
INTERVIEW WITH PRINCIPAL THURMAN



Brian Thurman, Nancy Marlin and Lilly Cheng at the Confucius Institute Conference

How did you feel when you first stepped foot in Yunnan, Kunming?

Principal Thurman: I was truly amazed. I'm so excited to do this interview because the Confucius Institute conference really demonstrated the world coming together for students. It struck me immediately when I arrived- people walking in with different costumes, different dress. I met people from all over the world. Just talking about all the work they do for kids and help these kids understand Mandarin Chinese culture. It was more about how we are helping students and working together to help schools get better. It was awesome especially this time in our country when things are so divisive. It was so awesome to be with this group of people that are were so much the same, even though we look totally different. We have exactly the same desire and same heart for students. With different people from all over the world, having one conversation after the other, I felt like the world is filled with very like-minded people who care about children.

Were there any interesting conversations between you and other attendances?

Principal Thurman: Yeah, many actually. One in particular was with another Confucius classroom organization that was selected from Thailand. I was struck that nobody has as many Confucius teachers as we do. I was surprised about that, but just hearing how they use the Confucius teachers and the impacts they have on their schools and me being able to share here. That's interesting you

know just talked about some of those unique things about Thailand versus America. But it was just interesting to hear what a typical day is like for her going into class- same thing that I do here. We talked about student struggles and all the different aspects. Her school has more social economic challenges than we do, but it was still just fascinating to talk to the Thailand group.

How was it like at the awarding ceremony rehearsal?

Principal Thurman: That day I woke up and had breakfast with Dr. Cheng and Dr. Marlin. Then they walked me over to the government building. It was at least two hours before the actual conference started. They asked those who would receive the award come up to the front. We practiced going all the way up. They said: "Now that the vice premier is going to be standing over there. When I tell you to, you will walk over there. You'll shake

her hand." Someone stood in for her. We did the walk over. We shook her hand and we pretended we got a plaque.



Brian Thurman received the award from Vice Premier Liu

How was it like at the actual ceremony? How did you feel?

Principal Thurman: It was amazing. It was packed with people ... about two thousand people were there. I was excited but I was really nervous going up. I just thought, “Don’t trip, don’t throw up, and just don’t get nervous.” We were standing in line and getting ready to shake the Vice Premier’s hand. She was very friendly and welcoming all of us. We had to wear headsets so we could hear the interpretation. It was striking to me how similar we all are even though we

look totally different and we live in different places. We all face way different circumstances when we go back to our home and our schools. We all have a common mindset for student success.

I was standing right in the middle of the stage. When I was up there, I could really see everybody. It was so exciting. I just couldn’t help but wish that all my 11 Confucius Institute teachers and my mandarin teachers could be there.

What have you done to achieve the award?

Principal Thurman: I really wouldn’t say it’s me. I provide the support, but our teachers here- both the Chinese teachers and American teachers who were teaching Chinese and English, with our CI teachers. They work so well together. They (the CI teachers) come prepared. They come ready. Sometimes it’s challenging for teachers to work out work styles and to get to know each other. When they come, our teachers work with them. They just become really solid teams. And they support our students and our families so well. When you walk in a classroom, you see them working one-on-one, sometimes with small groups and sometimes with large groups. They are such willing partners with us. They don’t expect to run things or expect to take over, but they are totally willing. When the teacher asks them to take a group, they can do it. They are with very high level skills. I know it is going to be a shock for them to first come in our classrooms. It’s a different culture, but they handle it so well. I try to get to know them when they first got here, help them see other parts of San Diego.



Brian Thurman with the Confucius Classroom of the Year Award

To create that atmosphere of such a great teamwork with CI teachers and local teachers, what does Riverview do specifically?

Principal Thurman: What is important to me is that to make them feel welcomed, and feel a part of our team. There was concern about their living situations. About two or three of them hadn't had a place ready to live. We had parents let them stay in their house until ready. The CI teachers bring their culture to our students. Being able to interact with someone who is most recently been there in China, and share those customs. Our CI teachers are just so good at going above and beyond. I was surprised last year for our Chinese New Year Celebration, they all got beautiful Qipaos and did a traditional dance "Tuberose". Our whole community was so impressed by them. I am so proud of them.

We talked a lot about their families because I know they miss them sometimes. I know this will be a huge challenge on their part. We are so grateful for what they gave up to come.

In your opinion, what are some positive impacts of having a Mandarin Immersion Program?

