**US Education Federation Trip to China**

The US Education Federation is an organization that arranges an educational trip to China for American educators and administrators. Thanks to the opportunity presented to us by our administrator, Jason Rose, and a parent at our school, Robert Hao, we were invited to attend this 10 day trip to China during our Spring Break. We were asked to teach S.T.E.A.M. lessons to different age groups, visit public and private schools, and share our teaching experience and strategies, specifically in S.T.E.A.M., with Chinese teachers and administrators. The two of us went on this trip along with 12 other educators, administrators, and family members, mostly from private schools in Southern California. Thanks to this program and the grant awarded to us by the TCEA Grant Committee, which paid for our $500 travel fee and $140 visa fee, our flights, food, hotels, and other travel expenses were completely paid for. The grant committee also worked with the district office to permit us to use 3 school/district business days for our trip. The trip was a wonderful opportunity for us to observe Chinese classrooms and schools and to share what American education is like.

Within the ten days that we were in China, we were afforded the opportunity to visit ten different schools in three cities across China (Beijing, Xinyang, and Changsha). The schools we visited came from varying backgrounds and philosophies (private, public, boarding, progressive, and traditional), but regardless of their differences, we were always received with a warm welcome and treated with such respect. We often felt like celebrities during our school visits! Both students and educators were excited to share their work and ideas with us and it was fascinating to hear their perspectives on education and how much the students valued and appreciated the education they were receiving. Additionally, they were curious to hear about what school and life was like in America and were amazed that traditionally, elementary educators taught all subject areas as opposed to just one. During our school visits, we had a chance to introduce what S.T.E.A.M stood for, what it looked like in the classroom, and taught S.T.EA.M lessons to 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 8th graders. Aside from the educational exchange, as a group we had a chance to explore a bit of China and learned about its rich culture and history. Some highlights included the Great Wall of China, The Forbidden City, night markets, visiting tea mountains and picking our own tea, and trying out local delicacies.

Considering a large portion of our student population is Asian American, specifically Chinese American, we expected to gain an understanding of parents’ mindsets of U.S. education. After visiting the schools and speaking with educators, students, and parents, we’ve gained an insight into Chinese educational values. It was interesting and surprising to see students take control of their learning, especially in the upper grades where they must take initiative to research, apply, and succeed in prestigious middle and high schools. To our surprise, the parents’ roles were much more hands-off than we expected. The pressure to do well did not come from the schools nor the parents, but rather on the students themselves. For example, at one of the private boarding schools that served students in grades 7-9, a student shared that her day primarily consisted of going to class and studying. During the small amount of free time she had, she chose to spend it reading, doing art, and hanging out with her friends. While this may not be be the preference of American students, this particular student and her classmates felt very fortunate and appreciative of the opportunities afforded to her. While one might feel sad for their long school days and lack of free time, the students seemed genuinely happy to be where they were.

Finally, the most heart-warming and eye opening take-away from our trip was that regardless of the school or its educational philosophy, each school encouraged students’ individuality, creativity, and to voice their opinions. They were not trying to conform students to fit one mold, but rather to challenge them to find their passions and pursue them with vigor and determination. This contributed to students’ appreciation for the education they were receiving, their zest for learning, and their overall happiness.

While it required flexibility and adaptability to changing schedules and long hours, this trip was certainly a worthwhile experience for educators. If you are interested in this opportunity, which occurs twice a year, please contact one of us and we’d be happy to share our experience with you more in-depth.

*Janelle Futa, 3rd Grade Teacher*

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