

The Elite Bilingual School and Kindergarten at the Chinese Community Center -- a parent's experiences and reflections

The growth and development of my son in this bilingual school

My son is six years old. He began attending the private Elite Bilingual School affiliated with the Chinese Community Center at Somerset since September 2006. In the past five months I have thought often of his schooling and his education. I wish to share my thoughts with other parents of school-age children.

The town Millburn in New Jersey, where I live, has a good school system. It offers all-day education from kindergarten on. So what could Elite offer that is worth giving up a free, first-rate public school and a commute time of fifty minutes each morning?

I began thinking about my son's schooling since he was four years old. It seemed natural to place him in a public school, but that would require seeking arrangement for him when school closes at 3 P.M., as both my husband and I are working parents. The only private after-school activity center not only charges a high fee, but it also has a strict 6 P.M. pick-up time policy without exception. And the center is usually closed on days when the school closes. My place of work is far and my work keeps me occupied. This is a difficult situation for me.

I have visited many schools, including expensive independent schools (the so-called aristocratic schools), parochial schools, the town's public school, and this bilingual school. After comparing these schools on many fronts, I chose this bilingual school for the following three reasons: 1. the school has longer daily opening hours and fewer annual closing days; 2. it offers a regular American elementary school education as well as a regular Chinese language education; 3. the tuition is reasonable and it has a low teacher-student ratio; for K and above the ratio does not exceed eight per class.

After my son's first day of school, I couldn't wait to question him on whether he was happy with the school. Cheerfully he answered, yes. Why? The teacher does not hand down

timeouts. I observed that, when children became naughty, the teacher corrected their misbehavior by explaining to them the reason for good behavior; it was not a simple punishment of sending the children to the corner of the room and asking them or her to reflect on their own. This kind of treatment is important to the psychological health of the children.

Everyday I have the opportunity to meet each of my son's teachers. Before enrollment he barely knew the twenty-six alphabets. At the school, the principle, the dean, and every teacher are friendly. Because the number of students in the school is not large, the school retains the atmosphere of a big family. My son has always said that he likes his home, and he likes his school. I do not have to worry about him when I am at work; I do not have to be anxious that he would be neglected or bullied.

A few months after the enrollment, I became impressed by the quality of his education. My son knew the alphabets before enrollment but not a single word. In mathematics he could count from 1 to 100, in the ascending order only. But by November, at the end of the first marking period, he could read 50 to 60 common words and phrases. On the occasion of Thanksgiving, each student was asked to write a short essay on whom he/she should be most thankful to. My son wrote, first, he thanked all the toys for the happiness they brought him and, second, his father and mother for their love. It was funny and annoying [translator note: the Chinese word is 氣, meaning 'to make {one} changing {one's} temper']. He has made great strides in mathematics. Now he can do addition and subtraction of three-digit numbers involving advance and borrowing. He has also learned grammar. He knows what is a noun (and the distinction between singular and plural), a verb, and how to change a declarative sentence to an interrogative or an exclamatory sentence. I tried to test him from a book designed for the first and second graders. He could do the majority of the test problems. The result has far exceeded my expectations. His teacher, Ms. Tara, just like Betty, the principle, has rich experience in elementary school education. She is also enthusiastic about her teaching. After a test she writes a multi-page detailed report: one page per subject, each with five or six areas. She grades each area. Ordinarily my son has three to four pages of homework everyday. Each week he brings home a pile of work he did in school. I calculate that everyday he writes about ten pages on various studies. It is no wonder that in three to four months he has attained the level of a first grader.

Besides study, my son also participates in extra-curriculum programs. Since the school has a lot of indoor and outdoor space [tn: see www.chinese-community-center.org], it has recruited specialists to teach musical instruments, dances, martial arts, computer graphics, and drama. My son has signed up for piano lessons and acting. Classes and practices take place in the afternoon or weekends. My son has never played piano before. But after about ten lessons, he can read simple scores, know the basic left-hand and right-hand finger movements, play simple harmonies and 1/8 notes. In this year's New Year Celebration Party [tn: the date is February 16 (Friday), 2007, 7-10 P.M.], he will play "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" and "Happy Birthday to You." He will also act out in the children play "The Sound of Music." In the drama class the age of the actors ranges from three to ten. Teacher Cindy, who was trained in vocal music, directs the play. Often during rehearsals the acting of the children made the parents in the audience roar with laughter. I thought about my own childhood days when I also liked to act in plays. I can imagine how excited my son is when his yearning to act is realized.

Lastly I must mention my son's Chinese studies. Each afternoon he spends two hours studying Chinese. The Chinese language teacher Jeannie holds a master degree in Chinese literature from a well-known university in Taiwan. Her mandarin is good enough to be a media broadcaster. After my son's first lesson in Chinese, he greeted us the next morning, in Chinese,

"Good morning, father; good morning, mother."

It was heart warming. Before enrollment, his enunciation of Chinese was as distorted as an American's. But after two months, he knew pinyin completely and his spoken Chinese began approaching the standard mandarin. From thereon, whenever he learns an English word, he asks for its Chinese equivalent. Now he has acquired a repertory of Chinese nursery rhymes and children songs, like

"The tricycle, runs fast, on it sits an elder lady ..."

[san1lun2che1, pao3de0 kuai4, shang4mian0 zuo3ge0 lao3 tai4tai0...],

“little mouse, climbs up the lamp table, steals a lick of the oil, and cannot get down.”

[xiao3 lao3shu3, shang4 deng1tai2, tou1 you2 chi1, xia4bu4lai2.]

“blinking, blinking; bright, bright; the sky is full of little stars...”

[yi1shan3 yi1shan3 liang4 jing1jing0, mang3tian1 dou1shi4 xiao3 xing1xing0...]

and others. One day when I returned from the supermarket, I found him asking me in Chinese,

“Mother, the apples you bought, how much is it per piece?”

That night I called my mother in China and told her that in the future when their grandson comes to visit them, he could buy grocery for them. As my son’s Chinese improves, the school will teach him the Chinese cultural traditions concerning being considerate to parents, love of siblings, loyalty, trustworthiness, law-abiding, righteousness, honesty, and shame. Since we were from China, it is natural that we wish our children to be guided by these cultural traditions. Only so can they be respected.

I know I have not spent much time in teaching my son, and yet he has made tremendous progress in both English and Chinese. I am thankful that the School has provided a wonderful environment conducive to learning. The students respect one another; I have never heard that anyone got into a fight or bullied weaker and littler ones. Every parent in the world hopes that his/her child receives good cultural and moral education. I feel the Elite Bilingual School is a hard-to-find good school. That is the reason why I insist on driving so far to let him attend the school. It takes ten years to grow a tree. It takes a hundred years to develop a person. To nurse a child to become a useful and functional person in the family and in the society is a task that takes a hundred years. A good school will benefit the student for a lifetime.

The Elite Bilingual School’s web address is www.chinese-community-center.org. Parents who have school-age children may wish to visit the site.