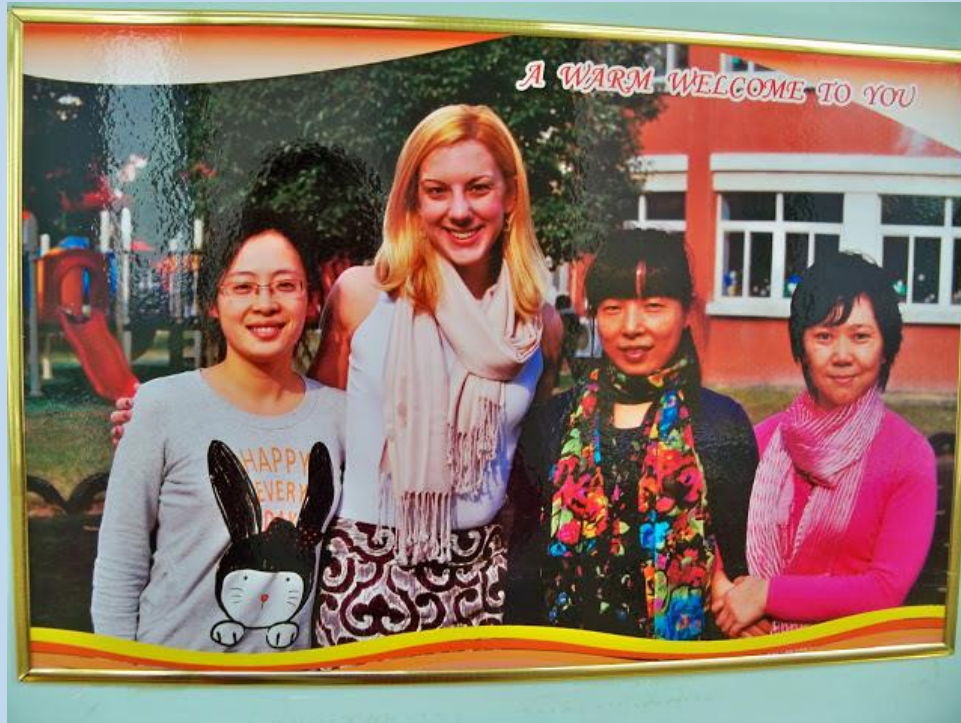


# Teaching at Kunshan International School

By admin on January 28, 2013  
Teachbrave.com



KSIS Kindergarten Galaxy Class Teachers

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I have been working at the Kunshan International School for over 6 months now. It has been quite exciting, but far different from my experiences in American schools. Come take a closer look at a typical school day with me.

I'm up by 6:30, shuffling around our apartment, lost in my morning routine. I must make sure I get around on time because I have a 10 minute drive to work. No, I don't own or drive a car, I catch the school bus... yes, a school bus! It comes every morning at 7:50 to the gate of our apartment complex, Yong Jing Wan. I have three alarms on my cell phone that let me know when I should leave. When the third bell rings, I lock the door, ride down the elevator, and make a brisk walk to the gate

where I meet 3 mothers, waiting with their children at the bus stop. There is a set of Taiwanese twins in middle school, a young girl from Malaysia in 5th grade, and a 2nd grade Chinese girl whose hair is always in pigtails. On occasion, a bratty boy runs up with his IE (nanny) who trails behind him carrying his book bag.

We stand near the busy street of Bai Lu Lu. I position myself at the edge of the sidewalk, watching for the top of our yellow school bus through the bushes. The bus is coming. It quickly takes a U-turn around the center divider and pulls up after nearly being struck by oncoming highway traffic. (This is typical: cars will turn into traffic, regardless of what is coming. It's just the rules of the road to slow down. For a first-timer though, it may feel like a near-death experience.) Our bus parks along the side of the road, which means we

are still in the street where traffic continues to flow. There is no stop sign on the side of the bus to warn others to stop and take caution. Instead, cars, buses, and mopeds zoom by us in the left lane as we board the bus. The door slides open and a Chinese teacher greets us from inside the cabin. She offers her hand to help the little ones climb the steep steps to the aisle, where they find their seat. Once everyone is situated, the bus driver closes the door, and we are off. Now compared to the big yellow school buses we have back in The States, these buses are **SMALL**. The one I ride holds only 15 people at maximum capacity, and that wouldn't be a comfortable ride. Our route has three stops and carries 8 passengers, including the Chinese teacher and myself. I always sit in the back seat because I have a little more room, and I get to be alone in my thoughts... but it is the bumpiest! We have driven over bumps and potholes that have sent me airborne for at least 3 seconds. The students and I have timed the bumps and look forward to them. Some start a countdown "3...2...1...WHOA!" they'll scream, while the others laugh hysterically.



Get this—I am the only international teacher that has chosen to live off campus; therefore, I am the only one who gets to experience this early morning thrill! Everyone else lives at school in furnished, two-bedroom apartments. (They don't know what they are missing!) But, if I had gotten this job before signing our lease at Yong Jing Wan, we most definitely would have done just that—it's very convenient to live on campus. Location-wise, we are 6 blocks from the nearest full-size grocery store and three blocks from the high speed train station. It's also very cheap. Since we are international employees, our apartment is provided free of cost. The school also supplies free internet, free gas and electric, oh, and did I mention? The school also provides you with free meals three times a day!

