

# Living the Language: International Exchanges for 5th Graders

Emily Wood

**T**he American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) annually presents the Melba Woodruff Award to an exemplary foreign language program in the nation. This year at the ACTFL conference in Baltimore, MD, the Eisenhower International School received this award for its outstanding immersion programs.

International student exchanges at the Eisenhower International School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, have clear benefits. These student exchanges provide rich opportunities for cultural comparisons, new perspectives and natural communication. The exchanges also provide experiential learning that result in cultural understandings that are likely to last a lifetime. Eisenhower, part of the Tulsa Public School District, is a Spanish and French Immersion K-5 elementary school with a total enrollment K-5 of 297. Each year groups of about nine fifth graders travel to Mexico and France.

## Exchange with Mexico

The exchange with Mexico is flourishing and has grown stronger each year since its inception in 1991. When we planned the exchange, we had no prototypes to follow since we knew of no other long-term academic exchange for elementary students in the U.S. Several factors made this exchange possible: Tulsa had a strong "Sister City" relationship with San Luis Potosi, Mexico; a summer exchange featuring homestays for children had flourished; in 1991 the Spanish Immersion School of Tulsa Public Schools was moved to its own building to become the new Eisenhower International School and the superintendent had a vision for the new school that included exchanges and community outreach.

We discovered that Mexican delegates to the International Summit for Sister Cities International held that year in Tulsa wished to start a student exchange program. Therefore, the new Eisenhower International School and Instituto Cervantes, a private school in San Luis Potosi, agreed to the first exchange. Located halfway between Mexico City to the south and Monterrey to the north, San Luis Potosi is on the main auto route. It is a city with a rich colonial past as verified by the cathedral and old plaza. San Luis Potosi is a wonderful place to observe change as the historic and traditional blend with new industrial expansion.



Today, the exchange program continues stronger than ever. In the fall of 2005, 11 Mexican fifth graders accompanied by a teacher studied at Eisenhower for eight weeks. They took the seats of 8 Tulsa fifth graders who were students in Mexico for the same period of time. Exchange students in both countries are regular class participants, doing all of the assignments and taking all tests. Their grades for class work are sent back to their home schools.

On both sides of the border, students live in the homes of their schoolmates for two four-week home stays. This year, the eight-week American period was inaugurated by a welcome picnic for all host families and student ambassadors. The exchange students also participated in a fall barbecue with a hayride as well as in other activities typical of Oklahoma. Host families take their guests to zoos, aquariums, farms, museums and sporting events. Experiences in and out of their exchange school provide both groups with a rich cultural understanding and context for communication. In Mexico, students take day trips to historic places such as San Miguel Allende with its historic cathedral and many restaurants, Dolores Hidalgo, with ceramic factories and a museum documenting Hidalgo's life and Mexican history and the old silver mines with tunnels for students to explore.

The Mexican students belong to a dance troop that shares traditional dances at many schools, festivals and other venues. Each year a professional instructor coaches the students in a dance from a different region of Mexico. The students bring colorful, authentic regional dress and the Tulsa community often requests their dances.

All students in the 2005 exchange adjusted beautifully. Over the years, there have been some tears and homesickness that disappeared after the first week. No one has ever left early. Some even expressed reluctance to return home! Attesting to the success of the exchange and the immersion schools, the Tulsa Public Schools started a second Spanish Immersion School. In 2006, the new school's first fifth grade class will also participate in the exchange program.

## Exchange with France

The success of the Mexican program led to Eisenhower International School adding a French immersion program and a subsequent exchange with La Salle,

a private school in Amiens, France. This seven-year-old exchange was initiated by the contacts of an immersion school teacher who was a native of Northern France. The French exchange is usually shorter, with an average stay of two to three weeks. In the spring of 2006, plans include an exchange with a second private school in Amiens, La Providence. Amiens is on the beautiful Saint-Leu River, about an hour northeast of Paris and this historic city was the home of Jules Verne. As in the Mexican exchange, many enriching experiences are planned both in and out of school. For example, host parents usually take the Tulsa students to Paris. In the Amiens area, students go on field trips to the home of Jules Verne, a magnificent cathedral and to World

War I sights. Some parents take them to beaches.

Since the French government prohibits enrichment activities during the school session, students from Amiens come to Tulsa each year over their spring break. Amiens became Tulsa's eighth "Sister City" during the fall of 2005. This was partly possible because of the relationships built during the fifth grade exchanges. The exchange teachers and students have been true citizen ambassadors.

