

# Regional International Visitor Leadership Program

By Marcella Sakaio

It is an honor to share my experiences from the Regional International Visitor Leadership Program, a trip that was sponsored by the United States Department of State from July 22–August 12, 2006. Having been on similar trips before joining the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) family, I was excited when the United States Embassy on Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands informed me over the phone that I had been selected to participate in the program. However, having the opportunity to have closer encounters and first-hand information provided to me by the people “behind the desk/scenes” was even more thrilling than I imagined it would be. Indeed, it was a phenomenal experience that coincided with my graduation from the San Diego State University (SDSU) Master’s in Educational Leadership Program a month earlier. In fact, it bridged the gap between my academic learning about leadership and my leadership career practices. There is no doubt that this experience enhanced my leadership skills both personally and professionally.

The trip changed my perception of the United State in many respects. One surprising discovery was the fact that the federal government provides only 10% of the funding for every state’s public education system. The state and communities come up with the remaining 90% of its funding on their own. Common sources of alternate funding include lotteries, casinos, and local taxes. It is no wonder education in the United State is always at the

top, since it really puts its money where its mouth is, as the saying goes. I learned more about: (a) the bottom-up, decentralized education system; (b) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements from the U.S. Department of Education; (c) the Teacher to Teacher Network; (d) local boards of education elected by the people; (e) textbooks approved by a commission; and (f) year-round school schedules.

As a Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC) Specialist, I expected to learn more about parent involvement programs or activities. In fact, the highlight of the trip was visiting the schools. I had a chance to question parents, teachers, principals, school counselors, and superintendents regarding parent involvement. I also learned from the director of the California Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) that the organization is not associated with one school in particular. The office is staffed by professional volunteers, such as doctors, dentists, and nurses, working on their days off or after their regular jobs to help out at the PTSA center. I was also able to expand my circle of friends and colleagues by getting to know the other 10 members of my group from East Asia.

How will all of these important discoveries and this information be useful for me, my country, my island, and, most especially, my school? At first, as I was going through the lectures and sessions, I was focusing a lot of my thoughts on what my government is doing wrong, until I listened to one presenter talk about being pre-



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scriptive vs. pre-prescriptive. Suddenly, my thinking and attitudes in general shifted from blaming my government to what I can do to contribute to the improvement of myself and my island. In other words, labeling my island and me won’t get me anywhere until I, as an individual, initiate changes in what I do, think, and say. In fact, I took the presenter’s statements to heart, and this has really changed my attitude toward my career and personal life.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the United States Embassy in Majuro for selecting me to be a part of this phenomenal experience! I would also like to express a very sincere thank you to my PREL family for allowing me to go on this unforgettable journey.

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