

Dear Friends!

I had the honor of being invited by the Virginia Association of School Superintendents to travel to India for a cultural and educational exchange. Initially, I was pretty apprehensive about the trip and somewhat reluctant. However, the trip was an all expense paid opportunity (through VASS) that I felt I couldn't pass up. The Greene County School Board was very gracious in allowing me to go. The trip was truly a life changing experience and I hope to take what I have learned as a means of enhancing the education of our students.

During the trip I maintained the following journal:

Days One and Two:

Any reservations I had about making this trip are gone. What an incredible place!! After a ten hour lay over in New York and a 14 hour flight to Mumbai (not too bad, really), we arrived in Mumbai around midnight. First impressions: really friendly people, unbelievable traffic, and EXTREME poverty! I saw hundreds of people (men, women, and children) sleeping right beside the road on little towels. We drove through one of the slums on the way to the hotel. Wow! Every American needs to see one for them self.

Upon arrival many were too keyed up for sleep; hence, I am writing this very late at night. Today we are doing the city tour (going to a place where the Jains put their dead on stands so the vultures can eat the bodies....I'm not making this up), then to the American Embassy tonight for dinner and a program including American and Indian educators.

Great group of people on the trip! A three star general, the state secretary of education, several business sponsors. I am looking forward to the next several days.

Day Three:

India seems to be a very tolerant place. There are at least five dominant religions (Hindu, Jains, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic), but everyone seems to get along fine. Women basically hold the same place in society as men (except for the Muslims). I've met just as many female school leaders as males. We have walked through several neighborhoods and people have invited us into their homes having no real idea who we are. Very interesting. There are animals everywhere (Hindus don't believe in harming animals, apparently), so I have crossed paths with dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, cows and a couple of monkeys without incident. They don't seem to fear people.

The food here has been mostly very good and the hotel is amazing. GW Bush stayed here last week. Travel to and from the hotel is frightening. I've learned to look out the side windows and never out the front windshield. Most roads are three lanes but become five

or six in an instant. Traffic laws seem to be none existent. We've discovered a little place called "Leopold's," and quasi-American establishment (terrorists shot several people there last year) about for blocks from the hotel. The walk there was uneventful, but the walk home was a little scary.

Days Four and Five:

The last two days have been very busy. The dinner at the consulate was great and I had a wonderful conversation with a high school principal from Mumbai. We talked about adopting one another and setting up some communication opportunities and visits for students between our schools.

The conversations yesterday and today (we visited K12 International today) have centered on the question: "Why Indian students are so strong in math and science even though schools here have much higher ratios (1:75 in public schools)." The general and basically agreed upon answer has to do with: 1) parent support 2) depth rather than width in math instruction (i.e. we focus on width, they focus on depth); many very interesting conversations. The Indians want to ask us about creativity, engagement, and opportunities for accelerated kids (they see this as a major strength of ours and they are very impressed with our public school system).

Day Six:

Delhi, 1:37am.

Just flew in from Mumbai and boy are my arms tired!! Today was a very long and VERY profitable day. We were out early to New Mumbai (Bombay) which looks a lot like Old Mumbai. We were guests at a place called "Knowledge City" which is operated by the second largest IT and Communications company in India. In 2001 they had 1 million customers. Today they have 90 million and add a new customer every second; very interesting place which I'll share more about when I get home. BTW: The PhD's who they have working for them make \$500.00 a month (!!!) and are considered well paid.

We also visited one of the five universities in Mumbai. The kids and professors were great but, again, what an eye opener!! 400,000 high school graduates take an entrance exam (like an SAT) and approximately 7,000 are admitted to the universities. The others are out of luck unless they are willing to relocate. So, the "why are their grads so proficient in math and science" picture got a little clearer: competition is intense. BTH: a year's tuition is \$1000.

The university visit has been the highlight of the trip so far. When we asked what they were concerned about, they again talked about creativity and engagement. I was very proud of our delegation as we discussed our public school system and how we teach all kids that walk through our doors and maintain an 80%+ graduation rate in Virginia. (The Indians don't talk about their public schools. The kids in the universities are mostly from private schools).

Tomorrow we hit the road at 7:30 for a trip to Delhi Public Schools and then to a Pearson presentation, then one more stop before dinner (I can't remember where).

I've got some good ideas that I'd like implement. I know that you all have been waiting two years for me to come up with a good idea, but it took a trip to India to produce one!!

Day Seven:

Delhi, 3:30pm

An unbelievable two days. We left the hotel yesterday at 7:30am and arrived back at 12:00am, up again and on the road this morning at 7:30.

