



P R E S S R E L E A S E

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Sister School Agreements with China in the Works *BCIU Administrator Traveling to China to Identify Potential Schools*

READING, PA – Berks County’s public schools could soon find themselves gaining a “sister” or two as a Berks County Intermediate Unit administrator heads to China with educators from across the country to explore setting up sister school agreements and to learn how to build Chinese language and culture programs in school curricula.

Dr. Bonita Troxell, director of the BCIU’s Office of Professional Development and Curriculum, is part of a group of superintendents, principals, and other public education administrators from across the country who are traveling to China June 22-30 as representatives of the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia (NCTA). Her excursion through China begins and ends in Beijing, with trips to a few Chinese provinces to visit elementary and secondary schools.

“American students must gain an understanding of Chinese culture and its language,” Dr. Troxell said. “We do our children a great disservice if we don’t prepare them to compete in a global economy, and China is a massive leader in that economy.”

A sister school arrangement will help Berks County’s educators and students better understand the importance of learning about China. It also will foster more opportunities to learn the language and culture. Videoconferences and e-mail exchanges certainly could take place, and exchange programs of students and/or teachers between a Berks County school and its Chinese counterpart also would be a distinct possibility.

“There’s a lot of interest [among county schools] to connect with a Chinese school in a sister school partnership,” she said. “I imagine that the schools who already have Chinese language programs may be the first to sign up.”

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Four Berks County school districts currently offer Mandarin Chinese language instruction: Oley Valley, Tulpehocken Area, Twin Valley, and Wilson. All but Twin Valley offer it at the high school level only; Twin Valley also offers Chinese instruction at its middle school.

The trip is a collaboration between the NCTA and the Chinese Bridge Delegation. Created in 2006 to build and expand Chinese language programs in U.S. schools, the Bridge program is one result of a partnership between the College Board and China's Office of Chinese Language Council International (more widely known as Hanban).

The educators are traveling as guests of the Hanban, which is covering the majority of expenses. The NCTA, which receives funding from the Freeman Foundation, also is assisting in funding the trip.

The June trip is the first step in a process that could take up to three years. While Chinese schools are eager to partner with an American school, the Hanban is meticulous in the matching process. Once schools are identified, the next step would be to have a school district's administrators travel to potential sister schools to meet with their counterparts.

Dr. Troxell's participation also will help the BCIU's Asian Studies Collaborative (ASC) further its goal of assisting Berks and Pennsylvania school districts that offer, or are considering offering, Chinese studies.

The ASC has partnered with the Freeman Foundation, the Chinese Flagship Program at Ohio State University, and the Confucius Institute at the University of Pittsburgh, three organizations specializing in Asian studies and Asian collaborations. The ASC's partnership with them will provide expertise, professional development opportunities, additional resources, and guidance in the ASC's development.

The hope is that the ASC will become a model for the creation of Chinese language and cultural studies programs and resources at school districts around the country.

Once she returns, Dr. Troxell also will take some of the information she learns on the trip to present Chinese language and culture curriculum proposals to school districts, with a first presentation of her recommendations being made to the Berks County Curriculum Coordinators at its meeting in September.

"We estimate that about 50,000 students in the U.S. study Chinese," Dr. Troxell said. "Compare that to the 200 million Chinese students who study English, sometimes starting as early as the second grade.

"It's imperative that our schools expose our children to a country and a culture that will have a huge impact on their future."

For more information, contact Dr. Troxell at 610-987-8422 or at bontro@berksiu.org.

Created in fall 2008, the Asian Studies Collaborative already has:

- Hosted a 10-week seminar, “East Asia: A Seminar for Teachers,” that provided an introduction to Asian culture and society and allowed participants to discuss various ideas about how to integrate the study of East Asia into the secondary school curriculum.
- Coordinated the Asian Studies Collaborative Spring Conference for educators and school administrators, where they learned how to add the study of Asian languages and culture to their school’s curricula.

In the works for the remainder of 2009:

- The BCIU will hold a one-day Chinese culture workshop for Berks County middle school students and their parents July 15. Participants will travel to the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania for presentations, workshops, and hands-on activities.
- Two teachers from China will arrive in Berks County in late July to serve as Chinese teachers at Wilson and Twin Valley high schools. Their arrival will enhance the Chinese language programs already offered at the schools.

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