### Keys to Success

What has made these exchanges so successful? The international student handbook, given to each exchange participant, shows parents and students exactly what is expected and clarifies the following:

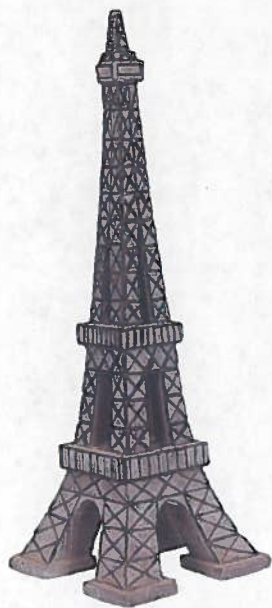
- **Rules:** All students must follow the rules developed over the years. For example, students are allowed only one phone call and one email home per week to speed up the adjustment period to the new culture. Both parents and students are expected to follow this restriction.
- **Exchange Coordinator:** The coordinator, who is a halftime employee of the Tulsa Public Schools, sends out applications, conducts parent meetings, trains students weekly, plans events, purchases airline tickets and more. This past fall, 96 people were directly involved in the Mexican exchange, including students, host families, chaperones, and parents of Eisenhower ambassadors. The exchange coordinator must maintain constant communication with all groups in order to make the exchange safe, comfortable and enjoyable. Safety is the priority. Since communication is a key component to maintaining safety, the exchange coordinator is essential.

- **Chaperones:** Accompanying the students on their flights and meeting them at school each day, chaperones play an important role in the success of the program. Chaperones are expected to quickly identify any problems with school work or behavior and to work with the student to solve problems. Chaperones stay in close contact with the exchange coordinator throughout the entire exchange.
- **Carefully-screened Students:** All students write an essay explaining why they would be a good student ambassador. Students are then selected by a committee of nine teachers and administrators based on their behavior, academics, responsibility and ability to adjust.
- **Ambassador and Cultural Training:** Before traveling, students meet weekly with the exchange coordinator, the counselor, the chaperones and natives of the country. These meetings prepare them to adapt to different classrooms, teaching methods, foods, family styles and schedules. Cross-cultural training includes direct teaching about differences in religion, customs, manners and family. During this time, students can voice their concerns in a supportive atmosphere.
- **Host Families:** To give the students diverse experiences, we find two host family homes per visiting child. The exchange coordinator recruits parents to apply and then thoroughly screens families. Host families participate in training and receive a handbook. Once the students arrive, the exchange coordinator keeps in constant contact.
- **Costs:** The only cost to Tulsa Public Schools is the salary of the halftime exchange coordinator and office space, computer and telephone. Parents pay the airfare for their children, the chaperone's airfare, and all expenses for students on the exchange. Tulsa Global Alliance, the Eisenhower Foundation and other groups have all contributed scholarships for needy students. The Hispanic American Foundation helps with the costs of entertaining Mexican administrators in the U.S.

- **Parents:** It takes an act of faith to send a fifth grader to a foreign country, therefore, parents are an essential part of the exchange. They assist in a many ways, such as collecting necessary travel documents, preparing weekly mailings, rehearsing dances etc. The parents bond and often form a weekly support group. These bonds last many years after the exchange is over.

Is it easy? No. Planning and implementation must be meticulously organized to ensure the safety and happiness of the students and the approval of the parents. Is it worth it? Yes!

Everyone in the exchange schools benefits, from kindergartners on up. Students from San Luis light up Eisenhower with their smiles, friendship and dances. At Eisenhower, we feel that we are making one small step toward world peace when children from diverse cultures meet. The students are young enough to lack prejudices and get to know and ap-



preciate each other. Many of the family friendships last for years. Language acquisition is improved dramatically as well as cultural awareness.

Of course, the exchange students benefit most of all. They come home with an understanding of another culture not found in books. They find that human similarities far outweigh the differences. They make lifelong friends from another country. They become independent learners and good ambassadors. Self esteem rises and changes lives.



Emily Wood serves as the Student Exchange Coordinator at the Eisenhower International School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and also teaches at the Heritage Academy, a Jewish day school. She has taught special education, social studies and gifted education for 35 years. In 1990 she received the Medal of Excellence from the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence.

## Special Recognition Award



A special recognition was given to Gladys Lipton by Mary Sosnowski at the 2005 NNELL Swapshop Breakfast for her contributions to early language learning.

# FOLKTALES:

Priscilla Russel

**P**icture the Senegalese griot seated on his stool under the generous shade of the baobab tree. Gathered on the ground around him are the village children engrossed in the folktale that he is passing on to the latest generation. Perhaps he is re-telling *Le Prince et la souris blanche* in which the tribal king sets various tasks for his three sons and a little mouse wins the day for the youngest. Or, the griot may chose to tell *Le Secret de Lunelle* about the friendless, young girl who wishes for a friend and one day receives a magic box containing a little playmate.



In another part of the world a Japanese street vendor with hopes of later selling his sweets to his audience, uses a set of colorfully drawn and painted cards to narrate *Momotaro, the Peach Boy* to the children gathered round. He is performing *Kamisibai*. Each card in the series has a scene on the front and the storyline for the next card in the story is on the back. This way the teller can show the card to his audience while reading the story.

*Momotaro* is perhaps the best known and best loved Japanese folktale. It is a wonderful story that tells of an old couple who found a big, delicious looking peach with a baby boy inside who quickly grew into a strong young man. Wearing a *hachimaki* (headband) to strengthen his spirit and carrying *danko* (traditional dumplings), he goes off to conquer the *oni* (ogres), and with the help of a monkey, a pheasant and a dog returns with riches for his parents.

For centuries folktales have played a central role in passing on the traditional culture of societies. From places as disparate as Francophone Africa and the Andean highlands