

China...Dr. James Fitzpatrick, Superintendent of Schools

In an effort to advance inner-cultural competency a number of superintendents from Wisconsin and the US participated in an exchange program with Chinese school leaders last school year. My colleagues described this trip as life changing event for them—just a magnificent experience! They were able to see the advances China is making while contrasting the differences in culture and education.

Thomas Freeman alerted the world in his 2006 best seller *The World is Flat* of the emergence of China as it has moved toward modernization. Always thought of as a sleeping giant, China educates 250 million students. According to the US Department of Education we educate 55.2 million students in public and private schools. That gives you a proportional perspective of just how massive China is per population.

Chinese students are *driven*. They typically go to school from 7 AM to 5 PM each day at the elementary level. The high school day is even longer beginning at 6 AM. They attend school year round including Saturday's and half days on Sundays. Chinese students typically learn three other languages. All are required to master English and most also learn Japanese and Spanish.

It is not unusual for a school in China to have 5,000 students along with large class sizes. The competition to get into good middle schools and high schools is very stressful. Sixty-five percent get into the best high schools based on examination scores. Since the most competitive middle schools and high schools are located in the more populated cities or towns, anywhere from thirty to sixty percent of the students are boarders. Compulsory education is required through grade 9. Students not testing well enough to be admitted to a competitive middle or high school remain in their province schools or drop out after 9th grade.

None of the superintendents when asked had observed any co-curricular activities. If kids are exceptional in certain sports they are identified early and attend special schools or are tutored by a teacher who can flexibly allow them to train for hours a day. The Superintendents saw no signs of special education programs, and in-fact were stunned to see handicapped signs actually stating directions for the “deformed.”

The superintendents toured schools where they noticed a variance in the facilities. In the slides one could see the desired schools were very well equipped with modern technology. Other schools were not quite as nice and immigrant schools were in deplorable condition and poorly equipped giving the audience viewing the slides a perception of “the other side of the tracks.”

A question that was never asked was whether all student test scores of Chinese schools are recorded for the global comparisons frequently published or just those fortunate enough to test into the competitive middle and high schools? I had to chuckle when I learned they do not turn the heat on until it is below forty degrees. In America we might have a mild riot on our hands if that were the case.

Another interesting observation made to superintendents by Chinese high school students was that *they all wanted to come to the United States!* In America they see opportunities for university experiences and greater happiness. Conversely critics of American Public Education often bemoan how American kids fall short on international exams compared with Pacific rim peers. So what is it that these Chinese students hunger for in wanting to come to America?

Any comparison of schools globally, absent of knowing who gets taught and what opportunities are offered to help shape the academic and personal development of a student needs to be viewed very carefully. Are there lessons to learn from China and its educational system—most definitely! But would we to emulate this system -I don't think so.

US public schools certainly have no shortage of challenges. Furthermore, our need to continuously strive to get better must be a relentless pursuit. For as fast as the world is changing, so too, we must change! Schools are often chastised for not changing fast enough, yet when I look at the technology and delivery of instruction of courses now, compared with five years ago, things are quite different. What once was thought to be years away is now months away per technology and its impact on instruction and operations in our schools.

In closing Dean Gorrell, Superintendent in Verona Wisconsin and part of the delegation traveling to China had one word to describe his feelings about American Public Schools compared with China. That word was GRATITUDE.

We need to take bold but we also need to be careful in the steps we take to transform ourselves in preparing students for the future. In addition, all transformation should encompass the needs of all learners!