In a rural classroom early on a Saturday morning working on math problems with her three-year-old brother asleep on her lap. Her parents work long hours in the farm fields for a low wage. There is no running water, and the family’s clay and straw home barely keeps the stench of the outhouse from being noticed. The thought of having the same life as her parents focuses Jin’s concentration deeper on her work.

As a sixth grader, Jin understands. In a few weeks, she will take a test that will largely determine the course of her life. If she scores poorly, she will be among the approximately 80% of Chinese students who will not be allowed to attend high school, leaving her in the same situation as her parents. Most children who do not attend high school are forced to leave rural areas and travel to large cities to seek employment as construction workers, waiters, or providers of some other service. Some, however, fall into petty crime, and many eventually return home to do farm work.

If Jin scores well on the test, she will be able to attend a better junior high that will help her prepare for high school. If she is one of the 20% of those who attend high school, she will need to be in the top 40% of her class to be selected for college. In rural China today,
To better understand the educational complexities and the degree of impoverishment in rural China, the delegation visited a rural public school, DaduKou Village School, southeast of Kunming. This village school served about 400 students in grades 1 through 6 in a community of 2,000 people (about 400 families). Within villages in China, the last names of individuals are often similar. That was the case for this village, as most students’ last names were either Ma or Dang. More than half of the students lived in the village while others commuted from smaller nearby villages. A large percentage of the students’ families were farmers who grew vegetables, rice, tobacco, and flowers. Fields surrounded the school grounds, and we saw farm equipment ranging from hand tools, to water buffalo, to a few very old trucks about the size of golf carts. As in many communities, the houses reflected different levels of wealth. Most looked like huts, while a few were relatively nice. However, most of the buildings revealed the community’s impoverishment.

The school grounds in the center of the village consisted of a two-story building for classrooms, a dormitory for sixth-grade students, a small building for meals, an open courtyard in the center of the grounds (used as a playground and for some outdoor classes), and several small sheds made of red clay and straw that housed chickens, goats, sheep, and other farm animals. Males and females had separate outhouses without toilets and running water. Sixth graders could live in the dormitory so they could spend their last year in more intense study and increase their chances of doing well on the compulsory standardized test that determines which students would be admitted to the county junior high school. The small, crowded dormitory had concrete floors and unpainted, steel-framed bunk beds. Sixth graders attended school on Saturday but were also often required by their parents to care for a younger sibling during this time, so they typically brought the younger children to school and had them sit on their laps as they did their school work.

The sixth graders were preparing for a high-stakes test that would be administered at a different school and proctored by individuals unknown to the students to only 0.2% have a college education. Since 1980, China has sustained the highest rate of growth in per-capita income in the world. From 1981 to 2001, the number of poor people living on less than $1 per day was reduced from 634 million to 211 million. The poverty problem, however, has not been solved. With 1.3 billion people, China is more than four times the size of the U.S. About 600 million Chinese live on $2 per day or less, and the country still has almost one-fifth of the poor people in the world. China has more than 200 million students in primary and middle schools and about 80% of those students live in rural areas. Providing facilities and educational services required by the nine-year compulsory education law enacted in 1986 is a goal still to be realized. Premier Wen Jiabao hopes to improve this situation for children living in impoverished rural areas by 2010.

In 2005, a delegation of professional educators, mostly from higher education, participated in an educational exchange in China through People to People International. In 1956, former President Dwight Eisenhower founded People to People International to create opportunities for individuals from different nations to interact, one-on-one, and to exchange thoughts and ideas that promote international understanding. The goal of the delegation trip was to engage in a dialogue comparing the U.S. and Chinese
education systems.

Understanding the complexities faced by the education system in China is impossible by observing only three schools. However, our visit did illustrate some key issues facing Chinese education: poverty, isolation, and diversity. Perhaps the main message of these three snapshots is the disparity in learning opportunities in China. We witnessed some very powerful learning as well as less than ideal situations. Clearly, China and all the nations of the world will need to continue to address the important issue of how to best educate all children equitably and well.


ensure that teachers could not assist their own students during the exam. Graduates of the village school attend one of two junior high schools: the county junior high school or a local, less desirable village junior high school. About 95% of the children in DaduKou Village complete the required nine years of schooling and about 20% of those students continue on to high school.

The rectangular classrooms were clean. Each had a chalkboard, desks, chairs, and windows for lighting, and each seated 30 to 40 students. Like most rural Chinese schools, classrooms had no audiovisual equipment, computers, maps, or other instructional aids. In the courtyard, however, were two large beautifully colored maps made of tiles and posters of government leaders, Confucius, and other Chinese historical figures. A list of rules and statements of moral guidance were also posted in the courtyard, along with a set of parallel bars and an old basketball hoop without a net.

The school’s 22 teachers taught Chinese literature, mathematics, English as a foreign language, art, working skills (i.e., crafts), natural science, healthy living, geography, physical education, and music. Most teachers had completed a two-year teacher preparation program, and a few had completed a bachelor’s degree through a distance education program. Many of China’s remote schools have difficulty attracting qualified teachers. Although compulsory education requires English instruction, when we visited, this school had been unable to teach the language for two of the previous three years because none of the teachers knew English. The recently hired English teacher had only a high school degree and didn’t speak the language. But members of our delegation who had math education backgrounds were impressed with the mathematics content knowledge and skills being taught.

A typical day at the school starts at 7 a.m. and ends at 4 p.m., Monday through Friday. The day begins with a one-hour self-study, then three 40-minute classes, followed by a two-hour block of time for lunch and self-study. The afternoon begins at 12:30 p.m. with a 3½ hour block of time for instruction. Students are allowed to leave the school grounds at 4 p.m., but they are required to complete one hour of self-study from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. as homework. And, of course, the sixth graders also attend school on Saturdays.

