Senator and sons talk same language

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SALT LAKE CITY, Utah－Howard Stevenson travels across the United States giving speeches to national educators about Utah's pioneering, decade-old effort to jointly teach Chinese and English in the state's public schools.  
Stephenson is a Utah state senator and a national spokesman for Chinese language immersion, and the 12,000 Utah students who take Mandarin daily can thank him for their ability to learn the most important language of the 21st century.  
From coast to coast, Stephenson is a sought-after speaker, telling how and why Utah leads the nation in Chinese immersion studies.  
But when he reaches the podium to speak, he always honors his son, Daniel.  
"Not only has learning Chinese increased his intellect, confidence and employability, but it has increased his compassion and empathy," Stephenson said to a crowd of hundreds last week at the National Language Conference in Salt Lake City.  
The accolades are repeated at every campaign stop the 35-year elected politician makes toward promoting Chinese-English education as a national priority.  
In her 1989 blockbuster book and Hollywood movie The Joy Luck Club, Amy Tan predicted that only three languages will be spoken on Earth in the future: Spanish, English and Chinese.  
Since then, China's economic and geopolitical influence has skyrocketed, while the other two tongues have emerged as the unquestionable global language links of the future.  
Senator Stephenson says Daniel is living proof of why every, single, public school student in the US should be studying Chinese.  
Dan was as naive as his father about Chinese culture when they crossed the Pacific for the first time in 2000.  
His dad, newly elected to the Utah senate, had been asked to speak about family and education at a conference that included 1,000 students from Russia, the US and China.  
The senator was 49 and his son 23. It was a 4-day trip that changed their lives forever.  
Returning to the US, Senator Stephenson doubled down on his mission to allow 50 percent Chinese/English classes taught every day of the week to Utah's public school kids.  
And while the father of five is quick to compliment his son today, he's also quite candid about Dan's lack of maturity and intellectual depth just a few years ago. But all that changed overnight.  
Within a year of his Chinese baptism, young Dan was back in Beijing, speaking little Chinese, 10,000 kilometers from home, and jumping into the adventure of a lifetime.  
"One important point here is that it doesn't matter what you think about China," Dan Stephenson, now 41, said as he explained why he has dedicated his life to increasing understanding and cooperation between the two most powerful countries and economies in the world today.  
"Regardless of what happens between the two governments, it is critical for both peoples to have the mechanisms to deal with each other," he added.  
It's an idea Stephenson knows plenty about. After attending Tsinghua University in 2002 as a young, sheltered US kid, he went on to a series of ambassadorial roles as he immersed himself in Chinese culture in his bid to promote dual language learning.  
Person to person exchanges－especially where students can interact with each other－are most valuable.  
Stephenson's 2012 venture, Economic Bridge, has overseen a number of such exchanges between "Chinese and Utah students: To get to know each other, and get to know more about each other's countries", he said.  
Later, another Stephenson joined the cause. In 2014, Dan's older brother, Andy jumped into the Zi Chinese Dual Language Immersion Foundation, where he works to promote Chinese language in the US.  
Meanwhile, Dan has expanded Zi's reach inside China－to Shanghai, where he works with his Shanghai-based business partner and Shanghai Jiao Tong University.  
It's all part of the Stephenson family's commitment to US-Chinese connectedness.  
"I see it as trying to push out the Utah model and show other states and school districts around the country the cost-effective nature of the Utah model," Dan said.  
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