Principal Thurman: Learning a different language is good for the right brain, especially one that is so challenging. The benefits are huge. I hope that through our Mandarin Immersion Program, the students learn about another culture. I am hoping that they will take advantage

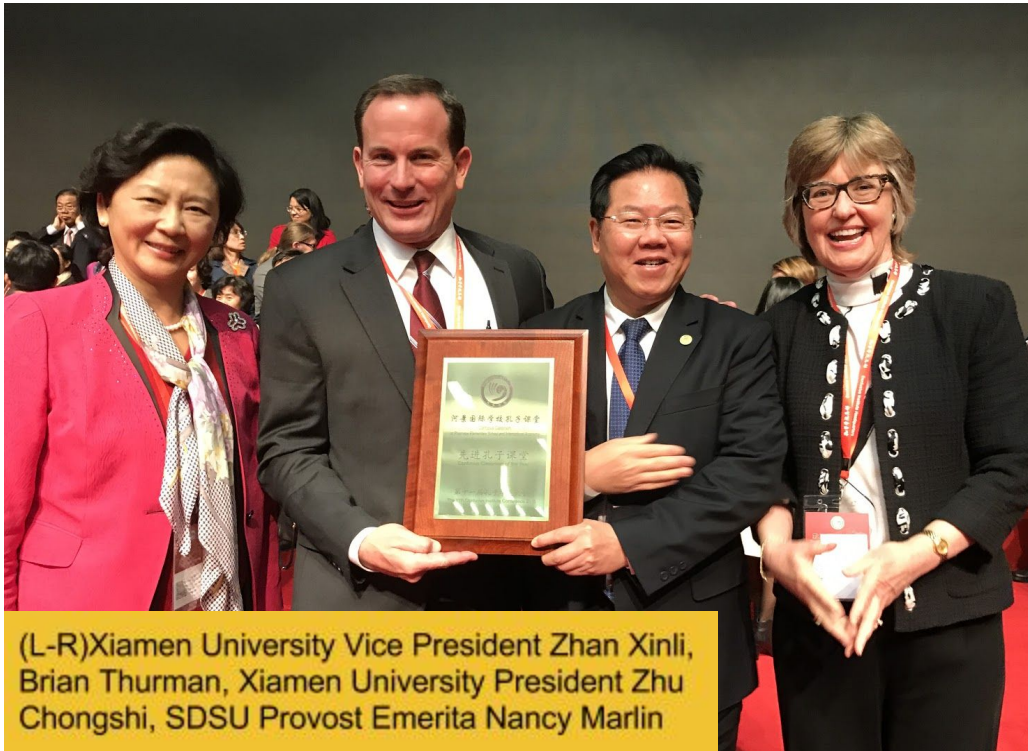


Brian Thurman with interviewer Chudan Li

of some trips to China. Some students say, "This is really a whole new world, where I can fit right in with my language. I can communicate out there!" This (the trips) would help them understand more about that perspective. You can't understand or experience the culture without the language connection. They would have a broader view of the world. When I went to the Confucius Institute Conference, the world became so small to me – colleagues from all over the world, with the same vision and same heart for students. I hope our children start getting that vision as well.

They are now becoming global citizens by learning a different culture. Right?

Principal Thurman: Yes, it is like the key to unlock different perspectives around the world.



(L-R) Xiamen University Vice President Zhan Xinli, Brian Thurman, Xiamen University President Zhu Chongshi, SDSU Provost Emerita Nancy Marlin

What will be the next step for Riverview?

Principal Thurman: Our school has been growing non-stop. In 2006 we had 344 students. Here we are 10 years later, we have about 1011 – huge growth! We have Mandarin and Spanish Immersion. We have two classes of Mandarin in every grade. Between kindergarten and third grade we have six classes of Spanish. This year we have to add another second grade. Next year we have to add another third grade and then we will be at our max capacity. People come in long ways especially for the Mandarin program. They see the value and what it is going to do on their kids.

After getting the “Confucius Classroom of the Year” award, what things would change differently at Riverview?

Principal Thurman: It is going to be one of the most significant aspects of our program. The news will be on our website soon. I think the award is sort of like the public recognition stamp of approval that our Mandarin program is a really solid program. It's the combined efforts of the whole Confucius Institute program and how they select teachers, train teachers, and support teachers throughout the year. Our team is working well with them. This combined effort is really what led to that (award).

What experience will you pass along to other schools, as the Confucius Classroom of the Year?

Principal Thurman: I would say to get plugged in with the Confucius Institute, and really partner with them. And focus on the site program and systems to be in place. Dr.

Olympia Kyriakidis and Mrs. Grace Cox have done a really good job in putting systems in place, both for the immersion and enrichment classes.

Eventually 100 percent of our students will receive some type of Mandarin instruction. Over the years there has been challenges that I've heard about- that (the school) needs to be systemized. The Mandarin lessons need to be all pre-planned.

(We make sure) CI teachers have materials and documents prepared when they come in. Creating a

system, starting small like we did, and putting those systems in place will help run things efficiently. But you can't do that without the partnership with the Confucius Institute.



Brian Thurman with the Confucius Classroom of the Year Award