



MORTON

UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

May 8, 2021

Walking ‘in other people’s shoes’ at Jefferson

“Bienvenidos, muchachos.”

That’s how Greg Lopez, father of Jefferson kindergartener Wynn, greeted several of his son’s classmates -- if to sometimes quizzical looks -- at the Mexico booth where he volunteered recently as part of the school’s inaugural Disability and Diversity Awareness Fair.

Mr. Lopez – who like his son was born in Peoria, even if Dad’s Peoria was the Arizona one -- was there to share information about his heritage and the nation his grandparents called home.

What he would soon discover, and what the children in attendance would learn, as well, was that whatever our differences, we also have so very much in common.



Mr. Lopez hands out Mexican flag stickers

Case in point:

“Do you know about Pokémon in Mexico?” a second grader asked Mr. Lopez.

Well, yes, evidently Pokémon is every bit the phenomenon in Mexico that it is in the United States.

Across three consecutive days during the last week of April, Jefferson students spent what otherwise would have been their gym classes learning about the challenges that many of their classmates face and about the unique cultures from which some of them hail.

India, Mexico and China, three of the most represented ethnic groups in Morton’s multilingual student population, were featured. Students learned to speak a few



Completing a passport, ready to head to China

words of the language, tasted their foods – plantain chips from Mexico, “pocky,” a chocolate-covered biscuit from China, and “Bombay mix” from India -- found out about their holidays, and filled out passports.

There were a number of “firsts.”

“I never tried Chinese food before,” said Ellie, a first-grader.

“Now I want my mom to buy these,” said second-grader Kelley of the Bombay mix.

In a by-no-means-scientific survey, the students were most fascinated by India, while preferring to satisfy their hunger in Mexico.

Meanwhile, students learned about other differences, as well – various mental and physical disabilities, from autism to vision and hearing loss.



Thumbs up to Mexican food

This little cultural exchange came about at the initiative of Alyson Baker, a school psychologist, and Kelly Hobson, a school social worker, who borrowed it from a program they were familiar with in another district.

The perspective they tried to offer Jefferson’s kindergarteners through sixth-graders is critical in a world that is changing rapidly, said Ms. Baker. It can be



Learning about the Lunar New Year in China

fascinating -- and heartwarming -- to overhear their conversations as they discuss issues they otherwise really hadn’t thought much about before.

“I was at the autism station and the kids were sharing their stories,” recalled Ms. Baker. ““Oh, I went to my niece’s birthday party and someone had autism. So that’s why her hands were over her ears the whole time.””

Indeed, it’s important for students to understand and to accept how someone with a disability might hear or see or feel things differently than they do. One exercise had students using a software program that permitted them to see as someone with cataracts or glaucoma would.



At the India Booth



Can’t get enough of China

Jefferson Principal Kate Wyman said she and her staff “had been talking about the increase in students at Jefferson who have a wide variety of disabilities,” with autism in particular on the upswing, and out of that came the idea for the fair.

“If we can put them in other people’s shoes, we can build empathy,” she said.

In a world where that quality seems to be in such chronically short supply, what better lesson is there?

Indeed, the success of this first fair already has the organizers looking forward to next year, with multiple community organizations already saying they'd like to lend their support to the effort.

"If the kids can remember even a couple of things and take them home, we've done our job," said Ms. Baker.

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