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Chinese educators learn from students

Tour emphasizes thinking over memorization

By CLARISSA ALJENTERA
Herald Staff Writer

The language barrier separating representatives from the Chinese Ministry of Education Curriculum Development Center and students at Chartwell Elementary School could not stop the two groups from communicating Monday.

With the help of translators and hand gestures, the distinguished delegates from Asia questioned Chartwell's students during an appearance at the private Seaside school's science fair.

The delegation of top Chinese educators are visiting schools and private companies in Monterey County this week to learn how to better train teachers in their country as China transitions to a new mode of education.

The tours of schools like Chartwell are an opportunity for Jian Liu, the Chinese assistant director with the curriculum development center, to reinforce the lessons and techniques that a growing number of teachers in China now use to teach subjects like math, science and language arts.

"The programs we've visited show how students learn with critical thinking and use those skills," Liu said through a translator on Monday.

Representatives from the Chinese Ministry of Education were accompanied by China Education Resources Inc., a Canadian-based company that specializes in distributing educational materials.

China Education Resources recently launched an online teacher training program that will draw 16,000 participants this year. About 10,000 teachers participated last year.

Chinese officials said they expect to eventually train all 12 million teachers in the country in the new method. China's educational system is the largest in the world.

The teachers use a Web portal, developed by China Education Resources and the curriculum development center, that included training programs covering 11 core subjects.

The delegation visited Monterey because of the region's intensive language resources, including schools like the Monterey Institute of International Studies and the teacher preparedness programs at CSU-Monterey Bay, where they are scheduled to visit today.

Through the Web portal, teachers in China can learn about topics ranging from classroom management and curriculum reform.

Chengfeng Zhou, chairman of China Education Resources, said teachers will soon emphasize critical thinking skills over rote memorization.

"Creative thinking has more interactions between teachers and students," Zhou said.

Liu said he was encouraged that China's teachers are on the right track, based on the projects and conversations students have had with delegates during the U.S. visits.

"I was interested in every single one but there wasn't enough time," said Liu, referring to the science fair projects completed by the school's fourth- through eighth-graders.

He stopped by a demonstration by Mike Tokiwa, an eighth-grader at Chartwell, and asked several questions about his Mentos-and-soda experiment.

Tokiwa dropped Mentos candy into soda bottles to see which had the most carbonation. The adults asked Mike about how he measured the carbonation and how much carbonation each type of soda had.

"I was enamored to see fourth-graders talking to delegates as if they were experts on science," said Douglas Atkins, executive director for Chartwell.

Clarissa Aljentera can be reached at 648-1171 or claljentera@montereyherald.com.

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