up after yourself and others
- Recycle printer paper
- Print only 1 copy to the printer
- Put materials back in their proper place

When students' behavior does not follow what a good character should be, they will be issued a rule slip that is related back to one of the Six Pillars and asked to verbalize what they do wrong and write a plan to improve their behavior.

In every Iowa school I had visited, the students in the classes we observed all behaved well working on the assignments individually or as a group. (This is different from what we have in our classes.) I think the character education does count to make them aware of proper behaviors in class. But, this might be partly true as the schools we visited must have been highly selected in its district. The social and economic background of their students and their family education is probably another reason that contributes to the way students know how to behave properly. Early, system-wide, and long-term education in character is also key reason to build students with good characters. From a teacher's perspective, I believe that quality education happens only in a class where students know what to behave appropriately in class. In Taiwan, I remembered we used to have nation-wide character education in every school at our young age. However, most schools don't emphasize it any more nowadays. Though it was considered kind of dogmatic, I do appreciate the existence of its values. I strongly recommend that we should regain our character education back into our education system.

To provide quality education is also closely related to the mechanism in evaluating teachers and then providing teachers with professional development training. In Iowa, it is the belief that improving students' learning begins with improving teachers' teaching.

In terms of professional development, the AEA provides many services and forms of assistance to schools and teachers, which include:

- Individual educator growth (such as human growth, classroom management, instruction planning and strategies, curriculum organization, methods of teaching

- Mandated or required training
- Organizational growth
- Mentoring and induction
- Leadership development
- Curriculum development
- Assessment
- Social and emotional development
- Others

The professional development is closely tied to the Teacher Evaluation System. There are 3 types of evaluations, Beginning Teacher Evaluation, Career Teacher Evaluation, and Intensive Assistance Plan. In every aspect of this evaluation system, teacher must demonstrate they meet the teaching standards that are:

1. Demonstrates ability to enhance academic performance and support for and implementation of the school or the school district's student achievement goals.
2. Demonstrates competence in content knowledge appropriate to the teaching position.
3. Demonstrates competence in planning and preparing for instruction.
4. Uses strategies to deliver instruction that meets the multiple learning needs of students.
5. Uses a variety of methods to monitor student learning.
6. Demonstrates competence in classroom management.
7. Engages in professional growth.
8. Fulfills professional responsibilities established by the school district.

For beginning teachers, the first 2 years is a probation period. Each of them will be assigned a mentor. The Evaluation is based on their involvement in the following activities:

- Participate in visitations of mentor's and other teachers' classroom
- Receive assistance and support from the mentor
- Receive feedback from district site coordinator's classroom visitations
- Keep a portfolio
- Complete the comprehensive evaluation
- Provide documentation for meeting Iowa teaching standards and criteria and for licensure recommendation
- Participate in required professional development activities

If new teachers meet all the requirements, they get a standard license and become career teachers. The career teachers will be evaluated focusing on continuous implementation of Iowa teaching standards and on their professional development plan and growth. If career teachers fail to meet any of the Iowa teaching standards, they will be put on Intensive Assistance Plan. This plan is to provide support and guide the career teachers who are in need of specific professional assistance in meeting the expectations set forth in Iowa teaching standards. It is a structured process for supporting and directing needed help and to provide highest likelihood for professional improvement. Because of the personal nature of this plan, confidentiality is expected of all participants.

I am concluding my report here.

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