

We Stand Alone in Education
By Wendy H. Weiner, Ed.D.

This past June I was invited to be part of an American delegation of principals to tour China and learn first hand about their educational system. My knowledge of China was dismal and I was curious to gain a better understanding of their educational system and what I could learn from their methods to improve our teaching back here in South Florida. We were treated as royalty when we arrived in Beijing. The ministry of education in China made sure that every need of ours was met. We toured Beijing University, which is arguably one of the most beautiful Universities in the world. I had the privilege of meeting with students from elementary school through high school. Public schools with state-of-the-art dorms and private schools with indoor ping pong and Olympic size swimming pools. Students greeted us with artwork, song and dance. Never did we see students text-messaging underneath their desks or even utter a word of dissent in the classroom. Yes, we saw the Chinese school system at its best. 60 students in a classroom. Students sitting on wooden stools for hours on end in high tech buildings, studying diligently to achieve high marks. Students did not ask questions, ask for clarification nor expected differential methods of teaching. I wanted to know why their system of education was one we should consider modeling? Although we as American educators were all taken back and impressed by the students' very strong work ethic, it still did answer the question of how their system might be better than ours. I thought of my gifted students always asking questions, composing their own songs and writing original screenplays. My students would never last in an environment where conformity is valued over individuality. I also came to learn that in order for a student to go on to seventh grade, exams must be passed. I thought to myself if we dismissed all of the twelve year olds who could not sit still in class, had a learning disability, behavioral issue or just learned differently, what would our schools look like? Our school system is not perfect by any means, but we must pride ourselves in the fact that we are one of the few countries in the world, which respects the individuality of each person and strives to educate all of our students as its goal. So what did I learn from the Chinese educational system to take back with me to the U.S.? That even though we face many challenges with our system, I will not give up the vision that we can educate all of our students by meeting their needs. Whether it be through the arts, automotive repair or technology, we do have a responsibility to educate all of our children to become productive citizens. Not to educate only the few who can conform, but to embrace what makes us each unique.

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