

**Minnesota educators learn from, share ideas with Chinese
by Dr. Debra Bowers, Superintendent, St. Louis Park Public Schools**

As the world becomes smaller and “flatter,” it is increasingly more important to prepare students to become responsible world citizens and compete in a global economy. That’s one reason I pursued the opportunity to join the Minnesota Trade Mission to China last month to learn all I could about the Chinese and their educational system. The trip was coordinated by the Minnesota Trade Office to increase trade with China, an emerging economic powerhouse where capitalism is taking root.

Superintendents Melissa Krull of Eden Prairie Schools, Kathy Leedom of Wilmar Public Schools, and I toured schools in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong as part of the education delegation, led by University of Minnesota President Robert Bruininks.

The staff and students in those schools welcomed us warmly. They are proud of their schools, and were eager to teach us about their educational system. In China, English instruction begins in grade three, and it is the main foreign language offered in the curriculum where emphasis on math is very strong. Compulsory education goes through grade nine.

Exams are used to sort and channel students early in their academic experience. They are only given one chance, whereas American students have multiple opportunities and pathways to achieve academic success. Learning in China centers around rote memory, but there is a new emphasis on developing more creative and critical thinking skills.

As we learned about Chinese culture and education, we began to see ways that a K-16 collaborative effort to create interest in Chinese culture and language instruction here in Minnesota would help position Minnesota as an economic player in China.

We heard clearly that there is a need to have a greater number of Minnesotans who speak Chinese. Understanding Chinese culture and building solid relationships is also fundamental to successful trade with China.

As a result, we are working with higher education leaders and the officials at the State level to develop a pilot program to incorporate Chinese learning into the educational experience in St. Louis Park, Eden Prairie and Wilmar. We’re exploring how we could add interactive Chinese educational components to our enrichment summer school offerings.

We’re looking into increasing the focus on Chinese culture in social studies classes, and introducing Chinese language sampler classes at the junior high or middle school level, then following that up by offering Chinese language as an elective in high school. Our Community Education departments could support K-12 learning and extend the reach to learners of all ages through language and culture enrichment classes. We are also investigating initiating student and teacher exchange programs.

Our partnerships with higher education will help connect us to Chinese teachers and students eager to share their culture and language to benefit Minnesotans. In turn, we can help Chinese educators learn new ways to teach engaging curriculum, reaching

beyond the traditional Chinese model of wrote learning. As we forge relationships, we will create more collaborative efforts in the future and open opportunities to train Chinese teachers in our educational system.

We traveled across the world and immersed ourselves in an exciting and different culture, but the truth remains that people are people wherever you go. We are all interrelated. I have developed a greater appreciation for interdependency as a way to raise the global standard of living and increase our knowledge by learning from each other.

I'm looking forward to developing new ways to prepare our students to achieve success in a global economy.