



美国第一州学生踏出学中文第一步 (Translation: First State students take first steps to learn Chinese)

By Larry Nagengast

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“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” the familiar Chinese proverb reads.

To see the proverb at work, visit Alexis I. du Pont High School or the Conrad Schools of Science, both in the [Red Clay Consolidated School District](#).

At Alexis I. du Pont, teacher Zhang Jie, known to her faculty colleagues and friends as “Jessie,” has already journeyed a thousand miles and then some — nearly 7,000 miles from Anyang, an ancient Chinese capital — to help 34 students take their first baby steps in learning a new language, Chinese.

The words are basic – the names of family members, the rooms of a house, counting from one to ten. The sentence structure is equally simple: “I love my mother” and “I don’t have two cats,” for example.

Using handmade flash cards and lots of pictures, encouraging students to work in groups and putting a strong emphasis on conversation, Zhang aims to give her class a strong foundation for building their language skills.

So far, the students are taking to it well.

“It’s pretty much the same as learning any other language,” said junior Zack Bielecki.

The difference between the 26-letter alphabet and the more than 10,000 characters used in the Chinese Mandarin dialect hasn’t been a problem for junior Aaron Schwartz, at least not yet. “Actually, I kind of like it a little better. One symbol usually means one word and I’m good at memorizing,” he said.

The students taking Chinese at A.I. du Pont believe the language could be an important part of their futures, even if they’re not sure what their futures might be.

“A lot of people speak Chinese,” said Vierka Sieova, an exchange student from Slovakia. (About one-fifth of the world’s population speaks Chinese as their native language.)

The program at Alexis I. du Pont and Conrad is called a “Confucius Classroom,” an initiative developed by a Chinese nonprofit organization called [Hanban](#) (its full name is the Chinese Language Council International), whose missions include promoting the use of the Chinese language internationally and promoting the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language in schools all over the world. By the end of 2010, 369 Confucius Classrooms had been established in 96 nations.

According to Gregory Fulkerson, education associate for world languages and international education at the state Department of Education, the Confucius Classrooms found a home in U.S. schools through a partnership between Hanban and the College Board, which has created a [Chinese Language and Culture Initiatives](#) program to support the growth of studies in Chinese language and culture. The program has already placed more than 450 Chinese teachers in U.S. schools.

While on an economic development trip to China in November 2010, Gov. Jack Markell signed a memorandum of understanding with Hanban that would pave the way for Chinese teachers to come to Delaware.

Soon after that, Red Clay officials began considering adding a second foreign language to Conrad’s course offerings and Conrad Principal Mark T. Pruitt Jr. expressed an interest in Chinese. Fulkerson told Pruitt that he could apply through the College Board for the Confucius Classroom program. Pruitt shared that information with other Red Clay administrators, and both he and Alexis I. du Pont Principal Kevin Palladinetti filled out the Hanban grant applications.

Hanban “provides a substantial part of the teachers’ salaries, tons of resources, and a startup fund for the schools to buy textbooks.” School districts are responsible for providing housing and transportation for the teachers and the state is contributing a small supplement to bring the teachers’ salaries up to what a Delaware teacher with comparable experience would earn, Fulkerson said. Families that live near the schools where the teachers are assigned have volunteered to house the teachers for the year, a Red Clay spokesman said.

Delaware has a three-year agreement with Hanban, with two additional teachers arriving for the 2012-13 school year and two more for 2014-15, Fulkerson said. The teachers are hired for a year at a time, but their visas allow them to stay in the United States for three years. “We hope they stay for three years if everybody is happy on both sides,” Fulkerson said.

For Chinese teachers like Zhang and Jiuping Wang, her counterpart at Conrad, the program presents new challenges and offers great potential benefits.

The most significant of those challenges is to adapt her teaching style and develop lesson plans that will keep American students engaged. “In China, my main job is to give a lecture. I do not do any activities for the kids,” Zhang said. “Here I have to think of many activities so they learn, so they do not feel it is boring.”

To ease the transition to the American school model, Hanban provided four weeks of training in Beijing and the College Board provided two more weeks of instruction at UCLA during the summer, Wang said. “Conrad assigned the best academic mentor to help me,” she added.

Having the opportunity “to borrow from the good American methodology of teaching” and to “learn real authentic English and to experience American culture” are among the reasons Zhang said she wanted to come to the United States. This will make her a better teacher when she returns to China, she said.

Wang, a Chinese university teacher who received a scholarship to study for a master’s degree in U.S. History at Indiana State University, said she joined the exchange program to “return the kindheartedness and generosity of American people.” Working with American students, who she says are “more active in class, more relaxed” than Chinese youth, “will not only enrich my teaching style but also transform my mindset in understanding the American philosophy of education,” Wang said.

