



Boards Making a Difference

Clinton Schools and Pangaea International Academy—A Winning Combination for Students

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For more than two years, the Ashford University campus, formerly occupied by a private college, sat vacant in Clinton, Iowa. Shortly before its vacancy, the science labs underwent a 50 million renovation, transforming them into state-of-the-art STEM labs. School and community leaders knew they wanted to repurpose the campus into a space that would benefit the community, and eventually landed on an agreement for an international education group to purchase the campus and partner with Clinton Schools.

“This is a unique partnership—it shows that private and public educational entities can work together and benefit both parties involved,” said Clinton Schools Superintendent Gary DeLacy.

Confucius International Education Group, the purchaser of the former Ashford University campus, has recruited 15 international students—primarily Chinese and Canadian—to attend classes at Clinton High School and earn their high school diploma. The group is contracting Clinton Schools for the core part of the students’ education for the 2018-19 school year.

However, public schools are only allowed to teach international students for one year, while private schools can serve students for the full four years of their high school education. Because of this legal roadblock, students can only attend this school year, then must return to their home countries.



INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY TAKES SHAPE

Enter former Clinton Schools Superintendent Deb Olson. She is the superintendent at the new Pangaea International Academy, housed on the former Ashford University campus, now called New 6 Arts Educational Park. International students enrolled in the academy will also attend classes at Clinton High School, and Clinton students will attend classes at Pangaea.

“Through this partnership, the Confucius International Education Group will be paying state tuition for international students to attend Clinton HS. Once Pangaea has obtained state certification, it allows us to issue diplomas. With the certification, Pangaea will apply to the federal government for Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) certification. SEVIS is the part of homeland security that allows entities to issue VISAs” said Deb Olson, Pangea International Academy Superintendent.

PARTNERSHIP BENEFITS BOTH LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

So, what’s in it for Iowa students? Sure, they have access to science and technology laboratories that are potentially unsurpassed in the state of Iowa. But it’s more than that, according to Clinton Schools Board President Eric Gettes.

“It’s so important in today’s world for kids to have a global knowledge of what’s going on. Clinton students are developing relationships and friendships with the international students and it’s opening their eyes to the things going on in the world, encouraging them to want to travel internationally. I just think it’s a great opportunity.”

Like many districts in Iowa, Clinton does not have a diverse student body. Currently about 70 percent of the student population are caucasian students and 30 percent are minority students. Once Pangaea International Academy is accredited and running at full capacity, there could be between 100 and 200 students enrolled, changing the student body of Clinton.

“We have kids who have traveled halfway across the world to go to school in Iowa. These students are being given the freedom to think outside the box and solve problems, and they’re learning that there isn’t one right way to do something—there are many ways. They’re gaining entrepreneurial skills, and being surrounded by this type of freedom will help them in the future,” said Olson.

The benefits to both local and international students abound, but perhaps the biggest takeaway is the connections these students will make and how it can help them—and the world—in the future.

“Think about it, in 20 years, these students may end up working together because of the connection they made in high school in Clinton, Iowa. Our world is a lot smaller now than it ever has been. They’re learning they can work with anyone, because everyone has common goals and values. They’re understanding culture from each other. This can go a long way to make our world a better place,” said Olson.

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMY BENEFITS, TOO

The Clinton community, population right around 25,000, is mostly positive toward the partnership. This is no coincidence, because the community group supporting the initiative has heavily publicized

newspaper articles, held town hall meetings and overall worked overtime to ensure the information was reaching all citizens in the community.

“The city feels there will be an economic impact because of this partnership. We’ve seen a huge population decrease over the last decade, so this is particularly exciting because we can welcome these students and serve them without constructing new buildings,” said DeLacy.

The international students are housed in the campus dorms.

Several community members have been instrumental in this partnership, especially during the initial phase when ideas were tossed around regarding what to do with the then-vacant Ashford campus, including local realtor Steve Howes. They’ve also seen significant support statewide from Gov. Reynolds, Senator Rita Hart, former governor Branstad and Ryan Wise.

THE BOARD’S ROLE

The Clinton school board has been very involved over the last several years, from monthly updates, to approving contracts, to hiring additional staff.

“Our board has been very flexible, we’re doing everything we can to nurture this idea and make it successful,” said DeLacy.

The board was supportive from day one, but the support has transitioned from support focused on financial gains, to something more.

“From the very beginning, we were certainly supportive of anything that contributed to our district financially. But as this project emerged, it became about much more than finances because we saw the unique educational opportunities it would provide our students. Clinton is a small town, so this gives our kids a real opportunity for exposure to different cultures and backgrounds,” said Gettes.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

This is just the beginning for the Clinton Schools and Confucius International Education Group’s partnership. While many aspects are still unknown, all parties involved are hopeful for the future.

“This could be a game changer for a lot of schools in the United States. It’s not happening anywhere else, and to think that this is happening for the first time in the states, here in Iowa. It’ll be interesting to see where we are three to five years down the road,” said Olson.

Can this be a model for other school districts in Iowa and nationwide? Gettes is cautiously optimistic.

“I hope it becomes a model—I’m optimistic but I also have a healthy wait and see attitude. There are so many things that could go wrong, but just as many things that could go right. I would love it if five to six years down the road, people looked at our model as something they could emulate.”

Public and private schools have been pitted against each other the last few years in a fight for funding at the federal level, and this battle is looming in Iowa in the years ahead. But Gettes doesn’t believe that competition is in our best interests.

“If we collaborate and offer the best of both worlds, we can offer our students so much more. Collaborating is better than trying to compete. Because of this partnership, our students now have access to some of the best learning facilities in the state.”

That really is a winning combination for students.

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