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Los Nietos Educators Journey to China to Share Education Practices that Inspire Students

Whittier, CA – Three Los Nietos School District educators from Aeolian Elementary recently returned from a week-long academic expedition to Chengdu, China, where they discovered a balance in school curriculum between arts and sciences and shared strategies with fellow teachers on integrating special education students into general classes.

Aeolian Elementary School Principal Becky Speh was joined by District teachers Rick Gallardo and Christina Fontenot from March 25 through April 2 when they toured five schools to observe and contribute classroom lessons, and visited unique sites in the capital of China's Sichuan province.

"It was an exciting journey and I couldn't wait to share our experiences with our students," Speh said. "Some of our students are currently learning about China for social studies so it's really inspiring to give them firsthand lessons."

Of the five primary schools visited, Aeolian educators were able to sit in on sixth-grade English presentations, observe classroom structure and instruct a fourth-grade writing lesson.

One of the primary schools hosted a question and answer session where Chinese educators inquired about teacher evaluation, classroom size, differences in teaching math and how to engage with different student behaviors.

Special education services were of particular interest to the hosting teachers and principals, and they inquired about strategies to support special needs students.

With primary school class sizes ranging from 50 to 60 students, teachers— rather than the pupils — move between classrooms. The subjects taught include English, Chinese language arts, math, art, music, performing arts and physical education.

The Aeolian educators noted the use of class choral response, especially in math, to help students memorize the lessons.

"It was such a fulfilling opportunity to connect with other educators and discuss the similarities and differences in our approach to education," Fontenot said. "Through this dialogue we can further serve and support our students."

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Outside of the classroom, Aeolian educators visited the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, where they watched Giant Pandas eat breakfast and cubs wrestle and play in their habitat. Other regional delights included a trip to the Jinsha Site Museum to examine historic artifacts.

Speh, Gallardo, Fontenot and their families also explored Chinese cuisine. Large round tables, stacked with various dishes were offered to the visiting guests, with options that included eel, tripe, rabbit, pig ears and taro root, all cooked in Sichuan Spices.

Los Nietos School District established this international partnership when Gallardo visited Chengdu schools in 2014. This relationship has led to an annual trip to China by Los Nietos staff members and a return trip by international educators and students.

Los Nietos District and Chengdu educators are in the process of planning more international trips. One plan proposes bringing Chinese teachers, parents and students to Los Nietos schools at the beginning of the upcoming school year to experience American education and living.

“This is a fantastic opportunity to continue a cycle of learning that draws from the best possible practices,” Superintendent Jonathan Vasquez said. “We’re opening up a whole new world for our students, and pushing the boundaries of their studies.”

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

041317_LOSNIETOS_TeachersChina1: Aeolian Elementary School Principal Becky Speh and District teacher Christina Fontenot learn a recess game at one of the four primary schools toured during their week-long academic trip to Chengdu, China from March 25 through April 2.

041317_LOSNIETOS_TeachersChina2: District educators Becky Speh, Christina Fontenot and Rick Gallardo pose with a sixth-grade group during their week-long academic trip to Chengdu, China from March 25 through April 2. The sixth-graders did a presentation on Italy for their English class assignment.

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