Zhang’s use of flash cards, exercises that match words with pictures and breaking her class into small groups in friendly competitions to see which group makes fewer mistakes show that she has already captured the essence of the American teaching style. Even so, student Schwartz said her classroom management is “a little stricter, more controlled” than other teachers at the school. “I like it,” he said.

In addition to their work at Alexis I. du Pont and Conrad, Zhang and Wang are helping launch a Chinese language initiative for students at the [MOT Charter School](#) and [Dover Air Force Base Middle School](#), Fulkerson said. Both schools are using an online introductory Chinese class taught by a Delaware-certified teacher who is based in New York, he said. Zhang and Wang serve as “conversation coaches” for the two schools, using a video-enhanced internet telephone connection to meet with the classes for three sessions each week.

Zhang, who works with four students at the Dover school, described them as “very intelligent, clever and cute.” The 30-minute sessions are short but “very focused, efficient and our conversation usually goes on very well,” she said

At Conrad and A.I. du Pont, both principals hope their Chinese language programs will grow.

Pruitt hopes Chinese will remain a regular component of Conrad’s world languages offerings.

Palladinetti hopes to grow the Chinese program so that it can be integrated to some extent with his school’s business curriculum to give them a better understanding of world trade and international relations. “It’s one thing to talk about world markets, it’s another to show them through the Chinese language how this all works,” he said.

“This is a wonderful experience,” Wang said.

And, as A.I. du Pont student Schwartz pointed out, “having Mandarin on your resume doesn’t look too bad.”



Why teaching Chinese is a priority in Delaware

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Adding Chinese language instruction at a handful of Delaware public schools isn't merely an effort to beef up the curriculum. It's also part of the state's economic development strategy.

"Language learning plays a role in being economically competitive and can have an impact on Delaware's economic competitiveness in the world," said Gregory Fulkerson, education associate for world languages at the state Department of Education.

Delaware has been accelerating its trade relationships with China. Delaware exporters shipped \$361 million in goods to China last year, up 21 percent from 2009 and up 217 percent from 2005, said Felicia Pullam, communications officer for Gov. Jack Markell.

In addition to increasing its exports to China, Delaware is to convince Chinese investors to do business here, Pullam said.

Chinese business leaders "have seen how difficult it is for international companies to learn how to operate in the Chinese market," so they realize they could face similar challenges in setting up shop overseas, she said. "They're looking for locations where people will help them understand what the market will be like, how to engage the community, what the expectations of government will be."

In that respect, she said, Delaware's ability to bring government and business leaders to the table, so important in attracting businesses to relocate from other states, should be an advantage in attracting Chinese business as well.

If Delaware's students develop a greater knowledge of Chinese language, business and culture, that helps "make sure that Delaware students are able to compete in the world" and could also benefit the state as it builds new links to Chinese business and government, Pullam said.

"Adding Chinese as a language option exposes students to a part of the world that they may not have thought about, but it's a part of the world that's increasingly important to our economic success," Pullam said.

Fulkerson, whose position involves developing links between Delaware schools and those in other countries, pointed out the Chinese are working even harder to develop similar linkages. “We talk about it. The Chinese are doing it,” he said.

“The Chinese want their kids to be learning English at very high levels, and they want it now,” he said. “We [the United States] need to shape up. The Chinese are learning English whether we help them or not. If we’re smart, we do it together.”

As a step toward working together, Fulkerson, three other Department of Education officials and five representatives of the Red Clay Consolidated School District, including the principals of Alexis I. du Pont High School and Conrad Schools of Science, recently spent eight days in China on a [trip](#) sponsored by [Hanban](#) and the College Board. Mark T. Pruitt Jr., the Conrad principal, said he found “far more similarities than differences” between Chinese and American schools, but some of those differences are quite significant.

Class sizes in China are much larger — with as many as 60 students in a chemistry class — and so are the school buildings, with one high school he visited serving about 5,000 students, Pruitt said.

In that setting, there’s not much in the way of small-group instruction, Fulkerson said. “In Chinese classrooms, a small group is 10.”

With numbers so large, there’s a big difference between China and the United States when the bell rings to signal the end of class. Here, the students move; in China, the students stay put, and the teachers move from room to room, Pruitt said.

Kevin Palladinetti, the Alexis I. du Pont principal, said American teachers are more dynamic than those he observed in China, but teachers, and perhaps the education system as a whole, are held in higher esteem in China. “When Chinese students talk about their teachers, they speak with a kind of reverence that is oftentimes overlooked here,” he said.

Fulkerson said Chinese education officials are trying to make their schools “more student-focused, more ‘the American way.’”

Although there are no plans now to send Delaware teachers on exchanges to Chinese schools, Fulkerson believes having school officials in both countries work together is a win-win proposition.

“Two superpowers can work together. They don’t always need to be in competition,” he said. “If we make collaborative efforts, kids in both countries will have the competencies they need to work with each other.”

- See more at: <http://www.wdde.org/20393-delaware-students-learn-chinese#sthash.4a1VWKP5.dpuf>