

News

Anoka-Hennepin superintendent travels to China with large education delegation

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While China has been named Minnesota's third largest export partner, a group of 15 state educators recently exchanged teaching practices instead of products.

Anoka-Hennepin School District 11 Superintendent Roger Giroux was part of the Minnesota Education Delegation, a group focused on increasing Mandarin Chinese in the state's curriculum. While overseas, educators compared teaching methods.

The group, led by Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner Alice Seagren, visited China's capital Beijing, and mid-sized Xi'an, located just southwest of Beijing.

The University of Minnesota's China Center, which helped coordinate the exchange, is interested in promoting Mandarin Chinese in the state's K-12 education system.

The people who went on the trip can bring the language into their school district, said Joan Brzezinski, the center's Assistant Director

Chinese children are learning English at an early age, and Giroux said one of his first impressions is the country has made it a priority to speak English.

"I don't know if we can mirror what is being done in the Chinese education system," Brzezinski said. "They start English in third grade."

She said starting Chinese early is key. The earlier any foreign language is taught, the faster and easier it is acquired.

Chinese is more difficult and takes four times as long to achieve the same efficiency as other languages, she said.

"There is a place for Chinese language and culture in our schools," Giroux added. "But it requires a curriculum."

Once the language curriculum is created, Seagren said Minnesota won't have enough Chinese language teachers. The trip also helped establish exchanges so teachers can come to Minnesota and Americans can go to China.

Economic bridges

Brzezinski said Minnesota is a unique place with its relationship with China. The Minnesota business community is very engaged in China.

Minnesota exports to China grew by 71 percent between 2004 and 2005, resulting in almost \$1.2 billion in sales, according to a Minnesota Trade Office annual report.

Having students learn Chinese for here recognizes that relationship and involves them with cultural and business exchanges, Brzezinski said.

Students need to be more open to other cultures and need to learn them; they aren't going to be able to avoid other cultures, according to Giroux.

In order to compete and be successful, America has to learn new things and new ways to remain viable, he said.

Students need to be taught to learn, create and solve problems at a high level. Cultures like China are embracing core skills in the arts, math, science, technology and communication, Giroux said.

Best of the best

China educates a 10th of its population and still has 130 million people who are the best and brightest, Seagren said. The total United States population isn't even 300 million.

While China is educating only its top achievers, the American education system educates all children and China is struggling with that, she said.

"They want to educate everyone, but they also know they can throw away many," Seagren said. "There are so many children they don't have to educate everyone. That's why it's so competitive."

Children are tested in ninth grade in order to advance to high school, and again before going to a university. They need very high scores and the tests often eliminate job opportunities that American students take for granted, she said.

"Not everyone moves on and they don't get a second chance. It's a massive system that uses a sifting process to continuously identify the best students," Giroux said. "They're taking the best students through the best education systems to produce leaders."

If the country does educate more of its population, it will have more people to compete in the global market place, Seagren said

"It's important to anticipate the future and what it could mean to jobs and the future stability of our county," she said.

Give and take

Seagren said Chinese teachers admit their system isn't a healthy way to educate because it puts a lot of stress on the children to achieve.

She said China is looking to take some teaching methods from American schools to make their rigorous education system more child-friendly.

The Chinese want to help Minnesota teach Mandarin Chinese in schools, but also seek the creativity and problem solving used in American classrooms, Giroux said

American schools also teach their children to be more creative and problem solvers, rather

than relying on rote memory to learn, Seagren said.

"Their kids are taught to do something and repeat it. Our kids are taught skills and then told to create," she said.

While China is taking notes on the American system, the delegation was taking notes during their visit as well.

Seagren said if Minnesota is going to increase expectations for its kids, more time is needed to learn. Chinese schools have a longer school day and academic year.

"We may not need the same intensity as we observed in China," she said. "But students do need more time to learn all the information we expect."

It's important for Minnesotans to think about what its education priorities are and evaluate if the schools are meeting those priorities, Brzezinski said.

China has a very strong idea about foreign languages and academic competitiveness. Educators are trying to carefully identify what the West is doing right and adopting those policies, but also looking at where we fail and making improvements, she said.

Delegation members

The Minnesota Education Delegation has scheduled an Aug. 9 reunion to discuss how to integrate the Chinese language and positive teaching methods observed during their week in China.

Members of the group included: Alice Seagren, Minnesota Department of Education commissioner; Bernice Ambers, Decar Manor Middle School principal; Kevin Borg, Westonka School District superintendent; Joan Bzeinski, University of Minnesota China Center assistant director; John Currie, Rosemount School District superintendent; Roger Giroux, Anoka-Hennepin School District superintendent; Bob Laney, St. Louis Park High School principal; Lawrence Leebens, Eden Prairie School District executive director for educational services; Elizabeth Leuth, Yinghua Academy director; Bruce McLean, St. Louis Park School District international baccalaureate coordinator; Linda Nelson, South High School principal; Craig Paul, Wayzata High School principal; Patricia Phillips, North St. Paul/Oakdale superintendent; Ursina Swanson, Park Spanish Immersion principal; and Michael VanKeulen, Yinghua Academy board member.

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