

BACKGROUND ON JAPANESE FOREIGN EXCHANGE PROGRAM

In two Fairfield County middle schools, students and teachers are quietly redefining American education. With the goal to meet the needs of our global society and the accompanying shift of enterprises to the Asian region, Roton Middle School and Ponus Ridge Middle School have developed a most exciting and unique program known as the Middle School Center for Japanese Studies Abroad (MSCJSA). In operation since 1993, MSCJSA provides the only middle school Japanese programs in the state of Connecticut. Its multicultural objective is to produce students with first hand experiences and academic studies in Japanese language and culture within the context of a changing international environment.

Since MSCJSA's initiative in 1991 under its founder, Dr. William Jassey, over 300 students from Norwalk have traveled to Chiba, Japan, and returned transformed as young ambassadors by their homestay/school experience. They attend Japanese schools where they study with their Japanese peers and, in turn, are expected to actively represent Norwalk, CT. They learn first hand the pleasures of living in a foreign country for approximately 2 weeks as well as the gracious hospitality of their Japanese host families during their stay, which is so different from American culture, and then come back to Norwalk more mature with coping skills because of their wholesome experiences. In 2005, the two-way exchange program was further developed and now Japanese teenagers from Chiba are also enjoying the immersion route with Norwalk homestay families and middle school participation so as to strengthen their linguistic and cultural proficiencies.

The dual thrust of learning about and living with each other shifts the emphasis from the classroom ambience to the challenge of life experiences. Developing proficiency in the Japanese language and absorbing the key elements of Japanese culture are posed to Roton and Ponus Ridge middle schoolers enrolled in the target language coalesced with a study abroad program. This concept underscores the overarching message that only through a world language opportunity will true progress in embracing diversity be cemented in this global world. Dr. William Jassey, Retired Founder and Consultant to MSCJSA.

