Citizens of the World

New York Public Library

Times Square

Addressing the assembly

Fun in Bryant Park

Museum of Modern Art

Chinatown was a big hit
"Peace is what every man is craving for, and it can be brought about through the child." Maria Montessori

Success in the 21st century increasingly demands cultural fluency and awareness of international affairs. To help prepare today’s students to take their place in a global society, Mountaineer Montessori School sponsored a delegation of sixth-grade students to the Montessori Model United Nations (MMUN) in New York in March.

The trip to New York culminated months of classroom study with a two-day global education simulation experience that gave students the chance to learn more about the operations of the United Nations and develop valuable academic and leadership skills.

Like a traditional Model UN, the MMUN is a simulation of the UN General Assembly. In a Model UN, students assume the role of ambassadors from UN member states to debate current issues on the organization’s agenda. During the simulation process, student delegates give speeches, prepare draft resolutions, negotiate with allies and adversaries, resolve conflicts, and navigate the Model UN conference rules of procedure – all with a goal of building cooperation to resolve problems that affect countries all over the world.

In a Montessori UN, there is a strong emphasis on engaging students in authentic learning situations that teach them about critical thinking, advancing justice, and collaboration while participating in a life-changing experience. Dr. Montessori understood that children learn about moral development by working on real-life tasks. When they feel validated while working toward a meaningful goal, they bring a great amount of energy, commitment, and intelligence to the job. By participating in the MMUN, students become part of a true youth movement to make the world more peaceful and just.

Through the process of role-playing, each student becomes a delegate of a selected nation. As a group, the MMS sixth graders represented the Republic of Poland at the conference, which gave them the opportunity to delve deeply into the country’s history, culture and government. By assuming the character of a citizen of their selected country, they fully develop an understanding of the needs of a people and the importance of accepting differences.

The MMS students spent seven months preparing for the conference, researching and presenting position papers on topics including nonproliferation of the People’s Republic of Korea, disposal of nuclear waste, racism and intolerance, the situation in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, and the peaceful use of outer space. The program offered many important benefits to the students, including the chance to learn more about the operations of the United Nations and different cultures and governments; advance their research and writing skills and written and oral communication skills; develop critical thinking, problem solving and evaluative skills; debate current global issues and world problems; use leadership skills in a real-life world situation; and understand the need and the process for peace and conflict resolution.

The impact of the program really hit home when the students entered the UN Headquarters for the final session of the MMUN. “The UN building had a lot of security, so I straight away knew that we were entering a very important place,” said Rudy Capeco. “It had beautiful architecture, and I was surprised by the amount of security,” noted Soleil Gloss. “It was pretty cool that we got to sit in the same places as actual UN members,” added Anahli Cordell.

Through the sessions, the students learned how negotiations play out in real life. “I learned that it takes a really long time to create peace,” said Madeline Snyder. “I learned that many ‘solutions’ cannot work,” added Maddie Peyatte. “I learned there are ‘issues,’ and then there are ‘mega issues,’” observed Tabitha Morris.

They also made friends with other students from all over the United States and around the world attending the conference. “I met a girl from China who gave me a fidget spinner,” noted Tabitha.

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The students and their teachers, Emily Capece and Jason Winesburg, took full advantage of their time in the Big Apple, exploring many landmarks and cultural destinations. “I thought New York would be scary, but when I got there, it was really fun and everyone was nice,” said Anahli. “Everything was going on at the same time, and there was so much to see and do,” said Madeline.

Food was a big hit with the MMS delegation: “There is so many different types of food. You can walk around the corner and get seafood and then walk another block and get Chinese food,” said Rudy. “Hands down, my favorite part of the trip was Chinatown, except for that guy cutting off a fish’s head,” noted Maddie.

The Montessori Model UN program is now an established component of the MMS sixth-grade curriculum, with fifth graders already eagerly anticipating their trip next spring. Students take ownership of the program by raising funds to offset expenses. This year’s delegation generated financial support through major projects such as running the school’s lunch program all year, negotiating with vendors, setting menus, managing orders and payments, and delivering orders to students, as well as fundraisers such as a cinnamon roll bake-a-thon during the holidays.

For the students, it was an experience that money couldn’t buy. “I was nervous, but I felt like I accomplished something very big and important,” said Madeline.

Mountaineer Montessori School, 308 20th Street in the University of Charleston neighborhood, is West Virginia’s original and largest Montessori school, offering a world-class, child-centered education experience to 140 students ages 3-14. Founded in 1976, MMS is the only member school of the American Montessori Society in the state.