Despite a language barrier — even the translator had problems interpreting the local dialect — students and teachers were very friendly to our delegation. The students were happy, energetic, liked to play games, and demonstrated curiosity in nonverbal ways. They were intrigued with the instantly available photos captured by our digital cameras, as it is uncommon for them to see pictures of themselves in this somewhat isolated community. While most were shy at first, they warmed up quickly. We did, however, experience one uncomfortable situation of cultural misunderstanding. As we were sharing departing gifts (a few university t-shirts, mugs, etc.), we noticed that the head teacher was becoming upset. Finally, he put down some of the gifts and walked away. We did not understand that in this village it was traditional not to accept a gift of greater value than you can give in return. We quickly took back some of the gifts and apologized for our ignorance.
To experience the diversity of learning opportunities in China, we visited Huijia Private School north of Beijing. Since 1993, private schools have become more popular in China. Huijia Private School has the honor of being the first and one of the most prestigious private schools in China. We found significant differences between the DaduKou Village School and Huijia Private School in the quality of school grounds and the learning opportunities for the students. This private school was considerably larger, enrolling 2,000 students in grades 1 through high school. Its campus consisted of several brick buildings with foyers featuring well-trimmed plants and flowers. The school had indoor pools, tennis and basketball courts, several private piano rooms, and other amenities. Each classroom had a teacher workstation, which included such items as an ELMO document-projector, a laptop computer, a data projector, a scanner/fax, and a range of useful instructional software. The rooms were nicely painted and well lit, and running water and restrooms with flush toilets were located throughout the buildings.

Students were polite, well-behaved, and friendly, and they wore their yellow and blue uniforms with pride. Class size ranged from 16 to 20 students, small enough to provide opportunities for frequent interactions with the instructor. Most students lived on campus in nicely decorated rooms, with only a few students to each room. The annual tuition for each child at the time of our visit was about $6,250 U.S. for primary and middle-level education and $8,750 U.S. for high school. Children were allowed to go home for the weekends.

Perhaps what is most important to parents is this school’s curriculum. One of Huijia’s goals is to cultivate Chinese leaders with an international perspective. International exchanges are fairly common and several teachers are from other countries, including the U.S. In addition to the government-required curriculum, physical education and the arts are an important and integral part of learning at Huijia. The educational philosophy of the school values swimming, for example, as a way to build the body and teach perseverance and piano playing as a way to improve keyboarding skills and the temperament of the students. Students are required to take such classes as piano, calligraphy, swimming, golf, baseball, football, and English. All the teachers seemed well prepared to teach the subjects assigned to them.
SPECIAL EDUCATION TRAINING SCHOOL OF ZHIGUANG

To provide education for children with special needs, the private Beijing Zhiguang Special Education Training School began in 1998 to prepare physically and mentally challenged children for employment and independent living. It was the first school of its kind in China.

Although the Chinese government tried to provide special education services, not all children were being reached, and the need for private facilities became apparent. The school was registered as a nongovernment and not-for-profit organization in the Chang Ping Education District north of Beijing. The school received no financial support from the Chinese government and, as a result, relocated four times, mostly to abandoned farms that were repaired for reuse. Individuals and international companies made donations to support the school. The school had classrooms, dormitories, gardens, and farm buildings for its 70 students and 30 teachers. Teachers stayed with students 24 hours a day to provide instruction and physical care.

Many students were orphans and arrived not knowing their real names, family origin, or date of birth. The school commonly named them according to where the child was found (e.g., found in box, found on river bank, etc.) with the family name given as the name of the school (Zhiguang). The school then estimated the age of the children and assigned them birthdates. Although many students had fairly common disabilities, such as autism, others had less common handicapping conditions and received different levels of training and treatment according to their individual needs. Many also suffered from diseases and required medical attention. Although most entered the program at a young age, some had completed nine years of compulsory education and entered Zhiguang in order to acquire an occupational skill. In all cases, however, the curriculum design had three primary purposes: to provide cultural knowledge, including Chinese, literature, moral education, and mathematics; provide rehabilitation skills, including music, dance, and cooking; and to provide working skills that will enable students to find jobs.

The tremendous success of this program was recognized with several national and international awards, including the Model Enterprise of Beijing Award. Because of the working skills that students acquired during their enrollment, most of its 460 graduates worked at jobs paying as much as fully able workers. Zhiguang’s teachers earned only about 25% of the pay teachers received in government schools and the facilities were not of the same quality, but many teachers joined the school because of its mission. Successful teaching applicants needed to be certified by a university to teach; qualified to care for students, teach life skills, and love their students unconditionally; and able to provide basic medical assistance as necessary.

The students were friendly and captivated by our attention and interaction. We observed students working on computers, creating crafts, learning how to cook, reciting literature, performing a Tibetan dance, and singing a cappella. Since teachers spent 24 hours a day with students in a loving and caring environment, teachers were able to interact with the children at a very high level and provide customized experiences for each. As a result, students could care for themselves, develop a skill that would help them gain employment, and practice using the cultural knowledge needed to be helpful and productive citizens.

Shortly after visiting Zhiguang school, a dispute arose between Wang Lijuan, president of the school, and a private company that had leased the property. The dispute focused on the right of the school to use the land on which it was built. Over the next few months, a Beijing court ordered the school to move. School leaders refused, and, according to a news report, more than 200 people in camouflage gear demolished the school for disabled and mentally retarded children and beat students who attempted to block the demolition. Information about the fate and fortunes of the school’s leaders, its teachers, and its students was not included in the report.

Students at Beijing Zhiguang Special Education Training School receive therapy as part of their school day.