



Suchitha Reddy, 10, left, works with Jingyi Zhang, 12, one of the 13 students from China, as Natalie Piergross, 10, works with Zhengzheng Ding, 12, also from China, on writing Chinese characters with water on the blacktop during recess at Lydiksen Elementary School in Pleasanton on Friday. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

By **BETH JENSEN**

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PLEASANTON — Some of China’s youngest diplomats visited Lydiksen Elementary School in Pleasanton on Friday, giving hundreds of local children an opportunity to meet youngsters their own age who live and attend school on the other side of the globe.

The rare encounter has been many months in the planning, said Lydiksen Principal Jacob Berg.

“We’re really excited that it’s happening,” he said last week ahead of the students’ visits on Friday and Oct. 14. “We started talking about this a year ago, so this is the end of a yearlong journey.”

The idea to establish a “sister school” relationship between Lydiksen and the Liuxia Primary School in Hangzhou, China, began after Berg and his staff became aware of a similar exchange program in the San Ramon Valley Unified School District, he said. The concept of children and teachers from China and the United States meeting and sharing experiences was a natural fit for the school and the district, Berg said.

“We felt (that) with our demographics changing ... this is something our students would benefit from,” he said. “This offers students a bigger world view. Many come from other countries. It also ties in with our school district’s strategic plan and vision that every student will be a world citizen.”

Berg and Lydiksen Vice Principal Janet Gates worked with United Education, a company that organizes cultural exchanges between schools in the Bay Area and China. The company paid for Gates to travel to China and spend two days touring the city and the primary school in March.

“It was really enlightening to see Liuxia Primary School in Hangzhou,” she said. “It’s a school in the middle of a city, and they have different policies than we have here. Parents are not allowed on campus except for one day a year, when there’s an open house.”

Other differences at Liuxia include the absence of a special-needs program at the school and only two second-language learners in a school population of 1,100. That compares to 85 English learners among Lydiksen’s nearly 700 students. After the day’s academic lessons, the Liuxia students attend 45 minutes of instruction in a cultural endeavor, such as traditional Chinese art, music, martial arts or pastry-making.

“They also didn’t have what we’d consider a playground,” Berg said. “There was a track and a couple of basketball courts and a lot of concrete. In the classrooms, the only technology I saw was a desktop computer for the teacher. Children were seated in rows, working with no collaboration on workbooks. I’d consider it old-fashioned rote learning. There were no bells; music plays when they change classes.”

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The Hangzhou delegation consisted of 15 fifth-grade students ages 11 and 12; three teachers, a translator and a United Education representative, Berg said. The visiting adults stayed in local hotels, but students stayed in groups of twos and threes with area host families. Each was accompanied on campus by a Lydiksen fifth-grade “student ambassador,” who acted as a buddy.

The group toured the school, observing and participating in classroom activities, and attended an assembly where the Chinese students presented demonstrations in such activities as martial arts, music and calligraphy. Teachers from both schools discussed teaching styles and techniques.

Lydiksen parent Samantha Thomas helped coordinate the visit, including coordinating a parent-prepared potluck lunch featuring a range of different ethnic dishes to showcase the school community’s diversity.

“We’re going to show them that the U.S. is definitely a melting pot. This is only a small elementary school, but there is a lot of diversity, which they don’t necessarily have in China,” said Thomas, adding that her 10-year-old fifth-grader Aidan was excitedly looking forward to the visit.

“Kids don’t always think about what it’s like for kids in other schools in other countries,” she added. “They don’t see that. It’s good for them to do this at a young age. This is a good experience for them to see.”

While Berg and Gates said there are no plans for a district-sponsored reciprocal visit, both expressed optimism that the two schools will maintain a connection.

“We’re hoping it’s ongoing,” Berg said. “We have an agreement that we’re going to try and continue this. At least one other Pleasanton elementary school is interested; I think we’re being looked at as some kind of model, but time will tell.”