

Town hosts two exchange language teachers

By Ciara Mceneany Community News Service Oct 6, 2022

MARSHFIELD — Students at Twinfield Union School and Bellows Free Academy in Fairfax are learning from two new exchange teachers this year. The teachers, one from Morocco and one from Taiwan, will be working at the schools for the entire year as part of a U.S. State Department–sponsored program.

The schools are hosting the teachers free of charge — with all housing, visa and stipend costs covered — as a part of the Teachers of Critical Languages Program, an initiative created by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State.

The program seeks to strengthen Mandarin and Arabic education in primary and secondary schools. Only 19 schools, out of 60 that applied, were selected to participate in the program.

At Twinfield Union School in Marshfield, students have been learning about Arabic language and culture from their exchange teacher, who is Moroccan. Principal Mark Mooney said he sees the program as an opportunity for students to expand their worldviews.

“It’s really about breaking down some of those cultural barriers so that we realize that world perspective,” Mooney said.

Bellows Free Academy has an exchange teacher from Taiwan teaching Mandarin. In the words of Principal Justin Brown, she’s “a veteran teacher from her home country.”

The teacher has made fast friends in the community, Brown said, starting on their first day in Fairfax. “She has the ability to build great relationships with both kids and staff,

as well as community members,” he said. “They love learning the language, the culture and working with the teacher.”

There’s a class for each grade level at the two K-12 schools; administrators at each said giving students of all ages a chance to work with the teachers was a priority.

The teachers will also plan to host events outside school to let community members learn about their cultures. The schools found out about the program from SPIRAL International, a national group working with schools to promote cross-cultural learning.

The organization has been collaborating with schools in Vermont for more than 11 years to build new language programs, said Sydney Estey-Dedell, the group’s marketing coordinator.

The exchange teacher program is just as much about impacting the local communities as it is improving the classroom, she said.

“Our teachers are doing conversation classes with adults and people outside of the school, community dialogues, cooking classes,” she said, “all sorts of things that bring people into the program and get them interested in learning a new language, learning about the teacher’s culture and really supporting a growing and sustainable program in the schools.”

For Mooney, breaking stereotypes is the biggest benefit of the program.

“This program was right up our alley in terms of breaking down some cultural barriers and trying to — in a very lily-white school — bring some diversity and prepare students for a world that’s, in so many ways, smaller than ever,” Mooney said.

At Bellows Free Academy, Brown’s main goal was to see whether the program could be sustainable in the long term. Seeing how successful the program has been so far, Brown hopes to make it a permanent offering for students in the future.

“It’s so uncommon to have a language like Mandarin Chinese offered in such a small town,” Brown said. “To be able to have this opportunity for our kids to learn both about the language and the culture has been such an amazing opportunity for the community. I’m so grateful.”

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