

Rural School Expanding Cultural Awareness

Thanks to Kan-ed Funding

With the high definition videoconferencing equipment that Circle USD 375 was able to purchase with Kan-ed Enhancing Technology Grant Program (ETGP) funds, the district was able to offer Interactive Distance Learning (IDL) for the first time during the 2008-2009 school year. Through IDL, the district is now able to provide their high school students with access to a course in Mandarin Chinese, taught by a native Chinese speaker.

Wilma Fast, the on-site teacher monitoring the Mandarin Chinese class, shared insight into the impact of this equipment on the students in class. She stated, "The students in Chinese class are now approaching the end of their second semester of Chinese. As I sat in class last week listening to the students carry on conversations in Chinese regarding their families, their birthdays, and the contents of their backpacks, I was impressed with how much they have learned in the past nine months. The students not only learn to speak Chinese, but also to read and write traditional Chinese characters. It is truly amazing to see how quickly students learn a language that is so very different from our own."

Fast further described the advantages of learning from a native Chinese speaker. She said, "We benefit from having a native Chinese speaker who speaks directly to us, who listens to and responds to our questions with first-hand knowledge of her country and culture, and who even evaluates our written work as we hold it up to the camera. Furthermore, our Chinese teacher also teaches students about Chinese culture. Students benefit from learning about an Eastern culture that places a strong emphasis on family relationships and respect. Videoconferencing allows our students in the geographic center of the United States to begin to understand the Chinese language and culture. Connections such as these are not only valuable in expanding students' knowledge base, but also in increasing students' understanding of cultural differences--an understanding that can further world peace."

Scott Dunson, in charge of technology at Circle USD 375, discussed the district's excitement related to the high school's use of the videoconferencing equipment and their desire to expand its use. He said, "The biggest impact we've seen so far in utilizing IDL is the ability to expand and extend the classes that we offer. Chinese is the first step in that direction, but we've been looking at other online or distance learning classes that would fit with our curriculum and our scheduling. There's an interest district-wide now in getting some more of these types of technologies in some of the other buildings and start making use of them at the grade school level." Circle USD 375 has been encouraging this excitement among parents by organizing some evening events during parent-teacher conferences to allow them to see the equipment their students are getting to use.

Dunson considers this first attempt at expanding classes a huge success. He stated, "The biggest thing that it's going to do is impact the number and the variety of curriculum offerings that we can provide for our students beyond what we can do with just our local teaching staff." Without the Kan-ed funding, Circle USD 375 would

have not been able to expand class offerings with new equipment. Dunson remarked, "The cost would have been prohibitive to us to have tried to do this with our own funding, and it's provided some great opportunities for our kids. I see more great opportunities in the future, and certainly the funding had a huge impact on that."



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