Our visits to schools have been, in a word, magical. I have been moved to tears several times in the last 36 hours. The kids are so polite, grateful, genuine, smart, respectful, and eager to learn from us that it's hard to put into words. What they don't realize is that I am the one learning from them. Both of the schools that we visited are private, although the one we visited today is very inexpensive and caters to impoverished students. Their monthly tuition is about 1200 Rupia (US\$25.00). I played Cricket and basketball in my suit clothes and flew a model airplane much to the delight of the kids (see attached photo). I literally hated to leave. The kids finally had to (very politely) ask us to get off their playing field so they could begin their match. I have never been called "sir" so often in my life. ANY TIME you walk by a student they stop and say "good morning, sir" with a respectful bow. Beautiful, beautiful kids. Their level of intellect and depth is mind boggling. They have absolutely blown me away with their knowledge and analytical minds. They don't shy away from any exchange and don't mind asking very tough questions (i.e. "Do you believe that Israel is a terrorist state?" This was a question from a 16 year old student).

The other meetings have been informative, but pretty dull. We visited a call station late last night where online tutors were helping students in Oklahoma. Most of the other meetings have been product oriented.

We can learn a great deal from Indian schools. No question about it. Their focus is on depth, not width. The parental support is unreal. Most of the kids today come from homes where they are the first generation to be educated. The parents certainly understand the value of education.

The negative is obvious. There are 142 million Indian children who are not attending school and the government schools are apparently not good (although we have not seen one, yet).

Day Eight:

Just when I thought I had seen it all...

Six hour drive from Delhi to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. Most of the trip was through rural/industrial parts of India. The poverty and pollution were staggering. I saw three very interesting things along the way

A Sadhu Holy Man, whom I probably would not have noticed except for the fact the he was completely naked walking down the road. It turns out that the Sadhu's relinquish all material goods including clothing.

A cow standing in the middle of a small roadside restaurant: No one was bothering him and he wasn't bothering any of them.

A rickshaw (SP?) meant for three passengers holding at least ten grown men.

India continues to leave an indelible impression on me. The people are just awesome. We leave for the Taj Mahal at 5:30am so we can see it at sun rise.

Days Nine and Ten:

Agra, Jaipur, and back to Delhi

The Taj Mahal met all expectations and the other palaces and forts in and around Agra were impressive. In order to build the Taj workers constructed a ramp 2.5 kilometers in length so that marble could be hauled to the dome. Interestingly, it was built for Mutaz, the second and favorite wife of Shah Jahan. It took 22 years to complete.

One of the highlights in Agra involved one of the superintendents who came too close to a monkey he was trying to take a picture of. The monkey bum-rushed him and tried to grab his pants. This was hilarious not so much because of the monkey but because of the reaction the unnamed superintendent.

After leaving Agra we traveled to Jaipur, about 5 hours away. We stopped along the way to stretch our legs and buy something to drink. I started up a conversation with the parking lot attendant, a very handsome man approximately 50 years old. He shared with me that he had four children, one of whom was on college. Tuition, he said, was \$500.00 Rupes per month (~\$10.00). He told me that he made \$1000.00 a month and worked seven days per week, riding four kilometers each way on his bicycle. Amazing!

Jaipur turned out to be my favorite stop. It is further north, cooler, with a higher elevation. It reminded me very much of southern California. We visited the Amber Palace and fort via elephant and the Maharaja Palace. The hotel we stayed in was a converted palace; very, very beautiful but very expensive. We decided to roll the dice and head in to town for some very authentic food and native dancing. Our group represented the USA very well. There were two other groups at the restaurant; one from England and

one from Scotland. Bor-ing!! We lit the place up. I'm not one to brag but my trademark dance, "The Sprinkler," set a new standard.

The next morning it was off to the world's oldest observatory, lunch, then south to Delhi for dinner and a plane ride home.

There was a great deal of conversation on the bus trip home about our experience and thoughts regarding next steps. Several of us will meet in January and establish a framework for a foundation designed to pay tuition for some of the "untouchable" children of Delhi.

India is a land of startling contradiction. The people are beautiful and friendly. They embrace western culture and seem to like Americans very much. They are a tolerant, democratic nation very in tune to their and our political landscape. Indian students are simply amazing. I saw a high school technology/computer classroom with 42 students and no computer, just a teacher standing at his chalkboard instructing, his hand the eraser. You could have heard a pin drop. Kids were 100% focused and engaged.

By contrast, 142,000,000 school eligible children don't attend school. The poverty and pollution are startling. Pigs, dogs, cows, monkeys, and goats roam uninhibited through many streets rummaging through garbage and waste. Begging and aggressive solicitation are everywhere. It was often a heartbreaking scene. I asked several kids who were on the streets why they didn't attend school. "Too expensive" was a common answer as was "I have to make money." Keep in mind, school tuition is about \$10.00 per month.

In terms of what I learned, well, I learned a lot. I will put together a formal presentation for our school board next month; however, I can sum up my experience through the words of one of my colleagues, Greg Killough, Caroline County Schools: "It is amazing to me that the schools in India are able to do so much with so little while we seem to do so little with so much." Those are indeed haunting and frustrating words, but words that we can and must learn from.