We reach in 10 minutes. It is at this time our horn peaks its highest usage. Beeping at cars and mopeds congesting the parking lot, we finally reach the security post outside the school. The guards have opened the collapsible gate, and we park the bus near the entryway. I gather my bags and walk to my office. Usually, Nini (a piano teacher and Kindergarten coordinator at our school) is sitting

inside, with the heat already on. The office is nice and toasty.

Yes, I have an office, along with all the other teachers at school. All students, from grades K-12 stay in one classroom all day, and it is the teachers who move around each period. There are no lockers (not in elementary, middle, or high school). You also may have noticed that Nini is not only a teacher, but she manages certain activities at school. This is the case with every teacher I know. Teachers will give instruction typically 20-25 hours a week, and the other 15-20 hours are spent in their office grading papers, preparing lessons, and caring for other managerial tasks. So teacher friends, you must be asking, do they ever take work home at night or on weekends? HEAVENS NO!

Something I really enjoy is hearing the students come into school. They run down the tiled floors, laughing, giggling, and talking with each other. There is little supervision, and might I say, very little trouble. If the weather is nice, students will make their way out to the track and complete morning exercises. Teachers lead them in structured motions, and after 15 minutes, the students walk back to their classrooms.

Afterwards, I sit at my desk and prepare for my kindergarten classes. I teach two kindergarten classes, which are an hour long each. I pack a shoulder bag with flashcards of pictures and vocabulary, then saunter up to the third floor.

### Morning Exercise

My kindergartners are always excited. English is considered the "cool" subject here, much like PE when I was there age. You must be wondering how I communicate with them, considering many are beginning to learn English with me... well, I don't run into too many obstacles. The kindergartners are very eager to learn, and I am assigned a Chinese teacher who helps me with translate my instruction and deals with disciplining students.



But on occasion, the teachers will leave the room; it

usually happens more frequently as holidays come up. Then, I am left with 30 wide-eyed and extremely excited kindergartners jumping all over the place. The problem is—I don't know enough Chinese, and they don't know any English. It can be an intimidating language barrier!

I must point out that our kindergarten teachers are kept very busy. If they leave the room, it is usually to prepare for other projects they are mandated to complete. Even though there are 3 teachers assigned to each Kindergarten classroom, each teacher has different responsibilities. I always see them working, even in my class. They usually will be flipping through assignment books and writing notes to the parents. Now that the students are familiar with me, the Chinese teachers typically never intrude on my lessons, even if things are going wrong.

My lessons are pretty intense. If you watch me, I have about as much energy as a monkey on Red Bull. I am bouncing around the classroom with over exaggerated gestures, songs, chants, and expressions. The students sit in small wooden chairs organized in two long rows with their palms down on their thighs. They giggle, watch, and practice along with me in English. We usually have time for a game at the end, like Marco Polo, Duck Duck Goose, or relay races where students practice the words they have learned.

I do have students in class that would be considered for Special Education. I have a student in kindergarten that is particularly a handful. He can't sit still, won't listen to teachers, and is always being naughty to other kids. Teac



hers were concerned about the boy and told his parent's they must take him to a doctor for a diagnosis (a lawsuit waiting to happen in the US). They did. The boy went for a full day of testing in Shanghai and was diagnosed with ADHD. Labeling does exist in China, but there are definitely not as many here as you might find in the US. There is no special education teacher in our school to carry out accommodations. No IEPs. No RTI. The teachers inform parents that they must take care of it, and

whether or not the parents follow through is their responsibility.

Next is lunch. The school offers free meals to all teachers. The first few weeks I ate at the cafeteria with fervor: I didn't have to be organized, and most importantly I didn't have to cook! I enjoyed getting to know all the teachers in school and listened as they spoke to each other in Chinese. Now I bring meals from home and eat in my office where I catch up on my work.

Otherwise, you would have caught me eating at the teacher's lounge eating Chinese food. The teachers' lunchroom is separate to that of the students. It has its own queue where you retrieve your meal. When you arrive, you stand in line, tell a cafeteria worker which food you wish to eat, and then you take your thin, tin tray to an open table.

The room is bare. There are no TVs or microwaves; no carpeted floors. It is a tiled room with long brown tables. You must fold down the chair if you wish to sit down. Flavor pastes and large stacks of napkins are stacked in the middle of each table. The food tastes good for the most part. I liked the curries, but thought the vegetables were very bland. Every meal has rice, a bowl of soup, a piece of fruit, two vegetable dishes, and two meats to choose from.

After indulging in my home cooked meal, I sit at my desk and check emails. I do my planning and grading for my three-hour high school class. This is also the time I write magazine articles for the Kunshan Expat magazine.

My afternoon class is three hours long. It is mostly comprised of 17 year old Chinese students, but there is one Korean girl who is 18. We focus mainly on discussion, but also do a lot of work in grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension. At 4:00 class is over. There is no dismissal bell, but I know it is time for me to leave them. I gather my things, say goodbye and walk back down to my bus who is waiting for me and 5 other students for our voyage home. (My high school students remain in their classroom and wait for their next teacher. They finish school at 5:00.)

Some people are surprised I can teach kindergarten AND high school, but I think it is the perfect mix. I get to be silly in the morning, and have a decent conversation with young adults in the afternoon. The longer I am here, the more I enjoy it. Maybe I will go back for my ESL License after all!

-Megan Banerjee, ESL Kindergarten Teacher