

DiPietro takes Chinese lesson

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COVENTRY — No amount of reading or study of the Chinese culture could have prepared Superintendent Kenneth DiPietro for his immersion experience in their education system this April, he said.

With a population of 1.3 billion, the size of the education system in China is roughly the same size as America's entire population. But whether in a rural school or a modern urban classroom, he recognized that the children there were very similar to American children, DiPietro said.

For the past year DiPietro, along with educators from Narragansett, Jamestown, Coventry and Pawtucket, have been preparing for the trip by learning the language, the cultural expectations and the history.

As part of a seven-day survey of the Chinese education system organized and funded in part through the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association, DiPietro took personal vacation time to travel throughout Beijing and Shanghai from April 14 through 20. The association contributed funds from donations. The trip was also funded



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by the Freeman Foundation, a private philanthropic organization, he said. The remainder of the trip was paid for out-of-pocket by the participants.

Walking through the streets of Shanghai, the sheer numbers of people overwhelmed him, DiPietro said. "Being engaged in such a huge population took my breath away," he recalled.

Going to the Macy Thanksgiving Day Parade with his family is the only similar experience he has ever had, DiPietro said. But this wasn't a special occasion; this was every day in a vast city.

It was experiencing the place, the culture, history, markets and people that made him realize "that you can't go to China and just sit in the schools for a week and say that you understand it," he said. "Here in America we say that we want no child left behind, we have certain educational standards. But if the size of the population that they have to educate is the size of America, how can you hold them to an American standard?"

The majority of his time in China was spent at the Beijing National Day School, which is similar to a charter school here. It receives provincial funding but no national funding, DiPietro said.

With 95 percent of graduates going on to universities, everyone wants their child to go there, DiPietro said. "There are 5,000 students, 2,000 of which live in dorms, 200 teachers living on campus and the students take nine 45-minute classes every day."

While at the school, DiPietro spoke with the teachers, the directors, and addressed the student body. One of the educators he met described the Chinese education system as in a state of imbalance.

Historically, one national assessment at the end of high school has determined who will go to college, DiPietro explained. Education has been based on lectures and the student's job is to listen and to memorize. Academic

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success is a measure of a family's success, so with only one child per family, each family has only one chance in each generation to rise to a higher place in society.

In the last 20 to 30 years, the Chinese government has been changing their education program, making grades k-12 open to anyone, and now as China becomes part of the global economy the Chinese are rethinking their approach to education.

"China is now awakened to the global marketplace and they don't know who their bright and shining stars are going to be," DiPietro said.

"They [are interested in

American education] because they want to expand the choices they offer their students and add a variety of application and teaching styles."

While the education system is not ready to give up lectures or the national assessment test, DiPietro said, they are trying to reduce the pressure of that one test and cultivate an interest in education in their students.

The differences between the educational system in America and China came out in meetings with educators, DiPietro said, but it came out most strongly when he met with students from the Beijing National Day School.

He sat down with a group

of students who had applied to American universities and was discussing the application process, DiPietro said, when the topic of rejection letters came up.

"These students are culturally ingrained to meet expectations, so if they are rejected from a college that is a reason for shame," he said.

"I told them they should write back to a university if they didn't get accepted and say 'I think you made a mistake, I'm prepared to succeed at your school, you want to accept me,'" DiPietro recalled. When he said this the students were shocked, "we couldn't do that," they told him.

Later in the week, when

DiPietro had a free afternoon, the students asked to meet with him again.

"I went in the room and none of them were saying anything, so I asked them who had called this meeting. One very quiet girl raised her hand," DiPietro said. Then the students began to ask him questions about whether or not he thought students should be allowed to date or to have student clubs to explore their interests.

"But even when I said that I thought they should, they would go back and say, 'but then I wouldn't have time to study for the national assessment.'"

These students represented the state of imbalance in Chinese education, DiPietro said, they see the rest of the world, "and they want to be global and international. They want to date and have student clubs like America and Europe. But they don't know how to balance that with all the cultural expectations."

As an educator, DiPietro

was most eager to learn about the class preparation methods in China, he said. Most teachers there teach two to three hours a day and spend the rest of their time preparing lectures, correcting tests, and meeting with students and parents.

"So I wanted to know how these teachers make productive use of their preparation time and if the result of that work is superior to [the American model]."

In the Coventry School District, teachers prepare to teach about four to five classes, daily, and only have an hour of preparation time. But most teachers here spend several hours preparing at night at home outside of the workday.

"The difference is that China allows more time within the workday to prepare — but all of them teach from the board, all of them perfect their lectures," DiPietro said.

"Here, our teachers are always developing new methods to engage their group, in-

corporating hands-on activities or a Socratic dialogue."

The emphasis in China is not about engaging the students, it is about the students applying themselves to learn what the teacher presents, DiPietro said.

But even if that method is not something that he will bring back to classrooms in Coventry, he cannot judge the Chinese education system as an outsider. "You really don't get the idea of why school is the way it is in until you go there," he said.

The week in China was unforgettable, DiPietro said. Some of his myths about their education system were dispelled and he learned more about their culture than he ever would have from study.

Modern day China is urban and up-to-date, and full, he said. "The skyscrapers are not for businesses but for housing. They have the newest of the newest technology and their economy is growing quickly. The whole world markets to China."